

Queen of Hearts

By Melissa Good

Part 1

The river bubbled gently in the sunlight, moving amiably past a patch of moss covered rocks under a spreading maple tree. Sprawled over the rocks, toes just dabbling in the water, basking in the sun was a scruffy blond figure in a simple blue tunic that came just over her knees.

A butterfly landed on a stalk nearby, and the figure turned its head and watched it flex its wings, a gentle smile appearing. "Hello." Gabrielle greeted the insect. "Isn't it a great day? Bet you're glad it's finally warm enough to come out and fly, huh?"

Finally a warm day, after a long, hard winter. Gabrielle was glad beyond words she could go outside without her thick fur cloak and heavy leggings and finally feel fresh air on most of her skin.

The butterfly lifted off the stalk and fluttered over her head, as Gabrielle folded her hands over her stomach and merely watched it, grateful for the peace and quiet and the warm sun drenching her body.

A thump. A scuff.

Gabrielle barely had time to cover her head before a wall of cold river water swamped her, bringing a strong scent of fish, and green, and the sound of a low, mischievous laughter. "Yahhhh!!!" She let out a yell, as the crisp chill shocked her skin.

"Ah heh heh!" A long, powerful body pressed itself up and onto the rocks and over her, dripping icy droplets onto her face as it gazed down at her with pale eyes and a rakish smirk. "What the Hades are ya doin laying here like a log, ya half pint excuse for a muskrat!!" She bellowed.

Gabrielle blew the damp hair from her eyes. She reached up and stroked Xena's cheek, capturing a handful of sparkling drops. "Waiting for you."

The tense, muscular figure over her went still, before leaning closer, as a smile formed on Xena's angular face. "You." She touched noses with Gabrielle. "Are a little cheat."

"Me?"

"You." Xena slid down onto the rock next to her, long legs extending off the edge. "Here I am, doing my damndest to give my kickass a little workout, and what do you do?" She flicked a handful of water at the younger woman, waiting with an arched eyebrow.

Gabrielle blinked as the droplets hit her. "What?"

"What what?"

"What do I do?" Gabrielle reached over and carefully moved the wet, dark hair out of Xena's eyes, tracing her eyebrows with a gentle finger. "I'm sure I didn't do it on purpose."

Xena's grin became sardonic. "Sure you do." She glanced around at the pretty day. "You turn me unmercifully into a sopping goop wad. It's a plot. I know it."

Gabrielle frowned, after a moment. "Sopping goop wad?" She cocked her head to one side. "You're not goopy."

"Ah. So I see you don't deny the sopping." Xena snickered. "So, what were you doing, anyway?"

The blond woman drew her legs up under her crossed and picked up a small sack near the rock she was sitting on. "I was out looking for berries." She explained. "And then I saw this nice spot here, so I sat down and thought about a story I was going to tell later on and I... mpfh."

"Shut up." Xena pounced over her, flattening her down on the rock and kissing her.

Gabrielle drew in an unsteady breath as Xena lifted her head a moment. She licked her lips. "Okay. So I was really lying here daydreaming about you." She admitted, with a sheepish grin. "But isn't it a great day out? Feel that sun!"

"Cheat." Xena leaned forward and kissed her again. "Yeah, it's a great day. Finally got to ride my damn horse and not have to wrap up like a grandmother." She tumbled off the other side of the rock and stood, stretching in the sun with a soft popping of joints. "About time!"

She shook herself, and the crimson linen tunic draped over her body reluctantly released from her skin to drip onto the ground around her. "That was one long winter."

"It was." Gabrielle hopped off the rock and followed her through the thick river grass, its stalks brushing over her legs and leaving behind a scent of warm, green richness. "But there were good parts, too. Like your birthday."

Xena stopped, and looked over her shoulder with a stern expression. "Did we not talk about this whole 'you are not to mention my birthday' thing, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle nodded.

Xena spread both arms out and lifted both of her eyebrows.

"But we had a party."

"So?"

Gabrielle caught up with her taller companion and took hold of her hand. "Xena, we can't pretend we didn't have a party. Didn't you have fun?"

"That's not the point!" Xena said. "Damn it, I'm the queen and I said no birthdays!" She announced loudly, scaring a pair of bluebirds in a nearby tree. "Don'cha poop on me, you little.."

"If it's so nice today, how come you're so grumpy?" Gabrielle asked, altering the subject a little. "Didn't you like what I made you for breakfast?" She asked the queen. "I thought you did."

"I did." Xena allowed. "Beats me why I'm grumpy." She glanced around. "Nice day, cute muskrat, finally got some sun, got to ride my horse... ah. I know what it is."

"What?"

Xena exhaled in satisfaction. "I haven't beaten the crap out of anyone yet today." She turned her head and looked at Gabrielle. "That's what the problem is." She flexed her hands, squeezing one of Gabrielle's in the process. "I think I want a nice melee. What do you think me against the tower guards? Me against the outside watch?"

"I think you beat them up yesterday." Gabrielle replied. "Can't we just walk in the garden? I think some flowers were just blooming in there."

"I'm going to spank you."

"I think there's those little sour oranges you like, too, in the corner." The blond woman went on, undeterred. "And I could get my stick out, if you wanted to teach me some more." She offered. "I wasn't too bad last seven day, was I?"

"Gabrielle." The queen released her hand and dropped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders instead. "You're a very lucky muskrat, you know that? You're very lucky I love you like a maniac."

Gabrielle paused and put both arms around the queen, hugging her. "I know." She said. "That's what I was daydreaming about before you got me all wet."

"And then splashed you?" But Xena was smiling, her eyes on her companion.

"Yeah."

The queen laughed softly. "Sour oranges and your damn stick, huh?" She sighed. "All right. Let's go. But no picking flowers for me, okay?"

"Okay." Gabrielle released her. "Will you teach me that behind the back thing?"

"Maybe."

They walked together through the trees, towards the lofty stone wall that marked the edge of the fortress they called home. A small gate stood open, flanked by four armed men bearing tunics with yellow hawk's heads prominent on the breast.

They kept their eyes forward as the two dripping wet women approached, bracing their arms in salute as Xena drew even with them. "Majesty."

"No. Scruffy goatherd." Xena indicated her damp form. "Get your eyes checked." She walked past the man without a further word, as his eyes widened and followed her. "You should have your head taken off for letting something like that in the palace."

"Hi." Gabrielle greeted him, as she slipped past in Xena's wake. "Spring fever. It'll be okay."

"What would you know about spring fever, you little lambs tail?" Xena's voice called back. "C'mon. Might as well dry you off before I get you all wet again."

Gabrielle jogged after the queen, her bare feet scuffing lightly on the stone floor. The stone works of the fortress wall surrounded them for several steps, until they passed through and into the inner courtyard full of activity.

Soldiers, carts, drovers, plowmen, everyone seemed to be moving in the mellow sunlight as the fortress came back to life after the long, dark cold season. Everywhere women were shaking out linens and mucking out corners, voices lifted cheerfully.

It felt nice. Gabrielle smiled, despite how wet she was, and how chilly the still brisk wind was as it blew against her. Winter had held its own magics, but she was glad the days were lengthening again at last and the bad weather was fading away into a beautiful spring.

Many things had changed. Gabrielle straightened a little as they walked past the stable hands, and the men all ducked their heads for her. A flu had taken many of the slaves lives, and there were new faces almost everywhere she looked. Fire had destroyed two of the noble's castles, and they were now living on Xena's mercy in the fortress, and wolves had rampaged through some of the far holdings, bringing unexpected losses.

Many things were the same, as well. Palace intrigues, the gossips, the odd danger, but the realm had settled down over the long winter and seemed to accept Xena again as its master. The known evil, one of the nobles had muttered, when he'd thought Xena couldn't hear him.

Lucky for him, Xena had taken it as a compliment. Gabrielle followed the queen through the inner doors and up the grand staircase, to the first level rooms she'd picked all those months ago. "Hey, wait."

"Hey, no." Xena held the door open for her anyway, then followed her inside, her hands already unfastening her tunic and pulling it off over her head. The warm sunlight pouring in the windows outlined her lean, sinewy body for a brief moment, before she passed through into the shadows near the large bed.

She'd questioned the choice of the place, at first, but over the months of winter she'd come to truly like it, especially since the leaded glass panes allowed the chill weather to permeate the room and brought on a true appreciation of warm baths and snuggling by the fire.

Disgracefully decadent. But she'd found it impossible to say no to Gabrielle's pampering and by the end of the winter she'd decided being treated like a queen wasn't really that bad for her.

Not that she'd admitted that to anyone, of course.

She draped the damp fabric over a dress stand in the corner and headed for the bathing room, only to be met by Gabrielle coming in the other direction already carrying a soft, fluffy towel. "Ahhh." She held up a hand. "Get naked first."

Gabrielle handed her the towel, then obediently removed her own clothing, pausing in surprise when the queen promptly started drying her off beginning with the top of her ruffled head. "Hey. I'm supposed to do that to you."

"Shut up. I'm the queen and I make the rules." Xena told her. "Besides, which one of us gets sick?"

Gabrielle gazed sheepishly up from under pale brows.

"You cheat." The queen gave her an indulgent look. "Besides, it was my fault, remember? I got you wet." She dried the blond woman's ears. "Last thing I need is to have to run around after your sniffles again." She studied Gabrielle, smiling a little at the clear, honest gaze looking back up at her. "Tell you what."

"What?" Gabrielle's hands took hold of the bottom of the towel, and she started rubbing Xena's skin with it. "

"Let's forget about flowers and kicking ass." Xena rested her forearms on Gabrielle's shoulders. "Let's get into that bathtub, and scare the servants." She stroked her thumb along the side of Gabrielle's neck, as the smaller woman moved closer, and their bare skin pressed together. "We can beat people up later."

Gabrielle slid her arms around Xena and nuzzled her skin. "We could practice those wrestling things in the bath."

"Last time we did that, I had bruises on my ass for a week." Xena reached around her and picked Gabrielle up, feeling her laugh. "You and your bunny hops."

They made their way to the bathing room, amidst chuckles and kisses and the scattered reflection of friendly sunlight that echoed the laughter in bright twinkles and flashes of spring.

Gabrielle trotted down the steps and into the library, feeling well scrubbed and sated, a twitching grin present on her face as she walked confidently down the rows of scrolls that rose on either side of her. She could smell the musky scent of the skins and the wooden shelves, and the sharpness of ink nearby. "Jellaus?"

"Ah." A middling height gangly figure appeared from around a corner. "Though the sun is bright outside indeed, you make the room all the brighter." He ducked his head in a bow. "And a good afternoon to you, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle accepted the compliment with a grin. "Isn't it a great day?" She asked. "I love spring."

"As do we all." Jellaus, the court musician and queen's bard replied. "It was good to feel warmth on these old bones at last, that's for sure. Did I see you walking out with her Majesty, earlier?"

"Sort of." Gabrielle agreed. "I was walking, she was bouncing all over the place. You know how it is."

The musician laughed easily. "I do indeed! You bring the child out in her, Gabrielle, no shame in that." He stepped back and gestured her forward. "Do you need more parchment? Ink? I know you were working hard over these last long days."

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, I've got some left, thanks. What I really need is.. I wrote something, and I was wondering if you could make a song out of it."

Jellaus positively beamed at her. "Nothing." He stated sincerely. "Nothing at all would give me a greater pleasure."

"Well." The blond woman blushed a little, and produced a sheepish look. "You'd probably wait to see it first." She folded her arms over her chest. "I wrote it for Xena."

"Really?" Jellaus cocked his head. "Imagine that. Never would have figured."

It was hard to tell if he was kidding her, but Gabrielle thought he was. "Anyway, I'll bring it down later, I just wanted to ask you before I did."

The court musician put a hand on her shoulder. "You do know you could command it of me, my lady?"

Eruf. Gabrielle did, in fact, know that in a far off, in the brain sort of way. She never really acknowledged it in a heart sort of way though. "I'm really not a lady." She stated, frankly. "It feels a lot better just to ask people nicely, you know?"

Jellaus laughed. "Ah, Gabrielle." He gazed fondly at her. "Blessings on the gods themselves for gifting her Majesty with you." He said. "Shall I have it for you by the planting festival, it's three sevendays hence." He added. "Tis the first grand ball of the new year, and it would be fitting, to have a new song for such an occasion."

Silently, Gabrielle nodded. The first ball of the new year, and her true debut as Xena's consort. She was more than a little nervous about it. There had been public dinners over the winter, but they'd had a dour, somber air and little of festivity about them. Between the sickness and the wolves, people hadn't been in the mood to party, and Xena..

Xena had reserved her partying for their private quarters.

Gabrielle took a deep breath, and released it. The cold season had been long, true, but in many ways it had also been very educational and at least now she could actually walk in a dress without tripping over it. "That would be great, Jellaus. It's going to be a big event."

The musician nodded. "Tis true. I saw the wagons coming in earlier, some of the outlying regions. Was a long cold season for them, as well." He walked towards the entrance to the library, gently guiding Gabrielle by the arm. "I think her majesty will have much work to do, now that the sun has returned to us."

They exited the library and walked into the main hall, where a dozen servants were busy beating out the tapestries hanging on the wall and sweeping the floors. The big wooden doors at the front were flung wide open, and a cool spring breeze was blowing through, airing out the stale scent of wood smoke and old straw.

"Lady Gabrielle." One of the court dressers spotted her, and hurried over. "A moment of your time, I beg?"

"I will leave you to it, then." Jellaus continued on as she reluctantly slowed.

"Jellaus.. will you come by later?" The blond woman said. "I think Xena wanted to ask you about something also."

The minstrel turned as he kept walking, bowed, and reversed himself again without missing a step, before he crossed between two of the chamberwomen hard at work sweeping, and disappeared around a corner of the hall.

Gabrielle watched him vanish before she turned reluctantly back to the dresser. "Yes?" She eyed the man with some mild apprehension. He was small, with a somewhat pinched face and blinking eyes, and he constantly twiddled his fingers against each other in a fidgety twist.

"Her majesty has commissioned me to create a dress for you for the spring ball, m'lady." The man said. "May I be so bold as to ask what color you wish for it?"

Color. Gabrielle frowned a little, and glanced aside, still unsure of most of the court's complicated protocol. "Um.. " She paused. "Did her Majesty suggest a color to you?"

"Spring green, m'lady." The man provided promptly.

"Sounds great to me." The blond woman answered just as fast. "I like green. A lot." She nodded. "Anything else?"

"Yes, m'lady. I need your measures." The man said. "It will take but a moment. Will you let me come to you in your rooms?"

With a sigh, Gabrielle nodded. "Okay." She gestured for him to lead on. "But let's do it in your workroom. If it's only going to be a minute.. I have to get something for her Majesty and you know she doesn't like waiting."

"Oh! No. It will be very fast. I promise." The dresser said hurriedly. "Certainly. Very fast. Just a moment.. really." He almost ran ahead of her to the inner door and opened it, watching her anxiously as she caught up and they went through.

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The inner halls were a small labyrinth in themselves, but they were familiar to Gabrielle from her brief time as a servant herself. She knew the turns past the big one for the kitchens and she strode confidently along the rush strewn floor aware of the carefully shielded eyes watching her.

There was wariness there, and fear, and not a little envy, and she knew it. She, who had been one of them, in fact, the very least of them, now stood at the right elbow of the queen in a life of ease and privilege all of them could only dream of.

How unfair it must seem to them. Gabrielle glanced into an open doorway as she passed, seeing a circle of kitchen workers crouched in a circle, peeling tubers. It had taken her a while to stop feeling guilty all the time, in fact, and even now there were moments when she found it hard to believe how changed her life was in so relatively short a time.

A life never dreamed of. Never looked for. And yet, here she was.

“In here, m’lady” The dresser scurried ahead of Gabrielle and pushed open the door to his little chamber, a room full of fabrics and leathers, scraps of fur and hand wound spools of carefully spun thread. “Please, please.. it will just be a bare moment.”

Gabrielle went over to a roughly strapped stool and sat down on it. Looking around, she suspected most of the dresser’s subjects were measured in the lofty confines of their stately apartments, but she didn’t really mind.

Xena tended to make people’s hands shake, and the dresser often had pins in his. She’d learned to her bemusement that her queen and lover’s often wicked sense of humor usually resulted in either embarrassment or mild pain and so she was more than content to let the fussy man get what he needed from her here in private.

The dresser bustled over and she stood, catching sight of her own reflection in a nearby mirror. Though her hair was cut neatly to frame her face, and her body was draped in silk, she still saw a scruffy peasant looking back at her and she wondered again if Xena’s choice had been the wisest.

Not her choice to love Gabrielle. That, she cherished every moment of every day. Her choice of making Gabrielle her consort and forcing her to play a part she truly didn’t feel in her heart was anything of what she was inside.

“You have a lovely figure, m’lady.” The dresser chattered at her. “Simply lovely. So symmetrical.”

Gabrielle found her attention dragged hastily back to the man. “Um.. thanks.” She studied herself in the mirror. “If you say so.” She added in an undertone.

The winter season had given her a chance to fill out a little and under the silk her bones no longer stood out against her skin, but taking after the queen’s example she’d worked hard to keep that peasant muscle and while Xena gleefully beat up on people, she simply used her body in various hard ways, moving grain sacks in the stable or armor blocks up in the queen’s practice hall.

So her shoulders had become a little wider, enough to balance her profile out in any case and though she was pretty much useless with that stick Xena had given her at least she didn’t get knocked over quite as often as she had before.

“I will create some pleats here, yes?” The dresser said. “And pull this in here, don’t you think?” He gathered the fabric of the robe she was wearing with gingerly fingers, pulling it taut around her waist. “Does this please you?”

Gabrielle glanced at the result. “Sure.” She half shrugged, unsure of what effect he was looking for. “Looks fine to me.”

Truthfully, she hated being dressed up. Xena said she didn't like it either, but Gabrielle suspected the queen just said that because she felt it fit her image. She had seen Xena preening in her stately gowns enough to know they suited her ego regardless of what she said about it.

Xena was funny that way. It wasn't unusual for her to come in from a long, sweaty session with her sword and want her hair braided after her bath, and her silk robe settled around her. Gabrielle often found herself charmed by the dual nature of her lover and never quite positive what reaction she'd get from the unpredictable woman.

Which was fine with Gabrielle. She didn't mind looking at Xena in her beautiful clothes, or in her armor, or with nothing at all on, for that matter. The queen was simply gorgeous and after all, the sometimes overly complicated gowns were fun to untangle her from at the end of a long day. "Is that all?"

"Just one more thing, m'lady." The dresser ran a measure from her hip to her toes. "There, all finished, and thank you."

Gabrielle escaped in some relief and ducked out the door, heading back up the hallway. She had pastries to find, and a flagon of honey mead to recover and she could already see Xena's raised eyebrows waiting for her as she got back to the room so they could conclude their afternoon break.

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Standing on your hands, Xena had discovered, was just difficult enough for her to be a challenge, and easy enough not to cause her skin to break out in a sweat. She started out near one wall, launching herself head over tail to land on her hands and balance as her feet brushed the stone surface.

It took a minute, as her reflexes struggled to cope with the unfamiliar posture. She could feel the strain in her middle until her body adjusted and she flexed her shoulders a little to work the stiffness out of the joints.

She had a strong body, and she knew it. But her arms were far more used to handling weapons than lifting her weight and that was one reason she was doing what she was doing, since you never really knew when you'd need an edge somewhere.

It had been a peaceful winter. Too peaceful, to her mind. Aside from a few inconsequential squabbles, everyone had gotten along and she hadn't uncovered even one milquetoast plot to kill her the entire of the long cold season.

She wasn't stupid enough to think it was a sudden change of heart around her. The only change of heart that she trusted was her own, and now she was aware that she had more at stake to lose than she'd had in a very long time.

So it was just a matter of that – of time.

She shook her head to clear her hair from her eyes, then slowly turned in a half circle and surveyed the room.

Different perspective. You could see underneath furniture in a way you never did right side up. Were there dust bunnies?

Spiders?

No. Xena smiled, suspecting no bunny escaped Gabrielle's jealous eye and the spiders wisely stayed out of the corners. However. She was surprised to find, among other things, a cat under the bed.

"Hey!"

The animal peered at her suspiciously, blinking it's almond eyes. It was gray, with fluffy fur and a visbly bad attitude.

"Scat!" Xena took a few rocking steps forward, and the cat hissed. Accepting the challenge, the queen hopped forward, flexing her arms and jerking her body forward with admirable balance. "Hiss at me will ya? I've had scarier things than you for tea biscuits!" She yelled, baring her own teeth. "Yahh!"

The cat's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets and it turned tail and scurried from under the bed, away from the noisy apparition coming at it as it bolted for the door with an indignant yowl.

"Yahhh!" Gabrielle let out a startled yell. "Yah! What! Hey! Help!" She threw her hands up instinctively and found them full of fur and sharp claws. "YOW!"

Xena reacted without thinking, flipping herself upright and launching herself over the bed with her arms outstretched. The cat had jumped into Gabrielle's grasp, and was scratching her, and Xena grabbed it's tail and yanked it backwards as she crashed full into her consort and they both bowled across the carpeted floor in a tangle of limbs and fur and silk covered bodies.

The cat yowled angrily, digging it's claws into the carpet and starting to run, only to be jerked backwards when it reached the end of it's tail still held in Xena's strong fingers.

Xena tossed the cat from her and lay flat on her back, looking up at the ceiling and shaking her head as Gabrielle slowly collapsed on top of her, shoulders shaking with irrepressible giggling. "I'm going to have to go torture someone." She bit the inside of her own lip, to keep from joining her companion. "Immediately."

"W.. why?" Gabrielle managed to get out.

Xena covered her eyes with one hand. "I'm developing a sense of humor. Gotta nip that in the bud or who the Hades knows what'll happen next?" She finally allowed the laugh to emerge, her entire body shaking with it for long moments as they lay there together in the late afternoon light.

"Boy." Gabrielle finally wiped her eyes.

"Guess all that sex did make you go blind." Xena commented. "You could at least get my age right."

"Oh.. borfpf." Gabrielle scrubbed her face and rolled over, sprawling her legs out. "Sheesh.. Where did that cat come from?" She asked. "Boy, that scared the tail off me!"

The queen reached over and pinched her. "No it didn't."

"Ow. Xena."

Xena chuckled wickedly. "It was under the bed." She said. "I was looking for your underwraps I tossed down there before."

Gabrielle turned her head and looked at the queen, her eyes widening. "You were???"

"No. I was standing on my head."

The blond woman turned over onto her belly and started squirming over towards the big, plush bed. "I'll find em.. for goodness sake, Xena.. you shouldn't be hanging around under the bed.. you're the queen!"

Xena folded her hands over her stomach, her long length relaxed on the floor as she enjoyed watching Gabrielle hunt around under the bed. She started chuckling softly and crossed her legs at her ankles.

"So, where are my pastries?"

“Um..” Gabrielle squirmed around to look back at her. “In the other room. I heard you yelling so I.. um...” She scratched her nose with one finger, as some dust got into it. “I thought you were in trouble.”

“Gabrielle, Gabrielle, Gabrielle.” The queen twiddled her fingers. “How many times do I have to tell you I never get into trouble?”

“You are trouble. I know.”

Xena crooked a finger at her. “Get over here.”

Gabrielle peeked under the bed. Then she peered over at Xena again. “You were kidding me, huh?”

The queen chuckled. “I love watching your butt wiggle. C’mere.”

With a wry expression, Gabrielle crawled back over to where the queen was sprawled and settled next to her, the wool carpet tickling her bare middle as her tunic separated. She could see the devilment and good humor in Xena’s face, and it made her smile even though she’d been the victim of her little joke.

The good moods had gotten more frequent, she’d noticed. Xena tended to be moody in the best of times, and the moods were mercurial. She could be laughing one minute, then choking a noble in the next, but over the winter Gabrielle had seen a certain tendency in her to smile a little more, and relax a little more, especially when they were in private together.

Like now. Xena rolled onto her side and propped her head up on one hand. “So.” She said. “You abandoned my pastries to save me from a little pussy. Damn, that’s romantic Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle’s nose crinkled up as she felt a blush coming on, heating her face and bringing on another laugh from her companion. “It wasn’t supposed to be romantic.” She protested. “I was trying to protect you.”

“I know.” Xena reached over and pushed the pale hair out of her face with surprising gentleness. “Did that useless dressmaker see you?” She asked, in an abrupt change of subject. “I told him he better make something nice for you or I was going to cut his fingers off.”

Watching those blue eyes watch her, Gabrielle felt herself start to melt into the wool surface under her, the soulful regard almost stopping her from breathing for a moment. She was used to Xena’s kidding, and the sharp wit, and the sudden angers but these glimpses of something so much deeper still caught her by utter surprise.

A little intimidating.

Then the queen grinned and tweaked her nose, and things went back to normal. “Yes, I talked to him.” Gabrielle nodded. “He’s doing something green, with pleats. I think.” She reached over and played with the velvet belt tying Xena’s robe closed. “I’m sure it will be pretty.”

Xena pushed herself upright, then got to her feet. She waited for Gabrielle to scramble up next to her and then spent a moment pulling the laces closed on her linen tunic. “Know what the most fun part of that party’s gonna be?”

“Dessert?” Mild, green eyes blinked innocently at her.

“Punky muskrat.” Xena leaned over and kissed her. “Besides that. I’m going to decide who keeps their land grants that night.” She rested her arms on Gabrielle’s shoulders. “I get to do that once a year. Nothing like scaring the crap out of everyone to make a fun evening, huh?”

Gabrielle put her hands on the queen’s hips. “You mean.. you can take their houses away?”

“Yep.”

“Hm.”

Xena gazed fondly at the pale head resting against her chest. “You’re safe.” She said. “I only boot out nitwits who piss me off.”

“Oh.”

The queen cleared her throat. “And incompetent jerks who can’t manage the land.” She added, with a faint shrug. “It’s not just an exercise of my big ego.”

“I didn’t think it was that.”

“Everyone else does.” Xena injected a note of dark irony.

Gabrielle thought about that. She remembered, in a vague sort of way, how every harvest she’d sensed the tension of her parents when the landholder came by to collect his share, and count the sheep.

She remembered the way the man had looked at them, his eyes judging and critical. She hadn’t known what it was all about, but she remembered being afraid because she knew her parents were.

Was this the same thing?

If someone was a bad farmer, did that mean they didn’t deserve a home, and a place, and bit of bread to keep them?

What would they have done, if Da hadn’t been as canny, and they’d lost the cot they’d lived in? Would they have had to go live in the forest, in the makeshift shelters she’d once seen there, with haunted faces looking out from them?

Gabrielle frowned, and thought back to something Xena had told her once, about slaves really being freer than freemen were. There was, she had to admit, a certain logic to that she understood better than most did. There was a peace in not having to make decisions, wasn’t there?

“Hey!”

Gabrielle jumped, despite the fact she’d felt Xena’s ribs move as she inhaled to yell. “Yow!”

“Stop thinking.” Xena bumped her towards the doorway into the outer chamber, where the pastries and mead waited. “You will go blind.”

Gabrielle set the thoughts aside and willingly led the way into the bright, beautiful room. No matter what Xena’s decisions would be, she knew the queen had her own peculiar logic about them and in any case, in blunt honesty, she knew wherever the queen’s home was, hers was too.

If it was this richly furnished room, well, then it was. “They had those roasted nut pastries you like” She told the queen. “And I can tell you about my poem now.”

“Do you have to?”

“It’s about you.”

Xena selected a nutmeat from the top of the pastry and ate it. “Again?”

“I asked Jellaus to make it into a song.” Gabrielle told her shyly. “For the party.”

The queen stopped in mid chew. “Is it mushy?”

Gabrielle nodded.

“I’m going to make you scream like that cat.”

**

The torches were fluttering low on the ramparts as Xena paced them, the fading twilight casting only faint shadows across the stone and dimly outlining her tall form.

Overhead, a partly cloudy sky revealed twinkling stars edging past wisps of thick gray cotton and as she drew in a deep breath, she found a musky hint of rain on the edges of it. “Ah.” Xena walked to the edge of the wall and put her hands on it, looking out over the long stretch of ground sloping down from her stronghold to the fast running river below.

She felt edgy. There was a prickle in the air that might be an oncoming storm, but it brushed against her skin with a sense of prescience she’d learned years ago not to ignore.

A storm was coming all right. But not the kind that got you wet. Xena wasn’t sure how she felt about that, much to her surprise. She’d expected to be bored, as she usually was at the end of winter, and anxious for spring to bring new faces, new things..

New blood. She grinned into the darkness. Spring usually meant some kind of fighting, either internal as someone tried to kill her, or external, as some nearby warlord decided to try his luck with her before the weather cleared enough for decent drilling.

However. Xena rested her chin on her wrists. She wasn’t nearly as bored as she’d always been in the past. In fact, if winter’d gone on a little longer, it would almost have been all right with her. She’d started to perversely enjoy Gabrielle’s halting attempt at bad poetry, and it had become a fascination for her to hunt and discover the small gifts her consort would hide for her around their rooms.

A little basket of dried fruits. A wool scarf. Some new slippers. Xena never knew what it would be, and so, this little bit of mystery in her life intrigued her immensely.

“Mistress.”

“Yes?” Xena didn’t turn, recognizing the voice. “What brings a hoary old bore like you out on a pretty night like this, Lastay?”

“It is beautiful, true.” Her heir agreed, as though she’d passed him a bland pleasantry. “It is good to be able to walk out and not swaddle myself in a heavy cloak. A long, cold winter it was for sure.” He leaned against the wall next to her. “Very long indeed.”

“Wife still puking?” Xena inquired. “Guess that’s to get you ready for the rugrat, huh?”

“We are looking forward eagerly to the birth of our child, mistress.” The man’s voice was mildly rebuking. “It will be a great joy for both of us.”

“Bet it’ll be a greater joy for her.” Xena said. “She’s doing all the work.”

“Aherm.”

The queen chuckled, her attention caught as the moon came out from behind the clouds and lit the ground before the stronghold in silver. There were stolid outlines against the grass, and if she cocked her head to one side, she could catch the soft lowing of the cattle out munching the new spring greens.

“Did you find the cold months so onerous, Mistress?” Lastay laid his hands on the stone. “It seemed not so much as in the past, to me at least.”

Xena's nostrils twitched slightly. "You mean now that I'm getting serviced in bed on a regular basis?" She regarded him from the corner of her eyes. "Clever of you to notice."

"Mistress." Lastay cleared his throat slightly.

The queen laughed. "So tell me, Lastay – how many toadies have you collected so far? I've got a bet on."

The duke laced his squared, powerful fingers together. "It has been an interesting time for me." He acknowledged. "As you perhaps know, I was somewhat an outcast prior to your granting me the honor of being your heir, and to find myself the object of such.. herm.."

"Sleezeball courting?"

Lastay chuckled. "Mistress, you suffer no courtly delicacy, that is certain."

"I don't tolerate bullshit, Lastay." Xena said. "It's one of the reasons they hate me so much. We both know that. They live for the dance, I stomp on their feet."

"That is so." The duke agreed, half turning so he faced Xena. He leaned against the wall, his rugged form draped in nubbled linen and silk. "I was not so popular a choice to them, but I think there is, in truth, relief that you have an heir, and the continuity of the realm is assured."

Xena kept her attention on the darkness around them. "It's a relief to me." She finally said, briefly. "Enjoy the fawning, Lastay. By the gods I never did." Her gaze turned inward for a moment. "I think we both won from it."

Lastay nodded again. "It seems to me we did." He said. "Are you content, Mistress?"

Xena remained silent for a while, then slowly, she nodded. "I think I am." She smiled, a trifle. "For now." With a sudden motion, she leaped upward, and pressed her body up onto the wall, letting her legs dangle over as she sat there on the edge of a very long drop.

Lastay glanced around nervously. "Mistress, have a care."

"Don't wanna." The queen drew in a breath of the rich spring air. "I think we're in for trouble this season, Lastay. There's battle on the wind."

"Here? Surely..."

"Out there." Xena indicated the river. "It's been too quiet, too long."

The duke gazed dubiously at her, watching the dark hair stream back in the wind, that also ruffled Xena's silk clothing tight about her body. "As you say." He murmured.

"I say." The queen nodded. "And if nothing turns up, I'll go conquer someone." She hopped up again, this time balancing on the wall as she walked along in relaxed balance. "Stay in one place long enough, people get comfortable, Lastay. Start thinking they can take a nibble here, nibble there... you gotta break some eggs sometimes, or else you end up with rotten ones."

Lastay walked alongside her, safely behind the wall. "We have been at peace for a while, yes." He agreed. "It has given the realm a chance to grow, and prosper. That is not so bad a thing, I think." His face grew thoughtful. "But it is also true.. our safety is ensured by your majesty's reputation."

"Bet you ass it is." Xena said. "And just like people here forgot that with Bregos... how many out there have also forgotten it?" She turned and looked at him, hands on her hips. "Word's out, Brego's is gone. Think anyone out there'll get ideas, thinking he was the power here?"

Lastay folded his arms over his chest. "Bregos campaigned in your name."

Xena gazed outward, as the moon peeked from behind a cloud again and outlined her in silver.

"He had successes, the past season."

"True." The queen said. "But how much greater could they have been?" She asked. "If I'd been leading the army?" The clouds parted, and she spread her arms to accept the accolade of the stars twinkling overhead. "Can you picture it?"

Lastay was staring at her in shock, lost on the queen who was faced away from him. "Majesty, surely you are joking with me." He spluttered. "You do not intend to leave.. to lead the army again?"

Xena remained gazing outward for a moment, then she turned and gracefully leapt down off the wall, landing lightly next to Lastay. She leaned back against the stone, and crossed her ankles. "You don't want to run the place for a while? Thought we had that worked out."

The duke appeared stunned. "Truth be told, Mistress." He finally said. "I had not put thought to it, at least in so near a time."

Xena pushed off from the wall and patted his shoulder briskly. "Grow some balls." She suggested. "And start getting used to the idea." She walked past him, heading across the battlements to the far stairs, walking through bars of moonlight and quickly into the shadows.

Lastay released a held breath, and shook his head. Then he turned and walked the other way, towards the main hall.

**

Gabrielle dipped her quill into the small pot of ink on the desk and paused, thinking, before she carefully scribed another few words on the parchment in front of her.

A candle sat flickering nearby, lighting her task, and she mouthed the last few lines of what she'd just written as she sucked pensively on the end of the quill.

It was quiet in the royal chambers. Xena had gone out for a stroll on the wall and the windows were now dark around her. In the distance, she could hear the faint sounds of doors closing, and a tinkle of crockery, but nearby there was only the light brush of the bushes outside the glass and the soft crackle of the fire burning in the fireplace.

Spring, yes, but the stone rooms long held the chill of winter and she had her feet tucked into warm slippers that felt soft and comfortable against her skin.

Gabrielle wiggled her toes, and paused, then added the last few words and set her quill down, gently blowing on the letters as they dried from rich black to dark ochre. "Well.." She reread her poem. "I wonder if it's too corny." She nibbled the inside of her lip. "Xena hates mushy stuff, but I just can't write about blood all the time."

A soft knock came at the door. Gabrielle hopped off her stool and trotted over to the entrance, slipping through the stately public space and reaching the tall, ornate double portal. She worked the latch and pulled the nearer one open. "Hello?"

There was a soldier there, looking nervous. He had a soft, leather bag with him, and he blinked at Gabrielle in true startlement. "Um..." He stammered. "Was told to c'mere? See the queen?"

"Okay." Gabrielle checked quickly for the hawk's head on the man's chest. "She's not here right now. Is there something I can help you with?"

The man looked around. "M' name's Devon." He said. "I'm the armorer. Captain said to come here, as the queen wants some work done."

Ah. Gabrielle hesitated. "Well, you can come in and wait for her."

The man's eyes widened. "No, m'lady. I'll just wait on the steps like, over there. Thanks to you." He backed away from the door, leaving Gabrielle standing there with a puzzled expression, shuffling hastily backwards until he struck something big, and warm. "Ah.. watch yer going there ya... ah!"

Xena cocked her head, as she watched the man collapse to the ground, dropping his bag and covering his head with his arms. "Me?" She pointed at her own chest. "Watch where I'm going?"

"Ah! Ah! I didn't touch er! I swear it! I swear it! Gods help me!"

Xena put her hands on her hips and stared down at him. Then she looked up at Gabrielle, who was watching from the doorway. "If you're the armorer, I'm lucky we didn't lose half the army last season. You've got the brains of a damn sow."

"Mmmmmistress?"

Xena stepped over him and shook her head. "Get the Hades out of here. Tell Brendan I said forget it." She shooed Gabrielle inside as she approached, and closed the door behind her as she entered the royal quarters. "Idiot."

Gabrielle stayed prudently out of the way. "He seemed kind of strange." She offered. "Did you want something taken care of? I could take it down to the barracks for you."

"No. Not if that's any indication of what'd happen to it."

The blond woman clasped her hands behind her back. "Well.. I think you just scared him, Xena. Maybe you could give him another chance... I mean, if you really need your stuff taken care of."

Xena had gone to the trunk along one wall, it's scarred sides seeming very out of place in the opulence of the room. She put her hands on the top of it, then glanced sideways at her consort. "He wasn't here for me."

Caught offguard, Gabrielle could only blink at her.

The queen turned and sat down on the trunk, her windblown hair half in her eyes. "C'mere." She held out a hand. "Let's talk."

Gabrielle crossed to her and took her hand, clasping it and turning it over, then gently kissing Xena's knuckles in a motion so automatic it made both of them stop, and just look at each other for a very long moment.

Then Xena exhaled a little. "I'm considering doing something potentially lethal and possibly very stupid." She remarked.

"You are?" Gabrielle felt shocked, and a little unsettled. "Why?"

"Why not?" The queen replied. "Life's short. Gotta have fun while you can. My idea of fun is going to war."

Gabrielle studied the carpet for a bit. "So.." She glanced up at Xena. "Is that why you want me to get armor? So I can go with you?"

Xena nodded. "Something like that, yeah." She watched the blond woman's face, seeing a dozen expressions all blurring across it, fascinated by the complexity of it all. "What do you think about that?"

What did she think about it? "I think I'm going to look pretty silly in armor, but if I get to go with you, I don't care." Gabrielle said. "But.. I don't understand.. is someone attacking us?"

"No."

"Oh."

Xena looked down at her leather boots, the worn buckles winking dimly in the candlelight. "Remember what you said to me, the first time you saw me in my drill gear?"

Gabrielle nodded in silence.

"You were right. That is who I am." The queen said. "I'm a fighter. I want to fight. I want to go out and take the fight to someone, not wait for someone to bring the fight here." She flexed her free hand. "I want you with me. But I can't promise you won't get hurt. Or croak, for that matter."

Gabrielle looked around at the ornate room, and thought about all the plush comforts of it. She remembered what it had been like when they'd so briefly been on the road before the winter, and how difficult that had been.

How uncomfortable. The blond woman pondered that. On the other hand.. "We don't have to bring any frilly dresses with us, do we?"

Xena snorted, and her shoulders started to shake.

"Wherever you go, I go, Xena." Gabrielle smiled at her. "And I bet I end up getting some really good stories out of it. I sure did the last time."

The queen gave her a hug. "That's my muskrat." She gave her a kiss on the head. "I won't even make you wear a tin hat."

Change. Gabrielle put her arms around Xena. Change was fine, so long as they were facing it together.

**

"Ow!" Gabrielle hit the ground hard, the breath whooshing out of her lungs as she lost her grip on her stick and it rattled away across the stone floor. "Pig farts!"

Across the room from her, Xena leaned on her own stick and laughed, shaking her head ruefully. "Sorry about that."

The blond woman shook her stinging hand and examined it, wincing at the reddened skin visible in the torchlight of the practice hall. Then she let her arm drop and she looked over at her adversary, her shoulders dropping in dejection. "Xena, I think I'm pretty hopeless at this. Can I try throwing rocks or something?"

"What makes you think you'd be any better at that?" The queen walked over and crouched down next to her, then apparently thought better of that and sat instead, sliding her stick out between her legs. "You're not that bad."

"Yes I am." Gabrielle looked glumly at her leather boots.

"No, you're not." The queen leaned back on her hands. "Stop arguing with me. I'm in charge here, in case you forgot." She added. "You're just completely inept against me."

“I’d be completely inept against the cook.” Her consort sighed. “But yeah, watching you doesn’t make it any easier.”

Xena booted her stick up with one foot, then relaxed on her back, and started juggling the stick with her feet, keeping it up in the air with negligent ease. “Gabrielle, I’ve been doing this since I was old enough to piddle by myself. You don’t really want to have lived my life.”

Gabrielle thought about that for a moment. “No.” She admitted. “You’re right. But I’d really like to just be...” She frowned. “Just be good at something.” She paused. “Anything.”

Xena turned her head. “I can think of something you’re good at.” She drawled, producing a wicked grin. “And believe me, that ain’t common.” She kicked the stick ceilingward, and sat up, reaching behind her to catch the weapon and tucking it back alongside her.

“Xena.” Gabrielle gazed at her from between disheveled bangs. “That’s not something I can tell everyone about, you know?”

“Why not?”

The blond woman’s green eyes widened.

“Cooking’s not a crime.” The queen said, her own eyes widening in mock innocence. “Wasn’t that what you were thinking about?”

“Ugh.” Gabrielle laid down on her back. “You got me.”

Xena chuckled, then she reached over to give her consort a rub on the belly. “You’re so easy.” She teased. “But as a matter of fact you’re pretty damn good at that too – so stop whining.”

Gabrielle wriggled her shoulders, as a small rock poked between them. “I’m not whining. Am I?” She asked. “I don’t mean to... I think I’m close to cycling. Maybe that’s it.”

The queen pushed herself to her feet and prodded her companion with one boot. “All the more reason to get a move on.” She said. “Neither of us will be in the mood for this tomorrow.” She laid the stick across her shoulders and strolled to the other side of the practice hall, sparing a glance at the big, empty room with a sense of dour affection.

It was damply chill there, defeating the best efforts of the torches and even in summer the place had never really been comfortable.

Appropriate, because Xena had used it to hone her martial skills, focusing intently on her drills and the repetitive motions that made her a master, and any outside distraction would have been unwelcome to her. She hadn’t looked for comfort – the room had nothing on the floor and nothing on the walls save the sconces and perversely she’d often leave the windows open to let the breeze blow through and cool off her often sweat soaked skin.

It had been her one, true, inner sanctum. No one had been allowed up here. No one had been allowed to see her in all her raw self punishment that left her often on her knees in exhaustion, too weak to stand for stretches at a time.

Gabrielle had been the first person she’d allowed inside. “C’mon, muskrat.” Xena twisted her body to the right and left, loosening up a little. “Haven’t got all night. Places to go, people to terrorize, you to ravish.. you know how it is.”

The blond woman got to her feet and dusted herself off before she went over and retrieved the battered staff from the corner of the room. She took a moment to collect herself, then she lifted the stick up so it was across her body and tried to get her balance settled.

That was the hard part, with Xena. When she came at you, the first thing you had to do was conquer the intense desire to run away.

“Heh.” Xena stalked towards her, angling to one side.

Then you had to figure out how to stop her stick when she swung it without getting knocked head over bottom. “Be nice.” Gabrielle asked, as she focused her eyes on Xena’s weapon, and the midpoint of her body.

“Bwahaha.” The queen struck, tapping her stick against Gabrielle’s as she watched the kid scramble to block her.

Although she dearly loved her consort, even Xena had to admit in the area of coordination Gabrielle had gotten the short end of the stick. She just didn’t have the instinct for fighting, and so everything she did came only with intense thought, and effort.

Xena hadn’t thought about fighting in probably twenty years. Her body just knew what to do and she could depend on it to perform and defend her in almost any situation. She wasn’t sure her consort would ever develop even the beginnings of that, and so teaching her to fight was like teaching a barn cat to swim.

“Oo!” Gabrielle almost tripped, as she forgot to pick up the end of her staff, and almost sent herself pitching headlong. She recovered barely, then she took a firmer grip on the staff and faced Xena again as the queen moved forward and attacked.

Of course, here she was only playing, barely hitting the other weapon at all lest she truly hurt her adorable little bedmate. The last thing she wanted to do was that – she wanted Gabrielle to think of the drills as more fun than torture. “Good.” She complimented her, as her strike was deflected.

Gabrielle slid her legs apart a little more and tentatively moved her staff, it’s end clicking against Xena’s. “Is that right?” She flexed her fingers, the brief, linen tunic she was wearing outlining a body that had at least grown sturdier over the months and more able to take Xena’s roughhousing.

Xena gently reversed her staff and was pleasantly surprised when her blond adversary went with the motion and did the right thing, countering the direction and meeting her as their staves crossed in front of them. “Hey.. not bad!”

Just to get to this point with her had been agonizing. Xena had persevered for two reasons. One, because the challenge to her temper was significant, and she liked challenges.

Two...

“Aha.” Gabrielle hit back again, and incredibly, ducked in time to miss Xena’s return stroke across the top of her head. She skipped backwards awkwardly and without really thinking about it, impulsively swung the staff at the queen’s knees.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Xena reacted a hair too late to keep the stick from cracking against the side of her leg, with a sharp sting. “Whoa!” She yelped in surprised. “Ouch!”

Two, she wanted Gabrielle to be able to defend herself, even if it meant getting whacked.

Gabrielle stopped in her tracks, her eyebrows hiking up comically. "Oh by the gods.. are you okay?" She dropped her stick and rushed forward, diving to her knees to examine Xena's leg. "Xena, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to do that!"

"Leave that alone!" The queen tapped her on the head. "Of course you meant to do it! That's the whole point of this, Gabrielle! You're supposed to knock the Hades out of the person coming after you!!!" She stifled a laugh at the look of rueful consternation on her consort's face. "Hurt me, baby!"

Instead, Gabrielle leaned over and gave the spot a kiss.

Xena knelt, and patted her cheek. "Okay. Go sit over there and let me get the kinks out. We can have another go round when I'm tired." She let her fingers remain, gently tracing Gabrielle's rounded cheekbones and finding her lips moving into a smile as the blond woman looked up at her. "Smile, muskrat. You got a touch on me."

Gabrielle wrinkled her nose. "You let me."

The queen shook her head. Then she stood up and walked to a clear space, trading the staff for her sword, laying on the floor. She drew the weapon from its sheath and let the blade rest momentarily against her forehead, before she gently dropped the sheath and started her warm up.

Gabrielle folded her legs up crossed under her and leaned her elbows on her knees, content to sit and watch. She didn't believe for a minute Xena hadn't let her get a hit in just to make her feel better, but.. in a way.. just knowing that made her feel better.

Xena was doing her slow motion things, that she always started with. She had both hands on her sword, and she was doing figures with it in the air, moving carefully through the motions with her eyes fixed on an imaginary opponent.

As she moved the sword in a circle, she moved herself in a circle in the opposite direction, her body outlined in the torchlight as the light and shadow moved across her skin.

Beautiful. Gabrielle exhaled.

In a breath, Xena changed her drill, moving from slow motion to quicksilver in the blink of an eye, releasing one hand off the sword as she slashed it into a rapid series of attacks before spinning the blade from her right hand to her left and starting all over again.

Incredible. The blond woman didn't deny the envy she felt, no matter what Xena had gone through to attain it. She shook her head faintly as Xena swept the blade in a circle around her, then she launched herself skyward, flipping over backwards as she brought the weapon around.

Whack. "Ouch!" Xena managed to catch her balance and hopped to a halt, having smacked herself across her own ear in the middle of the maneuver. "Son of a bacchae!" She rubbed the spot, which stung a good deal more than her leg had, and snuck a glance at Gabrielle, who had an appropriately somber look on her face.

No giggles.

It had taken a lot of being in love to let the kid in to see her smack herself in the puss, that was for sure. "Wanna come kiss that one too?" She asked, putting one hand on her hip. "My head's still ringing."

Gabrielle got up and came over, standing on her tip toes to gently touch the queen's ear. "It's all red." She waited for Xena to bend her head, then she kissed the ear, feeling the warmth of the injury against her lips as the queen's breath tickled the skin on her neck. "Better?"

Xena rubbed the back of her neck, the echoes of the blow still sounding inside her ears. A strong desire to simply quit, and go back to their rooms stirred in her; it had been a long day and she'd decided to start drilling the army tomorrow.

Gabrielle put her arms around the queen and hugged her. "You're so amazing. I love watching you do this."

"Even when I look like an idiot?"

"You never do." Her consort assured her. "At least.. not nearly as much as I do when I try messing with that stick."

Oh well. Xena patted her on the back lightly. "Wanna see that again, the right way this time?" She waited for her consort to release her, then she stepped back and started the drill again, this time with the sword in her other hand.

Just in case.

**

Xena leaned her elbows, her eyes studying the map on the large worktable lit by the early morning sun. It was made of skins, well scraped and painstakingly stitched together, and the scrawled markings on it were, she noted, sadly in need of updating.

"Well well." The queen drew her dagger from its sheath and idly scraped a spot. "About time I brought this old thing current.. surprised bugs haven't chewed it to nothing."

"Were you asking me something?" Gabrielle appeared at her right elbow.

"Yeah." Xena said. "I was asking you to take my clothes off."

Gabrielle looked around at the lofty, mostly empty throne room. "Okay." She gave a slight shrug, reaching for a tie on Xena's sleeve. "You're the queen."

"Hm." The queen in question studied the slim fingers easing under the fabric around her wrists. "Decisions, decisions." She sighed. "Be the queen, shock the nobles.. be the queen, shock the nobles.. damn it's tough to be me some days."

Privately, Gabrielle didn't think it was hard for Xena to be Xena at any time. She folded her hand around the queen's and peered at the map. "What's this?"

"What happened to you undressing me?"

"Do you really want me to do that?" Gabrielle turned her head and looked up at Xena. "I thought you called for Brendan."

"Maybe he likes to watch." The queen chuckled. "No, you little muskrat. I don't want you to strip me naked and ravish me."

Gabrielle cleared her throat, glancing at the guards near the door.

"Now, anyway." A wicked twinkle flashed in Xena's eyes. "And to answer your question, that's a map." She spread her free hand on it. "It's my map."

Gabrielle leaned on the table and surveyed the skins. "It's pretty." She commented, tracing the lines along one side. "Did you make it?"

"I did." The queen said. "In more ways than one. This is the map I used to conquer the lands we're in right now, and those across the mountain." She touched a spot. "That's where I bivouacked the army the night before we invaded."

"Ah." The blond woman studied the marks. "Why there?"

Why there. Xena cast her mind back. She could recall it being a cool fall day, with a touch of rain in the air as they'd moved up through the trees and cleared the pass, seeing the fertile valley spreading out before them. "There was a slide there." She said. "Piles of rocks we could mask ourselves behind."

"You hid?" Gabrielle gave her a quizzical look.

A faint smile crossed the queen's face. "We didn't want them to see us coming, Gabrielle." She turned her head and looked at her consort. "Easier to kill people that way."

"Oh."

Xena picked up her dagger again and scraped the hide. "Gotta update this so I can use it again." She said. "See this blank area here?" She pointed to one side of the hide. "I'm gonna fill that in, Gabrielle. It's gonna be mine."

Solemnly, Gabrielle studied the blank spot. "Yours?"

"You can have some too." The queen said.

"But... don't we have enough stuff? Do we need more?"

Xena turned and looked at her, one eyebrow cocked upward. Was the girl kidding her? She examined Gabrielle's face, turned towards her in open question, no hint of cynicism evident. "Let me ask you a question." She said. "How many sheep were enough?"

Gabrielle set to pondering that, leaving Xena in peace to scrape off the troop positions she'd marked on the hide, the soft sound of the blade rasping against the skin loud in the room.

A soft knock came at the door. The guard looked at Xena in question, and she waved a hand at him. The man walked over to the door and unlatched it, pulling it open to reveal Brendan's stocky form. "Sir?"

The troop captain entered. "Mistress?" He ignored the guard. "Ye wanted me?"

"Yeah." Xena continued her work. "I wanted Gabrielle to strip me naked too, but I guess I'll have to settle for you, huh?"

"Mistress?"

The queen looked up. "Forget it. Listen. I want you to start preparing for campaign." She said. "I want to move out after the festival."

Brendan slowly approached her table. He mounted the steps to the dias and looked at the hide covering it, the edges slightly ragged draped over the sides. "Ah." He touched the flap with his fingers. "Haven't seen this in a long while."

"Too long." Xena picked up a quill and scribed a few words into the map. "I want to fill in the empty spaces." She was aware of Gabrielle coming closer, the warm touch of her consort's upper arm against her elbow distracting her a bit. "So get your asses in gear."

She knew Brendan was looking at her, and she guessed Gabrielle was too, for different reasons. After she let the silence go on for a bit, she looked up sharply. "Someone have a problem?"

Her troop captain chewed the inside of his lip. "Not a problem, Mistress." He replied. "Just surprised, as all. Thought you said way back when you wasn't going to do this no more."

Ah. "I lied." Xena went back to studying her map.

"So... what's over here?" Gabrielle went over to the blank spot. "Is this where that little path goes, in back of the garden?" She traced a line past the walls of the stronghold, to the base of a green mound. "There's that big hill, and the tower there."

"Used to be barren ground." Xena said. "But it's been settled the last couple years... some dirtbag overload thinks he owns the forests past that. We'll start there." She leaned on the table. "I want to take from there..." Her finger traveled over the blank portion to the end. "To there. Before the end of the season."

Brendan scratched his head. "You always sent Bregos this way." He pointed to the opposite side of the map. "He did all right, seems like. Got some good lands." His voice was carefully diffident. "Least we know what's what thereabouts."

"Exactly why I don't want to go that way." Xena said. "I've got no intention of walking in that no talent crotch deficient pinhead's footsteps." She looked directly at Brendan. "So get your act together, and start planning for a campaign, the old way. My way."

Brendan took a step back, put his fist to his chest, and bowed his head. "Will be done, Mistress." He announced, in a firm voice. "You can count on us."

"One, two, three..."

"Mistress?"

Xena waved her hand at him, and shook her head. She waited until the door closed behind him before she turned to Gabrielle, who was still studying the map with pensive eyes. "So."

"So?" Her consort turned towards her.

"So what other pithy things are you going to say about my sudden desire to rape and pillage?" The queen asked. "Brendan already thinks I'm nuts."

Gabrielle snuggled in next to her and slid her arm through the queen's, ending up tangling her fingers with Xena's as she put a gentle kiss on her shoulder. "I don't think he thinks you're nuts."

"Sure he does."

"I think he's just wondering why you want to go out there where it's dangerous and take a chance to get more stuff when you already have a lot."

Xena gazed across the room in silence, before she turned and went nose to nose with Gabrielle. "Because life's nothing but a big ass chance, Gabrielle." She told her consort. "And if you stop wanting, you start dying. I've got no intention of dying any time soon."

She butted heads with the blond woman, then she disentangled herself and walked around the edge of the table, spreading her arms out. Over the white silk shirt she had on, she'd tossed on her house armor, for the first time since she'd retired.

Black strips of soft leather and chain mail – it wasn't something she'd fight in, but it would turn the odd knife point and served to remind everyone it's wearer was no paper general. It draped over her long form to mid thigh and fastened with a double dragon's head buckle at her waist and the constriction felt good after all those years of silken robes and tassels.

Brendan did think she was nuts. That was all right, because he had remembered correctly her saying she was done with fighting. Done with the field of battle. Now she'd have generals to go out and fight for her, die for her.

Win for her.

It was what queens did, right? Xena clenched her fists lightly, then released them. It was what queens did, and for a while, she'd lived that lie to the utmost, taking her pleasures where she wanted them, taking likely looking subjects to her bed, letting Bregos go out and earn the land, earn the laurels, and earn the glory.

Well. Xena put her hands on her hips. To Hades with that. "Gabrielle, I warned you about the real me, didn't I?"

Arms closed around her, and Xena felt a gentle warmth cover her back. She glanced down to find Gabrielle's head peeking up from under her arm, and despite it all it made her smile. "Didn't I?"

The blond woman slid around in front of her and kept hold around her waist. "You told me who you thought you really were, yes."

A dark eyebrow edged up. "Do I hear skepticism in that muskratty little voice of yours?" Xena laced her fingers behind her consort's neck. "Don't tell me after all you've seen of my ruthless and bloodthirsty nature that you doubt me, Gabrielle."

The light spilled into the window and highlighted Gabrielle's pale head, warming her eyes with an inner fire that seemed to burn right through Xena. "Tell me I'm bad, muskrat." The queen whispered, touching her face with the palm of one hand.

"I love you." Gabrielle answered, in a soft voice.

"Wasn't what I asked." But Xena accepted the words anyway, understanding the message behind them. "But I guess it's a start." She leaned over and gave the waiting lips a kiss, tasting apple on them as her body slipped out of her control and she pulled the blond woman close.

Well, there was ruthless...

Gabrielle's hands slipped under her armor and without warning, the buckle loosened.

And then there was ruthless.

Part 2

Gabrielle pushed the gates shut behind her and stood for a moment, appreciating the beauty of the garden before she continued inside. One hand was clasped firmly around the handle of a large basket, and she began a leisurely stroll around the richly fragrant space.

The castle garden was a special place for her. She'd spent many a wonderful moment in it with the queen, of course, but more than that, it represented to her a place where she was in charge.

“Oo.” Gabrielle smelled the heady scent of peaches, and she circled the tree, gazing up into the branches.

Really in charge. She was the one who told the gardeners what to plant, and decided where to put the rich and savory herbs and the fragrant fruit trees she knew she could delight Xena with. “Ah.” She found a just ripe specimen, and carefully detaching it, she placed it in her basket.

Xena had told her, a dozen times if any, that she’d take her meals from the barracks mess and not care a bit – but Gabrielle knew better. She wasn’t sure which one of them enjoyed her cooking their meals more, but it gave her a definite sense of purpose and she wasn’t about to give that up.

No way.

Freed slave, she was. Xena’s consort, she was called. But Gabrielle knew that at the root of it all she was a shepherd’s kid with few skills and aside from Xena, few prospects. “Let’s see what we’ve got here.. any berries?”

She ducked under a thick, green bush and hunted among the leaves, spotting a thick cluster of blue black fruits dangling there. “Ahah.. gotcha.” She plucked the berries, then wandered over to where the herbs were planted in their wooden racks, exuding a mixture of scents into the air.

It had taken a while, naturally, until she’d learned what Xena liked. There had been a number of failed experiments, but overall, she hadn’t done badly at it and it hadn’t been long before the queen had dispensed with even the hollowest of protests and instead simply accepted the offerings, apparently delighting at being surprised when Gabrielle could manage it.

And oh, she loved delighting the queen in any way she could. Gabrielle smiled, as she added two fragrant blossoms to the basket. Today she planned on a nice cold fish for lunch, with some fruit and fresh walnuts. The sun had warmed the castle and taken a bit of the chill out of it, so she thought Xena might like that especially if she set a piece of the honeycake she’d left by the hearth along side it.

Anything sweet was an easy bet. Gabrielle browsed through the bushes, picking up a few more berries, and then turned to the section where she’d had tubers and roots planted. She knelt beside the first row and plunged knowledgeable fingers into the soil, feeling a mixture of dampness and warmth that made her nod to herself approvingly.

Then she paused, and studied the row. “I wonder if I’ll even get to taste these.” She murmured, remembering the queen’s words. “How long does a war take, anyhow?”

“Gabrielle.”

The blond woman turned and rose in one motion, leaving the basket where it was as she readied herself for trouble at the unfamiliar voice. “Yes?” She searched the area warily. “Who is it?”

Very slowly, a figure emerged from between two bushes, staying well away from her. It was a woman, hardly more than a girl, really, with the worn but sturdy clothing of a kitchen slave and bare feet. She had dark hair, and freckles, and she looked intently at Gabrielle as they stood watching each other. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

Gabrielle relaxed a little. The face was in fact familiar, but her life had been so focused in the last few months she had to shake the memories around a little to figure out who the girl was. “That’s not true.” She said, as recognition flared. “I do remember you. I just didn’t expect to see you here.”

The girl looked at her. “What’s my name?” She challenged Gabrielle, in a soft voice.

One of the things Gabrielle had found to occupy the idle moments was a newfound ability to picture things in her mind, as she thought about stories to tell Xena. Now the names in the old scrolls had faces for her, and now she found the ability matching the face to a name she'd last spoken long before the frosts. "Celeste."

Celeste pulled a leaf from the bush she was standing near and rolled it between her fingers. "That's funny. I figured you completely forgot us." She paused. "What's left of us, anyway." Her eyes flicked to Gabrielle's face. "Did you know half the people down in the kitchens died in the cold?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I knew." She said. "The sickness."

Celeste paused, then nodded back. "Did you think about all of us, down there?" She asked. "Do you, ever? You were one of us, once."

Had she ever been part of them? Gabrielle looked back on her arrival in the realm and had to wonder. She thought about those first terrifying days, and her reception in the lower kitchens.

Kindness? Her lips twitched. The only kindness she'd found was from Toris, who had turned out to be an evil she'd never expected.

"Sure." The blond woman let her hands rest on her thighs. "I think about people down there almost killing me." She said. "I think about them betraying Xena, and letting Brego's men in."

The other woman glanced around nervously. "That's not what I meant."

Gabrielle half shrugged. "It's the truth. I had no friends there." She said. "Even after I got Xena to save you, down in the barracks.. everyone hated me."

"That's not true."

"I have scars to prove it." Gabrielle lifted her hand to her head, touching her hairline at her temple.

Celeste flushed. "You don't understand... it was.. we had no choice." She protested. "They said we'd die if we didn't go along."

"You always have a choice." Gabrielle picked up her basket. "I had a choice and I chose her." She gestured towards the gates. "I have to go now." She walked forward purposefully. "Excuse me."

The slave took a step back, watching her warily as she closed in on her, then brushed past, heading for the entrance to the garden. "Gabrielle.. wait."

Halfway there, Gabrielle stopped, and looked back over her shoulder.

"Is it true?" Celeste asked. "Is she going to war?"

Now, why, Gabrielle wondered, was she asking? She'd learned enough of court intrigue to become wary over the months of odd and innocent questions. But Xena had been very public in her intentions, so she saw little harm in answering. "That's what I hear." She said.

"Are you going too?"

Even stranger question. "Yes." Gabrielle said. "Of course I am."

Celeste slowly backed away from her, keeping her in view before she ducked between two thick bushes and disappearing. The branches wavered a little in her passing, then went still, and the air filled again with the soft buzz of insects and a single bird song.

Gabrielle stared at the empty spot briefly, before she shook her head and continued out, closing the gates behind her and taking a breath of spring air as she tried to put Celeste out of her mind and her troubling questions aside.

Once on the path to the stronghold, she paused again as she heard the sound of rhythmic hoofprints coming towards her, and she hurried ahead as she recognized the cadence and began to smile. .

**

“But Mistress.” Stanislaus wrung his hands. “It’s barely spring.. the landholders haven’t recovered from the cold season yet. If I call for all their provisions.. why.. what will they make provision for their people on?”

“Damned if I care.” Xena sorted through some scrolls, paying scant attention to her senechal. “No one cared when Bregos asked last year.”

“It was a far kinder season last year, Mistress.”

Xena looked up at him. “Are you suggesting that’s my fault?” She asked, in a silky tone.

Stanislaus’ eyes widened sharply. “Oh, no! Mistress!” He held both hands out in a warding gesture. “By the gods, no. I was just saying what all know.”

The queen leaned on her elbows, studying him from narrowed eyes. It had been a hard winter, no discounting it, but she had no intention of waiting till the first crops were in to start off. “Send the call out.” She said, with a note of finality in her voice. “Tell them to send what they have, and if it’s not enough, then I’ll come get what I need.” She added. “Personally.”

The seneschal blinked, and nervously fingered his beard. “As you wish, Mistress.” He finally said. “I will send the messengers out immediately.” He waited, watching her face. “Is that all you wish of me now?”

Xena eyed him. “I wish your head would fall off and roll across the floor.” She said. “How’s that?”

Rapid blinking. “Mmmmistress?”

“Go away.” The queen waved a hand at him. “Before I instantly gratify myself.”

The seneschal pattered quickly to the door and went through it, leaving Xena to her solitude. She chuckled under her breath and went back to her scrolls, opening one and studying it. “Let’s see.” Her brow creased as she read the words in it.

Lists, mostly. Notes to herself from long ago reminding her of what she needed on your average rape and pillage. “Salt.” She snapped her fingers. “Forgot to tell him to get that.” She clucked her tongue and scribbled a note on a fresh sheet of parchment.

Then she paused and glanced around the room, allowing herself an uncertainty she’d never display to anyone else. “Damn, I hope I didn’t forget how to do this.” She murmured. “Feel like my head’s been asleep for a few years.”

She sorted through the scrolls again and peered at one. This held a set of diagrams, x’s and squiggles and she studied it, nodding once or twice to herself. Troop formations, penned by her younger hand after the conquest of the realm and left to gather dust at the bottom of her campaign chest.

Gathering dust.

"I think I've been gathering dust." Xena said, with a sigh. She shook her head and made a few more notes, glancing up again as a knock came at the door. "Next time I hang a ripped off arm on the damn thing. Yeah?" Her voice rose on the last word. "What?"

After a moment, the door slowly opened, and the guard peeked inside. "Mistress?"

"Not here." Xena told him. "Sorry."

The man looked uncertainly at her.

Xena sighed again. "Yes?"

The guard looked around. "Mistress, there is a man here, said he's an armorer and you sent for him." He addressed a hanging wall sconce. "Should I send him in?"

Ah. "Yeah." Xena replied, briefly. "But only if he's brighter than the last one. Otherwise I'm gonna hang him out the window by his man's parts."

The guard disappeared, and for a long moment there was silence. Xena leaned on her elbows again, wondering what was going on outside the door. Was her guard giving the man a quiz? Telling him to run for his life? Running with him for his life? Having lunch?

The door creaked open and a tall, thin man in workman's leathers entered. He had a closely trimmed beard and moustache and the thick, powerful arms and wrists of a worker in metal. "Your Majesty." He came forward, and dropped to his knees before her table. "You honor me beyond my station."

Ahh! Xena came around the table and put her hands on her hips. Now that was more like it. "That remains to be seen." She told him. "I need you to make some armor."

The man's head tipped up and he looked at her with smokey gray eyes. "Your majesty's armor needs no work from these hands." He lifted his. "It is fine work."

The queen smiled at him in frank, open enjoyment. "I may let you meet my horse. You have a mind." She commented. "The armor's for my adorable, if martially deficient bedmate." She said. "So it has to be better than mine."

"Better, Majesty?"

Xena nodded. "It has to keep her alive." She said, in a suddenly deadly serious voice. "Because she does stupid things like get in the way of arrows coming my way, and damned if she's going to get hurt on my behalf. Understand?"

The armorer half smiled, his head ducking again. "Yes, Majesty." He said. "I do understand."

A little silence fell. "What's your name?" Xena finally asked.

"Jonas, Majesty."

"Welcome to Hades handbasket, Jonas."

"Thank you, Majesty."

**

Gabrielle knelt by the fire, humming softly under her breath as she worked, one ear cocked to listen to the sounds in the outer room. Xena was in there talking to some men, and she could hear the queen's voice floating over to where she was kneeling, the words inaudible but the music of it clear as a bell.

She loved to hear Xena talk. Even when she was cursing, she still liked it, and the few times Xena had sung to her were cherished moments above all others.

Beautiful.

She gave the soup a stir, then straightened as she heard Xena's footsteps approaching. She turned and a smile crossed her face as the queen appeared in the entrance to their private chambers, leaning against the doorway and crooking a finger at her. "Hi."

"Hi." Xena said. "Busy?"

Gabrielle wiped her hands as she got to her feet. "Just getting us some lunch ready." She answered. "Did you need me for something?"

"Hedonistic pleasure." The queen replied promptly. "But for right now, I just want you to come get fitted for something sexy."

Gabrielle sighed inwardly, but set her hearth cloth down and headed for the door, running her fingers through her hair to settle it. "I didn't think the tailor would be ready yet.. I just talked to him yesterday. Guess he wants to keep you happy, huh?"

Xena caught her arm and pulled her gently to a halt. "Keep me happy?" The dark haired woman looked sharply at her. "You got something against looking nice?"

"No.. no, I.." Gabrielle hesitated. "I didn't mean that, of course I like it, in fact I.." She fell silent as Xena's finger touched her lips.

"No." The queen tapped her finger against her consort's mouth. "No lies, remember? Don't start that with me, Gabrielle. I don't need you mouthing off like the rest of these losers telling me only what I want to hear."

Gabrielle felt her heart beating double time.

Xena watched the blond woman's face, seeing the fear and uncertainty, barely hidden, lurking there. "What's wrong with you?"

Gabrielle swallowed, but kept her eyes fastened on Xena's. "I just want you to be happy." She uttered. "So if dressing me up makes you happy, then I'm glad to do it. It's not a lie."

"But you don't like it." The queen pressed her. "Do you?"

After a moment the blond woman tilted her head slightly. "Not really, no." She admitted. "I mean..it's okay, but I'd rather be in your colors, or just this." She indicated the cotton tunic. "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

Now, Gabrielle looked down. "I don't want to disappoint you." She said. "I don't think I'm really cut out for this consort stuff."

Xena patted her cheek. "Bullshit." She leaned over and kissed her on the lips. "You're the best consort I've ever had. So pull your sheepskin socks up, herder, and c'mon in here. I want you wrapped in pink lace for dinner tonight."

Without moving a muscle, Gabrielle grimaced. "Okay." She wasn't fond of pink, and she hadn't thought Xena was either, but with the queen, you just never knew. "Can it be dark pink at least?"

"Wuss. You don't like pink lace?"

“Not really.”

“How about we curl your hair?” Xena teased. “You’d look cute.”

Gabrielle relaxed a little, realizing her tail was being pulled. “Okay, if you get yours curled too.” She said, as they walked together into Xena’s public audience space.

Xena growled a little.

“And you let me braid it.”

“Oh, you’re pushing it.” The queen warned her, as they slipped past the heavy, hanging curtains to where Xena’s worktable was set up, and two men waited. “I’m gonna spank your wooly tail for that later.”

Gabrielle smiled, as they closed in on the two strangers, and she straightened a little as the nearer one, a tall, bearded man, studied her intently. “Hello.” She murmured warily.

Two? Sheesh.

Both men bowed. “M’lady.”

Xena snickered. “Boy she’s got you both fooled.” She ruffled Gabrielle’s hair, and smiled, taking the sting off the comment. “This is Gabrielle.” She eyed the two men. “She’s never been to war before, so I want you to kit her out with everything she’s gonna need.”

The men bowed again. “Twill be an honor, Majesty.” The shorter of the two said, in a deep bass voice.

Gabrielle’s ears perked up. That sounded way more interesting than pink lace. “You mean, like you have?” She asked the queen. “When you went on that trip?” She thought about the leather chests and the folding cups and her eyes brightened. “Wow.”

The queen put her hands on her hips. “Well.” She drawled. “You’re gonna have to share my bed and my tent, but yeah. Everything else.” She found herself somewhat bemused by the ill hidden excitement in her consort’s face. With a faint shake of her head, she turned to the men. “No stinting.” She pointed at them. “She gets the best.”

Both workmen smiled. “Of course, Majesty.” Jonas half bowed again. “Does her grace bear weapons?”

“Well..” Gabrielle hesitated.

“A staff.” Xena replied for her. “And she’s pretty good with a sling.” She walked Gabrielle over to the two. “Make sure what you put her in let’s her move.” Now the queen’s voice became serious. “She’s got good reflexes.”

“I do?”

“Scale and chain, then, Majesty?” Jonas said, his voice brisk. “It would suit her, I think. She has the shoulders for it.”

Gabrielle looked at each shoulder. “I do?”

“Yeah.” Xena agreed. “That’d work. So go on, and get started. We don’t have much time.” She bumped Gabrielle with her hip. “Eddars, she needs waxed cloaks, and boots that keep her feet dry. Do it right.”

“Majesty.” The shorter man held an arm out. “your grace, do me the honor? We will surely take good care of you.”

Wow. Gabrielle trotted forward willingly, her heart soaring at the queen's words. It felt so good to really be a part of what was going on, she hardly knew what to think, and she quickened her pace as they left the queen's chambers and headed out into the hall.

Xena watched them go, a smile on her face that turned a bit wry as she walked back over to her worktable and put her hands on it. "I could have promised her gems and golden underwraps, and not make her as happy as offering her chain mail did. What a nutcase."

"Majesty?" Stanislaus had entered, and he hesitated. "Were you speaking to me?" He asked. "I have sent messengers out, and Mistress, a rider is approaching, the guard sent word."

"From the west?" Xena asked, sharply.

"I know not, Mistress." The seneschal answered. "Just up the main road."

"Have him brought to me." Xena said, rolling up some of the scrolls, and tying them with efficient movements. "Now things are starting to happen. I can feel it, can't you, Stanislaus? The whole world's waking up around us."

The seneschal gazed at her in momentary puzzlement. "Yes, Mistress." He said. "I'm sure its as you say." He draped a light cloak over the high chair near the door. "As you asked, Mistress. I will go attend again to the many details of preparedness."

Xena rolled her eyes, then she went to the windows and looked out, putting her hands on the jamb to either side. The sun was pouring in the room and it spilled over her, raising her spirits even further. She watched the breeze ruffle the flowers in the garden and found herself enjoying the colors of them.

Far off, she caught a sound that made her smile even wider. The soft clank and thud of fighters practicing in the yard, accompanied by the hoarse yells of men.

Yeah.

Suddenly the stronghold felt small around her, and she felt a wild urge to be outside it's walls, under the wide, blue sky and away from the court and all it's finery.

She wanted to be free. She wanted to be on the edge of danger, where every day, every moment would bring new things and she could see the sun rise over unknown land at every morning.

Xena rested her head against the sun warmed glass, understanding in a deep way the excitement she'd felt from Gabrielle as her consort went off with the armorers. She didn't know how horrible it would be to be out on campaign, but it didn't matter just like it didn't matter to Xena, who most certainly did know.

She'd asked Gabrielle what she remembered about the journey they'd taken before the frost, and her answers had told Xena everything she needed to hear.

She remembered the crystal clear skies, and the stars, and the peace of the evening fire. Not the cold, and the misery of the weather, and the fear, and the anguish they'd both been through.

Good sign.

"Mistress."

The queen exhaled. "Yes, Jellaus?"

"Must the little one go with you?" The court musician asked, in a gentle voice.

Xena stared at the flowers. "Yes." She answered, in an equally soft tone. "Oh yes."

"Would it not be better to leave her safe here?" Jellaus persisted. "She is such a gentle soul."

Xena turned and leaned back against the glass. "She's mine." The queen said, flatly. "She doesn't want me to leave her here." She watched the musician's face. "Go on. Ask her."

He sighed. "No need, Mistress. I know it for the truth." Jellaus said. "I just fear for her, is all."

"Fear is pointless." The queen remarked. "You can die right in your bed if one of those spider's gets ya, Jellaus. If we go out there and croak, at least we'll croak doing something and with any luck, it'll be quick."

The minstrel sighed again.

Xena eyed him. "Wanna go too?" She guessed. "Tired of making songs about flowers and stupid birds?"

His lips twitched. "And little mice." He murmured. "Ah, Mistress."

The queen merely chuckled wickedly, and turned back to the sun.

**

Wow. Gabrielle paused for a moment, leaning against the wall and feeling a bit overwhelmed. "I had no idea you needed that much stuff to be a warrior." She shook her head, then straightened her tunic, a bit disarranged from her session with the outfitters. "But boy, it's going to be great to have all that stuff when we're walking around out there."

Exciting. But a bit sobering too, as the armoror carefully measured her for all the things she'd need to protect her while they were out on campaign, and looked at her hands for what seemed an eon to fit a small hilt to them.

Definitely sobering.

However, lunch had passed, and the sun was starting to arch towards the west and it was time for some exercise. She pushed off from the stone and walked down the path away from the main tower, past the blacksmith busy at his anvil, and two men busy building crates.

There was an air of anticipation even she could feel, almost a humming energy present as she threaded her way through the work areas and it reminded her of the look she'd seen in Xena's eyes as she talked about the preparations for battle.

War was terrible, Jellaus had told her, and yet... She remembered the battle at the gates, and her heart racing, even through the horror of the bloodshed.

And yet.

Gabrielle slipped inside the stable door and ducked past the hanging posts of bridles and tack, carefully skirting the big box stall that held Xena's black stallion as she went to the smaller enclosure next to it.

Inside the enclosure was a pony, his back just even with Gabrielle's eyes, his off white coat and large, irregular reddish patches making him somewhat out of place along side his fancier neighbors. "Hi, Patches!"

The pony's head lifted from where he was chewing hay in the corner, and he wheeled and came over to her, shoving his shaggy head into her chest in an evident warm greeting. "How are you? She scratched him behind his ears and smiled, feeling a deep affection for the animal. "Want to go for a ride?"

Patches bobbed his head, and Gabrielle slipped his bridle on, then opened the door to his enclosure and led him towards the door. As they passed Tiger's stall, the big stallion whickered and poked his head over the edge, whuffling at them.

Gabrielle paused and patted his nose. "Sorry, big boy, you're out of my league. Your mom'll be down here in a little while, okay?" She grinned wryly at the grumpy head toss, and continued on, pushing the door open and emerging into the sunlight with her agreeably ambling steed.

Outside, the busy workers hardly gave her a second look, now used to her presence near the queen's favorite animals. Two of the guards, however, hurried forward. "Hold it, guys." Gabrielle called out. "I'm just going into the grassy spot over there."

One of the guards looked over at the field. "Tis well, m'lady." He said. "Does her majesty come soon, then?"

"Yep, she's just finishing up a meeting." Gabrielle paused. "You ready for me to jump on, Patches?"

The pony eyed her with what could only be amusement, but he stood steady as a rock as she crouched a little, then hopped and pulled herself up, swinging one leg over his back and getting onboard. "Good boy." Gabrielle patted his neck, as she settled her legs around his shaggy, warm sides and straightened, relaxing her torso as Xena had taught her.

It felt good, now that she'd gotten used to it. "Let's go." She squeezed her legs against him and took the reins in one hand, letting the other drop to her thigh as they proceeded across the stable yard towards the inner pasture.

The small square was just an exercise yard, really, but she knew it was safe there for her to practice her riding and Xena wouldn't mind that she went ahead of her there. It was squarely in the middle of the stronghold walls, surrounded by the stable buildings stretching away on two sides and as they entered the space, two grooms leading a chestnut mare waved at her.

Gabrielle waved back, then she clucked her tongue at Patches and squeezed his sides a little, rewarded by the pony amiably breaking into a rambling trot.

The trick, Gabrielle had learned, was to relax. The tenser you were, the more you bounced, and bouncing was just no fun. She enjoyed the cool breeze blowing against her, and the sense of freedom she got when she rode.

Totally different than when she rode behind Xena, sometimes, on Tiger's broad back. Then she was just a passenger, mostly hanging on for dear life as the big stallion raced across the grass, her face buried into the cloth over the queen's back hoping she didn't lose her grip.

Riding Patches was totally different. She was in control, well, sort of, and a lot closer to the ground to boot, and she could ride him bareback where Xena always rode Tiger with a saddle.

Of all the things the queen had taught her over the winter, she liked this the best. Gabrielle leaned forward and tightened her grip, laughing a little as Patches immediately sped up into a canter, and then a gallop, her hair whipping back as she exulted in the feeling of near flying. "Whoo hoo!"

Patches whickered and shook his head, bolting lightly over the ground, his small hooves sending up only tiny pockets of earth as he swerved agilely around the churned up dips from the larger horses passing, responding as Gabrielle urged him faster.

At the end of the pasture she slowed the pony, taking him around in a circle a few times as he pranced over the rich, churned earth. With a pressure of one knee, she sent him in the other direction, arching her back as she watched the grooms lead one of the new mares into the square with them. "Oh, look at her, Patches! Isn't she pretty?"

The mare had a finely boned face and kind brown eyes, and she whickered at them as the man set her free to run. Gabrielle turned Patches to keep her in view, and she exhaled in wonder as the horse seemed to gather the light into her golden coat and reflect it off her silvery white mane and tail. "Wow."

Patches bobbed his head as if in agreement, whickering to the mare and trotting towards her as she galloped around them. The mare slowed as they approached and shook her head, rearing up a little and watching them warily.

"No, it's okay." Gabrielle held one hand out to her. "We just want to say hello, you pretty, pretty girl." She could see the horse was young, and there was a touch of wildness about her. "We won't hurt you."

After a suspicious moment, the mare sniffed her hand and then nibbled her fingertips as Patches extended his head and his nostrils flared. "This is Patches." Gabrielle introduced the pony. "He's my friend, and he's a hero, did you know that?"

The mare regarded the pony momentarily, then she tossed her head in the air and dodged around them, breaking into a gallop as she headed for the end of the enclosure. "Hey! Be careful!" She urged Patches after the mare. "Don't go so fast!"

The pony responded, bolting after the mare and rapidly picking up speed as he chased after her, both animals moving at a dangerous speed towards the high fence at the far end of the exercise yard, that separated the stable area from the rest of the workspace. "Hey!"

Gabrielle clamped her legs around Patches' sides, her worry for the mare overtaking her self interest. She guided the pony towards the fast running mare, taking the shorter route to the fence in hopes they could head her off. "Hey!" She yelled at the top of her voice, aware of equally loud, male yells behind her. "Stop!"

The mare ignored all of them, racing towards the fence as though she expected to go right through it. Gabrielle urged Patches on, but she could tell they weren't going to make it in time. She kept going anyway, refusing to give up on the chase. "Hey! Hey!"

Hoofbeats behind her, but they were far in the distance. Gabrielle looked frantically around her as the fence closed in and suddenly she was aware of a motion in her peripheral vision, a streak of color, of restless, animal energy that wasn't there,

Then was there, then the fence was coming at her and she felt Patches starting to skid and she was leaning the other way and they were showered by dirt and the mare was screaming and pulling up and the motion came at them and then..

"What in the Hades do you all think you're doing!" Xena's voice shattered the confusion, as the queen grabbed onto the mare's neck in midmotion, pulling herself onto the horses back as it bucked and screamed in protest. "Cut that out ya she whore!"

Oh boy. Gabrielle managed to get Patches to stop just in time, her knee scraping against the fence as the pony scabbled out of the mare's way. "Xena!" She called. "I was just..!"

“Busy now!” The queen had her hands seriously full, as the mare tried her best to scrape her unwelcome rider off against the fence. “Apologize later!”

Right. Gabrielle concentrated on getting clear of the plunging mare and she got Patches turned in a circle, spotting the grooms racing across the grounds towards them with ropes.

Xena had gotten her legs clamped around the mare’s sides, and she had one hand wrapped firmly in the silken silver mane, her other hand fending off the fence that threatened to batter her senseless. “C’mon, you little bitch.” She growled, leaning forward to catch the mare’s eye. “Cut that out!”

The brown eye rolled back in her direction, and the mare bared her teeth, arching her neck around and snapping at Xena’s leg. The queen reached over and grabbed the horse’s nose, pinching it hard as the muscular body twisted under her. “I said..” She lowered her voice and injected a good dose of homicidal maniac into it. “Stop that.”

The mare’s teeth worked, and she tried to wrench her head out of the queen’s grip, but Xena held fast, and after a moment of stalemate, the horse stopped trying to bash her rider against the fence and sidestepped away.

“That’s better.” Xena released her, and readied herself for the corkscrew buck she felt building between her legs. “Oh, c’mon.” She felt the animal explode under her, turning half round in mid air and coming perilously close to tossing the queen head over ass into the dirt.

The strength of the mare was surprising. Xena concentrated on the contact she felt down the length of her legs, closing her eyes as she went with the motion and then quickly leaned back as the horse went into a series of savage hops.

Ow. The queen opened her eyes and started looking for an exit strategy. She had a fondness for her insides and at this rate, they were heading towards coming out her nose. “All right.. all right.. take it easy. I’m getting off!”

The mare whirled and started to run, then halted as the circle of grooms closed in. She screamed and stood up on her hind legs, pawing at the air with her forelegs and snorting in anger. Xena grabbed on with both hands and started to unwind her legs, afraid the animal was going to fall over sideways. “Yahhh!”

Gabrielle broke out of her paralysis and urged Patches forward, putting the pony between the grooms and the mare. “Stop!” She called urgently. “You’re scaring her!”

“NO they’re not!” Xena yelled, outraged.

“Not you!” Gabrielle shouted. “The horse!”

“Majesty!” The lead groom yelled. “Let her go! We’ll catch her!”

Xena sighed and took a firmer grip on the horse’s mane. “Oh sure.” She muttered. “Let you all see a horse get the better of me, yeah, right. What’s next, I start knitting?” She lifted her voice. “Just stay the Hades back!”

The mare screamed, and landed, her ears back hard against her head, and her teeth bared. Then with a wrench, she whirled and headed back towards the fence, seemingly intent on destruction.

**

Gabrielle clutched Patches mane, caught between wanting to do something to help Xena and not knowing what that something was. She watched in growing horror as the horse raced towards the fence, apparently deciding to try and run right through it. "Oh.. she's got to stop!"

Without further thought, she squeezed Patches sides and released his head, urging him after the running mare. The pony responded eagerly, moving from a canter to a gallop in short order. She leaned over his neck and wiped her free hand on her leg, clenching her fingers as she kept Xena's struggling form in her vision. "Xena!"

The name was ripped from her throat. She saw the queen half turn on the horse's neck, and briefly a flash of ice blue appeared as Xena looked back at her.

Was that a smile? Gabrielle's eyes widened as she watched Xena suddenly grab the mare around the neck and unlatch her legs, flinging herself off the animal just as they reached the fence.

The queen's body launched sideways, and the animal reared at the same time, and the result was that Xena's grip pulled the horse's head around to one side and her body followed, and they both crashed to the ground in a tangle of black and gold and thick, brown dust.

"Xena!" Gabrielle yelled again, flinging herself off Patches as the pony came to a skidding halt. She hit the ground running and scrambled over the rutted ground to where the horse was struggling, its neck caught in Xena's powerful grip. "Xena!"

There was no answer. Xena's body was half trapped under the horse, and her head was pressed against the animal's mane as she fought to keep it from rolling completely over onto her. Gabrielle dodged the mare's flailing legs as she reached for Xena's shoulder, tense and dust covered. "Xena!"

"Hey!" The queen yelled suddenly. "I know my damn name!"

"Yahh!" Gabrielle nearly jumped back. "Are you okay?"

Xena clamped her fingers around the horse's neck, as the animal tried to bite her. "Peachy." She grunted. "Get the Hades back, you nitwit! The damn thing's gonna roll over and crush us both!"

Instead of moving away, Gabrielle dropped to her knees at the horse's head, perilously close to the snapping teeth. "Hey, easy there, girl."

"Gabrielle!" Xena hissed.

"Shh... Xena.. you're scaring her!" Gabrielle reached out and touched the mare's moving head. "C'mon, just stop yelling at her, and she'll calm down."

There was a dangerous silence, and after a moment, Gabrielle looked up to find Xena glaring back at her with a look that could easily curdle milk. Then she had to look away as the mare started moving again. "Easy, girl. Easy." She eased one arm under the horse's neck, aware of the teeth close to her shoulder. "Okay, I've got her, Xena.. can you get out?"

"You know something, Gabrielle?" The queen said, in a quiet tone. "You're damn lucky I love you more than good sense cause otherwise I'd just have to kill you."

Gabrielle felt a lot of motion happen, then. She was grabbed by the scruff of the neck and the horse yanked its head out of her arms and then the ground was moving and she was moving and she heard the horse's hooves hit the fenceposts as she was pulled head over heels to land in the dirt near Patches as Xena joined her a moment later, landing with consummate grace on her behind as the mare scrambled to her feet and bolted off.

The grooms ran after her, leaving the two women on the ground behind. After a brief pause, Xena lifted one hand and wiped a bit of dirt off her cheek, then she rolled her head around and ended up gazing at a prudently silent Gabrielle. "Does it pay for me to ask you what the Hades you thought you were doing?"

Gabrielle pulled her legs up crossed under her in the dirt. "Well" She picked up a bit of stone, and played with it. "I was just doing what I thought would help." She peeked at the queen. "I didn't want the horse to hurt you."

Xena sighed. "Well." She mimicked her consorts tone. "She put a few dents in me so you're going to have to pamper me unmercifully later." The queen slowly got to her feet, grimacing a little as she put weight on the leg she'd trapped under the horse. "C'mere."

Gabrielle got up quickly and went to her side, sliding an arm around her waist. "That was amazing." She said, as they started to walk slowly across the field, Patches ambling behind them. "The way you just jumped on her.. wow."

"Yeah." Xena felt like every bone in her body was cracked. "Ain't I something?"

"Everything."

The queen glanced across the field, relieved to see the horse under rope and surrounded by the grooms. The animal was fighting them tooth and nail, and despite what she'd just been through Xena couldn't help feeling a certain admiration for the mare. "Kickass." She commented. "Nice blood."

"Even if she just hurt you?" Gabrielle also glanced at the mare. "She is really pretty."

"Yeah." Xena sighed. "Not her fault. That temper comes with the line." She paused, and studied the mare. "Didn't realize Lastan was bringing his stock up."

Gabrielle heard the change in her tone. "You know that horse?" She asked. "Oh, I remember.. at the race. The Duke had a horse like this one, you liked it."

Xena altered their course and started towards where the grooms were. "Her granddam was mine." She said, after a moment. "When I retired, I figured she was due it too and sent her out to Lastan's place." She watched as the horse kicked out viciously, nailing one of the grooms in the knee with a audible crack. "She bred true, that's for sure."

"She's really feisty." Gabrielle noted. "Was your horse like that too??"

Xena remained silent for a few steps, then she half shook her head. "Yeah." She stopped and turned, looking at Gabrielle. "What made you do what you did, with her?" She asked, with a sudden intentness. "It's just a horse. Why chase after her?"

The blond woman blinked, and shifted her gaze aside. "I don't know." She stammered, after a pause. "We were out here riding and she came out with us.. she let me pet her, and then.." Gabrielle looked up at the queen. "It was like she was just so desperate to be free. She didn't care. She just went for that fence like it was more important to her than living."

"Eh huh." Xena eyed her. "And you were going to... pick her up and toss her over the fence?"

Gabrielle frowned. "I wasn't going to do that, Xena." She said. "I was just trying to stop her from getting hurt I guess... maybe... I don't know." She paused. "She shouldn't throw her life away like that."

Xena appeared thoughtful, then she shrugged. "Okay, whatever." She continued on towards the mare. "Damn good thing you didn't catch up to her again. You'd probably have lost an arm and that would have ruined my hedonistic nights for a while."

Her body still ached, and she stopped just short of the group of hard working grooms, who now had three ropes on the mare and a hobble on her hind legs. The big golden horse was obviously hating every moment of it, her eyes rolling and white rimmed, and froth coming freely from her mouth.

Xena looked at the mare, and as her eyes met the animal's, the memories surged up and took her by surprise with their poignant strength. She stopped moving, and exhaled, remembering that last goodbye. "Damn."

"What's wrong?" Gabrielle whispered. "Are you really hurt? Should I get some help?"

"Nah." Xena scrubbed her face with one hand. Then she let it drop and disentangled herself from Gabrielle's hold, walking forward to where the grooms were working. "Hold it, boys."

The grooms all stopped, and turned. "Mistress." One of them came forward, wiping his hands nervously. "Mistress, we didn't think she'd bolt as so, I swear it. If you've come to harm from her, say the word and we'll put her down."

Xena merely waved him aside as she circled the horse, the rest of the grooms drawing back to give her space. They watching her uncertainly, and she could only imagine what she looked like after wrestling the damn beast to the ground and nearly getting squashed by it.

So much for the queen's dignity. She could see long scrapes down the parts of her arms not covered by her leather shirt and the scent of the rich earth clung strongly to her.

Ah well. The queen came round to the mare's head, now tied firmly to the work post. "All right, kiddo." She consciously pitched her voice lower, calmer, taking the edge out of it. "You don't want me to have to do something drastic, now do ya?"

The horse glared at her, and half reared, even tied as she was. Her forelegs struck out, trying to hit Xena, but the queen just stood there, sure of her safety. "Now, c'mon. Where's that gonna get ya, huh?" She edged a little closer and held a hand out.

For a moment, the mare paused and seemed to study her. Encouraged, Xena lowered her hand and turned it to one side, easing it towards the animal's muzzle. "Be nice, and I'll have those ropes off ya. You'd like that, huh?"

The mare jerked back away from her, as far as the ropes would allow. Xena paused, and nibbled the inside of her lip. She'd started off all wrong with the animal, but it wasn't the first time she'd made that mistake, now was it?

Maybe the beast needed a little time to cool off. "Take her inside the stables." She told the grooms. "Put her in the big box, where we kept Tiger last year. That should hold her."

"Mistress. As you will."

"Give her a feed, and let her be. No one's to mess with her. Got me?" Xena turned to look at them. "Have the farrier check her."

"Mistress?"

Xena snorted softly and dusted her hands off. "She just had a screaming manic hanging off her head and throwing her to the ground. Make sure she didn't get hurt." Her eyes caught a motion, and she

turned to find Gabrielle behind her, looking up at the horse and offering her something in her palm. "What's that?" She caught the blond woman's hand.

"Just an apple." Gabrielle answered. "I thought she might like it. She looks thirsty, and they're really juicy."

"Later." Xena turned her around and started walking back towards the stables. "Or give it to your rag doll there. He likes em too."

"He's not a rag doll. He's a great horse." Gabrielle could sense the turmoil in the woman next to her, and she knew asking a direct question would make Xena mad.

Well, madder than she was, at any rate. "I'm sorry if I did something silly out there. "She decided to apologize instead. "I was really just trying to help."

Xena put her arm around her again. "I know." She said. "Thanks."

Gabrielle looked up at her. "You're not mad?"

"No." The queen sighed a little. "It would have kicked me in the ass to have something happen to that horse. You did the right thing." Her head turned and she looked at Gabrielle. "Even if you had no clue what you were doing."

"Um.. okay."

"Confused?"

"Yeah."

"Good." Xena pushed the door to the stables open. "Let's see what other trouble we can get into, shall we?"

**

The fire crackled softly, it's golden depths reflected in the pale eyes watching it over the rim of a silver cup with steam gently rising from it's surface.

Xena took a sip of the mulled wine, then lowered the cup again, feeling the gentle tug of the comb as Gabrielle ran the tines through her hair. The touch felt good against her scalp, and she tilted her head back as her consort riffled her fingers through her bangs. "So."

Gabrielle looked down at her. "Do you feel better now?"

"What makes you think I felt bad before?" Xena let the back of her head rest against the blond woman's stomach. "I'm tougher than that damn filly is."

Gabrielle ran her fingers through the queen's hair again, rubbing gently around her temples and watching her eyes flutter closed. "You were just being quiet. I thought maybe you felt bad." She stroked Xena's cheek. "Or mad."

"Nah." Xena was thoroughly enjoying the attention. "That messenger pissed me off, but I got over it."

"About the ruined farms?"

The queen nodded. "Bastards. I'd bet my left nipple it's Brego's dregs."

Gabrielle started a slow massage of her neck and shoulders. "I sure hope you win that bet." She murmured. "I like that one."

Xena's eyes opened right up and she peered at her consort, one dark, finely arched eyebrow hiking up sharply, to find her consort smiling impishly back at her. "You raunchy little thing, you." She found herself smiling back. "But you know, I figured it's on my way to the pass, so I'll knock off two buzzards with one gut shot."

"Those poor people." Gabrielle's expression sobered. "Especially those children.. Xena, that's terrible how they were left out in the weather. Why didn't they bring them here? You would have let them in, wouldn't you?"

Xena studied the firelit face above her, it's rounded planes faintly gilded. "Did you forget who you're talking to?" She asked, after a brief, bemused pause. "Why would I take in a bunch of starving kids?"

Gabrielle's hands stilled. "Would you let them die outside the gate?" She asked, gazing intently down at the strong profile. "Really?"

The queen pondered the question.

"I don't think you would." The blond woman said, after a long silence. "You wouldn't just leave them there."

Would she? Xena was disturbed to realize she honestly didn't know the answer to that question anymore. "Given how we met, I'm surprised you think that." She remarked, watching the expression on her consort's face shift, as she turned away a little. "But you know something, I just don't gods be damned know what the Hades I'd do now."

Gabrielle looked back at her. Xena's expression was quiet and thoughtful, not angry, and though the moment of their meeting still caused pain in her heart, she took this moment and set it aside to somberly cherish. "I think you'd take them in." She leaned over and kissed Xena's head with gentle reverence.

Xena smiled wryly. "I think you'd chew my ankles until I did." She said. "But there's no point in talking about it, cause their own parents left em to croak in the snow anyway."

Gabrielle shook her head. "Horrible as my father was.. I don't think he'd have done that."

Privately, Xena had her doubts. Gabrielle's unlamented crumb of a father had beaten her, raped her sister, and left them out in the cold...

The queen stopped, as the last few words echoed softly into her conscience.

"Xena?"

"You know something?" The queen murmured. "I think I should go find those bastards who left those kids in the snow and kill them." She paused, then looked up. "Think that's a good idea?"

The stunned look on Gabrielle's face almost made her smile. Xena knew her sudden change of heart had more to do with her affection for her cute bedmate than any softening of her views but it was fun to see the widened eyes anyway.

"Would you do that?"

"Makes a better story than me leaving kids outside the gates, huh?" Xena studied her consort's face. "That's the problem with having a storyteller around... you always gotta be sure your good side's showing, you know?"

Gabrielle encircled Xena's neck with her arms and gently hugged her, exhaling into the back of her head. She could feel the softness of the queen's hair against her cheek, and after a moment of silence, Xena's fingers curled around her arm and lightly squeezed and they simply existed there together.

"So." The queen said, after it had gone on long enough to make her a bit uncomfortable. "Got any good stories about sexy maidens in distress?"

Gabrielle straightened up and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, then she started combing Xena's hair out again. "I know one where a maiden in distress gets saved by a sexy queen. Does that count?"

"Heh." Xena chuckled softly. "I love that story."

So did Gabrielle, but for many different reasons than her lover. "Want me to tell that one? I remembered a few more things the other day I wanted to put in it." She finished her combing, then braided the dark strands into a loose knot.

"Mm. Sure." Xena seemed lost in the touch again, her head resting lightly against Gabrielle's body, her eyes a little unfocused.

Gabrielle watched her for a minute, then she laid one hand on the queen's shoulder. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

The blue eyes looked sharply up at her. "Do I look sick?"

The blond woman shook her head. "Just sad." She answered. "Are you thinking about that horse?"

Xena got up unexpectedly and moved away from the fire, turning her back to Gabrielle and crossing to the windows to look out of them. She put her hands on the sill and leaned towards the leaded glass, her breath fogging the surface faintly.

Gabrielle remained where she was, having learned the hard way that when the queen needed space, she needed it. Instead of following, she collected the small tray of dishes from their evening snack and took it into the alcove, where one of the chambermaids would pick it up in the morning.

She returned to the fire, swinging the wine a little closer to heat again and giving the cushions on the queen's favorite chair a shaking out, lifting the thick quilt that was draped over the back, and that Xena would sometimes put over her knees in the cold and straightening it.

It was crimson, and roughly woven, and there was an even pattern of blue and green strips through it. Gabrielle liked the cloth, and she often ran her fingers over the worn surface that brought back vague memories of home to her.

A plain, shepherds cloth.

"What made you say that?" Xena asked, from the corner. "About the horse?"

Gabrielle took the invitation and crossed the room to stand next to the queen, looking out at the dark, moonless sky and the faint shadows in the night. "You've just been really quiet since then. I thought maybe you were thinking about that."

"I've been quiet?" Xena looked down at her.

Gabrielle nodded.

"Yeah, well." The queen turned and leaned against the glass. "I wasn't thinking about that horse. So forget about it."

“Okay.” The blond woman pressed her nose against the window. “Those armor guys were amazing, Xena. I never knew you had to have so much stuff out there.” She exhaled on the glass, then pressed her fingertips in the resulting fog, making eyes and a nose. “They’re making me a folding up cooking kit, and really fantastic boots, too.”

“I told them to take care of you.” Xena said. “But this ain’t going to be a walk in the garden, muskrat.”

“I know. I remember when we were going up the mountain. It was hard.” Gabrielle said. “But I liked it. Until we got attacked, I mean.”

“Until I walked us into a trap, you mean.” The queen sighed. “Yeah, that was fun. Loved every minute of that, for damn sure.” She shoved away from the glass. “C’mon. Let’s go to bed. I’m tired of thinking.” She stalked across the room and went to the silver basin, plunging her hands into it and splashing her face with the room cooled water.

Gabrielle obediently went over to the big, plush bed they shared and sat down on it, slipping out of her soft booties and blowing out the candle on her side table. It had been a long day, and she felt a little tired, and more than a little unsettled by Xena’s moodiness.

It gave her a stomach ache. Gabrielle wiggled her toes and then pulled her legs up onto the bed, stretching them out along the thick cover, the cool surface warming quickly to her skin. She leaned back against the pillows and folded her hands over her stomach, watching from the corner of her eye as Xena patted her face dry with a piece of linen before she turned, and started towards the bed to join her.

Even in a plain shift, she filled Gabrielle’s imagination. She waited for the queen to sit on the bed and then stretch out next to her, before she rolled over onto her side, and simply took Xena’s hand in her own and clasped it.

Xena studied the bed’s canopy briefly. “We’re not going to wait for the festival.” She said. “We’re leaving as soon as the supplies are ready.”

Gabrielle felt her heart skip a beat. “Why?”

“Because I want to.” Xena said “Something’s bugging me to get out there.”

“Okay.” The news was scary, and a little overwhelming. “I’ll try to be ready.” She murmured. “Stanislaus said there’s so much to be done, though.”

Xena kept her eyes focused upward. “Yeah, I know.” Her voice was a little rough. She cleared her throat. “Scared?”

Gabrielle had to think about that. “No.. um..” She paused. “Worried, I guess. About all the stuff I don’t know about.” She watched Xena’s profile, seeing an expression there that was strange to her. She wriggled a little closer, seeing the queen’s eyes blink a few times. “About you.”

Xena’s head turned, and she met Gabrielle’s gaze. “Know what I was thinking about before?” She asked. “That horses granddam.” Her voice dropped, gentling. “I loved her like crazy.”

“I figured that.”

The queen turned on her side, so they were facing each other. “I gave her to Lastay because I was afraid the same thing would happen to her that happened to Lyceus.” She exhaled slowly. “Damn, that hurt. She was the last of my family.”

Tears stung Gabrielle's eyes, and she slid her hand up the queen's arm, knowing a moment of synergy with her as she remembered that first, horrific night she'd spent in the stronghold after seeing Lila die. "I'm sorry."

"Me too." Xena's body relaxed, almost into a slump. "Wolves got her. Couple years after. I never got a chance to say goodbye." She fingered the silken sheets, the candles providing just enough light for them to see each other. "Seeing that filly today.. brought that all back, I guess.. reminded me I'm going out there and risking everything again and.."

The queen stopped speaking, her eyes wandering past Gabrielle's face.

Gabrielle wasn't really sure what to say. She gently turned Xena's hand over and kissed the palm, then folded her fingers around it again. She could almost feel the sadness and the turmoil inside the dark haired woman, and it surprised her. "You were just trying to keep her safe."

"Yeah." Xena shifted, and pulled Gabrielle closer, wrapping her arms around her as they snuggled together in the middle of the bed. "Or maybe I was just fooling myself." She tucked Gabrielle's head against her shoulder and sighed. "Wouldn't have been the first time. Maybe it's not the last."

And what, Gabrielle wondered, did that mean?

Xena bit her ear, and the question became irrelevant. At least, for now.

**

Dawn found Xena standing on the battlements, watching the early morning stirring of the stronghold unfold before her. From where she was, she could see the barracks, and around them there was evidence of the upcoming campaign, from the wagons being constructed to the temporary anvils set up to one side for the armorers already busy beating out plates and weapons.

The bustle was familiar and orderly, and she nodded a few times as she watched the door to the barracks open and men file out, carrying practice swords and bows, with an air of stolid purpose.

She was dressed in her worn practice gear, and soon she'd go down to the barracks practice yard, and join the sparring, crossing that line as she did so and committing herself to the battles to come in a way that just talking about it, and ordering preparations didn't.

She would leave being the queen behind, and take up the mantle of conqueror again, and she found herself feeling a mixture of excitement and apprehension about that.

After a moment, she slapped the top of the wall and then turned and headed for the stairs down, the buckles on her gambeson jingling softly as she took the steps two at a time, the worn, heavy boots she was wearing scuffing against the stone.

The weight of her sword, clipped to holders on her back, felt familiar, and yet strange. Though she often used it in her nightly workouts, she seldom wore it anymore, preferring to simply carry it up to the tower chamber and back again.

She reached the bottom of the steps and started across the foreyard, her sudden presence causing a mild commotion as workers stifling yawns as they walked realized who was crossing their paths and scrambled to bow and curtsy.

Xena walked past them, whistling softly under her breath. She approached the open wall gates that separated the barracks area from the domestic one, and passed through the metal strapped wooden portal with a sense that she was entering a different space.

As she cleared the gate, several of the soldiers spotted her and straightened, bracing and bringing a fist up to their chests in salute. Xena lifted her hand in acknowledgement, then paused as Brendan emerged from the nearest of the barracks, apparently summoned by a call, and approached her.

“Mistress.” The old soldier greeted her with the same raised fist, but his motion was unstudied and natural, and as such, seemed far more sincere. “Welcome.”

“Hope you say that after drill.” Xena remarked, in a pleasant tone, as she slowly turned in a half circle, surveying the work in progress.

“Xena.” Brendan lowered his voice as he used the queen’s given name. “Were ye to beat the lot of us senseless, you’d still be welcome and ye know it.”

Xena swung her head around to study him with a raised eyebrow, which she held momentarily before she broke into a very rakish grin. “The lot of you are kinky bastards.” She told him, her voice then becoming brisk. “Show me what’s been done so far.”

Brendan nodded, as if he’d expected the request, and then he turned and they started walking together. “Got almost three full legions.” He said, as they walked past the first set of anvils. “Had a score of fellers come in yesterday and today, after they heard we were on the move.”

Xena paused, as she spotted Jonas working over his anvil, his focus so intense he hadn’t noticed the stir and sudden silence around him. She walked over and watched him work for a few moments, as he carefully shaped another tiny ring and set it in place. “Nice.”

He jerked, and turned. “Majesty!”

Xena strolled closer and lifted a corner of the square of chain mail, examining it’s quality. The rings were small and tightly knit, in a double layer thick, and yet flexible. She let it drape over her hand, nodding as she could barely see her skin through it. “Good work.”

Jonas ducked his head a trifle. “I will layer leather scale across here..” He touched his own chest. “And down to here.” He indicated his upper thigh.

Xena nodded. “She rides.” She advised him. “Put a leather strip down the inside of the legs. Save the damn horse some grief.”

“Yes, Mistress. She said.” Jonas agreed, quietly. “Tis strange for me, I will be honest, to be kitting out so gentle a soul.”

The queen remained silent for a moment then she snorted softly under her breath. “Imagine how I felt making love to her.” She gave the men a wicked smile. “Next? Got some fletchers working overtime, Brendan?”

“Yes, Mistress.” The old soldier scratched his jaw, muffing a smile. “This way. Biggest problem we had, I tell you, is getting the feathers for it.”

“Really?”

They walked away from the anvils, towards a smaller circle where four rough tables were set in a square, lined with men working on shaping wooden shafts and fitting them with iron barbs and trimmed feathers. “Damned merchants were holding back to sell em to the posh types, for pillas.” Brendan shook his head. “Can you see it?”

Xena, who had several of the aforementioned pills on her bed, nodded gravely. "Terrible." She picked up a shaft and glanced down its length, pleased with the straightness of it. She fingered the well cured wood, and glanced at Brendan. "This didn't come from the forest yesterday."

A faint, wry twinkle entered her old captain's one remaining eye. "Been drying em since before the frost, Mistress."

Xena smiled, and set the shaft down. "Have you now?" She waved her hand at the fletchers, who had stopped and stood to attention at her approach. "First thing we gotta do is stop that crap." She told Brendan. "No time for people to stop working every time I cough."

They continued on towards the practice grounds. "I'll put the word out, Mistress." Brendan said. "The men know it, most of em, but these workers don't yet."

Xena glanced up as the sun emerged from behind the walls and bathed the compound in warmth. She felt the light touch her skin, and as they walked past the rows and rows of barracks, the doors started to open and men started to pour out to follow them.

In her plain garb, and workmanlike boots, Xena was unremarkable among them, and knowing that her heart suddenly soared, as she felt herself moving from what now seemed like a dream back into what she knew was her own, personal reality.

It felt good to be covered in leather and rough cloth, and feel the heaviness of boots around her feet instead of the light silks and slippers she'd been wearing these past years. It felt good to breathe in the scent of sun warmed metal, and leather, and horse manure, and hear the grunts of honest workers around her.

She stopped just short of the practice ground and turned to face the crowd of soldiers trooping after them. They stood in silence, their eyes on her as they waited, bodies covered in scuffed leather and mail, faces bearded, weapons slung around them liberally.

"All of you ready to go out there?" Xena's voice rang out over the sound of her banners, flapping in the wind overhead.

A wordless yell answered her.

"Good." The queen turned and led the way into the practice yard, her hands already twitching, wanting her own weapons in them. She spread her arms to either side, gathering in the sunlight with a sense of absolute sensual pleasure. "Nice to be back in the ass kicking business."

Beside her, Brendan smiled, but remained silent. He turned and walked backwards, placing his fingers between his teeth and whistling, with hand gestures directing the troops to their starting points on the field.

Love did, he knew, odd things to people. He'd watched Xena over the winter months as she roamed about the stronghold, Gabrielle never far from her side. He'd expected the queen to fall back into her former habits, but instead, she'd shunned the court, shunned the nobles gatherings, and turned her back on the politics of the realm as she focused on this new fascination in her life instead.

It was almost as if the throne had stopped being important to her, and while Brendan was canny enough to know the danger of that, he was soldier enough to be glad for Xena's sake for it.

The crown sucked your soul, he was convinced. He'd felt only sadness watching his former commander retreat further and further up into her tower, without friends, without anything other than her growing fondness for wine and her solitary shadow fights up in the tower.

It was like watching a dear friend die, and not being able to do for them. Brendan now watched the tall figure at his right as she picked up a spear and laid it across her broad shoulders, twisting her body to loosen it.

Still the warrior, even after all the years at court. He nodded to himself. Even the mind numbing boredom of ruling hadn't taken that from her, but he knew the winter had reignited more than just an interest in the world around her this time.

The gods themselves bless that little one. The old soldier exhaled. He didn't resent Xena's insistence on taking her consort on campaign with them, but the knowledge that Gabrielle's life was of deadly importance to his queen weighed heavily on his shoulders.

He knew how important Gabrielle was to this newborn leader, now lazily tossing spear after spear, with a powerful overhand motion to hit straw targets set across the field.

Did Xena know it? He watched her from the corner of his eye. Did she see the new vulnerability Gabrielle represented?

Ah well. Brendan took a deep breath, and released it. The risk was worth getting their leader back, at least to his mind. "Xena?"

The queen turned towards him. "Damned good thing I carry a sword on horseback. If you counted on me to hit something with those things we'd be dead already." She gave the targets a wry look. "Never was good at that."

Brendan walked over to her. "Melee's ready." He indicated the field. "Are ye for some fun then?"

Xena drew her sword, and extended her arm, twirling the blade in her hand before she then whipped it in a circle, making the very air sing. "Oh yeah." She finished showing off and let the blade rest against her shoulder. "Let's do it."

She threaded her way through the milling soldiers to the center of them, and began to call out orders, directing the field of battle as the men began to group together on either side of a central trench. "Get left there... no you idiot, your other left!"

One of the men next to Brendan hefted his shield. "Should we give her Majesty one of these, sir?"

Brendan chuckled dryly. "Son." He clapped the man on the shoulder. "She don't need none of that."

"Sir?"

"Just wait. You'll see."

**

Gabrielle found a good spot up in the tower, with a great view of the practice yard. She tucked her feet up on the bench and leaned her elbow on the window sill, putting her chin down on her arm as she fastened her eyes on the tall, rangy figure in the center, her height and long hair making her stand out from the soldiers around her.

Part of her wanted to be down there, but another part of her felt that this was something that was very personal, very private to Xena and she didn't want to intrude on it.

Yet.

She'd come to understand that there was this violence in her beloved, that far from being ashamed of, Xena exulted in.

Now, she watched as the mock battle started, and Xena jumped onto a rock in the center of the field and pointed her sword, directing the men towards each other and she could almost feel the happiness in the queen's heart.

The men surged forward, and in the blink of an eye, Xena was off her rock and into the thick of it, her sword moving powerfully as she drove back a squad of men, whirling and ducking as two others came in from the side and then surprising them both with a roundhouse kick that sent their weapons flying.

Gabrielle could hear the laugh.

She watched the melee a moment more, then she bit the inside of her lip, struggling with the decision to stay where she was, or go down and join in the fighting. She knew she had very little time to learn even the basics, and make herself less of a liability and more of an asset when they were out there in the middle of a battle.

"Hello, Gabrielle."

She turned, to find Jellaus behind her. "Hi." She indicated the field. "Xena's down there."

"I know." The minstrel chuckled, sitting down next to her. "The stories are already being told in the kitchens." He peered out the window. "Sure you're ready for that, little one?"

"No." Gabrielle answered, putting her chin back down. "I know I'm not. But I'll learn."

Jellaus watched her, with a touch of sadness. Her gentle face shifted, as she watched the fighting below. "Yes." He finally said. "I'm afraid you will, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle apparently didn't hear him. She got up, patting him on the shoulder. "I'm going to go see what I can learn right now. See you later?"

The minstrel nodded, as he watched her trot off, her pale hair bouncing a little as she ran. "So." He sighed. "What note is this song going to end on, hm?" He stood and folded his arms over his chest. "Guess I best be packing, idiot that I am."

Shaking his head, he walked off.

**

Part 3

"Please, hold still your Grace."

Gabrielle tried to stifle her fidgets, having only marginal success as the chain mail draped over her shoulders. It felt strange, flexible yet constricting, the rings chill against her skin, but in a way warm as well.

Or maybe the fact that the armorer was having to poke and prod her was making her feel a little warmer than necessary. She barely knew Jonas, after all. "Sorry."

Jonas glanced up, with a brief smile. "It pinches a bit, I know. You'll have a leather undergarment for it, to gentle your skin but that's not yet ready."

Leather and metal. Gabrielle briefly wondered how that was going to feel, once they were out in the world and she had to walk around in it. "Is it going to be really heavy?"

"No, your Grace." Jonas straightened up a little and twitched the rings over the points of her shoulders, evening the garment out and studying it critically. "How does that feel?"

Gabrielle lifted her arms and moved a little, turning around in her new armor. She brought her hands up and felt the unfamiliar binding of the links around her upper arms. "It's a little..um.. tight.." She hesitated, touching the spot. "Here."

Jonas scabbled around on his knees and took hold of her arm, extending it and studying the sleeve. "Ah." He set to work unlinking a row of rings. "My apologies, your Grace. Give me but a moment." He worked at the links with a small tool, careful not to pinch her skin. "I misjudged your span there. My apologies."

"My what?"

"Just a moment, I beg you."

"Okay." She was content to stand there as he worked, glancing at her reflection in the mirror. The rings showed a rippling dark silver over her shoulders and down her sides, but over her chest and back, they were covered by small pieces of beautifully shaped overlapping leather scales in a deep forest green.

There was a leather collar, too, that protected her neck from the links, and belt with a darkly glittering hawkshead buckle to clasp the thing around her body.

"There. Is that better?"

Gabrielle lifted her hands again, closing her fingers on her non-existent stick and miming its motion. "Yes." She nodded, now feeling no constriction at all. "Much."

"Good." Jonas stood and circled her. "Does it suit you, your Grace?"

She didn't feel particularly graceful, matter of fact. Gabrielle walked towards the mirror, feeling a little strange moving in her new gear. She touched the rings with one hand, tracing their intricate twining. "Was this hard to make?" Her eyes met his in the mirror's reflection.

"Eh." Jonas lifted one shoulder. "It is close work, truth." He said. "But not as great as some, as your Grace is delicate of stature."

Gabrielle turned and looked at him. "I'm short, you mean." She said, with a grin.

"Not just so." The man smiled back at her. "My commissions are mostly soldiers, footmen, big hulks of fellows, as it is." He replied. "As each ring is formed alone, 'twas easier to complete a set for your Grace than if it had been for one such."

"Ah." The blond woman looked down at herself. "It's beautiful." She touched one of the pieces of leather scale. "I really like it."

The armor's bearded face broke in a broader smile. "It was difficult." He admitted. "To make it of a quality that suited me in a fortnight, but if it pleases you, it satisfies me." He expertly adjusted her belt. "The leggings fasten so, here at the knee, and the boots – do they feel good to you?"

Obligingly, Gabrielle stamped her feet, feeling the supple leather flex around her ankles. The boots did, in fact, feel very good, though she suspected she would need to wear them a little so she could escape a few blisters. They came up to her knees, and from the boot top to her seat a wide strip of soft leather protected the insides of her legs. "Feels good."

"Good." The armorer nodded. "Can you sit on that stool there, and see if it doesn't pull, when you are mounted?"

Gabrielle walked over to the padded bench and readily straddled it, tucking her boots about where her stirrups would hold them. She straightened a little and sat back in what would be her saddle, trying to imagine what it would be like to ride all day in the new gear.

It was hard, because she could hardly imagine what it would be to ride all day dressed in anything at all, so she guessed she'd just have to live with whatever it turned out to be. "Feels okay." She turned and looked at Jonas, catching him grinning at her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, your Grace." The man cleared his throat.

"Lady Gabrielle?" The door opened, and the outfitter Eddars came in, his arms full of things. "Ah, Jonas. I am glad you are here. Her Majesty is looking for you."

Jonas looked up in surprise. "For me?" He glanced at Gabrielle in some mild apprehension. "Has something displeased you, your Grace?"

Gabrielle was as surprised as he was. "No." She shook her head. "Maybe she wants you to make something else.. maybe for her?" She suggested. "She was working on her stuff in there before you came in." She pointed at the side room, where Xena had moved her armor chest.

Jonas looked at the doorway in question, then at the other man. "I am sure the queen needs none of my humble touch on her armor."

Eddars shrugged. "I know not. Her majesty was outside in the great hall, you best attend her and find for yourself what she wishes."

With an apprehensive expression, the tall armorer went to the door and through it, closing it after him and leaving Gabrielle to Eddar's tender mercies. She got up off her stool and trotted over to where he was sorting his various burdens out and peered at them. "Oo."

He held up a leather cloak, trimmed with some kind of fur. "This first, I think, your Grace." He shook the cloak out. "May I fasten it about you?"

"Sure." Gabrielle took a fold of the cloak as the outfitter laid it over her shoulders, and carefully fastened the clasp across the front. "Wow." The cloak was a well softened hide, with a waxy outer surface and it draped neatly to her boot tops. "This is gorgeous."

"Thank you, your Grace." Eddars beamed at her. "The craftsman who made it was so pleased it was for you. He slit the sides here, see?" He indicated the side. "So that it might drape well as you ride."

"Oh, yeah." Gabrielle gently touched the fur to her cheek. "It's so soft."

"Squirrel, your Grace."

"Oh." The blond woman made a face. "Wish you hadn't told me that. I like them. I think they're cute." She glanced at her reflection again, secretly delighted at the surprisingly dashing figure looking back at her. She raked her fingers through her hair and freed it from the cloak's collar. "This is great, thank you."

"And now, your traveling clothes?"

With a grin, Gabrielle turned to the pile, noting not a frill was to be seen in anything.

**

Jonas edged out of the doorway, and spotted the queen standing under the big arch, arguing with a tall courtier.

Or, truly, she wasn't arguing, she was yelling, and the silk bedecked noble was nodding and bowing as fast as he could. Even despite the cringing, the queen overtopped the man by a good handspan, and standing there in the hall dressed in riding breeches and a gaudy crimson overtunic she seemed literally twice his size.

Beautiful. Jonas exhaled.

"Now, get the Hades out!" Xena finished in a loud bark. "If you can't deliver what you promised, I'll find someone else to hold your lands. Got me?"

"Majesty!" The man dropped to his knees. "You are begging me! My family will starve!"

"GOT ME?" The queen repeated. "I'll give it over to my armor master there... he's got more talent in his kneecap than your entire family!!!"

"Mistress! You ask too much!"

"Listen to me." Xena grabbed the man by the throat. "You financed Bregos last year. Don't think I don't know it. You were his bankroll."

The noble turned red, then white as Xena's fingers tightened. "M...augh."

"So you better cough up what I asked for, or you're going to pay for that with more than horses and hides, understand?" Xena said, coldly.

"Y...yes."

Xena released him, wiping her hand on her leggings with an expression of disgust.

Armor master? Jonas' ears perked up, and he glanced quickly around to see if Xena could possibly be referring to someone else in the big hall. Seeing no other man present, he stood a little more boldly out in the hall as the noble scurried off, followed by Xena's blue eyed disdain.

After a moment, the queen snorted and shook her head, before she turned to face Jonas. "There you are." Xena's expression was stormy, and she glowered at him. "Where the Hades have you been?"

"Mistress." Jonas bowed, and touched his chest. "I was fitting your beautiful consort with her new armor."

"Were you?" The queen cheered up immediately. "Did she like it?"

"I think so, your Majesty."

Xena put her hands on her hips. "Where'd you put the scale?"

"Here." Jonas touched his shoulders and chest, then his belly and thighs. "I left the sides open, and cut the sides high for riding." He touched the side of his leg.

The queen nodded. "Good. She'll have to get used to wearing it."

"So she said." The armorer nodded. "I think she will do well with it, if I may say so, your Majesty. She has strength, she does."

"Sure she does." The queen appeared pleased, however. "She's gotta deal with me. She'd have broken something before now if she wasn't." She gave Jonas a shrewd glance. "Given her the pigsticker yet?"

"No, your Majesty."

The queen nodded quietly to herself. "All right." She paused. "I'd um.." Her gaze broke from his, and went across the hallway. "Give it to me. I'll give it to her."

Jonas was watching her. "Very well, Majesty." He responded in a quiet tone. "Was there something you wished of me? Ellas indicated so."

Xena appeared lost in thought for a moment, but she gave herself a shake and focused on him again. "I did." She said. "But let's get this taken care of first." She added. "So she liked it huh?"

"I believe so, Majesty."

Xena started for the royal chambers. "Well, she's clueless about the stuff so I'd better go check it out. C'mon." She indicated that Jonas was to follow her, and then stiffarmed the doors open, sending them flying back to slam into the wall with a loud bang. "I smell sheep!"

Gabrielle looked up from inspecting a basket and grinned. She stepped away from the table and spread her arms out, lifting the edges of the cloak so Xena could see her new armor. "Look what Jonas brought, Xena! It's great!"

"Let me be the judge of that." Xena strolled over. She unclasped the cloak and removed it from around Gabrielle's neck, then circled her, looking intently at the armor covering her slim form. "Hm."

Given the short amount of time, she'd honestly not expected a real quality job, no matter what she'd said, or what Jonas had promised.

However, as she smoothed her hand over the links covering Gabrielle's shoulder, she found herself impressed by the work, and admiring the fit of the scales layered neatly over the blond woman's chest and back.

Difficult, on a woman, as she should know better than most. "Nice." She glanced over at Jonas, giving him an approving look. She came around to face Gabrielle and made a small adjustment at her collarbone, giving her a wink and chucking her under the chin as she finished. "I like it."

The green eyes were watching her intently. Gabrielle's lips twitched into a hesitant smile. "Better than pink frills?"

Xena let her gaze deliberately move from Gabrielle's head to her leather covered toes and then back up again. "Much better." She said, with a grin. "You look damn sexy in it, matter of fact."

A predictable blush. Xena looked up at the two men. "You both agree?"

Jonas looked at Ellas who looked right back at him, both sets of eyes widening.

The queen grinned. "You're screwed either way. Pick one."

"Yes, Majesty." The two men said, in unison. "Very sexy." Jonas added. "Begging your pardon, your Grace."

Gabrielle didn't think she really looked sexy, but she wasn't going to stop anyone from saying it. She could see by Xena's expression though, that the queen really did approve of the armor, and that made her happy in any case. "Want to see all the other stuff they brought?"

"Later." Xena crooked her finger at Jonas. "C'mon with me." She walked towards her erstwhile armor room. "Now you get your reward for being a craftsman and doing an impossible job in a fortnight."

"Mistress?"

“You get more work.”

“Ah.”

**

Jonas paused in the doorway, his eyes widening a little as he took in the small workroom. In the center, a wooden table was set covered in armor pieces and scattered among them were tools very familiar to him. Had the queen another armorer? Perhaps she was displeased with him.

His eyes brightened a little. “Something is amiss, Majesty?”

Xena went behind the table and sat down on a stool there, leaning her forearms on the table. “Yeah.” She pulled over the plates that covered the front of her chest and shoulders. “See these?”

Thus encouraged, Jonas approached and peered at the armor. “Wonderful workmanship, your Majesty.” He murmured.

“Thanks.” Xena said. “This bit here, goes down my spine. I want a mail link between it and the shoulder plates.”

Jonas cautiously eased closer, up against the table. He studied the pieces. “To hold this part in place, is that what you intend, Majesty?” He asked, touching the back protector, which was visibly newer than the rest of the armor.

“Yeah.” The queen picked up the armor. “I’m getting to be an ancient old bitch, so this’ll keep my sword from smacking my ass and any disaffected pigbrains from stabbing me in the back.” She sighed, her eyes narrowing a little. “Peh.”

Jonas looked from one side of the room to the other. “Surely, your Majesty, you are making a jest with me.” He said, mildly. “But in any case, I would be greatly honored to make the mail you require. Greatly honored.”

Xena gave him a wry look. “Took me longer than I thought to make this thing. Ran out of time for the rest of it. Get it done before sunset day after tomorrow. Got me?”

Jonas stared at her, goggle eyed.

“Something wrong?”

“Majesty.” Jonas looked at the armor. “Forgive me, but that is your work? You made this?” He indicated the newly pounded metal piece.

Xena looked around. “Yeah.” She replied, with a half shrug. “Got a problem with that?” She watched the man’s eyes grow round and wondering, and almost revised her opinion of him. “If you’re going to turn into an idiot, get out of here before I break your arm.”

“Forgive me, Majesty.” Jonas murmured. “May I take the pieces, to measure them?”

“Measure them here.” Xena told him. “I’ll be right back.” She got up and stalked outside the workroom, letting out a sharp whistle as she cleared the door.

Jonas blew out a breath, and paused for a long moment before he picked up one of the pieces of armor carefully and turned it over in his fingers, admiring the precise hammering and the carefully sculpted leather underlay. “By the gods. “

With a shake of his head, he drew out a scrap of parchment and started measuring the piece against his handspan, making marks on the parchment with a bit of charcoal.

**

Gabrielle found the queen out on the battlements and she walked quietly up to stand next to her as they both gazed out at the setting sun. "That's so pretty." She put her chin down on the top of the wall.

"What is?" Xena seemed to be in a pensive mood, her usual edgy energy muted.

"The way the light looks on those buildings. See?" Gabrielle pointed to an orange lit surface.

The queen studied the rooftop. "No." She replied briefly. "But I'm glad you like it."

Gabrielle edged a little closer. "Did you know they even made a coat for Patches?" She said. "It's really cute."

Xena turned around and leaned against the wall, then after a moment she slid down it and sat on the stone, patting the surface next to her with one hand. "Siddown."

Obligingly, Gabrielle did so.

They sat side by side in comfortable silence for a bit, then the queen let her head rest against the wall and turned her eyes to her companion. "Y'know this isn't going to be a walk in the garden."

The blond woman glanced at her. "Um.. I kind of figured that." She said.

"Scared yet?"

Gabrielle thought about the question. "Should I be?"

"Yep."

"Are you?"

Xena drew up one knee and rested her elbow against it. "That's a damnable question, Gabrielle." She replied, in a thoughtful tone. "Y'know. I'm something." She scratched her eyebrow. "Damned if I know what. You'd think I'd never done this before."

Gabrielle studied her boots. "Are you sure it's the right thing to do?" She asked. "Maybe that's what you're thinking about."

"Nah." The queen made a face. "I couldn't give a rat's ass about that. I want to go kill people and get booty." She picked up a small stone off the ground and tossed it across the battlement, bouncing it off the far wall and watching it skitter around. "I think I'm just.. " She let her hand fall to her knee. "I hope I remember how to do it right."

"Right?"

Xena nodded. "You ever do something really good, and then come back to it again and you weren't so good at it?"

"Um." Gabrielle sniffed. "No. I'm not really good at much, remember?"

"Stop that." The queen said sharply. "I'm trying to be insecure here. You're not helping."

Gabrielle wondered what was going on with her tall companion. "Sorry." She apologized. Instead of saying anything else, she reached over and took the queen's hand and clasped it, stroking the powerful fingers with her thumb.

"If I do something stupid, you won't tell anyone about it, right?" Xena said, suddenly. "You won't put that in a story, will you?" She turned and faced Gabrielle, her expression serious.

Gabrielle was dumbstruck. She looked back at the queen, her eyes wide. Of all the things she'd thought Xena was worried about, that hadn't even occurred to her. "Uh.." She spluttered. "Buh.. me?" her voice rose on the last word almost to a squeak.

"You." Xena cupped her cheek. "Storyteller."

Gabrielle exhaled softly. "I would never do anything to hurt you, Xena." She whispered. "I'll stop telling stories." She felt the fingers on her cheek twitch a little at her words. "P... please don't say I can't go with you."

Xena's expression shifted, and her head tilted to one side a little.

"I just want to be with you." Gabrielle felt afraid, suddenly. "I won't tell anyone anything. I promise Xena. I promise, please, just d.. don't make me stay here alone."

Slowly, the queen leaned forward until their heads were touching. "If I do this right." She uttered. "You're going to end up hating me."

Gabrielle remembered, suddenly, a moment in a castle at night, when she'd let the horror of what the queen was doing overcome her. Now, the risk Xena had taken to reassure her started to make a little bit of sense. "Nothing could do that." She lifted her hand, and stroked Xena's cheek.

"I don't want you to hate me." Xena said, with an odd quietness. "I want it all, Gabrielle. I want to lead my army, kick everyone's ass, not screw up and not have you think I'm a..."

"I just want to be with you." Gabrielle interrupted her, with unusual boldness. "Whatever that takes, I'll do it."

Xena looked her in the eye. "Whatever?"

The blond woman nodded.

Xena reached down and pulled something out of the top of her boot. She brought it closer, then turned it so it caught the last rays of the dying sun, which glittered against a small sword hilt. "You're going to be the closest person to my back."

Gabrielle felt short of breath suddenly, the fear of being left behind being chased out by fear of another kind. She looked at the hilt, focusing on the hawk's head on the pommel.

"Take it."

She lifted her hand and slowly closed it around the leather wrapped metal. It fit her hand, but she almost started when Xena pulled the sheath back and exposed the length of the blade. "Oh."

"Can I depend on you, Gabrielle?" Xena asked, softly. "If someone comes at me, can you stop them?"

Gabrielle stared past her, at the twilight tinted wall. She could smell the wood smoke from the kitchens and far off, hear the sounds of the castle settling in for the night. She heard a soft cracking sound, and wondered if it was her soul breaking, before she looked back at Xena, knowing the queen was waiting for her to speak.

"I already know you'll die for me." Xena said. "That's not what I want. I want you to live for me, and keep me alive. Can you do that, shepherd?"

Could she?

Gabrielle drew the sword all the way out of its sheath and examined it, lifting it up before her eyes. It was short, not half the length of Xena's, and it didn't feel anywhere near as heavy. After a moment, she turned her eyes back to her companions. "I will."

Xena could see her own reflection in that blade. She was pretty sure she'd more likely get it stuck in her ass than Gabrielle would do anything useful with it, but it was the thought that counted, wasn't it? "Don't die on me, Gabrielle." She said, seriously. "I've done a lot of rotten things in my life, but getting you killed is what I'll send myself to Tartarus for. I mean that."

Gabrielle's head came up a little. Her expression altered a trifle, from grim to something gentler. "I understand." She slid the sword back into its covering. "I'll do my best to make sure we both are okay."

Xena suspected she would fail. However, she'd rolled the dice long before and it was time to stop being so gods be damned maudlin and just get it done. "Okay." She leaned back against the wall and draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders, leaving the sword in her hands.

She was still worried about looking like an idiot. But now she was confident it wouldn't be at Gabrielle's hands, since she knew the adorable mophead tended to leave out the goriest details and her occasional lapses into insanity from them anyway.

She didn't want her to stop telling stories. She just wanted to look good in them. "Gabrielle?"

"Hm?"

"Don't use that thing for cooking."

"I won't." Finally, Gabrielle smiled, laying the sword on the wall next to her leg. "Are we ready now?"

"As we'll ever be." Xena reviewed her preparations. "Guess we'll end up staying here for that damn festival anyway." She'd intended on leaving before it, but the supplies just weren't coming in fast enough and she knew starting off by raping her own people of what they had wasn't smart.

"I'm glad."

The queen looked at her. "Changed your mind about silk frills?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "I wanted you to hear my poem." She said. "The one Jellaus made into a song."

"Uh oh."

"It's worth wearing a dress for that."

"Uh oh."

Gabrielle laid her head against Xena's shoulder, and smiled, casting her future into the same uncertain waters her queen seemed to be predicting. Whatever happened, did.

Whatever.

**

Xena climbed the steps into the main hall, leaving the star scattered darkness behind her. A glance to her right and left showed an empty, echoing space, most of the castle having gone to bed already and she could hear only the occasional soft clank from somewhere else breaking the silence.

She paused before the doors to her chambers, admitting to herself how much she felt the long day, now that she was at the end of it. "Not a good sign." She clucked her tongue, shaking her head as she pushed the door open and walked inside.

The outer chamber was empty, as she'd expected. But the door to the inner was partly open, and she could see the faint reflection of the fireplace on its surface, and smell clean linen and burning wax drifting through the gap.

It made her stop and ponder, just for a second, whether deciding to leave the castle and go pillaging was worth leaving behind this new, cozy life she'd developed over the last few months.

Aggravating question. Xena dismissed it and went to the door, peeking through it with a slight grin of anticipation. The inner chamber was lit with candles, and on the low table near the fire there was a tray with a decanter and two glasses, and two bowls of neatly cut fruit.

"Oh, you're back!" Gabrielle emerged from the bathing room, her body draped in a light, sheer shift that clung to her body and made the grin on Xena's face widen. "How are all the soldiers doing?"

"Damned if I care. C'mere." Xena entered the chamber and held her hands out. She waited for Gabrielle to cross the carpeted floor, then she closed her arms around her as their bodies met. "What have you been up to?"

"Just writing in my diary, nothing really." Gabrielle said. "Would you like a bath?"

"Do I smell like I need one?" The queen inquired. "I wasn't having sex with the horses."

Gabrielle laughed softly, nuzzling Xena's collarbone. "You're so funny." She said. "You don't smell like horses at all. I just found some new soap and I thought you'd like it." She backed up a step, clasping Xena's hands and tugging her gently towards the bathing room. "Come see?"

The queen allowed herself to be drawn into the bathing chamber, where a steaming, opulent tub was indeed waiting, the scent rising from it half spicy, and half something else. "Ah." Xena considered the fact that her swanky tub opportunities were now limited and decided she was overdressed for the occasion. "I do like it."

Gabrielle's hands dropped to the belt holding her tunic shut and unlatched it. "I thought you might." She untied one of the five ties that closed the shirt. "I packed a bunch of it."

Xena allowed herself to be undressed, as she ran her fingers through Gabrielle's pale hair. "You packing that tub too? The horses are gonna bite your ass."

"Um.. no." Gabrielle untied the last fastening. "I figured we'd just have to improvise." She peeled Xena's tunic off, ducking behind her and coming back around, draping the garment over one of the basins before she turned her attention to the laces on the queen's leggings leaving the taller woman naked to the waist.

"Oh, did you?" Xena leaned over and put a light kiss on her companion's neck. She saw the quick grin form on Gabrielle's face, a typical reaction that mixed innocence and desire and tickled the queen to her toenails. "You're so damn cute."

Gabrielle looked up, her eyes lighting from within at the words, growing brighter as Xena cupped her face in both hands and stroked her jawline with her thumbs. It was a total focus on her that the queen appreciated in a deep way she sometimes didn't quite understand. "Let's get wet."

The blond woman's grin took on a touch of mischief. "Right now?"

Xena turned them both and sat down on the edge of the bath. "I'll have plenty of time to get my boots wet." She started to unlace them, then paused as Gabrielle took over the task, leaving her free to rest her elbows on the marble and enjoy the light steam bathing her back.

"I heard the nobles talking today, in the hall." Gabrielle spoke as she worked, her brow creasing as she undid a knot in the boot's laces. "I couldn't tell if they were happy about what we're doing or not."

The queen gazed down the length of her bare torso, watching her ribs move as she took a breath and released it. "It's greed versus greed, Gabrielle." She remarked. "They want to keep what they have, and they want to get what conquest will bring back."

Gabrielle drew one boot off, darting a mischievous look at her companion as she ran her fingertips across the sole of her bare foot.

"Gggabrielle." Xena rumbled warningly.

"Sorry." The blond woman pretended contriteness, as she started working on the other boot. "But, how can they expect to get more, if they don't help the army?" She asked. "That doesn't make sense."

"No. It's human nature. By definition that doesn't make sense." The queen sighed. "Stupid bastards."

Gabrielle pulled Xena's other boot off, then she stood and took hold of her leggings, giving them a tug. "I think the water's cooling off." She said. "It's really better hot.. don't you think?"

"Know what I think?." The queen remarked. "The bath's just a smoke screen." She folded her arms across her chest, one eyebrow hiking up as she watched a blush start right about neck level on her companion. "I think you just like undressing me."

"You're right. I do." Gabrielle responded readily, aware of the heat and the knowing blue eyes on her. "You're so pretty, I love looking at you." She admitted. "And I guess a bath's a pretty good excuse, isn't it?"

Xena chuckled softly, standing and letting Gabrielle strip off her leggings as she reached over to pull the blond woman's shift over her head. "C'mon muskrat. In ya go." She circled the smaller woman with one arm and swung her legs over the edge of the tub, pulling Gabrielle with her as they both slid into the marble basin with a significant splash.

Gabrielle was laughing as she surfaced, shaking her head and sending bubbles flying, the light, joyous sound echoing off the marble. "Oh boy." She spluttered. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Ah, now you know why I was such a successful despot." Xena extended her long legs and leaned back against the wall of the tub. "I never did what anyone expected." She sighed. "Hope I haven't lost that touch.. damn I feel old today."

"Why?" Gabrielle scooted over and took a seat next to her, lathering some of the soap on a bit of sponge and scrubbing her bathmate's shoulders. "You don't look old." She reassured her. "I mean, you never do, but especially not today when you had that really cute outfit on."

"Cute outfit?" Xena willingly allowed herself to be distracted. "That wasn't supposed to be cute."

"Well, you looked great in it." Gabrielle told her. "I think it's sexy."

"Hmph." The queen slid down in the water a little, letting it creep up almost to her chin. "Yeah, well... all I know is I'm tired. I don't remember that happening before." She took a breath of the warm, scented air, and relaxed, as Gabrielle's sponge worked it's industrious way along her skin. "And we haven't even left yet." She closed her eyes, giving her head a shake.

The blond woman reclined on her side next to Xena, watching her profile as she gently soaped her. "I got tired just watching you." She said. "I mean, you beat up all those guys. Can you imagine how they feel?" She remembered seeing the soldiers trudging from the field, covered in blood, mud, and sweat. "They were all talking about you."

One blue eye opened, and studied her. "They were, huh?"

Gabrielle nodded.

"What were they saying?"

"Well." The water tinkled softly as she rinsed out the sponge and added more soap, then went back to her scrubbing. "They think you're amazing with your sword."

"I am." Xena said. "What else?"

"That you're so fast when you move. They can't catch you."

The queen smirked. "Nice to hear that." She allowed. "Anything else?"

"They can't figure out how you do that jumping around thing you do."

"Ah." Xena lifted her arms out of the water and spread them out to either side along the wall of the tub. "Now that's a question with a long hard answer." She stretched her body out, feeling the stiffness receding as the warmth penetrated deep into her bones. "Let em keep guessing."

Gabrielle eased herself up and settled over Xena's legs, straddling them as she worked. She knew how Xena did her jumping around thing, and it was something she knew she'd never duplicate so she'd laughed to herself listening to the soldiers talk about it.

She hadn't known what to make of the long, heavy stuffed burlap roll laying along the wall in the tower, until she'd watched Xena lift it up onto her shoulders and start working with it.

Crouching, and leaping. Crouching and leaping, and pushing herself and the thing up off the ground amazing enough until Gabrielle had tried lifting one corner of it and realized it probably weighed twice what she did.

Unbelievable. Incredible the strength it took to do what Xena did, and the constant, neverending practice she did with it almost every time she went up to her chill, empty training chamber. "I don't think they'll ever guess that." She said.

"Nah." The queen sighed. "It's easier to think it's a trick." She mused. "Ah, I'll get used to it again once we're out there. I've just been living too soft all these years." She let her eyes drift shut again, surrendering to Gabrielle's slowly crossing from utilitarian to erotic touch with the sponge.

Yeah, she was spoiled. Xena felt her breathing shorten as the slightly rough surface slid down from her collarbone and circled her breasts. Her body had gotten to very much liking Gabrielle's attentions and while her blond bedmate certainly wasn't the most experienced wench around, she was..

Ungh.

The warmth erupted into heat, as Gabrielle's body gently molded itself to hers, and her thigh eased between the queen's, a lightly insistent pressure that almost made her gasp. She gave into it though, welcoming the burn as the blond woman leaned forward and their lips met, the faintest hint of mint entering her mouth as their tongues explored.

It felt a little out of control, but that made it all the more enticing, and Xena could feel her body surrendering to the craving, wanting the release she knew Gabrielle would give to her.

Hedonist? She'd never denied that, but she'd always been able to discipline herself in her excesses and somehow this little shepherd's kid had gotten past that and had her wrapped around her little finger, having her way with Xena to an almost frightening degree.

The sponge roamed downward, and she stopped worrying about it, the pleasure overcoming any reservations as the exhaustion of the day fell away replaced by a surge of sexual energy.

Gabrielle was very focused on her and she'd learned well what Xena liked. Her attentions were sure and persistent, teasing touches that had her body twitching in short order and her mind taken right off her concerns and into a sensual space that set her own hands roaming.

Well.

Maybe they could find a way to take the damn tub.

Never knew till you tried, right?

Far off, Xena heard the soft clarion tones of the evening horn, sounding the watch for the first time in a very long time, and she smiled. It'll all work out, she thought, before thought lost it's coherence. It'll all work out just fine.

**

Gabrielle paused as she entered the kitchens, cocking her head to listen to the chaos. She moved inside the door and put her back to the wall, just absorbing the voices around her.

The center of the big room had been cleared, and now it was full of boxes and wrapped parcels, with more parcels, baskets, bushels and loose items scattered around them. Three men were standing among the boxes waving their arms and yelling, and two women were on the periphery of it all, yelling back.

"Good grief." Gabrielle muttered to herself. "This is no way to get things organized. Xena's going to have a fit!"

That was the last thing she wanted to have happen. Taking a deep breath, she pushed herself away from the wall and walked into the center of the chaos. "Excuse me."

"Damn it woman, I told ye it just won't do!" The man closest to the boxes hollered, unheeding. "It can't be packed like that!" He grabbed one of the boxes and dumped it on the ground, scattering the contents. "See?"

"Now you stop that, Machus!" One of the women scolded him. "Leave that be! You'll clean that up with your tongue at your rate!" She gestured at the mess. "It's not for us to know how to feed an army. That's your job!"

"My job? It's your neck on the line if there ain't food for them to eat!" Machus yelled back. "Want her Majesty to show you how to pack a box?"

"Excuse me."

"Don't you be wagging that one at me, you dirty rug!"

"Dirty rug, is it? Wasn't what you said at the inn, now was it?" The man put his hands on his hips. "Turn your nose up at the army now, will you? Hades to you, Hina."

"Hades right back to you, Machus.. you beggarly hanger on! Going to steal the droppings, don't think we all don't know it!" The woman snapped right back, a low mutter rising behind her. "The army? You're no more the army than that little.."

Gabrielle took a deep breath, and opened her mouth. "HEY!" She bellowed.

When the echoes faded, she was standing on one side of the pile of supplies in a pool of silence, as everyone's eyes turned on her and they realized who it was in their midst.

The relaxed, if chaotic atmosphere vanished, replaced by uneasy fear, and Gabrielle absorbed that for a moment before she squared her shoulders back and forced herself to take a step forward. "Okay, now look." She said. "We really don't have time to fight about this. We're going to leave soon, and this has to be ready."

The woman glanced at her, then looked away. "As you say, your grace." She muttered.

"Aye." The man agreed, staring at his feet.

Gabrielle studied them. "You're just saying that." She said, in an almost conversational tone. "You're not really listening to me, are you?"

No one answered, they merely stood in sullen silence, now attracting attention from the rest of the kitchen.

"You know people are going to depend on this stuff, when we're all out there, so it has to be right." Gabrielle felt a curious flashback to hearing her mother's voice, ordering the larder echoing somewhere in her fading memories. "So I think the first thing to do is fix it up so that it's not going to fall apart if it gets knocked around. Like he was saying." The blond woman stepped over the scattered packets and dropped on one knee, sorting among them. "If we take this here.."

"Here, what's going o.." The ring of silent watchers edged aside to allow Stanislaus past them. "Why... uh.."

Gabrielle looked up. "Gabrielle." She enunciated her name politely. "Xena's put me in charge of making sure her back's covered. I think that means making sure she's got all the stuff she needs, don't you?"

"Ah.."

Stanislaus appeared at a loss. "My lady, can I escort you to the royal chambers.. I think it's time for tea." He glanced at the kitchen staff. "These good people have work to do."

Gabrielle stared at him. Then she turned and looked at the boxes.

Should she let this go? Let 'these good people' go on with their scatterlot packaging of things that they just might need out there? "No, thank you." She responded politely. "I'd really rather stay here and get this sorted out." She paused. "Want to help me?"

Now the tables were turned. Stanislaus's nostrils flared, and he glanced around again, this time more furtively. "Your grace?" He lowered his voice. "Help you?"

"Sure." Gabrielle started stacking the boxes. "Look, all this stuff is different. It doesn't make sense to put the grain next to the skewers, does it? You never use those with grain." She looked up when there was no answer, to find Stanislaus gone, and the ring of kitchen workers staring at her a little gape jawed. "Well, do you?"

Machus, to give him credit, recovered first. "Ah.. well, yes, m'lady." He cleared his throat. "I mean.. no, m'lady, no.. we wouldn't and that's what I was saying, you see?"

Gabrielle smiled at him. "I think we need to fix this." She got up, holding a packet of folded straw mats. "So I tell you what.. why don't you and I work together to get things straightened out, okay?" She turned and regarded the rest of the workers. "Do we have more stuff?"

The uneasy distrust was almost a scent in the room. She could also sense an underlying anger, and wondered for a moment if she really wasn't making a big mistake.

Then again. She lifted her chin and surveyed them, wondering which of them had been on Bregos side, and which had been on... A faint smile tugged at her lips. Which had been on their side. Hers and Xena's. "Okay." She let the package rest against her hip. "We can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way, and I'll go get Xena."

It was like throwing ice cubes at them. She could see the jerk in their bodies as she spoke the queen's name, hearing in her own tone a casual familiarity she knew jarred them. "I'd rather not do that. She's busy right now." She added. "So let's just get started here, so when she comes check on what I'm up to, she'll see how much progress we made. Okay?"

From ice cubes to hot pokers. There was more fear of Xena here than malice against her, and Gabrielle knew for the moment that she was safe. Two of the women at last stirred into motion, edging gingerly over to join her and kneeling in the scattering of boxes, keeping their eyes averted as they started sorting them.

"What's that over there?" Gabrielle pointed to a storage area, half hidden behind stacks of crates. She half turned, but stopped when she caught the furtive glances being exchanged. "Behind those boxes?"

"Tis nothing." One of the smaller women muttered.

Gabrielle put her hands against the wooden stack and braced her feet, shoving against the heavy boxes with sudden, sure strength.

"M'lady!" The drover hustled over. "Please, let me!"

The crates moved just enough for her to stick her head in the hidden area, which was full to bursting with packets, jugs, boxes, and provisions, obviously tucked out of sight. She pulled back and looked at the workers, all of whom stared at the floor and refused to look back at her.

The drover let his hands drop, then he met Gabrielle's eye and faintly, almost fatalistically, shrugged.

Holding back, huh? Gabrielle knew Xena would be furious if she knew, but she'd been a little, hungry kid standing in her parents small hut watching them give up everything to rough, bawdy raiders and she felt a brief understanding fill her.

Only a brief one. "Well, guess we've got lots to pack, huh?" She remarked cheerfully. "Xena's going to really like this." She dusted her hands off and regarded her unwilling audience. "How about we get started?"

Machus rubbed the side of his nose, then he gave a small shrug in the direction of the rest of them. "Best do as the lady says, friends." He said, briefly, as he started to rearrange the boxes.

The women watched in sullen silence, then shook their heads and gathered around him, pushing things here and there with angry gestures.

Deliberately, Gabrielle stepped over the stack of wrapped baskets and walked further into the larders, doing her best to ignore the stares at her back as she studied the provisions lining the walls.

What did you take out to war? She reached out and touched a twine wrapped jug, and tried to imagine being around one of those campfires. “How much of this do we have?” She turned and looked at the nearest woman in question.

“That be oil, m’lady.” The woman answered stiffly. “Not her Majesty’s wine.”

Gabrielle cocked her head to one side. “I know that.” She replied. “How much do we have?”

The woman hesitated, pressing her lips together. She finally gave Gabrielle a brief nod of her head. “Twelve more like that’un.”

Twelve? Gabrielle studied the jug of olive oil with a frown. “Okay, take those boxes over there.” She directed, pointing to a set of crates. “And fill them with straw.”

“M’lady?” The woman sounded incredulous. “We don’t be sending good oil with the likes of..”

Gabrielle turned and stared at her. “What?”

The woman predictably fell silent, realizing what she’d almost said.

Machus somewhat clumsily got up and moved between her and the now visibly bristling Gabrielle. “Now, your Grace, pay her no mind. She’s a mindless slut, never left the kitchen once.” He said, loudly. “You wanting the oil, eh? Word is you’re a right wonder for cooking. Be a good lesson, eh?”

The crowd parted, suddenly, and a slim form pushed through. “Senna wants the flour, what’s all this... oh.” Celeste halted, spotting Gabrielle. “What are you doing here?”

Pale green eyes, in a strangely more mature face framed by shortened hair swept the room. “Representing the Queen’s interests, apparently.” Gabrielle replied. “It seems not everyone’s willing to obey her requests.”

A tense silence fell, and her words echoed softly in a space no longer quite so safe for anyone.

**

“Your Majesty.”

Xena looked up from her notes. “C”mon in.” She greeted Jonas with relative cordiality. “Got the stuff?”

Jonas crossed the room quickly, a small wrapped bundle in his hands. “I do, Mistress.” He reassured her. “I just need to attach it, if I may.”

Xena held her hand out. “Gimme.”

He laid the packet on the table and backed a step, putting his hands behind his back as she laid her quill down and unwrapped the bundle, removing two long strips of mail and laying them out.

“Hm.” The queen leaned on her elbows and studied the mail. It was another example of neat interlace, the edges lined with double rings in a heavy, dull gray metal. “Nice.” She gestured towards the small room to one side. “Get half of it in, then you can do the rest with it on me.”

Releasing his held breath, Jonas carefully took the two strips. “Very good, Majesty.” He murmured. “I’ll be quick about it.”

“Good idea.” The queen went back to her writing. “With my reputation you never know when a fit of cycling might take me and then where would you be?”

“Mistress?”

Xena looked up at him, one dark, finely arched eyebrow lifting sharply. He got the message and retreated to her workroom, disappearing behind the door as a knock came at her outer one. She put down the quill she’d just picked up and lifted her sword instead, removing it from its sheath with a whisper of steel on leather.

The knock came again. The queen twirled the sword and stalked to the opening, yanking the door open and preparing to plunge her blade into whatever was making the annoying sound.

Her hand got as far as her side, and she halted. “Damn it.” She exhaled in frustration. “Stanislaus, you’re almost killable.”

The senschal had shrunk back, his eyes huge. “Mistress!” He blurted in dismay. “I only come to warn you! Please! What have I done!”

Xena turned and headed back to the desk, shaking her head. “What?” She picked up a sharpening stone as she reached her stool and dropped onto it, laying her blade against the rough surface and drawing it across with a nape prickling scrape.

Hesitantly, Stanislaus entered, staying prudently near the door. “Majesty, you must do something, I beg of you. Your hard working slaves in the kitchens are trying to get things organized the way you need them, and..”

“My what?” Xena gave him an amused look. “What have you been drinking? Most of those bastards down there haven’t even pushed a broom in a moon.”

“Majesty, it’s your ..” Stanislaus hesitated. “I am sure she means only the best, she’s such a sweet child, but really.. to be arranging the supplies! Majesty! It will be a disaster?”

Xena paused in the middle of a sharpening stroke and looked at him. “What in Hades are you babbling about?”

“Lady Gabrielle.” The man said. “Surely your Majesty knows what I speak of.. perhaps it was a small jest? Sending her there to make an amusing joke?”

The queen put her sword down. “Hold it.” She held up a hand. “Are you telling me Gabrielle’s down in the storeroom with the goats and chickens?”

Stanislaus looked relieved. “Of course.” He said. “But your Majesty did not know? Perhaps you are not pleased?”

Xena leaned back and wrapped her hands around her knee. “You’re telling me that my sexy love slave is downstairs telling everyone what I want packed?” She sounded incredulous. “My short, blond bedwarmer?” She held her hand out more or less the level of Gabrielle’s head.

“Yes, Majesty.” The seneshal folded his hands, looking pleased with himself. “I am certain you well know the consequences.. with the army leaving so soon.”

Well, well. Xena allowed that she was, in fact, surprised. She hadn’t expected the little muskrat to take the initiative and go meddle in the middens but then, it was the things Gabrielle did that she didn’t expect that were more fun than the expected ones. “Damn straight I do.” She answered, briskly.

Stanislaus smiled.

“Means I probably won’t have to eat gods be damned oatcakes across half the realm.” Xena brushed her hands off and sheathed her sword. “Tell those idiots if they don’t do everything she tells em, I’m gonna drag the lot of them behind my horse on the way out. Got me?”

Stanislaus sighed. “Mistress.”

The queen chuckled softly, as he left. “Bet she packs lots of honey.”

**

Gabrielle stopped at the top of the kitchen stairs to the old tower and sat down, leaning her shoulder against the cool stone as she flexed her tired fingers and exhaled. “Boy.”

Her voice echoed softly off the corridor, and she slid her boots down one more step, grimacing a little at the discomfort from the new leather.

Over her shoulder, the high, arched window set up in the wall was admitting a late afternoon light and she felt a bone deep tiredness from a long day’s work she hadn’t experienced for many a month now. With a faint, wry look, she examined her hands, the palms of her right one scraped and reddened where she’d taken out a splinter. “Not much used to this anymore, huh?”

Only the empty upper hall returned her voice to her and she was quietly glad of a moment of peace after the day of labor, allowing herself a additional moment of satisfaction as she reviewed her progress. A smile appeared as she put her hands behind her and stretched her body out, flexing her toes and exhaling.

A good day. Gabrielle tipped her head back and looked up at the arched stone ceiling, watching the gathering shadows darken the lines of it as the sun began it’s descent behind the walls.

To her left, she heard a soft creak as the door to the outer walk opened, allowing a flood of golden light inside.

Danger?

A gust of wind blew against her back, fluttering the fabric around her body and chilling her skin a trifle. She could hear the faintest scrape of leather against stone and she cocked her ears to listen as footsteps came up behind her.

Rhythmic footsteps, with a perceptible swagger. Gabrielle smiled in pure reflex and half turned, to see a tall, silk draped figure approaching her. “Imagine meeting you here!”

“What.” A low, musical voice rumbled over her. “Have you been up to, my little muskrat?” Xena reached the wall and leaned against it, casually crossing her ankles as she gazed down at her lover. “Hm?”

Gabrielle tipped her head back and looked up at the queen’s towering form, letting the sight fill her senses and feeling a squeeze of happiness around her heart. “I’ve been downstairs.” She admitted, glancing down at her dirt smudged tunic. “Did I get in trouble?”

Xena laughed suddenly, a light sound of actual amusement that had been coming more and more naturally to her of late and she sat down next to Gabrielle on the steps and rested her elbows on her knees. “You?” She eyed her companion. “My little innocent sweet bit of charm?”

Gabrielle’s face scrunched into an embarrassed grimace. “I’m not.”

"You're not what? Innocent, sweet or charming?" The queen inquired. "Muskrat, trust me you are." She reached over and gently smoothed the hair off Gabrielle's face. "No, you're not in trouble. You caused trouble. You know how much I love that."

The blond woman's smile returned. "They were just all so disorganized about everything. I wanted to make it right for you." She leaned into Xena's touch. "Besides, I want to help do stuff. Not just hang around watching."

Xena understood that feeling, in a vague way. Slowly, she nodded, her face thoughtful. "You find their stash?"

Gabrielle looked up at her, a little startled. "What?"

"Their stash. The stuff they were holding back?" The queen watched her face intently. "Did you find it?" She knew the answer by the widening of those open, green eyes, and the faint motion in her jaw as it dropped slightly, but she waited, curious what her lover would answer.

"You knew?"

Ah. Wasn't what she'd expected her to say. "Sure." Xena said. "You don't really think a bunch of ignorant peasants are smarter than I am, do ya?" She studied Gabrielle's dirt smudged, disheveled figure. "C'mon now."

Gabrielle was very confused. She had expected Xena to be upset, angry over the downstairs people hiding things away from her and instead, she just seemed sort of amused by it. "You're not mad?"

The queen gave a half shrug. "I know I'm pushing hard to get out of her." She said. "Natural they'd try to save a few things back, I would."

"You would?"

"Sure."

Gabrielle goggled at her.

"Don't worry." Xena patted her cheek. "You'd get a share." She started laughing at the dumbfounded expression on the blond woman's face. "Ah, you're right." She went to stand up. "Lemme go kill a few dozen of em. We've got time before dinner. C'mon." She started down the steps, humming under her breath.

"Buh.. buh.. bu.. w.. Xena!" Gabrielle found her tongue trying to get outside her mouth and hastily drew it back in. "Ge..bu.. no, wait!" She scrambled to her feet and bolted after the taller woman, thumping down the steps hastily and catching up with the queen just as she got to the bottom. "Wh.. wait! No.. uh.. Xena, um.. just hang on there a minute.."

Xena paused at the door to the kitchens and peered around at her. "What?" She asked. "Wanna help?"

"No.. no, Xena, listen. I wasn't.. I didn't mean you should do anything to anyone I was just.." Gabrielle gently grasped her arm, having learned fast, strong motions made the queen twitch. "I thought you would be angry, and I was surprised you weren't. Please don't hurt anyone."

Xena half turned and looked down at her. "You really think I was going to?" Her voice rose in surprise. "C'mon Gabrielle. I was kidding. Lighten up." She patted her bedmate on the side and pushed the door open with one boot. "Thought you knew me better by now."

Gabrielle followed her inside, her guts churning with a tremendous mix of emotions. It was very hard to know when Xena was kidding, as a matter of fact because the truth of it was, Xena did things horrific

things, with the same offhand black humor that she made jokes with and while she wished she did know the queen's heart as well as Xena seemed to think she should..

She didn't.

"Your majesty!" Machus straightened from tying a final bundle, his entire body covered in grime. He dropped to his knees, as the rest of the kitchen staff hastily joined him, ladles going flying and pots falling to floor as everyone scrambled to acknowledge Xena's presence.

Xena paused in the center of the now cleared loading space, turning her head one way, and then the other to sweep the room with a cool, blue stare. The big doors leading to the courtyard were half open, and the scent of horses was drifting through, two stacks of boxes near the portal the last to obviously be loaded.

The shelves around her were empty. She could remember stopping by here a few days ago and seeing them laden with stores, boxes stacked against the walls and bales lining the passageways. Now, the flagstones were clean, and the larders stood bare and empty.

She would leave behind scarce provisions. Xena acknowledged that to herself, as she looked around and saw the silent, resentful accusation in the faces before her, who could not fend on their own, and depended on her for everything they had.

Oh well. They'd have to manage.

Without comment, the queen walked to the doors and pushed the huge panels open with a casual shove, walking out into the late afternoon light to find six wagons lined up before the kitchens, all packed tightly with boxes, bales and parcels.

The loads were already lashed for travel, and on the wooden sides of the wagons was writing, lines in a studied, careful script the queen well recognized.

She turned around and put her hand on her hips, regarding Gabrielle who had followed her quietly from the kitchen. "You do that?" She indicated the wagons with a thumb.

Gabrielle diffidently clasped her hands behind her back. "Well." She cleared her throat modestly. "I told them how to put things." She said. "And what things, and helped them but.."

Xena strolled around the wagons and peered inside them, thoroughly enjoying the sense of order and logic she could sense in the laying out of the loads. How incredibly unexpected. "Where'd you learn to do that, muskrat?" She asked casually, leaning an elbow on the edge of a sturdy wheel.

Gabrielle walked forward and put her hands on the edge of the wagon buckboard, her expression surprisingly pensive. "I used to have to put in the harvest, at home." She admitted. "Store everything for winter, you know, and take care of the sheepskins, and all that."

"You?"

The blond woman nodded. "It was just me and Lila and Mama and Da." She said. "I was the oldest."

Xena turned and looked at the markings. "That you too?"

Gabrielle pulled a rolled parchment from her belt and came around to where Xena was standing. "I marked down what was in which of the wagons." She explained. "See here? So we don't have to waste time when we stop and have to get stuff."

"Uh huh." The queen grunted. "Interesting."

Gabrielle looked at her with something close to apprehension. "I know putting up one little cot's harvest isn't anything like running an army, but.."

"Know something?"

Gabrielle paused and folded the parchment up. "No, what?"

Xena put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder and looked her right in the eye. "Every time I scratch your surface, you come up gold. That's a damned amazing thing." She said. "I've got soldiers coming out my ass, some of them good, some bad, but you're worth more than all of them together to me for what you did here."

Wow! Gabrielle felt her eyes popping wide open at the very unexpected praise. "I'm.." She stammered. "I'm glad you liked it." She felt her shoulders relax, and the weariness of the long day faded from her, replaced by a warm, happy feeling that put a smile on her face and found its echo on Xena's. "I think I made the people doing it pretty mad."

"I'm sure you did." The queen pulled her closer and gave her a kiss on the head. "But you're going to keep on doing it, because I'm gonna tell everyone you're the master of the camp in this damned army." She put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulder as they headed back towards the kitchen. "And that's really going to piss everyone off."

"Oh."

"Except me."

"Oh. Well, I guess that's all right then." Gabrielle knew she probably had just gotten herself into more trouble than she'd ever intended. "I hope I do okay."

Xena could see the kitchen staff watching them as they entered, still with that deep resentment in their eyes and she knew without a doubt taking Gabrielle with her was the best idea she'd had yet. "Better get planting." She told them, with a dour look back. "Or it's gonna be a long spring chewing the grass out there."

"Your Majesty." Machus was still on his knees, holding his cap against his body. "Tis true it's only a seven-day's provisions we've left here."

"And?"

"Tis hard, Majesty." The man replied bravely.

"No it's not." Xena answered, sweeping her gaze around the room. "Going out with an army, fighting and dying and watching men's heads split is hard. That's all to bring land and riches back so you all can sit here and eat your fill of what I provide you."

A quiet stillness settled over the room. Even Gabrielle was motionless, pressed against Xena's side.

"Better hope I come back." The queen added, widening her eyes mockingly, before she guided Gabrielle to the steps and disappeared up them, slamming the door and sending echoes all through the tower behind her.

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Gabrielle curled her aching hands around her cup of tea and sipped it, glad of a few moments to gather herself before she had to get into her newly finished gown and get ready for the banquet. She was in her own little chamber, with her writing desk to one side and her clothing press behind her and it felt good just to be alone for a brief time with her thoughts and scent of mint curling around her face.

She was very tired. They had a long dinner before them before she could rest, but she wouldn't trade Xena's praise of her work for anything.

Thinking about it now made her smile again, and she took a long swallow of tea, pulling her robe around her a little and moving a bit closer to the fire to ward off the chill from getting out of her warm bath, savoring the moment all the more since she knew how few of them she would have soon.

Master of the camp. Gabrielle covered her eyes and couldn't quite stifle a giggle. Xena had said it had to be master of the camp, because mistress of the camp would give everyone the absolute wrong idea but for the sake of the gods...

Ah well. She really didn't want to be called anyone's Mistress.

So.. why did everyone call Xena that? Her thoughts wandered as she relaxed back in her chair. Did Xena like it? Why did she let everyone call her that if she thought it was a bad thing?

Or did she like it because it was a bad thing?

That seemed like something Xena would like, to be called something that was bad, or naughty because she thought Xena liked everyone to think that's how she really was. Gabrielle knew she had a mischevious streak, but there was something in her that understood there was something in Xena that was good and honest and true no matter what she said otherwise.

It was the part of her that would walk up behind Gabrielle and lay her hands on her shoulders and kiss the top of her head, just for no reason.

It was the part of her that made sure Gabrielle had everything she needed, and more, and never stinted on giving her clothes, and parchment, and all the pretty things scattered about her little room.

It was the part of her that loved and cherished Gabrielle in a way she'd never known before in all her life, not from family, not from anyone.

Xena the Merciless. Most of the time. Gabrielle turned her head a little as she heard the queen stirring in the next chamber, the impatient motions so typical of her apparent in the drop of a cloak on the dressing table and the slight hiss of annoyance as the footsteps approached her doorway.

After a brief pause, the queen's dark head poked itself into her chamber, faintly disheveled hair partly obscuring one pale eye. "Hey. What are you doing?"

Gabrielle swung her head around to look and see if her limbs had started to do something odd without her knowledge. Then she returned her gaze to Xena's face. "Having some tea. Do you want some? I have water on here."

Xena entered and came over to her small hearth, dropping into the armchair next to her with a sullen grunt. "No I don't want any gods be damned tea." She growled. "I want to be out of here."

"Well." Gabrielle got up and went to the fire, taking a cup and setting some tea leaves in it, then pouring the heated water over it. "We are leaving tomorrow, right?"

"Yes." Xena paused. "What are you doing?" She asked, peevishly. "Didn't I tell you I didn't want any damn tea?"

Gabrielle drizzled a good stickful of honey into the cup and stirred it, then she turned and came over to where Xena was sitting, handing her the cup and perching on the chair arm, reaching up to smooth the queen's hair back out of her eyes. "You seem like you're in a bad mood."

"I am in a bad mood. Nice catch." Xena sipped from the cup anyway, as she felt her body reacting to her lover's touch. "So don't try to suck up to me. I'm not falling for it."

Gabrielle laid the backs of her fingers against Xena's cheek, which was cool and the skin seemed a bit roughened. "I love you." She said, unexpectedly. "I was just thinking about that when you came in."

Blue eyes glowered at her. "I'm in a bad mood, and I'm trying to stay that way. Stop sabotaging me." She watched the skin on either side of the blond woman's mouth tense and her eyes warm and gave it all up as a stupid lost cause. "See? That's the problem."

"What's the problem?"

Xena relaxed, letting her head rest against Gabrielle's side. "I can't be mean when you're around." She said. "You make me feel too good."

"That's bad?"

"That's bad for someone who has to be a bastard and lead an army, yeah." The queen sighed. "Some idiot said something to me on the way up here and I'd gotten a really good piss off going and the minute I walked in here and looked at you it was forget it."

Gabrielle wasn't sure what was called for at this point. An apology? "I'm sorry." She ventured. "I don't do it on purpose."

"Sure you do." But Xena's tone was more resigned than angry. "But I want you to promise not to be so damn nice to me in front of the army. Those men have to understand I'm mean and ruthless."

Gabrielle suspected there was a lot to being part of an army she was going to learn starting tomorrow that she had no clue about today. "Um.. okay." She said. "But.. isn't it more like you shouldn't be nice to me if you're supposed to be all mean and ruthless?"

Xena didn't answer, her eyes seemingly fixed onto the low flames in the fireplace. After a long silence, she tipped her head back and looked up at Gabrielle, with a quiet, open honesty that made the smaller woman hold her breath. "You're right." She said. "I should."

Gabrielle felt a sense of deep fear inside her, the stuttering insecurity that made her guts clench. "O..okay." She stammered, harsh images flashing in her mind's eye. "Okay." She added, in a softer tone. "If it's what you have to do."

The queen examined the expressive face just above hers, seeing the humor and gentle affection vanish, replaced by apprehension and a furtive terror that made her understand just how well Gabrielle understood that her future rested squarely in Xena's hands.

Not just life, but this fragile happiness of theirs dangled over them. Xena sighed gently. "Tell me, Gabrielle. Is that why you're doing all this extra stuff? So I don't maybe get the idea to lock you in the closet and leave you to rot while I'm out there raping and murdering the country side?"

Gabrielle's jaw muscles tightened, and she went very still. Xena's sharp eyes were watching her and she felt caught in a vise of a sudden. The accusation was uncomfortably close to the truth and she felt so sick to her stomach she was afraid she'd spew uncontrollably if she so much as opened her mouth.

"Is it?" Xena prodded her, the queen's intense gaze almost unbearable.

After a moment, Gabrielle nodded slowly, without saying anything.

Xena pursed her lips, then she exhaled, shaking her head in silence for a very long period of time, as the fire crackled softly in the heart. Finally she glanced back up at Gabrielle, who was merely sitting there, gazing at the floor. "You're an idiot."

Instead of answering, Gabrielle just nodded again in numb acceptance.

"Do you know **why** you're an idiot?"

Gabrielle shook her head after a brief pause.

Xena got up and paced across the floor, reaching the hearth and turning to look back. Gabrielle's haunted eyes met hers and she could see the echo suddenly of the scrap of a slave kid she'd almost had shot in front of her instead of the warm, sunny companion she'd come to depend on.

Gabrielle hadn't cared then. She'd stood up to Xena and talked back to her because she expected death, or worse, and she hadn't seen anything better coming in her life.

Xena remembered that feeling, remembered drinking enough to drown it out during those long nights across the years when she'd felt her own life losing its meaning.

Did she understand Gabrielle's fear? Silently, inwardly, she mockingly laughed at herself, knowing the answer far, far too well.

So.

"You're an idiot because you don't apparently realize I'd cut my own heart out if I left you." Xena turned and left the room, slamming the door between their chambers shut behind her.

Gabrielle slowly lowered herself to the ground and sat there, her face buried in her hands.

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Stanislaus stood there, a stunned expression on his face. "Cancel the banquet, Majesty?" He repeated. "Is that, my pardon, what you said to me?"

"Cancel it." Xena continued writing on a piece of parchment. "The army leaves tomorrow. I don't have the time, the patience, or the energy to entertain a bunch of useless dogsbodies who do nothing but whine and bray like donkeys at me."

The seneschal's jaw snapped shut, then opened again. "Very well, Majesty." He murmured. "As you will." He bowed, and backed towards the door. "As you will."

Xena waited for the door to close, and slowly her writing trailed off, leaving her staring at her parchment before she closed her eyes and lifted a hand to rest her head on it.

The closed door to the smaller room to her right beat against her in silent accusation and after an aching moment, she tossed the quill from her against the opposite wall and got up, heading with determined steps towards where Stanislaus had so expediently disappeared.

But after a few steps she found herself going to the door between her and Gabrielle instead, the pain in her chest rising almost to choke her.

She laid her hands on the door, surprised to see them shaking, then muttering a soft oath under her breath as she pushed the panel open and walked back inside, stopping at the quiet darkness within.

Now, it was her turn to be afraid, and she was. Her eyes scanned the inside, her heart pounding so hard in her chest she couldn't hear a sound around her. The low daybed was empty, and the so were the chairs before the fire.

She opened her mouth, her throat dry, to call out Gabrielle's name when she spotted the small, curled figure in the corner, near the far wall and she exhaled, her breath trickling out from between her lips.

Hesitantly, she walked over, hearing the soft, stifled sobs as she reached the spot and dropped to her knees, unable to stop herself from reaching out and before she knew it she was sitting on the floor gathering Gabrielle up in her arms and pulling her onto her lap.

Was she crying? Xena was startled to find that she was, and grateful that instead of resisting the touch Gabrielle simply curled up into it, burrowing into her embrace with a desperate, soft sound that should have been profoundly terrifying.

Xena didn't care.

Whatever she'd become now, it wasn't what she had been and she no longer knew where she was going and why she wanted to get there.

Nothing made sense.

Nothing.

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Part 4

The sound of rain against the window slowly lightened Gabrielle's sleep, until the unusually close sound mixed with the position she was in roused her from a deep, dreamless sleep into a strange and worrisome reality.

It was dark, and she was half on the floor and half sprawled in what she realized was Xena's arms and for a moment she was very confused trying to figure out what was going on until she remembered what had happened.

Her heart sank, as the slamming door echoed in her mind and she almost panicked until her scattered wits took hold again and she drew in a breath full of Xena's scent.

It was okay. She wasn't alone here.

She let her held breath trickle out and felt an echo of the fear that raised goosebumps over her skin for an instant, before the hold on her tightened as if in reaction and she calmed herself with the memory of Xena coming back in for her and holding her and telling her it would be all right.

They'd be all right.

What a night. Gabrielle wasn't exactly comfortable, but she wasn't about to move either. The sudden strife had hit her so hard, and been so unexpected her insides were still shivering from it and all she really wanted to do was huddle there in the darkness and not have to face the day.

It was hard. She was so happy being a part of Xena's life and yet so afraid it would all just end between one moment and the next and she'd lose what had become the most important thing in her world.

She loved Xena. She had no idea what she'd do if the queen lost interest in her, and went on to someone else, so deeply was she lost in that love.

The pain still echoed softly inside her, and as she thought about it she started to cry again, tears leaking helplessly from her eyes. The sleep she'd gotten had only made her feel more exhausted and she blinked silently, feeling the warmth drip down her cheeks.

"Hey."

Gabrielle bit the inside of her lip almost through, tasting blood inside her mouth. "Uhm." She uttered softly. "S...ssoor.." She took a breath. "S.. s.." The stutter got the better of her, and she just stopped trying, closing her mouth and sniffing a little instead.

Xena shifted a little. "You okay?"

Gabrielle nodded, after a brief pause, hardly daring to breathe as she felt Xena's fingers cradle the back of her head.

"You don't sound okay."

The somber, quiet concern in the tone nearly made Gabrielle pass out, so much in contrast was it with the way Xena had been talking before. This was not the mocking, angry woman who had shattered her composure – this was the companion she'd slowly come to know.

To trust.

To love more than she loved life. She licked her lips, bitter with the taste of copper on them and felt her body relax just a trifle. "I..uh.. " She could barely talk, her throat was so closed from crying. "Didn't mean to make you mad."

"I know." Xena's voice sounded very tired. "You're not an.. you're really not an idiot. I kill people when I'm mad."

Gabrielle thought about that, knowing how true it was. "N...no." She whispered. "I just didn't want to make you mad because I didn't want you to be unhappy." She admitted. "Not.. not because of that."

The darkness hid Xena's features entirely. "Do you think I'd kill you?" The queen asked. "If I got mad enough?"

"No."

"Really?"

The bizarre conversation was only making her more exhausted. "Yes." Gabrielle answered faintly. "I don't think you'd ever hurt me on purpose."

Xena was silent after that for a while and they just sat together in the gloom, even the fire burned down to nothing but embers.

"I wouldn't ever hurt you on purpose." Gabrielle said, suddenly. "I just want you to be happy." She could feel Xena's breathing. "I just want to love you." She felt the tears come again, warm on the skin of her cheek.

The queen very gently closed her arms a little more tightly around her, tucking her head under Xena's chin as she rocked them both back and for a while. They listened to the storm outside, the rain driving against the window with steady force, but with a rhythm that was close to soothing.

It was lulling Gabrielle back to sleep, and she let her eyes close, leaving the tense uncertainty for a while as she slipped into a half doze, wishing again the night was timeless and never-ending. This was peace here, for this moment in this place, and it was good to simply live it.

Xena's voice surprised her, coming as it did out of the storm, so gentle she almost didn't hear it. "I had no clue what happy was until I met you." The queen mused. "Ain't that something?"

Gabrielle took a moment to remember her life before Xena. Before the slave traders attacked her village, and killed her parents and took her and Lila captive, before the long, terrifying walk to the stronghold.

Before she stood in the courtyard and watched Lila die, her body punctured by a long, black shaft that cut off her cry of fear and sent her clutching hands flying away from her in terrified entreaty.

Before she'd lost everything.

"Me either." Gabrielle whispered, with the faintest of smiles. "Ain't that something."

Found everything.

"We're both sapwad nitwits." Xena remarked, but even in the darkness the return smile was evident. "Neither of us should be running anything. We should be retired to pasture out in the hills somewhere picking flowers and dancing in the full moon."

"Can we go do that?"

Xena let her head rest against the glass of the window, feeling the thrum of the rain against the back of her skull. "You mean give up all this, and just to be vagrants in the wood?"

"Yeah."

Xena felt the rumble of thunder against her shoulder-blades and she found herself wishing to Hades that the following day wasn't going to start soon, in a storm, with her head all screwed up on top of it. "You mean, give up all this luxury?" She released one hand off Gabrielle and patted the stone floor.

"Yeah."

Screw it. "If I mess this up badly enough and we lose we'll end up either homeless vagrants or dead." The queen remarked. "Guess that's something to look forward to then, eh?" She felt Gabrielle shift and snuggle closer to her, and her roiling insides slowly started to settle as she realized things weren't as bad as she'd thought they were.

Gabrielle didn't hate her yet.

"Xena?"

"Yeah?" The queen felt a slow sense of resignation coming over her, as the coming day inched closer with every dark moment, edging towards a dawn she'd once thought she hungered for. "What is it, muskrat? Sorry I freaked you out."

"Can we go sit on the bed? I'm freezing."

Somewhere, Xena found a laugh inside her, and she indulged in it as she slowly straightened up her body and stood, grimacing at the pops as her joints protested and her spine realigned itself. "Oh, gods be damned I'm getting old." She grouched. "I feel like somebody's grandmother."

Gabrielle gingerly rocked her head to one side, then the other, hearing a few nascent pops herself. "You don't look like anyone's grandmother." She replied, cautiously. "Not like any I remember anyway."

"Thanks." Xena put a hand on her shoulder. "I think."

Her body was chilled now that she was no longer pressed against Xena, and she walked over to the small table and picked up the candle. "Let me get this going."

"Why?" Xena came up behind her, and took the candle. "I can see just fine. C'mon." She draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders and led the way through the door between the blond woman's small room and the larger one beyond.

"Can you?" Gabrielle strained her eyes, but nothing other than faint gray shadows were visible to her. "I can't see anything."

Xena turned her head and looked around, the bed and furniture in her inner chamber standing out as solid, silver outlines against the pale walls. "You can't see anything?" She asked, her mind sidetracked momentarily. "Nothing?"

Gabrielle reached out suddenly as her upper legs collided with the bed. "Oh!" She turned and looked up at what she imagined was Xena's head. "Not a thing. Not even you."

Though she could see Gabrielle's eyes moving in her direction, Xena was fascinated to realize they weren't focusing and to prove the point, she waved her hand in front of the smaller woman's face and got no response.

She herself could make out her companion's face easily. "I'll be damned." Xena murmured, a flash of memory suddenly bringing back Lyceus' face, in a pitch dark hallway so heartbreakingly clear to her eyes if no one else's.

'Xe's owl eyes.' Ly had always called them, half envious and half kidding, when they'd come in damn handy getting them out of the pits and crawling through tunnels saving their skins at night.

She'd forgotten, over the years, just how different she was sometimes. It was easy for her to let that knowledge slip, since she really didn't need those skills much anymore, aside from the handling of her sword and the ability to kill without hesitation or regret.

Easy to forget how much their young lives had depended on her, on the hearing more sensitive than any dogs, and her reflexes, and those eyes.

"Xena?" Gabrielle's voice was gentle. "Are you okay?"

If she had remembered, would it have mattered? Could she have caught those telltale scuffles and smell that tang of copper on the barest wind and maybe saved him?

"Xena?"

Warm hands pressed against her stomach, and she jerked her mind away from the past. This was not Lyceus, and she wasn't a wild, reckless spirit anymore.

Question was, if she wasn't that, then what was she? Xena gave her bedmate a pat on the arm, then she nudged her backwards onto the bed and joined her, stretching her stiffened body out along the soft mattress for the last time in what might be a long while.

She didn't really know what she was, anymore. Maybe that was why she was all over the place, pissing off the nobles, driving the men crazy, and freaking out Gabrielle. She'd pitched herself in a role she thought she had nailed down tight and now that she was coming down to putting her dinars where her mouth was she'd discovered she had doubts even if the army didn't.

What if? Xena tugged the decadent, down filled cover over both of them and resigned herself to the knowledge that she was exchanging a life of boring, if pleasant certainties for something far darker, more dangerous, something full of hardships and pain, and possible destruction.

What right did she have, really, to take Gabrielle into that? Just for her own solace?

“Xena?”

“Mm?”

“Are you okay?”

“No.” The queen sighed. “I’m insane.”

A pause. “Oh.”

Xena looked up at the canopy over the bed. “Gabrielle, I never asked you if you really wanted to go do this war crap did I?”

“Um.. no, but..”

“Well, y’know, you’re not a slave anymore. So listen.” The queen squared her shoulders. “I won’t think any less of you if you stay here, see, and maybe run this place while I’m gone.”

“Uh.”

“Being on campaign is rough.” Xena said, in a quiet voice. “A lot of men are going to die before I’m done. Lands might be burned out, villages, like yours.. might be gutted. I could plunder the crops of half the kingdom to support the fight if I have to. Do you really want to see that? I’m serious now.”

“Xena...”

“I know.. you want to go in your heart, little one.” Xena whispered gently. “I know you do.. but there are things no sane person should do and no sane person should see and you’re the sanest person I know.” She paused. “I don’t want you to lose that sanity and become a nutcase like me. Understand?”

Silence from the shadows. Then a breath. “I do understand.”

Xena exhaled silently, nodding a trifle. “So what do you say, Gabrielle? Wanna be Queen?”

There was a faint motion, almost as though Gabrielle had laughed just a little. “I say take me with you.” She replied. “Where you go, I go, Xena. Even if it’s Tartarus.”

Xena had to smile. “You really do mean that, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Last chance.... “

“Same answer.”

Well, screw it. “All right, muskrat.” Xena cast her dice into the wind. “Tomorrow we ride to war, then. Don’t say I didn’t warn ya.”

Gabrielle suddenly shifted and lifted herself up, leaning forward and finding Xena’s lips in what was for her, total darkness. She kissed the queen with quiet passion, then she dropped back onto the mattress and burrowed under the covers, leaving a bemused queen lying beside her as the storm thundered outside the windows.

“Nuts.” Xena closed her eyes, with a sigh. “We’re all nuts.”

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Dawn broke over a still stormy landscape, the gray clouds overhead matching the gray walls of the stronghold as the army started to assemble before the gates ignoring the weather.

Wagons were being rolled out to one side, and the stable doors were flung wide open, grooms moving animals out with a brisk sense of purpose even though the sun had just barely risen behind the thick layer of clouds.

Inside the stable, Gabrielle was standing next to Patches stall, feeding him handfuls of grass she’d pulled up outside. “How’s that, Patches?”

The pony chewed her offering with a thoughtful expression, edging over to nudge her a little in an evident search for more booty. He was already wearing his new coat, it’s thick weave strapped around his chest and under his belly, and his saddle was sitting ready across the post.

Gabrielle sorted his mane out, and scratched his ears, taking a breath and feeling the odd sensation of her armor constricting her body. “I hope this really isn’t as heavy as it looks. She told the pony in a confiding tone. “It feels really weird.”

Weird, but not uncomfortable. Gabrielle stepped away from the stall and stretched her arms out, swinging them back and forth as she tried to get used to her new garb.

She’d gotten more sleep after their talk last night, and she didn’t really feel too bad despite the early hour and the rotten weather. There was a definite excitement in the air, and though she hadn’t seen Xena since they’d taken a hurried breakfast, she had the feeling the queen had settled herself and was in a better mood.

At least, she hoped so. “Patches, we’re going to go off and have an adventure. What do you think of that?” She stepped inside the stall and glanced around, glad there were no grooms to interrupt her as she lifted Patches saddle off the post and hoisted it over his back.

The pony stayed amiably still as she fastened the chest strap, then dropped to her knees to reach under him and grab the belly clinch. It was one of the first things Xena had taught her, along with the patient combing of Patches’ thick coat, and the meticulous care of his feet. She knew all the parts of his tack and how to fasten it, sharing an affinity for the animals that was kin to Xena’s own.

Gabrielle pulled the strap taut and buckled it, giving the saddle a little tug to make sure it was secure. She let her hands rest on Patches back and glanced at the rich, deep green sleeves tied securely around her wrists, that fit under her armor and cushioned her skin.

It felt good. It felt different, to have the underlay on with the armor over it. She’d felt a little gingerly having the links laying right on her skin, since a few incautious moments had pinched the tiny, fine hairs on her arm between the metal and made her squawk to Xena’s amusement.

Now the links slid over the fabric and she found that the outfit felt good to wear and she suspected she’d get used to it very quickly.

“At least I hope so.” Gabrielle tucked her hand into Patches bridle. “Are you ready to go, Patches? Let’s go find your buddy Tiger, okay?” She led the pony out of his stall, knowing a moment of wistful regret on his behalf at leaving his comfortable surroundings behind. Tough as the traveling would be on her, it would be doubly tough on her mount and she hoped she remembered to tuck away enough little treats for him in her bags to make up for it.

The moist, cool air hit her face as she walked out into the courtyard, and she paused a moment at the scurry of deliberate motion in front of her, feeling a little awkward, and more than a little out of place.

“Morning, m’lady.” One of the soldiers recognized her and made an easy, casual salute with his hand to his chest. “Beautiful day for marching, isn’t it?”

Gabrielle glanced up, then grinned wryly. “If you say so.”

The man, who at second glance was not that much older than she was, grinned back. “My da would say, good to be in as it can only get to better, nah?”

That surprised a chuckle from Gabrielle who could remember her mother saying almost the same thing. “Yeah.” She agreed. “Good for the wool.”

The soldier tipped his head back and laughed, continuing on his way with his burden of shields, and Gabrielle led Patches onto the path feeling a bit better. All the men around her, whatever their task, carried in some portion of their gear the hawk’s head insignia that matched the buckle on her belt and now she noted that the shields also had it newly painted on them.

Xena’s mark, the yellow crest against black that fluttered over the top tower of the stronghold and was now in evidence everywhere, on the horses surcoats, and the men’s armor, and on her.

Gabrielle patted her buckle, and looked around, craning her neck to see if she could spot Xena, or even her big black stallion somewhere. “You see them anywhere, Patches?”

Patches whickered amiably, picking a way along the churned path with his neat, iron gray hooves. Gabrielle patted his cheek, then her heart jumped as she caught sight of Xena through the press of wagons, the queen sitting in a relaxed pose on Tiger’s back as he stood up on a little rise where she was watching everything.

Gabrielle drew to one side and slowed Patches to a halt, resting her arm on the pony’s back as she simply stood there, looking at Xena in all her martial glory.

The queen was in her armor, the black leather and burnished metal snugly outlining her long frame, and she had a beautiful cloak in black with her hawk’s head blazoned on the back draped around her. Her sword hilt was visible just past her right ear, and tucked behind her knee was the bag holding the round metal weapon Gabrielle was fascinated by.

Tiger pranced in place, and Xena relaxed and went with him, leading him neatly around in a circle and then backing him up a few steps, the maneuver making the queen smile.

“Okay.” Gabrielle turned and faced Patches. “Are we ready to go Patches?” She took the reins in one hand and got her foot in the stirrup, hopping a little then hoisting herself up into the saddle with a soft grunt. “Boy.. I really do like riding you naked instead, Patches.”

The pony craned his head around and peered at her from under his shaggy eyebrows.

Gabrielle gathered herself up and nudged the pony’s side. “C’mon, let’s go over by Xena and see what she’s up to.” She tried to relax herself as they made their way across the busy courtyard, soldiers pulling up or ducking gracefully out of her way as she gave them all smiles and tried not to plow into anyone.

Xena saw her coming, and she half turned Tiger, resting one hand on her thigh as they came over, her brilliant blue eyes studying her companion intently. “Gabrielle.”

“Yes, your majesty.” Gabrielle stopped Patches next to the big stallion, feeling almost comically dwarfed by him. “I’m ready.”

One of the queen’s dark eyebrows lifted. “You are?”

“Well. As ready as I’ll ever be.” Gabrielle admitted, wryly. She looked around, as the troops started to gather in large groups together, and the wagons began to creak into line. Four legions of men, and they were all men, she realized, were forming up to march under Xena’s banner, and she frowned a moment, trying to remember how many there had been when Xena’s troops had fought Bregos.

Were there less now? Gabrielle remembered that Xena had said, back in the winter, that some soldiers had joined the army, but she also knew some had died with the sickness and it was hard to tell if they were ahead or behind.

Definitely, there were more than what they’d traveled with the last time. She turned and looked up at Xena, who was sitting there quietly watching her. “How do you go to war, anyway?” She asked. “Do you just go down the road until you find someone to fight and do it?”

Both of Xena’s brows shot up, and she lifted one gloved hand to stifle a laugh. “No.” She cleared her throat, and turned Tiger so they were side by side. “First thing we’ll do is cover the ground between here and the border, and take care of those damned fleabag raiders.” She flexed her hands. “Then we’ll see what the best way to go is.”

Brendan rode up on a sturdy gray gelding, with a darker gray mane and tail. “Mistress.” He saluted briefly. “The horsemaster’s asking a word with ye, if you will.”

“Tell him c’mon.” Xena said. “If he’s the shy type, tell him he can stay here and weave baskets.”

“Mistress.” Brendan turned his mount and ambled off, turning a corner near the stables and disappearing, as Xena kicked her boots free of her stirrups and let her feet dangle.

“What if we don’t find anyone out there to fight?” Gabrielle persisted in her line of questioning. “Will we keep going?”

Xena looked at her. “What’s the point of this conversation?”

“I’m just asking.”

“You never just ask.” The queen smiled, taking the sting from the words, mostly. “You always have something cooking inside that little cute head of yours.” She reached out and ruffled Gabrielle’s hair. “If we don’t find anyone, we’ll take all the land we’re gonna march across, but don’t count on it.” She glanced past the army, towards the walls. “There’s something out there.”

“What kind of something?”

Ah. Excellent question. Xena didn’t know herself what the urging was inside her that was driving her out and to the border, she just knew it was strong, and it was annoying, and it was overriding even her self indulgent impulse to stay in her stronghold with all it’s hedonistic pleasures. “That’s what I want to find out.”

One of her most hedonistic pleasures frowned, and played with her reins, looking innocent and particularly fetching in her neatly made armor. “Well, it’s a good thing to stop the raiders, anyway.”

Xena reached over and rearranged the edge of her companion’s new cloak, impatient now to be on her way and not loitering in the courtyard as the nobles looked on from the walls. “Yeah, I’ll at least get

some fun in before I have to start working hard.” She agreed. “And you can make up a good story about how I defended the little homeless kids, all right?”

Gabrielle nodded, after a brief hesitation. “What’s going to happen back here?” She asked. “To all the people, if you’re taking the army?”

Ah. Another excellent question. Xena elected to let the approach of her horsemaster distract her. She directed Tiger towards the stable, and intercepted him. “Sheldon.”

“Mistress.” The man greeted her. “Tis the new filly, Mistress. She’s broken her stall again, and I fear to leave her here with the young’uns.” He wiped his hands on his leather trousers. “She’s a high spirited one, she is.”

Xena drew in a breath at this unexpected complication. “Lastay’s filly?” She said. “Send her back to him.”

The horsemaster cocked his head. “Mistress?” He seemed confused. “Twas his man that said the filly was yours.. just the other day, it’s a fact.”

Huh? “What?”

“Wow, that was nice of him.” Gabrielle had typically wormed her way into the action, her pony poking his head under Tiger’s neck as she scooted past. “She’s such a pretty horse, Xena.”

“Ah, and you’ve been the one giving her apples, have you?” The horsemaster smiled at Gabrielle. “Taken a liking t’you, the groom said.”

Xena turned her head and looked at her young lover. “You’ve been messing with that horse?” She growled. “I told you to leave her be.” She glowered at the horsemaster. “Send her back to Lastay’s. I don’t need her here.” She shifted, and Tiger reacted to her agitation, moving in a fast circle, his head tossing. “Stop that!”

The horsemaster backed a step. “As you say, Mistress.” He murmured. “I’ll send my son and one of the older men with ‘er.. the gods hope they can handle the animal. She’s for sure a fighter.” He turned and headed back towards the stable, shaking his head as he walked.

“Idiots.” Xena got her stallion back under control. “Last thing I need to worry about is a damn..” She paused, as Gabrielle dismounted from her pony. “Where in Hades are you going?”

Gabrielle handed up her reins. “Can you hang onto him? I just want to say good bye to the pretty horse if you’re sending her away.” She explained. “It’ll just take a second.”

“B..” Xena’s hand closed around the reins instinctively. “Say goodbye to a damn horse? What’s wrong with you?”

The blond woman shrugged, a little. “I like her.” She gave Xena a sheepish grin. “She reminds me of you.” With that, she scooted off after the horsemaster, leaving her queen sitting there on her big horse with her jaw dropped enough to see it, and her hands full of pony reins. “Be right back.”

“Reminds you of..” Xena let the words trail off, as Gabrielle disappeared behind the stable door. “You little barn rat.” She glanced down as something nudged her leg, to find Patches looking reproachfully up at her. “What?!”

The pony mouthed his bit and shook his head. Tiger snorted, and also shook his head. Xena rolled her eyes and looked up at the gray skys overhead. “This is starting out just gods be damned peachy.” She exhaled loudly. “Damn it.”

Thunder rumbled, as if in answer to her, laughter of the gods that made her swear silently to herself again.

Damn it.

**

It seemed to take forever, but finally they were underway, and headed down the long, winding road that would take them first to the river, and then away from the stronghold and towards the unknown.

Gabrielle settled her cloak around her and did her best to relax into her saddle, stretching her legs out and listening to the faint creak of the leather as she rode at Xena's side here in the front of the first section of the army.

Not at the very front, she noted. There were about a dozen soldiers on horseback riding ahead, or on point as Xena had said it was, sort of making sure things were okay before the rest of them followed. There were also soldiers riding to either side of them, though whether they were just there or supposed to be bodyguards was hard to decide.

Behind them, the legions stolidly marched, and behind them, the supply wagons rolled followed by a guard troop bringing up the rear.

The road was wet from the previous nights rain, and the sky overhead seemed to threaten to add to that at any moment. But still, even with all that, Gabrielle felt a sense of almost relief as they passed through the gates of the stronghold and were out in the open, with the damp wind sweeping against them.

It ruffled her hair and the fur collar of her cloak and she was glad of Patches sure footing as they splashed through a thick and muddy puddle in the center of the road.

It had all kicked off with a remarkable lack of ceremony, she'd thought. She'd expected at least the castle occupants to stand on the walls to see them off, but outside the Duke, who had dropped to his knees mud or no, and clasped his hands between Xena's everyone else had apparently found something else to do.

It had felt strange, as though everyone was turning their back on the army, when really, they were going out into the world to bring things back for the very people who were ignoring them. Gabrielle frowned.

That is what they were doing, weren't they?

She wasn't sure how Xena felt about that. The queen had been relatively quiet since they'd started off, her body slouched in the saddle, and her hands resting casually on her thighs as Tiger walked along the road with his head pretty much free.

She seemed relaxed, but as Gabrielle watched, the queen's fingers went to sort out Tiger's mane, then to her saddle ties, then to the ends of the reins in an odd fidget that belied her apparently casual stance.

Xena didn't really seem bored, she appeared to just be thinking about something, and Gabrielle decided that being quiet and letting her do that was probably a good idea for now. They had all day to walk, and she turned her own attention to the surrounding scenery, since they didn't usually ride this way and there were new spring flowers to look at.

Blue and yellow ones, very pretty, with plump looking bees hovering over them. Gabrielle leaned forward a little and watched as a hummingbird traded spaces with the bee, it's wings going so fast she couldn't make them out even a little.

Amazing. She straightened up in her saddle and looked ahead of her again, watching the road slope down towards the river as thunder softly rumbled overhead again.

"Gabrielle."

Startled, she looked up at Xena, who was now half turned in her saddle watching. "Oh. Yes?"

"Remember that word game we played once?"

Word game, word game... wh.. oh. "The one when you were hurt?" Gabrielle said. "The guessing game?" She watched Xena nod. "Sure, I remember. You won."

"Naturally." The queen flicked her cloak edge out and untucked it from behind her boot. "So let's do it again." She turned herself forward and scanned the lands they were moving through, pleased to see fields under plow on either side as far as the river and beyond.

As they moved past one, the workers busy among the plantings looked up, then came over to the road's edge to watch them pass. One of the young men waved, and a soldier waved back, letting out a whistle as the watcher shouted.

"What was that?" Gabrielle asked, peering past Tiger's tall form.

"Kin." Xena replied shortly, then she glanced back. "Or maybe they're lovers. Who knows?" She glanced down at her gauntleted hands, the fingers of one clasped lightly around her reins, and sighed at the strangeness of the sensation of wearing the gloves after so long.

Everything felt just a little strange. She'd always ridden, but there was something different about knowing at the end of this day, and the next, and the next, and the next, there would be no warm stable to have Tiger taken to, and no respite from the feel of the saddle and the wind against her face.

"Do you want to go first?" Gabrielle's voice distracted her. "Thinking of something, I mean, or do you want me to?"

Distraction. Exactly what she needed. "You go." Xena fought the urge to try and scratch an itch between her shoulderblades, which were covered by armor and her sword. The leather provided good protection, and it was well broken in and fitted, but it too felt just a little strange constricting her body and she could feel the aggravation in her rising at the picky little nits her mind was throwing at her. "Make it fast."

"Okay." Gabrielle said. "I've got something."

"Already? I don't believe it."

"I do." The blond woman assured her. "Go on, guess."

"Animal or plant?" Xena started off, feeling the shift in Tiger's body as they started down the long, gradual slope towards the river. Ahead of them she could now see the bridge where she'd joined the court in greeting Bregos at his final homecoming as her general, and she remembered that chill fall day with a sudden, bleak clarity.

Was it then, that she'd felt herself becoming irrelevant? She remembered the sour taste of bile in the back of her throat as she fought down the envy she'd felt at the greeting her general received, the love of the people always denied her.

Was it then, that she'd decided he had to die?

"Plant."

"Stinkweed." Xena guessed, knowing by the quick, easy grin on her companions face that she'd missed the mark. "All right, is it a tree, a bush or something smaller?"

"Um... " Gabrielle scratched her nose. "Yes."

"Ggggaabbbrielle."

"It's a bush and something smaller." The blond woman's eyes twinkled. "Not a tree." She reached over and let her hand rest on Xena's boot. "Xena?"

A bush and something smaller? The queen eyed her. "Yes?"

"I know there's going to be some great stories before we come back." Gabrielle told her. "I'm so glad you let me come with you."

"You trying to distract me from guessing your bush weed?" The queen raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I bet it has something to do with berries."

"No." Gabrielle squeezed her calf through the heavy leather. "I just wanted you to know how happy it makes me to be here, to be going with you.. and that you let me share your life."

Ahh. Love's dividends. The funny thing was, Xena mused, the innocent little kid really meant what she said, and even though she knew the stories they would come back with weren't something Gabrielle would enjoy telling, the knowledge that she'd come with her willingly finally put a smile on her face.

"Thank you." She let her hand drop to cover Gabrielle's. "No smartass comeback. I mean it."

Gabrielle's eyes brightened, and she stuck her tongue out to catch the first droplets of the rain that finally started coming, as she pulled her hood up with her other hand.

Xena just laughed, leaving her own head bare as the storm broke and the wind blew right into her face as she looked right into it, unblinking. And so, she nodded to herself, it starts – it starts, and where it ends may not even matter.

Behind them, the troops started a marching song, low, rough voices counterpointing the thunder rolling overhead and after a moment, Xena joined in, her mind busy pondering places to camp, people to terrorize, and plants which might or might not be bushes to haggle through.

**

Xena pushed aside the flap of her tent and ducked inside, blinking her pale eyes to rid them of the rain that stung them. Inside she halted, her senses assaulted by the scent of leather and furs mixed with hot spiced wine and warm candles. "Gabrielle?"

"Here." A damp, blond figure, barefoot and in a light tunic appeared from behind the fur strewn double pallet that served her as a bed. "Let me get your cloak.. I've got mine drying over here near the back."

The queen gratefully shrugged off the waterlogged leather and handed it over, straightening up and looking around at the spare, somewhat barbaric interior and liking it. "Nice." She sat down on a chair and started unlacing her boots, glad of the travel rug underfoot and the heavy leather tent hides that kept the rain off them.

She was soaked through, cloak or no cloak, the driving rain had kept up all day long and now she felt like her leather armor had become part of her skin, the moisture easing the snugness to something more familiar as the day went on and she got used to wearing it again. "Good day."

Gabrielle came over with a piece of linen and gently dried Xena's hair, moving it back and patting the raindrops off her face. "Was it? Everyone seems a little grumpy."

The queen chuckled, evidently not sharing the sentiment. "They'll get over it." She captured one of Gabrielle's hands and nibbled the palm. "I noticed the cooks were happy." She said. "Wondering who'd packed up all the supplies they'd though they'd be without."

"Heh." Gabrielle grinned. "I bet we can find more stuff on the way, like those herbs I spotted today."

"Bet we can." Xena pulled one boot off and let it drop, then started on the other, only to pause when Gabrielle knelt and circumvented her, taking the laces in her own fingers and working them. "Hey." She tapped the blond woman on the head. "You're not my servant. I can take off my own damn boots."

"Xena." Gabrielle looked up at her. "You're the queen, and I like doing things for you. Don't you like people doing nice things like this?" She slipped the other boot off and folded her hands around Xena's chilled foot, massaging it with warm fingers.

Xena's eyes narrowed, but a grin was lurking there as well. "I'm screwed no matter what I answer, you sneaky little muskrat." She accused. "If I say yes, you squash my tough as three year old hide reputation and if I say no you'll stop doing that and damned if I want you to."

"I won't tell anyone."

"Yeah, yeah." Xena leaned back in the chair, a clever bit of folding wood and leather strapping that tucked into a small case for traveling and yet held her long length with acceptable comfort. "I want to have my captains in after they get the food to everyone. Saw some carelessness today I don't like."

Gabrielle touched the armor covering Xena's knee, reaching behind it to unbuckle the worn strap. "Well, it's kind of new for them.. and they found that big stag.. I guess they got excited."

"Hmph." Xena started to unlatch her chest plate. "No excuse. That idiot's broken leg held us up, and lost me two men taking him back. We can't afford screwups like that." She lifted the metal armor off over her head, and laid it carefully on the carpet, taking the linen from over Gabrielle's shoulder to dry her neck off. "All for some damn venison."

"Smelled pretty good." Gabrielle finished removing the leg armor and took the linen back, drying the queen's legs.

"Did you go tell them how to make it right, at least?" Xena ruffled her hair as she stood up, unlacing the front of her leathers and loosening them as she walked across the tent to her garment press. "Glad I had a spare set of these made up. Damn." She stripped the drenched hide off her and draped it over the center pole as she sensed Gabrielle coming up behind her.

The middle of the tent held a patch of bare ground and that was where the camp stove was, radiating a comforting heat against her bare skin as she opened her press and removed a dry set of leathers. She shook them out while her back was being dried off and paused to listen to the rain before she donned them. "Crops love this. I don't."

Gabrielle took her wet underwraps and set them to dry next to her own. "I heard the soldiers talking about setting a guard." She said. "But we're still near the castle."

"We were attacked in the castle before the winter, weren't we?" Xena pulled on her dry leathers and walked over to the chest, sitting down and removing her sword from its sheath to wipe it down. "Half the damn army ran off, Gabrielle. They're out there somewhere and they've got lots of reasons not to like me."

"Hm."

A knock sounded at the post outside. "Yes?" Xena called out.

"Supper, your Majesty." The responding call was slightly hoarse, raised to sound above the rain.

"Get it in here before you drown it." The queen said, then, as the tent flap parted, she grinned wickedly. "But close your eyes, we're naked and I skinned the last jackass who saw Gabrielle's butt."

The soldier froze, turning his head and almost letting go of the tray he was holding to cover his face and letting out a gargling sound.

"Xena." Gabrielle bolted across the carpet and grabbed one end. "You're so bad." She helped the rattled soldier to the folding table near the stove.

The queen inspected the tip of her blade contentedly. "Bet your ass I am." She remarked. "It's about time everyone remembered that, matter of fact." She added, in an undertone.

"Mmmmajesty." The soldier ducked his head. "A..nything else t'your pleasure?"

Xena regarded him. "Nothing you could do anything about. Scram." She pointed at the flap with her sword. "Tell Brendan I want him here in a half candlemark, got me?"

"Majesty." The man bowed and fled, leaving the tent flap fluttering in the wind behind him.

Xena let her sword rest against her shoulder as her eyes lingered on Gabrielle's linen clad figure outlined in the light from the stove.

As though sensing it, the blond woman turned her head and met Xena's eyes. "Ready for supper?"

Xena grinned at her, laying her sword down and crooking a finger at her. "Yeah. C'mere, lambchop."

"Xena."

"Hey. You're the one who said I was the queen so stop messing with that and get your tail over here."

Gabrielle left the venison to simmer and obeyed, hoping that whole skinning thing was just Xena's little joke.

Just in case.

**

Xena wrapped her cloak around her as she came to the edge of the camp, a line of thick trees that shielded them from the road and cut the wind that whistled through their branches. She eased between two huge trunks and gazed out into the early faint gray of dawn, drawing in a deep breath of cool spring air.

It tasted good on her tongue, rich with dew and pine and she found herself looking to the coming day with a sense of pleasure and a touch of prickling excitement. It felt good to be outside, and she reveled in the brush of long branches against her hands as she made her way through the forest.

To her right, she could see the watch for the front side of the camp, two soldiers perched on half fallen trunks and one high in the branches of a tall tree, legs hooked around the bark as his head turned slowly in a practiced sweep.

With a faint smile, Xena emerged from the trees, walking across the leaf litter and damp ground as the first birdsong came softly to her ears.

Today, she felt a little more herself. Or her old self, at any rate. The leathers had started to feel more natural, and she was getting used to the weight of her sword on her shoulders again. She felt a little stiff from riding all day the day before, but at least she'd gotten some decent sleep, the strangeness of the pallet offset by the now comfortable familiarity of Gabrielle's warm body curled up against hers.

It felt good to know she had an entire day of new experiences ahead of her. Insanely good to know she had no courtiers to deal with, no nobles to listen to, and no court intrigue to roll her eyes over.

Here, she just had the army, and her soldiers, and the problems of the road, and riding at her side a half nutty blond kid who liked to make her laugh and loved her like no one else ever had.

Didn't that just beat fawning dukes and silk slippers? The queen chuckled silently. Rain or no rain, she was damn glad she was out here now that she was.

A butterfly, ghostly gray in the pre dawn fluttered up suddenly in front of her and before she realized it she had caught it in her hand, her fingers closing around the insect in a motion so quick even she didn't see it.

Instinct. Deep as bone. She exhaled and opened her fingers, releasing the butterfly as it tottered off while her eyes followed it until it vanished in the gloom. "Guess the old reflexes aren't shot quite yet, huh?" She muttered under her breath, shaking her head a little before she moved on.

Xena paused behind the watch, and leaned against a tree, undetected by the men. A twinkle entered her eyes as she leaned over and picked up a small rock, juggling it a moment in her fingers before she whipped her arm sideways and sent the missile flying to smack the nearest guard in the ass.

The man jumped and cursed, turning smoothly and drawing his sword as his eyes raked the forest, freezing into large round gray balls when he came face to face with the tall, lanky figure watching him. "Bigods!" He yelped, dropping to his knees. "Majesty!"

Xena glanced quickly at the other two guards. The one on the ground was heeled around staring at her, but the one in the tree had stayed facing forward, eyes peeled on the clearing past the stand of trees.

So. "C'mere." Xena pointed at the man she'd nailed with the rock.

The man scrambled to his feet and walked over to her, standing uncertainly before her in the slowly filtering dawn light, barely having a chance to straighten up before Xena bumped herself away from the tree and shifted with flickering speed, cocking her fist and cracking it across his jaw with a sound that echoed through the trees and sent birds flying in every direction.

He dropped like a stone.

Xena lowered her arm, and looked at the other man. "You're the watch." She stepped over the fallen soldier, stalking his companion who was frozen in place, staring at her. "You know what enemy soldiers do to people like you, who get distracted by people like me?"

"I.." He stammered. "I'm sorry, Mistress."

“No.” Xena struck, her fingers catching his throat and shutting off his air as she swung him against the tree. “You’re dead.”

Her peripheral vision told her the tree scout had held his post, her one bit of mollification. She watched the soldier in her grip turn white, and then start to gag, his chest jerking as he tried to breathe. His eyes bugged, and he stared at her in despair, finding nothing of comfort in the ice chips studying him. “People like you kill good soldiers.” Xena told him. “That doesn’t work with me.”

The man struggled harder, but Xena’s grip was inflexible, as she heard rustling behind her and knew she had an audience.

It would be a good lesson. She watched his face darken, and his eyes slide past her to something, then move back to her face and she suddenly felt a presence at her back she knew was no soldier.

It was impossible to describe, that feeling. She just knew the eyes on her back weren’t eyes she wanted to see the scene she herself was looking at. “So.” She released her grip, and the man collapsed to the ground, gasping for breath so loudly it made her wince. “Lesson one.” She refused to turn around and face what was behind her. “When you watch, you watch. Understand?”

The man looked up at her, his hand on his throat. After a moment, he nodded frantically, his mouth opening but no sound coming out.

“Good.” Xena tipped her head back and looked up at the other sentry. “Brendan, promote that guy and give him fifty dinars.” She dusted her hands off and turned, finally, completely unsurprised to find Gabrielle peeking out from behind a tree at her.

“Aye, Mistress.” Brendan moved briskly past her and hauled the half choked man to his feet, turning him around and giving him a hearty boot the rear. “G’wan you jackass. Thank your mother you missed feeding the fish in the river for being so damn stupid.”

The man stumbled off, joined by his hapless companion still holding his jaw as the trees came alive with soldiers, murmuring to each other and respectfully ducking their heads in Xena’s direction. “Majesty.” One said.

“Xena.” The queen stepped into his path and pulled him up short. “There’s no majesty out here.” She raised her voice. “That goes for all of you. My name is Xena. Use it.”

The soldiers eyed her, but none of them were quite brave enough to take her at her word. She watched them disperse, then she swiveled around again to face Gabrielle.

The blond woman was dressed in her armor, with her pale hair damp from washing and she’d left her cloak behind in her apparent rush to see what was going on.

Xena watched those green eyes carefully, ignoring the bustle of soldiers around them. They held visible curiosity, a touch of apprehension, but no horror and she relaxed a little, glad she’d decided not to break the damn idiots neck. “Good morning, muskrat.”

“Wow.” Gabrielle eased between the tree trunks and came to her side. “I didn’t know where you went, so I..”

“Went looking for trouble and found me.” The queen produced a wry grin. “You should be careful walking around camp, muskrat. They might take you for a lamb and catch you for breakfast.”

“Xena, I don’t look at all like a lamb.” Gabrielle looked up at the guard, who was still steadfastly watching the clearing. “What’s he looking for?” She decided not to mention the other soldiers, as her guts slowly unclenched from the shock of seeing Xena choking one of them.

“My enemies.” The queen draped her arm over Gabrielle’s shoulders. “We depend on them to keep the army safe, to give us warning if someone’s attacking us. They’ve got to do it right.”

Gabrielle nodded her head, after a brief pause. “Like our guards in the castle.”

“Right.”

“But you end up keeping us safe most of the time yourself.”

Xena sighed, and chuckled softly under her breath. “When you want something done right... “ She said. “I’ll trust them to watch the army but I only trust me to watch me.” She paused. “And you.”

“I feel safe.” Gabrielle responded immediately. “But I bet the army would feel safer if you were watching out for them.” She put her arm around Xena’s waist as they walked through the trees towards the main area of the encampment.

“I bet they would.”

“The carters came to take down your tent.”

“Our tent.”

Gabrielle glanced up at her, and smiled. “I made sure I had everything packed away right first.” She said. “I figured you’d want to get started early.”

“You figured right.”

They walked through the outer ring of the army bivouac, most men already kneeling by their bedrolls and fastening them up to carry. They had pitched no tents – the bedrolls themselves had a waxed leather cover but Gabrielle could see there were some who had picked the wrong spot to sleep in and were wet, a few shivering in the early morning chill.

Xena noticed also. She veered towards them, coming to stand in the middle of a small depression in the ground, which would have been almost invisible in the dusk they’d made camp in. She booted one of the men gently in the shoulder. “Hey.”

Everyone in the clearing froze. Gabrielle was fascinated, because she knew they’d heard Xena tell them not to call her anything but her name, and she could see the M’s twitching on everyone’s lips but not coming out.

The young man who she’d kicked looked right up at her, his damp blond hair sticking to his skin. “Y... es.... Um..”

Xena raised an eyebrow at him.

“Ma’am.” He finished weakly. “Am I doing this wrong?” He indicated the bedroll.

Xena made a face as though she’d stepped in something. “Ma’am?” She repeated. “Oh gods. Kill me now.” She grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him to his feet. “C’mere with me, ya little punk.” She started towards the cookfires. “Rest of you wet idiots come too.”

Gabrielle carefully skirted the nervous soldiers and followed as well, scooting up next to Xena and stepping over the thick coating of leaves.

“Careful not to get Gabrielle wet.” Xena warned the soldier in her grip. “Drip somewhere else.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The soldier answered meekly.

“Only I get to get Gabrielle wet.” The queen went on, in a conversational tone. “It’s good to be the queen, huh?”

“Xena.” Gabrielle murmured. “I don’t think they want to hear stuff like that.”

“Sure they do.” Xena led the way into the cooking area, and stopped, shoving the soldier nearer to the big fire in the center. “Dry off.” She turned and pointed at the others. “All of you, dry off before you end up getting sick as dogs because I ain’t your mother and I won’t be wiping any noses. Got me.”

“Yes, ma..” The soldier bit his tongue and swallowed the word as he found himself nose to tip with Xena’s sword.

“What?”

The young man paused awkwardly. “Yes.. um.. Xena.”

Xena turned her blade sideways and patted his cheek. “Good boy.” She said. “Next time, all of you pick better places to sleep or I’ll leave you on the next farm I find.” She turned and glared at them. “Understood?”

They nodded.

“Sorry, Xena.” Brendan came over from where he had been speaking to the drover master. “Kids, most like.” He stood next to Xena and watched the young soldiers gather around the fire. “New ones.”

“Mm.” Xena draped her arm over Gabrielle’s shoulders. “Muskrat’s new too, and she had the sense to sleep out of the rain didn’t she?” She said, pointedly. “We don’t have much time to take them from idiots to something useful, Brendan. Work harder on it.”

“Aye.” The captain nodded. “Got a few days yet, before the border.” He turned and stared yelling out orders, as the rest of the men started approaching the fire, where the cooks were lining up to ladle out hot scrapple and waybread with mugs of morning ale.

Xena watched them briefly, then she indicated a rock nearby and steered Gabrielle over to it. “So.” She reached out and took a mug of ale from a passing cook and sipped from it. “Ready to ride all day?”

Gabrielle flexed one leg, then the other. They were stiff, true, and they ached a bit but nothing like the first time she’d ridden and she felt actually pretty good. “I think so.” She said. “Maybe it will be better weather.”

Xena tipped her head back and studied the dawn sky. “It will be.” She said. “Today’s gonna be a good day.” She leaned forward and gave Gabrielle a leisurely kiss. “I can just feel it.”

Gabrielle felt the heat of a serious blush color her skin as she caught the soldiers watching them and she was suddenly aware of just how many guys there were in the army and how out in the open the two of them were. “Um.. Xena..”

The queen chuckled wickedly, and licked her nose. “Definitely gonna be a good day.”

**

Gabrielle had just slipped off Patches to capture some mushrooms when she heard the yell, far off, towards the front of the army. She stood up quickly and looked over the pony’s back, seeing the mounted horsemen closest to her wheel around and start moving. “Uh oh, Patches.”

The pony picked his head up from the grass he was munching and peered at the commotion, green stalks poking out of his mouth comically.

It didn't seem dangerous, Gabrielle could see the nearest soldiers and they appeared more intrigued than alarmed, so she took a moment to tuck her mushrooms away before she got back on Patch's back and urged him towards the other end of the wide open field they'd stopped to rest in.

She could see Xena on Tiger's dark back also heading in that direction and instead of aiming Patches for the disturbance she angled him a little towards the queen instead.

Xena on horseback was a sight to see. Her whole body moved with the horse's motion and she appeared to be part of the animal as Tiger galloped along, different from the soldiers who were all good riders, but not in her league.

Gabrielle envied her that effortless comfort in the saddle, wanting to look and feel the same way when she bolted along on Patches much smaller frame but knowing it would be a long time before any of that would happen. "C'mon, Patches.. go get Tiger. G'wan!"

The pony, having had a more or less relaxed day ambling in Tiger's shadow down the cobbled road, was willing to comply and he quickly moved from a walk to a canter, and then to a gallop across the thick grass as the scattered soldiers also started converging.

Near the front of the army, a group of them were clustered and as Xena arrived, they parted and stepped back, to give the queen room to see what was going on. Gabrielle watched her lover's body language intently, glad to see that cock of her head that seemed more curiosity than anger.

Patches slowed to a canter as they approached and she saw soldiers turning to watch her as she eased into the circle next to Xena, her shoulder lightly bumping the queen's knee. "What's going on?"

"Good question." Xena leaned on the front of her saddle. "Escar?" She addressed the man in the center of the circle, who was bent over, obviously catching his breath from running. "Spit it out. If we're being attacked we're dead already."

The man straightened. "Fire." He got out. "On the horizon ahead, and rising from the trees. I heard sounds."

Gabrielle looked up at Xena, who seemed thoughtful. "It was raining last night." She said. "Seems weird a fire would start now."

The queen peered down at her. "And people think I just ravish you for that cute face." She said. "Fires start when jackasses start them." She straightened up. "Get moving." She ordered, her voice rising. "Brendan, take a squad forward on the point and let's go see what's going on."

"Move it! Y'heard the gen'r'l!" Brendan wheeled his gray gelding and half stood in his stirrups, waving one arm at the troops. "Move out!"

Xena backed her mount and flipped her cloak back, exposing the hilt of her sword. "Bout time something exciting happened around here." She muttered. "Muskrat, I won't waste my breath telling you to stay here, but stick near me, okay?"

"Oh yeah." Gabrielle felt a sense of excitement herself, as she made sure everything was tied down tight to her saddle and followed in Xena's wake. She didn't know really what was going on, but things on fire regardless of why usually wasn't good.

The sound of their hoofbeats made talking impossible, but Gabrielle did her best to keep even with Xena anyway, given how much smaller Patches was than the queen's huge stallion. "What do you think it is?" She yelled.

"Trouble." Xena yelled back, as they caught up with the main part of the army and swept through them, way being made as if by magic. It wasn't as if the men were bowing to her, they just moved out of the way as if by instinct even though their backs were turned and they couldn't see who was coming.

Gabrielle stopped trying to puzzle it out and concentrated on sticking with Xena instead, as the queen leaned and guided her mount through the crowd with shifts of her weight and squeezes of her powerful legs.

She mainly just hung on and tried not to fall off. She supposed that Xena did have an advantage, since she'd been riding all her life, but still, it was aggravating not to be able to be that comfortable herself.

Time, Xena had said, it would just take time, and she'd said she could see Gabrielle was a natural at riding, so she'd get it eventually.

"Ha!" The advance group had thundered out ahead of them and now they were cresting the small rise and the speed picked up, one of the men half turning in his saddle to wave back at the rest of the army. Xena chuckled, thoroughly enjoying the rush as she caught up with the leading wave of riders and swept past them, Gabrielle rambling gamely at her side.

It was ridiculous, really - the pony riding in the middle of the army, his shaggy white and copper coat looking out of place as a rag doll in the armory - Xena knew that. She knew the army looked askance at her for it too, but so far, Gabrielle was holding up her end of the bargain, and not asking for special treatment.

Like now - she was urging her little mount along at Xena's side, her jaw clenched in concentration, every so often giving her head a shake to clear her bangs from her eyes.

Adorable. The queen sighed, wrenching her attention back to the job at hand, which was leading her army. She sat a little deeper in the saddle and released one hand off the reins, wiping her palm as she scanned the ground ahead of her, seeing the flames now, and smoke rising above the trees.

Just a fire?

"Ware!"

Ahhhh. No. Xena chortled softly, as she reached over her head and drew her sword out, bringing it down to rest point facing rearward with the hilt against her thigh. "Gabrielle, keep your head down!"

"More than it is?"

Xena chuckled again, and felt her throat tighten a little, as she saw what her advance guard had seen, figures riding in and out of the flames, and heard on the wind the screams of the dying. Blood rushed to every inch of her skin as her body responded and she felt her heart start to beat faster, warrior instincts erupting with a savage joy.

"Xena! Look!" Gabrielle's eyes were wide. "They're hurting those people!"

"Yes!" Xena yelled back. "And in a minute we're gonna be hurting them! So keep your damn head down, and if I yell DUCK, you DUCK!"

“QUACK!” Gabrielle took hold of her reins and tried not to be scared, as she saw the men on horses now surrounding what she realized was a village on fire. The horsemen were riding in and out, firing crossbows and swinging swords, though she was too far yet to see what they were swinging them at.

A gust of wind came at her face, and she nearly choked from the stench of it, thick smoke that held a touch of burned flesh that slammed it home to her this was no lark.

People were dying there.

Xena urged Tiger faster, and as she came even with the advance group they parted to let her through then bolted after her, as the uneven lines straightened out into an attack force wedge with her at the head of it. She could see the raiders now clearly, and a moment later they spotted her, and yells went up as the horsemen wheeled and turned to meet them.

Xena let out a yell, the sound ripping from her throat as she swung her sword out and dropped her reins completely, freeing her other hand and wishing she had a mace in it.

She met the first raider coming at her as he swung a pike at her head and she ducked before she even really thought about it, feeling the breeze as the pole swept over her and seeing the man's body overbalance as he tried to recover from it.

Stupid. The queen took her shot and buried her sword into his chest, feeling the steel grate against his ribs as he dropped the pike and screamed, his arms swinging around and flailing as his horse slammed against hers.

She freed a boot from her stirrup and lashed out with it, kicking the man out of his saddle and off of her sword blade in one neat motion. “Yah!” She yelled at the horse, who shied back from her and bucked, kicking the man rolling underneath him and darting off.

Xena whipped her blade back into position as she felt the next one coming at her, droplets of blood flying back to spatter her face and making her blink.

Copper scent. She could smell the tang of it as she threw Tiger against two of the raider's animals and then turned him in place, signaling him to kick out as the two raiders suddenly found themselves fully occupied with just trying to stay on their horses.

Xena turned again and threw her sword from her right hand to her left, then backhanded the man moving past her, slamming the blade into the back of his neck where his helmet ended. She felt the crunch all the way up her arm as she shattered his spine, and it took only a shove with her forearm to tumble the helpless figure to the earth.

Yells. Xena's head swept around, seeing her men sending the raiders running in all directions, none even trying to come at her again. She felt almost a little disappointed, as she turned Tiger in a tight circle, something niggling at the back of her head.

What was it? The fire? The raiders? Dead villagers? Wh.. oh. “Gabrielle!”

“Here!” A voice came from behind her, and Xena quickly turned Tiger again, not missing the cross look the stallion gave her with all the whirling around. “Sorry.” She muttered, glancing over to where Gabrielle was kneeling next to her mount, looking at something on the ground. “What is it? Don't get off your damn horse, Gabrielle!”

The blond woman stood up and walked over to her, leading Patches by his reins. She stopped and offered up what she had in her hand, her eyes searching Xena's face with quiet intensity. “I found this.”

Xena took the item and examined it. "Campaign coin." She murmured, wiping the surface off against her leggings.

"That guy dropped it." Gabrielle was fixedly not looking at the first man Xena had killed. "I saw it fly out."

The queen turned it over. The coin was one of the common bits of struck metal that the army used when it was moving through unknown territories, crudely punched, it served to buy little things, comforts on the road when going through the smaller towns. One side held a tree, the other...

Xena's lip twitched, as she picked out the shape of a head. "Bregos." She glanced at Gabrielle. "I've told you you're worth your weight in pearls, haven't I?"

Gabrielle was stroking Patches neck, leaning her cheek against the pony's rough coat. "No.. I don't think so. That's a lot of pearls."

The queen reached down and stroked her head. "You are." She said. "Most of my men would have run right over this." She put the coin in her saddle pouch and turned, looking at what was left of the fray. A squad of her men were riding around the perimeter of the town in a cleaning up motion that made her nod to herself in approval.

Damn, had that felt good. She flexed her hands, wishing it had lasted longer. Her blood was still up, and she could feel the energy running over her skin as she reviewed her short battle. The raiders had been poor soldiers, but already she was going over what she'd done and wanting to better it.

She felt a little rusty. It hadn't come as naturally to her as it used to. With a soft grunt, she removed a cloth from her saddlebag and unfolded it. "Squeeze some water on this, will you?"

Gabrielle responded at once, taking her waterskin from her saddle ring and opening it, spilling a good bit of it on the cloth. "How's that?" She asked.

The queen positioned the cloth across her palm and ran her blade over the surface, cleaning the blood from it. "Perfect." She finished her task and examined the metal, noting the nicks in the edge she'd have to work out of it later on. "Neckbones." She sighed, shaking her head. "Hate em."

Gabrielle swallowed, then she turned away and took a swallow of the water before she closed the skin and put it back on Patches saddlery. She rested her hands on his neck and looked back at the line of trees they'd camped in, not wanting to turn and see the destruction of the village on the other side.

"Get up." Xena said, as she surveyed the burning village. "Let's go see what else we can find out." She seated her sword back into its sheath with a soft hiss and click, and put the cloth away. "And if there's anything to salvage from that mess."

Mess. Gabrielle pulled herself up on Patches back. *Well, Gabrielle, you wanted to go with her. You begged to go with her. You were thinking of running away after her if she left you behind. So now you're here.* She lifted her head and nudged Patches to follow Tiger. *So get used to it and be useful. No puking.*

"You say something?" Xena asked. "You've got a weird puss on."

"No." The blond woman got herself sorted out. "I'm right with you. Let's go."

"Uh huh." Xena urged Tiger into a canter, as they passed a scattering of dead bodies. "Hungry?"

Gabrielle just looked at her.

"Just kidding."

**

As they moved into the center of what had been a small, but well kept village, the destruction became more and more horrific. Xena found her eyes drawn to burned bodies, lashed to poles outside the remnants of huts and the inherent cruelty of the deaths raised even her hoary old eyebrows.

She was in the lead, with Gabrielle beside her and her captains riding in silence behind them. Aside from the dead and dying raiders, they'd seen no living inhabitant of the town, and she was beginning to expect that not to change.

Barns and fences had been destroyed. The houses and shelters burned to the ground. On one side, a wagon had been set ablaze full of people, and now just charred bodies and wood remained. The stench was considerable, and even Xena wasn't immune to it. "C'mere." She ordered a white faced Gabrielle.

Gabrielle steered Patches over to Tiger's side and reached out impulsively to clutch Xena's leg, wanting nothing really but some kind of comfort in all the horror. "This is terrible."

Xena looked around them, feeling a wholly personal and selfish anger at the destruction of what was, in fact, her property. "You got that right." She reached into her saddle bag and removed a small sack, digging something out of it and offering it to her companion. "Here. Suck on this."

Gabrielle looked dubiously at it. "What is it?"

"Ginger."

The blond woman made a small face. "I don't really like ginger."

"You like puking?"

Gabrielle took the bit of candy and put it in her mouth, sucking on it quietly as they rode along. The taste filled her senses, a little sweet and a little spicy, and she felt her stomach settling as if by magic. Wow. She looked up at Xena with respect, noting that the queen's jaw was moving, though her face was impassive at all the charred remains. "Thanks."

Xena turned to look at her, sticking her tongue out and displaying her own drop before she closed her mouth again and pulled Tiger up at the center of what had once been a town. Now there was nothing but death in front of her, and she was damn mad about it. "Brendan."

Her captain moved forward, his face as impassive as hers. "Bastards." He commented, turning his head to spit carefully on the ground. "Good for killing."

"Any of them left alive?"

"Few." Brendan admitted.

Xena folded her hands over her saddle bridge. "Take whoever's alive and strap them up in the trees along the roadway there. Make sure they'll bleed out."

"Aye."

"Xena."

The queen turned her head, as one of the young soldiers approached on foot, a long, jagged cut across his face. "What?" She asked, in a clipped tone.

“There’s a.. “ He hesitated. “We found a rock cairn, or such like over towards the hillside there. Got a stone cap over it. Figured something was inside.”

Xena considered a moment. People didn’t usually put rock caps over something unless they were trying to protect or save something under it. “Brendan, take a squad over and open it up. Might be some grain or supplies in there we could use.”

“Aye.” The older man clucked his tongue and his mount moved forward. “Bladas, Eskar, take the prisoners and do what the genr’al asked with em. You three come wi’ us.” He started for the hillside, with the younger soldier jogging to keep up with the horses.

Xena waited for them to leave, then she turned and regarded Gabrielle, who was sitting there in silence, gazing at her pony’s neck. “Any thoughts?”

Gabrielle hesitated for a long moment. “I’m trying not to think.” She admitted. “It’s just all so horrible.” She finally looked up at Xena. “Why did this happen? What did these people do that they were all killed like that?”

Xena leaned forward and exhaled, blowing her bangs up off her forehead as she pondered the question. “Coulda done something to piss them off.” She mused. “Maybe they wanted something and the town wouldn’t give it to em. Happens sometimes. People are stupid stubborn.”

The comment had the ring of personal knowledge to it, and Gabrielle decided not to pursue the subject for now. “What are we going to do?”

“Well.” The queen removed a bit of mud from her lower lip and flicked it away from her. “Ordinarily I’d say we’re gonna kill them all, but we’ve pretty much done that, so I guess we’ll move on and find something else to attack.”

She looked down to find Gabrielle peering back up at her. “You asked.”

“I meant, what are we going to do with all these... “ Gabrielle let her eyes drift over the charred bodies. “For these people.”

Xena’s brow creased. “Gabrielle.” She said. “They’re dead.”

“I know but..”

What in the River Styx was she thinking about? Xena looked quickly around herself. “Most I’d have done is give em a pyre, Gabrielle. They got one.” She started to direct Tiger towards the more promising hillside. “Now, c’mon.”

Gabrielle did so, trying to keep the bodies out of her peripheral vision. She understood, in a way, what Xena was saying. After all, the villagers were already dead, and there wasn’t anything they could do about that, but still..

Still. “Couldn’t you just say something?” She caught up with Xena. “Like a prayer or something?”

Xena pulled Tiger to a halt so suddenly she almost slid backwards off his butt. “What?” She barked out. “Gabrielle.. In case you never noticed I’m nobody’s priestess.”

“But you re the queen.”

Xena started her horse forward again. “Just come on.” She shook her head. “I”m not saying any damn prayers. You can go say one if you want. Gods damn sure are more likely to listen to you than me.”

Gabrielle frowned as she followed along. Was that true? She knew Xena didn't worship any of the gods, and actually, she hadn't had much experience in that area either. She knew their names, but her parents had been only grudging in their tributes and she'd never really seen any benefits from them herself.

Anyway. She was glad when they cleared the square, and left the horror of the charnel pit behind them, moving through now mostly just collapsed storage huts and broken furniture towards the sounds of men working, and a series of sharp cracking noises.

"Ah." Xena murmured. "Almost open."

Gabrielle looked past her, to see a stone doorway set into the hillside, with a bunch of Xena's soldiers in front of it wrestling aside a huge, round wheel of stone blocking the doorway shut. As the stone rolled aside, the men peered inside curiously, one bringing a torch close to see what there was to see.

"Back, all ya." Brendan had seen Xena approaching, and he quickly took charge, pulling the soldiers back and clearing the opening for Xena's inspection. "Genrl?"

Xena dismounted, stalking forward with sinuous grace and taking the torch from the soldier's hand as she ducked her head inside with little apparent concern. Her eyes blinked as she got used to the darkness, then she stepped all the way inside and straightened as much as she could, holding the torch out to one side to cast light on the contents.

Eyes blinked back at her, full of fear, and she found herself facing a huddle of children, in front of some bags and boxes, and a few odd barrels. "Well."

"Please.. Don't kill us." One of the children whispered, as they stared at her in horror. "We didn't do nothin."

"She won't hurt you." Gabrielle slipped past her and approached the small group. "It's okay." She slowly went to one knee and held a hand out. "It's okay."

Faced with Gabrielle's gentler visage, the children relaxed, and one edged forward towards the blond woman. "Who are you?" The child asked, so covered in soot it was impossible to tell if it was a girl or boy.

"My name's Gabrielle." She answered. "What's your name?"

"Sache." The child said. "This is Mele, my brother." In the light of the torch, suddenly, they could see she was a girl. "Our family's the bakers."

"Not anymore." Xena turned and motioned Brendan inside. "Get them out of here." She said, briefly. "See what's in the boxes."

The children shied back from the soldiers, obviously terrified by them as they moved inside and started to investigate the chamber.

"It's okay." Gabrielle repeated. "They won't hurt you. That's Xena, the queen, and these are her soldiers." She explained. "She'll make sure you're safe, now."

Xena came over and crouched next to her bedmate, giving the children a dour look. "What happened?" SHE asked, "Why were those men attacking your village?"

"Xena." Gabrielle uttered softly.

"Listen, we don't have time to be nannies." The queen told her. She looked back at the children. "Well?"

Sache stared at her, wide eyed. "I don't know." She replied. "I don't know why they came. Mama just put us in here and said she'd come back for us when they were gone." She looked from Gabrielle to Xena and back. "Can I go find her now? Maybe she knows."

Oh gods. Gabrielle felt her guts churn again. There was nothing left outside. No one left. These children had no families, no homes...

Nothing.

The sudden memories of being this child in the not to distant past snapped vividly into her mind, and she turned away, overwhelmed by it. She didn't want to see the looks in their eyes when they realized what she already knew.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, and she knew they all were looking at Xena, and she didn't know, truly didn't know what the queen was going to say to them.

She hoped it was kind, but she remembered her first few days in the castle and she knew there was a cruel side to Xena she'd felt the rough edge of.

"Listen to me." Xena's voice broke the silence. "All of you." A scrape of boot against rock. "Those bastards your parents hid you from destroyed your homes and killed your families." Her voice was steady and yet, not really as cold as the words would have seemed. "There's nothing left out there."

The children started to cry.

Gabrielle did too, ducking her head and biting her lip to hide it.

"You can't change it, so stop crying." Xena went on. "Your parents gave their lives up so you'd be safe, and you are. You'll go someplace where you'll be taken care of, understand?"

Brendan turned and looked at her, grizzled eyebrows lifting in surprise. Xena met his gaze, then her eyes shifted to Gabrielle's bowed head, then back to his face. She lifted both hands and let them drop in mute eloquence, and glared at him when he had the audacity to smile at her. "Get them out of here. Send a wagon back to the stronghold with six men. Understand?"

"Aye." Brendan knelt beside the sobbing girl, who stared at him beseechingly. "S'all right little one. Her Majesty'll make sure you'll be all right."

Xena produced a sound somewhere between a groan and a cluck, then found herself being gently hugged by Gabrielle as the blond woman turned and buried her face into Xena's chest. It was, at least, a meagre reward for the wholesale shattering of her image.

"Mama." Sache rocked back and forth, hugging herself. "Mama." She repeated softly. "Why did they take you away? Why?"

Why. Xena grimly stared over Gabrielle's shoulder. Yeah. Why?

"Xena." One of the soldiers straightened, from where he'd been kneeling at the back of the shelter. "Look." He was one of the older men, a veteran of hers, and as she looked up and saw what hung from his fingers, they both knew the answer to the question why.

The torchlight flickered off gilded chains and a single, large stone hanging from them, the answer to one question spawning a dozen more.

Gods. Xena exhaled. Gods be damned.

Part 5

Twilight found them another few leagues down the road, in an open, somewhat wild spot far from inhabited areas. They hadn't encountered any more raiders on their journey, but they hadn't found any more people either, just two abandoned towns empty of everything and everyone.

Xena sat on Tiger's back, on a small rise overlooking the camp. She leaned on her saddlebow and watched grimly as the bivouac was pitched, the cooks working to setup the pit fire as the soldiers grouped themselves by squad scattered among the trees.

Camping in the open would be easier for everyone, she knew. She also knew hanging her ass out in the wide open for anyone to take potshots was dumbfoundingly stupid, so she decided to put up with the difficulties of scattering the men among the trees in the interests of security.

To one side, in the center of four large trees just past the stream she could see the men putting up her tent, a wagon standing by that she knew had her kit in it being unloaded under Gabrielle's watchful eye.

She wondered, briefly, if she'd taken too much crap with her. Was it fair the men had to work so hard to put her shelter up after going all day in the field?

Nah. Xena dismissed the thought. She chewed reflectively on a stalk of grass as she thought about the empty villages, and the barren fields they'd ridden through. This had always been the tougher part of the realm, in fact, it had been where she'd hid with her first army before she'd laid siege to the stronghold and taken over.

Scrub grass, poor soil.. Xena looked around her. The slave train that had brought Gabrielle to her had come this way and she knew somewhere off the road, on one of the rough cut wagon paths now becoming overgrown was the wreck that had once been her lover's home.

Probably wasn't anything left. A long winter and a wet spring would have scoured most of the remnants of human living from the land, but probably there were bits of things left. She wondered if Gabrielle would want to stop there and see.

Xena didn't think so. Not after seeing her face going through the wreck of the last first town and the sad emptiness of the last. She'd gotten quieter as they day went along, ending up merely riding along at Xena's side with her head a little down and a sad expression on her face.

It was hard to say which one of them was more relieved when Xena at last called a halt to the progress and they had something else to do other than just listen to horse hooves on the road.

Speaking of horse hooves. Xena looked up as some approached, and she spotted Brendan headed her way. She sat quietly and waited for him to join her, loathe to give up her nice spot so soon. "Problems?"

Her captain half shrugged. "None to think of, truth." He adopted her pose, leaning forward on his saddle. "Bad winter in these parts, eh?"

Xena's eyes took on a certain glitter. "Bad winter, sure. But bad humans made it worse. Someone made those towns empty."

Brendan nodded, as though he wasn't surprised. "Bregos."

Xena reached in her pouch and found the coin, handing it over to him. "Gabrielle found it." She remarked, her lips quirking into a smile. "I think the stupid bastard tried to run his deserters through the winter. Had no choice but raid." Her eyes narrowed. "Question is, why didn't we hear about it."

The grizzled, old soldier grunted, turning the coin over and over in his fingers. “Funny they were, with him.” He remarked finally. “Folks thought he was a good one.”

“Well.” Xena straightened in her saddle, seeing the steady progression of bodies away from her encampment that meant its set up was likely complete. “They knew I was a bad one, so there’s no telling what they gave him. Apparently it wasn’t enough.” She tugged her gauntlet up a little. “Wonder what other surprises we’ll find.”

Brendan snorted, and took up his reins as Xena started moving off towards the camp. The sun had just set, and purple shadows dusted the fallow fields in a somber hue as the two riders made their way down the slope towards the cluster of trees ahead.

A cool, fresh wind ruffled the branches, and as they approached the camp, two men standing sentry on horseback started in the other direction, to take up a position on higher ground, the ridge in fact that Xena had been watching from. “Watch the pass over there.” Xena pointed to fold in the hills. “Word might have gotten out we’re here.”

“Aye.” The closer guard nodded. “Easy night, M...” He coughed a little. “Xena.”

The queen gave him a dazzling grin. “Good boy.” She patted Tiger on the neck as they continued on, chuckling softly under her breath. “Wonder how long it’ll take them to get over that.”

Brendan chuckled as well. “Talk of the road, for sure.” He said. “You’ve charmed the lot of them, Xena. Like the old days.”

Like the old days. Xena remembered the old days, before she’d become queen when she’d lived with the army in the field and every night practically she’d taken someone to bed with her. She had wandered through the camp after the fires burned low and made her choice, and she knew the men had competed for it.

Nice. Good for the ego.

But that was then, and this was now, and she didn’t think Gabrielle was the kinda gal who liked to share. Certainly, she wasn’t, in any case. “Not just like the old days.” The queen said, as they moved between two of the unit’s campfires. “I wasn’t taken then.”

Brendan chuckled again. “How’s the little one doing, then? Having a time of it? Saw her in the cave, poor thing.”

“She’s all right.” Xena said, then fell silent. They went the rest of the way through the camp, to the center where her pavilion was. It was surrounded on all four sides by troops and she spent a moment wondering whether they thought they were guarding her or hoping she’d guard them.

Ah well. She pulled Tiger to a halt and swung her leg over his head, removing her other boot from its stirrup and sliding down to the ground with a moderately graceful hop. She handed the reins to a groom who hurried up, then brushed past two men carrying buckets of water and approached the flap to her tent.

Behind her, she could hear wood being chopped, and the soft clash of weapons sparring. With a faint nod, she put her hand on the hide and pushed it open, ducking her head to enter.

She surprised Gabrielle, who was seated on a small folding stool near the brazier, her hands clasped in front of her and her head bowed. “Hey.”

The blond woman looked up.

Hm. The wrinkled forehead look again. Xena eyed her dubiously, then opened her arms up in invitation. She caught the look of gratitude before Gabrielle ended up mashing against her, and figured she'd done something right. Damned if she knew why, but the fierce hug she was getting was definitely a good sign.

"Oh, Xena." Gabrielle simply reveled in the warm strength wrapped around her. After a day full of soul chilling experiences she'd been waiting for this moment ever since they'd stopped. "I'm so glad you're here."

Xena decided she was pretty glad she was, too. "Ah, c'mon, muskrat." She enjoyed the contact anyway. "Don't turn into a little sheephead so soon, huh? We just started."

"I'm not, I just -" The blond woman sighed. "That first place was so horrible."

Xena steered her back over to the brazier and sat her back down on her stool. "It'll get worse." She told her. "This was just a bunch of burned bodies and some blood." She walked over to the wooden bowl of water set ready near the double pallet and took her gauntlets off, laying them aside before she dipped her hands in the basin and splashed a good quantity of the fresh water onto her face. "Wait till you see your first maggots."

"Ugh." Gabrielle muttered. "I've seen them, thanks."

"Have you?" Xena looked back over her shoulder, as she reached for the piece of linen resting nearby. "Find something in the pasture?"

"No."

Xena cocked her eyebrow in eloquent question.

Gabrielle shifted and clasped her hands again. "My mother sent me with some bread, once." She answered, in a remote voice. "To my grandma, she lived behind us. I went into her house, and she... I guess she'd been gone a few days already."

Xena turned all the way around and looked at her, the linen towel hanging forgotten from her hand. She examined Gabrielle's face intently. "That's lousy."

"It was. Yeah." Gabrielle agreed. "I had nightmares about it for a long time." She pondered that. "I still do, once in a while."

Xena walked over and sat down on the stool next to hers. She tried to imagine what it would be like to be a little kid and find something like that and utterly failed. Her own childhood had been filled with different nightmares. "Life sucks sometimes." She commented.

"Mm."

The silence lengthened and grew a little awkward. Gabrielle finally cleared her throat and shifted. "But you know, finding those kids was great." She said. "I felt so bad for them but you made it bearable for them. That was wonderful."

Xena studied the brazier, hesitantly holding her hands out to it and feeling the warmth against her palms. "I just sent them to the tower." She said. "They probably won't get much better treatment than you did, Gabrielle. They've got nothing."

Gabrielle got up and went to get the small travel kettle, which she brought back and set on the brazier. She put two cups on the bench next to her and removed a packet from her belt, opening it and taking out some leaves she set into the cups with faintly shaking fingers.

Realizing she'd said something wrong, Xena stood up and moved past her companion, leaning over and giving her a kiss on the top of her head. "Lemme get this iron off. I feel like I'm rusting in it." She walked to the press and started to shed her armor.

A soft knock came at the tent support. "Xena?"

"C'mon in." The queen sat down on the press to take her leg armor off.

Brendan entered. "Lookout found a cache." He held up a dirt covered rucksack. "Buried under one of the oaks." He brought it over to where Xena was perched. "Bregos for sure, look."

Xena peered inside, then dipped her hand in and drew out a folded piece of cloth, smudged with dark stains and rusty looking edges. She let it unfold and hang from her fingers, a purple background with a silver half moon and sword. "Ah huh." She released the flag and watched it flutter to the ground. "Ugliest battle standard I ever saw."

Gabrielle carefully poured hot water over the tea leaves, glad of the distraction. "Does that mean he's still out here with his army?" She asked.

"You mean, half of my army?" Xena's pale eyes narrowed a little.

"Useless half." Brendan added, with a snort.

The blond woman gently stirred the cups, sniffing the steam to judge how steeped the leaves were. She wanted the soothing warmth of the tea badly, and felt guilty about wishing Brendan would leave so she could be alone with Xena again.

There was something she wanted to say to her. "Are you going to go find him?"

Xena removed her bracers and laid them on the press. "Won't have to." She said, briefly. "If he's out there, he'll come after me."

"Tch." Brendan made a sound. "Jackass." He retrieved the banner and stuffed it back in the sack. "I'll tuck this away for ye, Xena. We'll keep good watch tonight." He turned and left, the flap swinging lightly behind him and allowing in a gust of cool air and the scent of sweet, night flowers.

Xena shrugged out of her chest armor and set it down before she rejoined Gabrielle by the camp stove. Instead of sitting next to her on the stool she sat down behind her and draped her arms around the smaller woman's waist, extending her boots past hers.

Laying her cheek against Gabrielle's back, she felt the inhale, and then the surface relaxed and Gabrielle's hand covered her wrist and squeezed it. She knew at some level, in some primal way they both understood each other even when it seemed they were so far apart sometimes. "Listen."

"Me first." Gabrielle interrupted her unexpectedly. "Xena, no matter what happens, if those kids end up finding what I found back there the gods will have blessed them."

Aw. Xena didn't like goopy mush, personally, but she was smart enough not to shut someone up who dearly loved directing it towards her at regular intervals. "I sent word back to have them taken care of." She said, in a matter of fact tone. "But don't tell anyone that. You've already wrecked my image."

Gabrielle took a breath to answer, but they both jerked as a loud yelling commenced outside, and Xena scrambled to her feet and grabbed her sword on the way out of the tent before they could

manage another word to each other. After a shocked pause, the blond woman bolted for the opening, stopped in mid run and grabbed her stick, then rushed out after the queen into the gathering night.

**

Xena stalked into the center of the chaos, only to find it not nearly as chaotic as it sounded from the yelling. Near the main watchfire five of her guards were standing and surrounding a bedraggled, muddy figure that was half hunched over with its hands tied behind its back. "What's going on?"

The guards wheeled and spotted her, their faces lighting up. "Found this lot." The oldest one pointed a dagger at the prisoner. "Trying to sneak into the camp."

Xena grinned. "Before dinner entertainment. I love it." She twirled her sword in one hand. "Better than those frilly assed dancers any day." She examined the prisoner, who was staring at her in shock. "I remember you." She pointed her weapon at him. "You're Bregos toady."

The guards looked at Xena, then back at the man, grabbing him as he tried to back away from the queen's tall, menacing figure. "Where you going, dog?" The older guard laughed. "Figgered to slip in an no notice?"

The man licked his lips. "Just looking for a place." He muttered, in a hoarse tone, his eyes roving everywhere but Xena's face.

"You had a place." Xena said. "You're the one who chose to run away from it." She sheathed her sword and drew her dagger instead, moving closer to him. "But hey. I'm a forgiving sort. We'll take you back."

If a dragon had materialized in the camp and started tap dancing, it would not have drew a more stunned response from the watching soldiers. To a man, their jaws dropped, even the new recruits. Gabrielle eased between them and came up next to Xena, both hands clutched around her staff. "Wow. But what if he's a spy?" She asked.

Xena rolled her head around and looked down at her. "Must you?"

Gabrielle blinked at her. "Must I what?" She said. "I wasn't doing anything, yet."

The queen merely turned back around and grabbed the prisoner by the hair. She jerked his head back and put her dagger to his neck. "Sure, we'll take you back. But first you're gonna tell me everything you've been doing since the last time I saw ya."

The man swallowed hard. "Y.. You'll kill me."

Xena shrugged. "We all have to die sometime." She remarked. "C'mon, spill it."

The prisoner gave a half shake of his head, at least as much as he could with Xena's fingers gripping his longish, pale hair. "N... we went out, did some raidin.. Starved half to death." He rasped. "Scour went through."

"Idiot." The queen said. "Go on."

The man stared past her. "Then the storms got us." He said. "What wa left of us. Don't know more after that. Went on my own." His eyes lifted to her face, finally. "Hiding, till today."

He was lying. Xena knew it, the way she knew the coming weather and the shift and change of battle while she was in it. The problem was what kind of lie it was - a little one, not wanting to tell her he'd taken part of the town raiding, or a big one, that he was really spying for Bregos and the other army was out there waiting for her.

She looked at his face, which was on the youngish side, and lacking in scars, and studied his lightly built body. She remembered him as a nondescript footman in Brego's troops, more of a hanger on than a fighter. Useless to her, and probably, useless to Bregos as well.

She had no place for useless people. Her fingers twitched on the hilt of her dagger, and she saw his eyes close in reaction as he felt the motion, and she almost simply cut his throat before she caught another shift, this one at her right hand side.

Hm. On the other hand. "Brendan." She withdrew her knife and sheathed it in a flickering motion. "Put him to some use. If you can find one." She released his hair and only just kept herself from wiping her palm on her leggings in distaste.

"Aye." Brendan looked both surprised and skeptical. "If'n you say, Xena."

"I say." The queen acknowledged. "But before he does anything, sit him down and get every scrap of detail out of him including the color of Brego's socks these days." She stepped back to let the guard take the man, who was blinking as if he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. "Get him out of here."

Brendan stepped in front of her, and lowered his voice. "He's twice a runner." He said "Or maybe worse."

Xena looked him in the eye. "You questioning me?" She kept her voice light, but there was an edge to it and she knew he heard it. "Little late to be starting that now, old man." She said. "Now get him out of here."

"Aye." The captain nodded briefly and turned, gesturing to the guards. "Ye heard, get a move on. Tie em to the tree over there, we'll get the dickens out of him first."

The queen heard the low mutters, and saw the faint shakes of many heads as the soldiers dispersed, and she waited for a space to develop around her before she turned and regarded the quietly watching Gabrielle. "You got any comments?"

Gabrielle shook her head and straightened up, taking hold of her staff and waiting for Xena to start back towards their tent. Her back was stiff and hurting, and she wanted to just sit quietly for a while.

"Thinking about something?"

"No." The blond woman said. "Just tired."

Xena put a hand on her shoulder and left it there as they walked across the camp, passing groups of soldiers she knew were now looking askance of her for not killing the spy they'd found trying to sneak into their camp. She herself wasn't sure why she hadn't, except that her instincts had told her not to and her instincts were usually right.

Weren't they?

She followed Gabrielle inside the tent, and took the staff from her hands, setting it in the corner as she watched her companion cross the room. She thought she detected a slight limp, and as the blond woman went to pick up the waiting tea mugs she saw a definite grimace. "Hey."

"Hey." Gabrielle brought her one of the mugs. "It's been a really long day, huh?" She ran her fingers through her hair. "I think I'll go over and see what they're making, get some for us now. Does that sound okay?"

"No."

“No?”

“Sit.” Xena nudged her towards the camp chairs. “Let me go do my job.” She turned and went to the tent flap, leaning her head out and scanning the area. “Jas!”

One of her older soldiers responded, getting up and running over. “Aye?”

“Get me a tray with some of whatever they got on it, cooked or not.” Xena ordered. “And a wineskin.”

“Aye.” He headed off at a good clip.

Xena pulled her head back inside and took a sip of her tea, strolling over and taking the seat next to Gabrielle and extending her long legs out towards the fire. She felt more than a little frustrated and it aggravated her to have so many things tossing doubts at her from every direction.

She’d thought it would be simpler out here. Just her, and the army, and some unnamed but suspected enemies out there for her to defeat. Easy. But she was finding things more complicated than they used to be and choices harder.

Damn it. “It was a long day.” She answered Gabrielle’s previous question. “Longer for you than me, I bet.”

Gabrielle had both hands cupped around her mug and she sipped a bit more tea before answering. “It was a lot to take in.” She admitted. “But I’m okay with it.”

Xena watched her over her mug rim. “Yeah?”

Gabrielle nodded. “I’m not a child. I know why we’re out here Xena.” She lifted her eyes from her mug and looked over at the queen. “So if you wanted to do something to that guy, you could have.”

Both Xena’s dark eyebrows lifted. “Are you questioning me now?” She asked, sharply. “I’ve been deciding to kill people or not since you were in diapers, kid. I don’t need your permission.” She got up and went to the press, slamming the mug down and yanking the closings on her leathers free. “I don’t know what the Hades is wrong with all of you. Maybe I had damn good reason not to cut that stupid bastards throat!”

The echos of the yell faded, and she turned back to face Gabrielle. “It had nothing to do with you!”

Sea green eyes blinked back at her a few times. “Okay.” She answered. “I’m sorry. You just gave me such a funny look out there I thought it did.” She set her cup down and got up, trudging over to the tent flap and untying it as they both heard hurried footsteps approaching.

“Funny look. I’ll give you a funny look.” Xena sat down on her press, but instead of continuing to disarm herself she let her hands fall to her knees and scowled. “Is that what people think? That you’ve turned me in to a soft old woman?”

Gabrielle, who had taken the tray from it’s deliverer and turned to set it down, now turned around again and peered at her. Her brows creased. “What?”

“Never mind.” The queen got up and took the tray from her, taking it to the map table and plunking it down with an atypical lack of grace. “Maybe I should go out there and skin that punk alive so everyone wont’ think there’s something wrong with me.”

She opened and recovered a few of the dishes, not even looking at what was inside of them until she felt a warm presence at her back, and Gabrielle laid her hand there, resting her cheek against Xena’s shoulder. She didn’t speak, she simply stood there, lightly rubbing Xena’s back as the queen let both hands rest on the table and leaned her weight on them.

After a brief pause, Xena pushed the tray away and stood up, turning and leaning back against the table as she gathered Gabrielle to her in a rough hug, closing her eyes and surrendering to her need for the contact. Gabrielle's breath warmed the side of her neck, and she deliberately set the aggravation aside for the time being.

Didn't do a damn thing for either of them. "C'mere." Xena said. "Wanna see where we're going?" She drew Gabrielle around to where the map was resting. "Pour some of that damn wine.. It'll make it make more sense to you."

Gabrielle smiled, and reached for the wineskin, as she settled across the table from the queen. "Thanks." She said. "Sorry I made you mad before."

Xena took her cup and downed a swallow, licking her lips thoughtfully. "You were right." She glanced ruefully at the wine. "Didn't want to end your day by drenching you in blood." She looked up after a moment of silence, to find Gabrielle looking back at her with a painfully raw expression. "Teach me to be nice, huh?"

The blond woman's expression gentled and her eyes warmed. "Thank you." She said. "I really mean that."

The emotion in the words made her very soul purr. Xena touched the edge of her cup to her companions and spread her hand over the map, letting already made decisions, badly or no, fall to the past. "Tomorrow's another day." She said. "So we might as well be ready for it."

The night horn sounded the watch as they drained their cups, and night settled over the camp leaving it in torchlit watchfulness.

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Gabrielle cautiously poked her head out of the tent flap and looked around, finding a camp full of pre dawn rustlings and thick pine scented fog. She listened for a moment, before she emerged into the dim light, a water basin clutched in one hand.

"Now." She murmured to herself. "Which way was that creek?" She looked one way, then the other, then with a slight shrug she moved off to her left. The trees stood silent sentinel as she passed them, reaching out with one hand to brush against the damp bark as she carefully picked her way across the uneven ground.

Stupid, really. Gabrielle sighed, as she edged around a boulder. She should have thought to bring water for their morning bathing in last night, but with everything that happened she'd just forgotten. "Good thing I remembered before Xena woke up."

Her ears caught the sound of running water, and she smiled to herself in mild triumph. She passed between two leaning trees and smelled the water before she spotted it rushing over the moss covered rocks just ahead of her. With a faint sigh of relief she knelt by the creek and tilted the edge of her basin into the current, blinking a little as droplets of water jumped from the surface and peppered her face.

It was more chilly than refreshing, since the spring air definitely had a bite to it. Gabrielle kept the basin where it was until it filled, then set it carefully between two rocks while she wiped her face with her sleeve.

A thinking sound made her jerk, but she started breathing again once she recognized an ax striking a tree, and along with it she heard a rattle of pots from the cooking area. With a wry grimace for her own

nervousness, she picked up the basin and turned, starting back towards the queen's tent with the basin clutched in front of her sloshing just slightly.

She wasn't really scared of the troops around her. She knew they knew how Xena felt about her and they generally treated her like a glass slipper.

"Your grace?"

For instance. Gabrielle glanced to her right. "Good morning." She gave the soldier a warm smile. "Just getting some water for the queen."

"C'n I carry it for ye?" The young man asked. "Tis a big bucket you've got there."

Gabrielle considered, then shook her head. "No, I've got it thanks. It's only over there." She eased past him and climbed up the small rise to where Xena's encampment was isolated, the air getting lighter around her at every step. Just as she got to the flap, it was thrown aside and Xena bolted out, her eyes sharp and raking the surroundings. "Oh!"

"Ga.." The queen slammed her jaws shut with a very audible click as she spotted her target. Her nostrils flared and she unclenched her fists. "Where the Hades were you?"

Gabrielle looked at her, then dropped her gaze to the basin, then looked back up at Xena in puzzlement.

"Oh shut up." Xena stepped back and drew the flap aside. "Get in there." She waited for Gabrielle to pass her before she turned her attention to the nearby troops. "Tell the cooks to get moving. I want to be on the road in a candlemark" She ordered. "Got it?"

"Yes. Ma'am." The soldier dispensed with any familiarity and trotted off, presumably in search of Brendan. Her voice had carried, however, and the small rustlings in the dim dawn light now quickened and low whistles began to sound.

Xena listened for a moment, then she grunted in satisfaction and turned to reenter her tent, standing for a moment inside the flap as she watched Gabrielle putting her washing up things down neatly by the water basin. "Hey."

Gabrielle turned her head. "I'm sorry." She said. "I forgot to get this last night. I just went to the creek for it.. I didn't want to wake you up." She went back to retrieving the soap from Xena's travel bag."I think it's going to be a nice day..once the fog lifts."

Xena went over and sat down on the bed, letting her hands rest on the front edge of it as she studied her boots. "Yeah?" She said. "That's great. Maybe everyone won't be in such a bad ass mood at the end of the day then." She pondered that, then laid back flat on the bed and folded her hands across her stomach. "Wanna do me a favor?"

"Sure." Gabrielle wiped her hands and came over to her, sitting down on the bed. "Anything."

The queen studied the roof of her tent as though she were reading something across the surface of it. Her eyes flicked back and forth, before she finally half closed them and glanced over at Gabrielle.

"Wake me up next time"

The blond woman scuffed her boot along the carpet a little. "Were you afraid I ran off?"

"No." Xena answered.

"Did you think someone kidnapped me?"

"If someone kidnapped you under my nose and I didn't notice and they didn't stab me in the heart on the way out, I'd have stabbed myself. No." The queen said. "Just do me a favor and wake me up, okay? Stop asking questions about it."

Gabrielle laid down on her side next to Xena, watching her profile and seeing a half hidden vulnerability there she hadn't expected. If Xena hadn't thought she'd run off, or been taken, then why worry about her not being there?

Why? She reached out and touched the queen's cheek. "Okay." She said. "If you want me to, I will."

"Good." Her companion rolled her head towards her. "Now that I told everyone I want to leave before the damn sun's up, I guess we better get washed, huh?"

"Want me to wash you?" Gabrielle's eyes twinkled a little.

Xena glowered at her. "Listen, lambchop." She reached out and grabbed Gabrielle's nose. "I've got enough image problems with out you making them worse. Got me?"

"I fing u gof me."

The queen started chuckling, and released her. "So I do." She let her hand drop back to the bed but remained laying there watching Gabrielle instead of getting up. "How are you and that little runt getting along?" She asked. "Goofy, or Puddles, or whatever you named him."

"Patches." Gabrielle rolled onto her back and stretched her legs out. "He's great." She said. "I just think I need to get used to all this riding. My backs a little sore."

"Ah huh." Xena nodded. "Thought I saw you limping yesterday. Remind me to look at your saddle when we mount up." With a sigh, she sat up and rocked her head back and forth, rubbing her neck and grimacing. "Damn headache." She got to her feet and went to her kit, rummaging in it. "Did you let me drink too much last night, muskrat?"

Gabrielle also got up and went to the brasier, moving the pot of water closer to the embers to warm. "We were drinking last night?" She asked, in a puzzled tone. "I thought we just had cider with dinner."

"Ah. That' the problem. I wasn't drinking last night." Xena walked over with a travel cup in hand and lifted the pot, pouring the water slowly into it, and sniffing the resulting steam cautiously. "You gotta keep me from doing that. Makes me wake up bitchier than hell and it gives me n..." She stopped, and took a sip from the cup instead. "Anyway, let's get washed up and ready to go be soldiers."

Gabrielle put her arms around Xena and gave her a hug. "Okay." She went to the basin and dipped her cloth in, adding some soap before she washed her face with it. She was aware of Xena at her back, the sound of the water swirling in the cup just audible to her.

Footsteps approached the tent. Xena turned, the soft sound of her leathers moving loud in the silence as the queen walked to the opening and stood just inside it. "Who is it?"

"Brendan."

Xena pushed the flap open to let her captain in. Brendan's head was wet and his leather armor was damp as well, but the sturdy soldier was in good humor and he lifted a hand in greeting to Gabrielle when she turned and waved at him.

"A good morning, eh?" Brendan said. "Fair day coming, Xena. We should make good time through t'pass." He let his hand rest on his sword hilt, worn at his hip. "Got bits of things from that bistard last night we did. Camp stuff, little things. He's nothing, yeah?"

“Yeah.” Xena nodded. “He was a skank.”

“Aye.” Brendan’s eyes darted to Gabrielle and back. “Got that from ‘im, and made sure he knew we wasn’t looking for that sort here.”

Xena walked over to the basin and dipped her hands into it, throwing a goodly portion of water at her face and sending droplets everywhere. She scrubbed her skin, then blinked as a piece of cloth got in her way and she blinked as Gabrielle gently removed the moss scented liquid from her skin. “Hey!” She growled.

“Nothing much else.” Brendan went on. “Scared scrap of naught, he is. Don’t know as we can use em for nothing, cept..”

“Except?” Xena wiped her hands on the cloth she’d snatched from her companion, and turned, leaning against the center pole and watching him with hooded eyes. “Don’t tell me he can cook.”

Her captain snorted. “Likes horses.” He said. “Not sure he knows aught, though.”

Xena crossed her arms over her chest. “Bring him here.” She ordered. “I’ll find out what he knows and what he doesn’t know before I let him so much as polish a stirrup.” She said. “If we can make him useful, maybe everyone won’t think I haven’t gone nuts for not gutting him like a fish.”

Brendan had the grace not to reply to that. He raised his hand and escaped out the tent flap, leaving his grumpy queen and her bemused companion behind. Xena glowered at the moving hide for a moment before she turned and looked at Gabrielle. “You think I’m going crazy?”

“No.” Gabrielle finished scrubbing her bare arms. “Why would I think that, because you didn’t kill someone? I’m the one who said killing people isn’t always the answer.” She wiped her skin dry and came over to face Xena. “Why should you be ashamed of saving someone’s life, or helping those kids, Xena?”

Good question. Xena took the cloth from her and slowly wiped her own hands with it.

“It’s like your embarrassed to be a good person.” Gabrielle put her hand on Xena’s arm. “You shouldn’t be.. Xena, you can be such a positive force..”

“Sh.” Xena covered her mouth with one hand. “Don’t go there, Gabrielle. I’m warning you.”

Mutely , the blond woman merely watched her.

“I am NOT a good person.” The queen enunciated the words slowly and carefully. “And I don’t WANT to be a good person. Do you understand that?”

After a moment, Gabrielle shook her head no.

Xena let her hand drop with a sigh of exasperation. “Damn it. I’m going to go kill something. Maybe that’ll help my headache.” She turned and stalked out of the tent, grabbing her sword as she passed her arming trunk and letting the tent flap slam, as much as it could, behind her.

Gabrielle knew she had only a little time before Xena came back, and they had to pack tent, and move on. But she went to her chest and took out her parchment, sitting down and taking up her quill, the words tickling with such force behind her tongue they wouldn’t be denied her expressing them.

**

It was hard to say who was the happiest to finally get to the pass, the soldiers, the horses, or Xena. The path towards it had been filled with shale slate pebbles and with the grade, it had been a

difficult climb for everyone. The soldiers had all dismounted when Xena had, and plowed their way upward, boots slipping in the loose stones as they struggled to keep their balance and help their mounts move forward.

Xena halted them just shy of the cleft in the mountains that was the beginning of the pass, remembering the last time she'd led the way into a pass and nearly gotten herself and everyone with her slaughtered.

She hated when that happened. "Take a break." She ordered, glad enough to lean against Tiger's tall shoulder, as the stallion merely stood, catching his breath. A crunch of steps made her look to one side, spotting Gabrielle approaching, her lighter steps easily negotiating the rocks and her pony's likewise. "Well well."

"Hi." Gabrielle slowed to a halt and patted Patches neck. "We made it!"

"Mm."

Gabrielle turned and looked behind them. The army was spread out on the path, bodies turned half sideways against the slope that led down and down towards the river plain they'd come from, ending at a height that surprised her. "I didn't think it was so high up." She admitted. "The river looks so small."

Xena walked over and leaned her forearms on Patches back, gazing down at the scene. "I remember standing right here." She said. "And wondering how much plunder there was to be had in these lands."

Gabrielle fiddled with Patches reins, but kept quiet.

"Didn't figure it for much." The queen mused. "Look at all that damn scrub."

Her companion moved up next to her. "Do you see that hill over there, with the crooked tree?" She pointed down, and to the right of where they were, a goodly way downslope.

"Yeah." Xena said, after a pause. "That home?"

Gabrielle laid her hand on Patches scruffy back. "It's where I used to live." Her face was somber. "It's where I'm from, I guess."

Xena unlooped her waterskin from her belt and uncapped it, then passed it over to her companion. She watched in silence as Gabrielle took it and sucked a long swallow from it, taking it down from her lips and staring off into the distance for a pensive moment.

Then she turned and coughed violently, expelling the mouthful onto the stones and making Patches ears flick back and forth in some alarm. "Pah!" She staggered back a step, coughing again. "Pah pah pah!"

The queen chuckled. "Got your mind offa that old place, huh?" She reached over and gave Gabrielle a good slap between the shoulder blades. "C'mon, Gabrielle, you can't leave your ass in the past. We've got things to do, and treasure to plunder." She took back the skin and took a much more prudent sip of the pungent liquor, licking her lips and raising her eyebrows at the blond woman. "Good stuff, isn't it?"

Gabrielle's tongue was still too numb for her to answer. She took her own waterskin down and hastily gulped some of the contents, trying to dull the fire that was making her eyes water. "Gods! What is that!" She managed to rasp out, counting herself well and truly distracted from her previous thoughts.

Xena replaced the skin onto a loop on Tiger's saddle. "What is it?" She stretched her body out, gauging the sun's position in the sky. "It's Xena's Fire. That's what it is." She told her companion. "Couple years back I decided to try my hand at brewing, and that's what happened."

"Um." Gabrielle finally felt the tingling start to fade inside her mouth. "Are you really supposed to drink that?" She felt as dubious as she sounded. The liquid had tasted like...

Well, darned if she knew what it tasted like. "It really wasn't..uh.. I mean, I know you made it, and so it has to be good but..."

"But it's an acquired taste." The queen watched her, a faint grin appearing on her face. "Like me."

Well, there was no way Gabrielle could dispute that. She merely took another drink of water and stepped back a little, walking around to ease the slightly cramping muscles in her legs. The climb had been more than she'd expected, but she'd weathered it better than she'd expected so it worked out all right. She was glad they were at the top though, and now she watched as Xena motioned forward a few of the soldiers.

Xena's fire. Gabrielle had to chuckle at herself. Boy did I fall for that or what? She could still taste the burn along the edges of her tongue and she could only imagine what it would have felt like if she'd actually swallowed it. She walked back over to where Patches was patiently standing, the pony nosing around in the rocks in search of a stray blade of grass. "Yeah, not much up here, huh boy?"

"Pffpht." Patches snorted and moved a few steps further up the slope, coming up on Tiger's right side. The big stallion eyed him, stretching his neck out to sniff at the pony's ears, then he turned back to watch Xena as she consulted with her captains.

Gabrielle did too, focusing on Xena's large, powerful hands as they sketched shapes in the air before the men's rapt eyes.

Xena's Fire. The blond woman exhaled slowly. If she's an acquired taste, it sure didn't take me long to get it. She remembered their first real meeting so clearly, and so intensely, her heart started beating faster just thinking about it. Xena's tall form, stepping around behind her, that velvet voice brushing against every nerve.

"Gabrielle!"

Whoops. "Sorry." Gabrielle got her foot in the stirrup and mounted Patches, giving his neck a patch. "I was just.."

"Thinking?" Xena settled her knees on her saddlepads. "Again?"

"Inventing poetry about your hands."

The queen stopped, and her eyebrow hiked. "What?"

Gabrielle nudged Patches to start up along the path, following the half legion of soldiers who had already passed them by while she'd been daydreaming. She started whistling under her breath as she passed Tiger, looking around with as innocent an expression as she could come up with.

"I'm gonna teach you to whistle with another part of your body if I start hearing those poems, you little muskrat." Xena caught up to her, and they ambled along together, entering the pass at a businesslike pace. The rock walls rose around them, but they were not the sheer cliffs of the fertile lands they'd traveled in before.

These were gentler, and rounded, worn by the ever-present winds and covered in scrubby brush barely clinging to a foothold. They were smooth and bore few places to hide, and after a few minutes riding Xena relaxed and started thinking ahead to the passes exit.

It had been a long time, both in years and in living them that she'd been this route. She'd taken some trips the other direction, but she'd avoided this one, reasoning that she'd seen it all before, so why go backwards?

Why indeed? Xena let one hand drop to her thigh as she relaxed into Tiger's rhythmic pace. The black stallion was one of the largest of the army's horses, and he had a touchy temper and an often bad attitude. Xena positively adored him, and though he'd taken time for her to master she truly enjoyed riding him and feeling the sense of power the big animal gave off.

She'd never let on about that though, to anyone. To her subjects, to the troops, Tiger was just her warhorse. Nothing special, and so dangerous to be around you took your life in your hands just trying to groom him.

He hadn't become a target.

Xena heard a whistle from ahead, and she quickly stood in her stirrups, using her height and Tiger's to see past the troops in front of her. She could see the men coming to a halt, and she gave a little click of her tongue, heading forward through the thickening crowd.

Gabrielle scrambled to follow her, glad Tiger made a big enough hole for her to do so easily. She kept Patches on the stallions tail, as she sensed the rising excitement around them.

"Xena! It's them!" Brendans voice was unmistakable. "Bistards ahead of us! Taking a merchant train!"

Xena pulled Tiger up next to the advance group, who had held behind a stack of boulders just at a bend in the pass that prevented them from being seen. She sidestepped her horse over to where the watch was crouching on a low part of the rock, peering over it. "What do you see?"

"Two score, mebbly more." The man rasped, not turning his head. "Taking the whole train, bistards. S'big one. Biggest I seen this season."

Xena sidled over to the rock and stood up on Tiger's saddle, then she crouched slightly and leaped, grabbing two handholds and pulling herself up next to him. "Yeah?" She scanned the area below the pass, her heart rate speeding up as she saw the huge train, and the men attacking it.

The train was trying to defend itself, half armored men desperately trying to fight the troops off, but they were having little success, and she could hear the screams of the merchants as the raiders cut them down. "I knew it was going to be a good day." The queen said, before she turned and released her hold, landing on Tiger's saddle and whistling in a low, but strident tone. "Let's move. Just ride, and mow em down."

She dropped into the saddle and drew her sword, as the men parted to let her through into her place at the front. "Raise the standard." She ordered, hearing the flutter of silk hit the wind as she rounded the bend, and the wind blew her hair back as well. "Heeeeyah!" She started Tiger forward, aware from the corner of her eye of a small, scruffy pony in her wake as the army surged into motion and headed around the bend and through the pass.

Gabrielle was too excited to do much else other than hang on to Patches reins and stay as close to Xena as she could. She could feel the ground starting to shake as the horses moved from a walk to a canter, and around her soldiers were readying their weapons for battle and taking better grips with their knees on the well trained horses.

It was terrible, and yet, it was wonderful too, because she knew they were going to help out the people being attacked, and they would keep them from being hurt or maybe killed. She tightened her own knees on Patches, and the pony snorted as he gamely kept up with his bigger brothers and sisters as they swept around the bend and down the last bit of pass onto the lower road.

Xena twirled her sword so the blade was behind her, held a little to one side as she felt Tiger's feet hit steady, solid ground and he started to speed up. The wind blew hard against her, and she reveled in it, because she knew it took the sounds of the army and sent them back into the pass, rendering her targets almost oblivious to their oncoming attack.

They'd find out, soon enough. She made a gesture to split the force right and left, and lead the right hand fork right at the bulk of what was left of Bregos army.

Damn! She KNEW it was going to end up being a great day.

**

Once she was in the middle of the battle, Gabrielle abruptly realized she had no idea what to do in the middle of a battle. It seemed very disorganized and chaotic, men and horses flying by her at high speed and everyone yelling and screaming as they followed Xena into a clash of swords and grunting bodies.

It was random and dangerous, and she only barely kept herself from being slammed between two of the bigger warhorses as she fought to stay at Xena's side.

They were in the first wedge that drove against the raiders, and the men were slow to react, turning in shock as they were caught from behind by Xena's men as they tried to pull apart the merchant wagons. They were in half armor, rattier and rustier than what the queen's men wore, and of course their leather breastplates lacked the golden hawk head symbol.

They recognized it, though. Gabrielle saw one man's eyes nearly come out of his head as he turned to look fully at Brendan, just before it became irrelevant as Brendan's sword caught him right across the back of his neck and severed it.

Gabrielle had to look away, when Brendan merely kicked the body to one side, and went after another raider. What was she doing here? She hadn't even brought her stick because Xena had been afraid she'd get it taken from her and whacked silly with it.

A hole opened in the crowd, and she and Patches squirted through it, regaining Xena's side as the queen went headlong into the biggest patch of the enemy, who were pulling apart boxes from a spilled wagon.

Quite by accident, she sent Patches forward and he crashed into one of the men, knocking him down and giving Xena the opening she was looking for. "Thanks!" The queen yelled back over her shoulder. "Keep your damn head down!"

"Okay!" Gabrielle bumped her shoulder against the overturned wagon and pulled Patches to one side, trying to look around her and see everything, absorbing the scene with a prickle of excitement. It was all so fast, and so savage.

Xena used her height and Tiger's to great advantage, surprising two men who were grabbing things out of the back of one of the wagons by bringing her sword down on their heads, sending blood and bone splinters everywhere. They went down under Tiger's hooves as the queen pulled her boot out of its stirrup and kicked a third man right into Brendan's mace.

Blood. Gabrielle watched the man die before her eyes and it stopped being even a little exciting when she realized she'd know him from the castle.

Heard him talking about his little boy. She hesitated, her knees clamping a little on Patches sides as Xena moved on, driving more of the soldiers away from the wagons. A scream distracted her, and she looked across the wooden planks to see a woman scrambling out of the back, her shirt torn half off and a man's arm hooked around her waist.

Without really thinking, Gabrielle pulled Patches head around and sent him headlong towards the two. "Here!" She held a hand out to the woman. "Get on behind me!"

Wild eyed, the woman was more than eager to obey. She half jumped, half sprawled across Patches hindquarters as Gabrielle shoved the man behind her back, wrenching his arm free as she nudged Patches forward and he overbalanced and fell out of the wagon to the ground.

She bolted around the other side of the wagon, trying to keep Patches under control as the woman flailed around behind her, and a half dozen soldiers nearly crashed into them. Somehow, she managed to pull the woman up and get her settled as she pressed against the wagon, trying to stay out of everyone's way. "Are you all right?"

"Bloody bastards!" The woman gasped. "They told us not to come here! We should have listened!"

Gabrielle ducked as two struggling soldiers slammed into the wooden planks, falling off their horses and half into the wagon and threatening to roll over her. She yanked Patches head around again and tapped him with her heels, going back around the rear of the wagon as the last of Xena's soldiers moved past and into the fight.

It was no contest, really. Xena's men outnumbered the raiders four to one and most of them were mounted, where the raiders were mostly on foot. Gabrielle could see the ones at the very front starting to run away, and she exhaled a little, knowing it would be over soon.

She sent Patches after the last of the soldiers, feeling guilty all of a sudden when she realized she couldn't see Xena and she'd promised not to leave her side. "Just hang on." She told the woman. "You'll be fine."

"Bastards!" The woman repeated. "Safe passage, they said. Just give them a few barrels of ale... damn them!"

Gabrielle spotted a flash of flying, dark hair and she put Patches into motion. "Hang on!" She warned, as she dodged between two fighting men on foot, thrusting spears at each other. One man slipped, and she saw the spear point too late, half turning sideways as it struck her in the chest, nearly taking her off Patches back with the sudden, violent impact. "Ahh!"

The shock knocked the breath of her. She grabbed wildly for Patches saddle as she felt herself twisting and sliding off to one side and then just as quickly she was being hauled upright, and the pressure against her chest was gone and she could smell blood, and leather and hot horseflesh.

Somehow, through all that, she knew the grip on her back was Xena, even without seeing Tiger's dark flanks or hearing her voice. There was just something about her presence that Gabrielle could feel. "Xena!"

"Who were you expecting, Aphrodite?" The queen yelled at her. "What in Hades are you doing?"

"Trying to stay out of the way!"

Xena reached behind Gabrielle and grabbed hold of the wide eyed women behind her. She lifted her off Patches back and tossed her over into the wagon bed, with two other women who were huddled together. "There. Stay." She told her. "Cause I know this thing here won't." She whirled and stood in her stirrups, reviewing the battle.

Such as it was. "Too damn short." Xena sighed. "Damn cowards.. Look at them run."

Gabrielle carefully felt her side, relieved only be bruised by the spear rather than gutted by it. The point had lodged in her armor and turned, the point not even close to penetrating it. She turned to see what Xena was looking at, but the queen was already sidestepping her horse to one side, shading her eyes to see better.

There was no more fighting around them. The men were starting to straggle back towards where Xena was, the ground littered with bodies and a wild thrashing in the distance as the grasses closed around the retreating raiders being chased by some of the queen's mounted men.

"Whao." One of the soldiers was wiping his battle ax off on a torn sleeve. "That's a nice bit of a warm up, eh?"

Xena was still standing in her stirrups. "They're headed for the next valley." She said, lifting her fingers to her lips and letting out a long, piercing whistle, then pausing before whistling twice more. "So let's not kill em all until we find out where they're going."

Gabrielle put her hand on the edge of the wagon, and glanced over into it. "You'll be okay now." She reassured the people inside. "Don't be scared."

The woman she'd pulled away from the raider crawled over to the side and put her hands on it, staring past Gabrielle towards Xena's tall form. "Is that her, really?" She asked. "Xena the Merciless?"

Xena finally sat down again and took a cloth from her saddlebag, wiping down the length of her blade and changing the metal from crimson to glistening. Her hair was windblown and she had mud splattered all up the length of one leg and hip.

Gabrielle studied her lover and sighed. "Yes." She said. "That's her."

Xena looked around, as though suspecting she was being discussed. She guided Tiger with her knees over to where Gabrielle was waiting, and glowered at the people in the wagon. "They say anything to you?" She addressed them. "What'd they ask for, what did the promise for it?"

The merchants just stared, wide eyed at her in silence.

Gabrielle saw Xena's hands start to twitch and she cleared her throat. "Um.. Okay, well, this is Xena, and she's the queen." She introduced her lover. "And you all are.. Um.. " She waited for a response, but nothing was forthcoming. "You were talking a minute ago. I know you're not mute."

"I can make them that way." Xena twirled "C'mere and stick your tongues out." She edged closer to the wagon.

"Xena."

"What?" The queen frowned at the people. "I don't need idiots who can't talk around me. Never had that problem with you, did I?"

"Majesty." The oldest of the women in the wagon finally spoke up. "Forgive us. We did not expect to find you out here on the road." She explained.

Xena gave her head a shake to clear the hair from her eyes. "Answer my questions." She ordered. "Who were those guys?" She pointed with the tip of her sword back down the way they'd come. "You came from that way?"

The younger woman who Gabrielle had rescued edged forward on her knees. "You don't know them, Majesty?" She asked. "Strange, they said they were your men." She ignored the older woman's attempt to shush her. "They promised us 'safe passage' to your stronghold.. Then turned on us when we didn't want to pay their coin."

Xena's eyes grew hooded. She let her sword rest against her leg as she straightened in the saddle, her face set and angry.

"No." Gabrielle decided it was probably time to say something. "Those are some men who deserted from Xena's army before the winter." She let her hand rest on the wood. "We found some villages that were destroyed by them back there.. Xena's going to make sure that doesn't happen again."

"Say that again." The queen muttered.

"What?" The blond woman turned her head.

"Shut up." Xena felt Tiger shift under her restively, his nostrils flaring at the drying blood on the ground. "Stay here." She told Gabrielle. "I'm going to see what's left of this pathetic mess." She turned her horse and moved off, breaking into a canter almost immediately.

Gabrielle watched her briefly, then she turned back to the wagon. More of the merchants had joined them, gathering together in a shocked huddle as the chaos died down, and the extent of the losses began to be obvious. "It'll be okay now." She told them.

"How did you find us?" The older woman asked. "What's she doing here?"

"Well, it's like this." Gabrielle sorted through the recent past. "I'll tell you how we came to be here, and what we're doing, and why you don't have to worry about being safe anymore."

**

The merchant train was in shambles. Xena rode up and down the line, reviewing the wagons and wondering what the Hades she was going to do with them. Most had damage to their wheels, the ones in the front of the line, closest to where she'd caught up to them were half collapsed into the ground with yokes shattered, and some of the pulling oxen dead in their traces.

Idiots. The queen slapped her thigh with one hand in aggravation. What had Bregos men been thinking? How did they figure to get the booty away from the merchant train, on their backs? Hanging from their horses tails?

She knew Bregos wasn't a fool. He'd had enough success in the field for her to respect, at least, his strategic skills, though his judgement had often been left wanting. Had the men just gone overboard? She knew the ones that had left with him had been the hungriest, the youngest, and the most dissatisfied with her rule.

So maybe they were just that stupid. She pulled Tiger up next to one of her captains, an older man with a deeply scarred face. "What a mess, eh Andar?"

The man shook his head repeatedly. "Got lots of stuff they need back t'ere." He said. "Pity. We can't use it, most of it. Wont' travel, no use to us."

Xena eased one leg over her saddlebow and winced as her spine popped as she twisted. “Yeah, damn it.” She reviewed the long straggle of destruction. Merchants, those who hadn’t been hurt or killed, were working around the train trying to make sense of it, with some help from Xena’s soldiers.

Her instincts were pushing her to follow Bregos men. She knew they were headed somewhere, and she figured wherever that was, she’d find him, and when she’d found him, she’d kill him, and the day would just get much brighter from then on.

But in the meantime, she had this to deal with. Leaving the provisions here was out of the question, and releasing her own wagons to take it was also out of the question. The only choice open to her was to have her men fix the wagons, and consolidate what goods they could for the missing oxen.

That meant she was stuck here for the day and that was pissing her off.

However, Xena was, if nothing else, a realist. “All right.” She motioned two other of her captains to her. “Make camp.”

“Mistress?” The nearer man stared at her.

Xena slugged him out of pure annoyance. “Shut up, idiot.” She snarled. “Andar, we’ll make camp here. Tell the blacksmiths and anyone who can use a tool to come up forward, and see what they can do with these damn wagons. If we need to go cut trees, send a squad back to do it and drag the logs through the pass.”

“Aye.” Andar nodded. “Fix em up, yeah?” He said. “Struth, it’s better than killing them off, I’m thinking, and the castle will get the profit of the goods.”

“One smart man.” The queen remarked drolly. “Be still my beating heart.” She waved her hand. “Get moving. Getting stuck here in the open isn’t my idea of a party. You and you, come with me.” She pointed at several men. “Let’s go see if there’s anything up there we need to be worried about.”

She whirled Tiger around and headed for the end of the merchant train, her eyes already on the heavy scrub that Bregos men had disappeared into.

Just because everyone else’s fun was over, didn’t mean hers had to be, now did it?

**

Part 6

Gabrielle hesitated as she watched Xena ride off, split between the desire to follow her and the desire to stay behind and help the merchants. Logically she knew she’d be of more use here than tagging along after the queen, but it took only a moment before she was scrambling up on Patches back and sending him pattering after Tiger’s big form.

She knew how to fix wagons, she’d seen her father and others in the village do it often enough, but she suspected the soldiers and definitely the merchants wouldn’t listen to her. Xena on the other hand, very occasionally did, and so she turned her back on the troops and followed the queen out across the grass, following the path beaten in it by the raiders.

They had dropped things as they ran, she spotted a sword to one side, and some rope, but she didn’t have time to stop for them as she saw Xena speeding up ahead of her. She had a gathering of soldiers around her and Gabrielle wasn’t sure if she knew she was coming, so she urged Patches to a faster gait anxious not to be left behind.

Unexpectedly, Patches gathered himself, and jumped into the air, nearly scaring her into falling off his back. "Whoa!" She yelped, grabbing hold of his bristly mane, as they landed and she only just stopped herself from slamming forward and mashing her face. "What was that for!"

The pony merely continued on, and she looked behind her, spotting a dark form lying in the grass directly behind them.

A log? Gabrielle turned and faced forward, resolutely deciding it was a log and not a fallen raider. If it was a log, Patches was just a very smart pony and she now knew she could trust him not to run into anything like that.

If it wasn't...

Well. "C'mon, Patches." Gabrielle settled her legs more firmly around the pony's barrel and leaned forward, as his rapid strides brought her closer to Xena's scout group. The last soldier heard her approach and turned, his hand going to his sword hilt until he recognized her and the motion turned to an acknowledging wave.

Relieved, she released on hand and waved back, seeing Xena's head turn as a low whistle went forward. The group slowed and parted, and she found herself riding through a horseflesh tunnel with the queen at one end waiting for her.

"Hey." Xena greeted her as she came alongside. "Don't tell me you didn't want to stick around helping people back there."

Gabrielle glanced at her, as they rode. "There are lots of people helping." She said. "I wanted to be with you."

Xena grinned rakishly, but turned her head forward and busied herself following the broken path the raiders had taken to get to the wagon train.

Ahead of her, she spotted a cleared area, and she held a hand up and slowed Tiger's pace as they approached it, standing a little in her stirrups to survey the spot with a wary eye. Nothing but beaten brush met her gaze, though, so she continued into it, pulling Tiger to a halt as she reached the center and turning him in a circle.

From the road, with the high scrub it would be almost invisible, and she supposed that's why the raiders had used it as a camp. There was a hastily covered firepit in the center, and scattered belongings around it giving evidence that their owners had moved in a hurry.

Hm. Xena dismounted and walked over to the fire, pulling one gauntlet off and laying her palm over the dirt covering. A telltale warmth confirmed her suspicions, and she stood, lightly slapping the gauntlet against her thigh as she reviewed the debris. "Opportunistic. Interesting."

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle had slid off Patches back and now joined her. "They were messy, that's for sure."

Xena's eyes narrowed. "Collect anything useful." She ordered the soldiers. "Look careful.. Especially for anything parchment." She turned and walked to the far side of the camp, where a dirt scuffed, narrow path lead away. "That explains why they went for the oxen."

"It does?" Gabrielle was completely lost, but she followed in Xena's footsteps anyway. "Why did they kill the oxen.. Did they want steaks for dinner?"

Xena turned her head and looked over her shoulder, lifting one eyebrow to its limit.

Gabrielle blinked at her. "Sorry. That's the only reason I could come up with. Maybe it's because I'm hungry."

Xena turned and watched the soldiers scavenge. "I thought they were attacking the train to get provisions." She said. "But now.. I think they were here for something else."

"For us?" Gabrielle hazarded a guess.

"Mm." Xena waggled her ungloved hand. "They were trying to destroy the train. Stop it from reaching the stronghold, but they got surprised."

"How do you know?"

The queen chuckled humorlessly. "I have many skills." She drawled.

"Oh." Gabrielle decided to search her little patch of ground for anything interesting. "Okay." She scuffed her boot against the earth, and moved off into the brush a little, pushing the leaves aside to peer between them. After a moment, she felt a tug on the back of her armor, and she turned to find Xena watching her. "What's wrong?"

"Don't you want to hear how clever I am?" The queen asked.

Gabrielle straightened up. "Sure." She dusted her hands off. "Sorry, I thought you were done explaining." She apologized.

"Ahem." Xena turned and indicated the camp. "This has been in use a long time. See the depressions around the edges, and how hard the ground is?" She waited for Gabrielle to nod. "Smell the garbage pit?" She watched the girls' nose wrinkle. "Well, why put a camp here? There's no water, no small game, no shelter... unless you just don't like the jerks you send there."

"Oh. Okay." Gabrielle paused. "Why?"

"The one thing it does have is that rock there." Xena pointed to a barely seen boulder. "If you stand on it, you get a good view of the pass, and anything moving through it." Parting the brush with her hands she revealed the stone, which had rough wear marks on it. "And it was used for just that."

Gabrielle walked over and examined the boulder in fascination. "Wow. Look at that. But why did they pick this spot? Did they think we were coming?" She looked up at Xena. "I thought you didn't even decide that until it was almost time to leave."

"Exactly." The queen said. "So they were watching for people coming in, not going out." She turned and gazed across the grass towards the road. "They were attacking us all winter, and we didn't realize it." She leaned back against the watch stone. "If I hadn't ordered the larders filled at harvest... damn. The blasted nobles were pushing me to send everything outside.. For sale."

Gabrielle could hardly believe what she was hearing. "Do you think they knew? They were in on it?" She asked. "But that.. We sent stocks to most of them over the winter. They'd have..."

"Yeah." Xena expelled a short laugh. "Well, we'll find out when we get back how much they knew and when they knew it." She turned and started up the path. "C'mon. Let's see what other clues we can find."

Gabrielle followed her willingly. The path was narrow, and closed in by thick brush, but as she walked even her inexperienced eyes detected long broken branches and debris that indicated the path had been in use for more than a short time.

This was exciting, and interesting. It was like a puzzle, and she was here watching Xena work it all out. "Hey, Xena?"

"Mm?"

"Would they have just killed all those merchants?" Gabrielle asked, as they moved further into the brush, and towards a stand of thick pines.

"Probably." The queen said. "They stopped them to find out what they were carrying, and once they figured that out they probably had orders to make it unusable any way they could." She stepped around a tree. "Ah." She grunted. "That's what I was looking for."

"What?" Gabrielle poked her head around the queen's arm. "Oh. A well."

"Mm." Xena crouched down next to the inexpertly stacked rocks, picking one up and examining it closely. The stones were rounded and as she peered the the bottom, she saw a bit of green staining it. "In-teresting." She turned to Gabrielle, who had hunkered down next to her. "This is river stone."

Recognizing the rounded shape, the blond woman nodded. "They must have brought it with them." She agreed. "It's good for wells, because it's heavy and the water washes over it, there's no corners for it to grab onto." She took the stone from Xena's fingers and rubbed the edge of her thumb over it, her expression growing thoughtful.

"Why Gabrielle." Xena leaned her elbow on her companions shoulder. "I had no idea you weren't a well virgin, along with everything else." She snickered at the rolling of the blond woman's eyes. "So now tell me, shepherd - where's the nearest place those might have come from?"

"What makes you think I know of one?" Gabrielle answered softly.

"I have many skills."

The blond woman set the stone down, and regarded her companion. "There's a river... I don't know if it's what you're looking for, but there are stones like this there." She said. "It's not far from where I'm from."

Was the world that quirky? Xena rocked back on her heels and pondered. It seemed far too fantastic that Bregos would choose her lover's old home as a base, certainly not on purpose. She hadn't figured she'd even ever mentioned to anyone where her former slave had come from.

But life was funny, sometimes. The queen shrugged, and stood, hauling Gabrielle up with her. One empty deserted hovelish village was a good as any other when you were looking for shelter, she well knew. "All right." She stepped around the well and continued past it, her eyes picking up traces off between the trees past the stamped down earth near the well.

At the edge of the thicker foliage, she paused, glancing behind her. "Do me a favor, willya?"

"Sure." Gabrielle replied.

"Run back and let the guard know where we're going. Not that I need them tripping after me but losing the queen's bad form and they might get flogged for it."

"Right." Gabrielle turned and trotted off back in the direction they'd come. "Don't go without me, okay?" She called back over her shoulder. "I don't want to miss any of your being clever."

Xena made a soft, gargling sound in the back of her throat, but she retraced her steps and began a close inspection of the ground around the well instead of plunging off into the trees as her restless

temperament was urging her. She spotted a glint of metal near the stones and knelt again, clearing the mud and leaf litter away from the object.

It was the cap off the end of a dagger. She lifted it and brushed the dirt off it, cocking her head as she recognized the tip. Not Bregos, no - but typical of the ones he'd brought back with the army from his last campaign. Cheap things, if she recalled, but the men he'd brought with him were proud of them because they were so different than the ones Xena's men carried.

Of course, the steel her men carried actually cut things, but that was apparently of no consequence to the little mudheads. Xena turned the bit of metal over, seeing where it had sheared off the horn handle, the crooked edge cracked and crumbling under her touch.

Suddenly, her senses prickled. She was aware of a change in the air behind her and the soft scrape of leather against mud, and an intake of breath just as she dropped the dagger bit and turned, feeling her body react instinctively as she reached up one hand in front of her rather than drawing her sword.

There was no thought involved. Xena had no conscious part in the decision and that was exactly as it should be since the choice to catch the arrow rather than pull her sword out and possibly expose her chest to it readily saved her life. Her fingers closed around a fast moving shaft and she dropped it as her drew her dagger from her wrist sheath and sent it back in the opposite direction.

A soft cry marked her aim, and she grinned, now drawing her sword and advancing into the trees, one hand held in front of her to catch any further feathered annoyances. She heard a crashing in the bush and altered her course, leaping over a low bush and lifting her blade up as she spotted a movement, erratic and wavering on the other side.

With a triumphant yell, she started a fast downward strike as her eyes cleared the leaves and she found her target, only jerking her arm to one side as her brain processed what she was looking at and she threw herself off her mark to land to the left of it.

Wide, terrified eyes looked back at her, framed in short, straight brown hair in a face young enough to barely be an adolescent child's. The boy's mouth opened and he panted, his hands clutched around the hilt protruding from his belly where her aim had buried it.

Dropped behind him was the bow the arrow she'd caught had been fired from, and there was a small hunting bag lying next to it. In an instant, her senses caught all that, and her initial fear of a stupid mistake eased as she turned her full attention back to her victim.

He was, in truth, barely older than a child. That didn't change the fact that he'd tried to kill her, and Xena refused to feel sympathy for him. "Guess you picked the wrong wild pig to shoot at, huh?" She knelt on one knee beside him and rolled him roughly over.

He cried out, but she batted his hands away from the knife hilt and folded her fingers around it, yanking it out of him with a fast, steady pull that changed his cry to a scream. Dispassionately she wiped the blade on her leggings as he clutched his belly and squealed, sliding the blade back in its holster as she heard running footsteps behind her. "Over here."

Gabrielle came barreling out of the trees as though she was fully intending on doing something martially useful, complete with her big stick waving in the air. She skidded to a halt when she saw the scene before her, and Xena watched her face carefully as the blond woman looked at the kid, then looked at the bow, then looked at her.

There were two things Gabrielle could possibly ask her. One would continue their relationship, and one would likely end it. Xena found herself unable to guess in the slightest which one it would be and so, in

that moment of the dancing of their souls she experienced a lurch of the heart that sent her lightheaded.

“Are you okay?” Gabrielle blurted out.

Xena sat back on her heels, unsure if she was going to laugh or cry. “Oh yeah. I’m great. How are you?” She muttered. “Look what I found out here. A little lamb with a nasty sting in his tail.”

Gabrielle put her hand on Xena’s shoulder, and gazed at the boy, who was still lying curled on the ground, clutching his gut. “Where did he come from?” She asked. “Is he with Bregos?”

Xena stared off into the trees for a long moment, before she dusted her hands off and felt her heart rate settle back down again. “Guess we’ll find out.” She turned her head as the guard arrived. “Take this piece of trash back to the camp and hold him there. If he doesn’t bleed to death I might get something useful out of him.”

She got up as the soldiers grabbed her young victim and hoisted him up, one man taking his bow and shaking his head at it, with a disgusted expression. She waited for them to drag the kid out, before she turned and looked down at Gabrielle. “I thought you’d feel sorry for the little punk.”

Gabrielle’s brow creased. “Why?” She asked. “He tried to hurt you.. Why would I feel sorry for him?”

Ah. The queen exhaled. So that was the line in the grass, was it? She wondered if Gabrielle even realized she’d crossed it. “Just a notion. Now that we’ve got the boys with us, let’s see what other surprises we can find.” She clapped Gabrielle on the shoulder and started forward, stepping over the forgotten bow and moving off into the trees with her little band as the sun moved through the sky overhead, dappling them with patterned light.

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Gabrielle stopped walking when she felt Xena’s hand grip her shoulder. She waited for the queen to come up next to her then she pointed to a thick stand of bushes dimly seen through the trees. “The river’s just past there.”

“I know.” Xena said. “I can smell it.” She moved past Gabrielle. “So now, the bitch with the pointy metal thing gets to go first and you stay behind me. Okay?”

“You’re not a bitch.”

Xena laughed. “Oh I most certainly am.” She drew her sword and started forward. “String out, stay alert.” She called behind her to the soldiers. “No telling what we’re gonna find.”

It occurred to Gabrielle, suddenly, that they were a pretty small group to be maybe coming into where lots of Bregos men could be hiding. She didn’t remember exactly how many had left, but she knew it had seemed a lot when they had, and he could always have collected more in the meantime.

Six people didn’t seem like a safe number, especially since she was one of the six and she couldn’t do much in the way of fighting anyone. But on the other hand, they had Xena with them so maybe it was all right. She took a tighter grip on her staff, careful not to smack the queen with the end of it, and followed Xena down towards the river.

It wasn’t her part of the river. They were significantly downstream from the fords she’d known as a child and the stiff, rippling rapids that rushed past the little alcove where she’d knelt to fill their waterpot every morning. She was glad of that, since she had no wish to be anywhere near what she knew would be an empty shell with nothing but burned out memories.

She didn't want to go back there.

Xena held her sword backwards, her fingers clasped lightly around the hilt as she stepped past the last tree and emerged onto the bank of the river. Her eyes flicked over its surface, and she revised her evaluation, as the waterway was more of a creek than a river, maybe the span of six horses across, but moving at a decent clip.

She stepped onto a mossy rock near the edge and studied the water intently. It was dark and muddy, and as she knelt and extended her senses, she caught a whiff of garbage and stench on its surface. "Don't touch it." She ordered, standing and moving easily upstream.

They followed her single file, and slowly a silence descended on them as they took their cue from her, placing their steps with care as she led them up the creek towards a steep bend they could just barely see ahead.

Xena felt a definite sense of pleasure, as she practiced her very favorite form of hunting. The cool breeze blew against her face, and she smelled humanity on it, and it made her smile. For all the uncertainties she'd felt so far, this at least was something she remembered well, and she let the cares of the day fade around her as she concentrated on moving silently, the slowly wakening thrill lifting the hairs on the backs of her arms.

It was much better than being queen, really. Sitting in a castle up on a musty hard backed chair somewhere - how had she borne it all this time? Xena's ears twitched, as she caught faint sounds on the wind. This was living. That? She exhaled slowly, shaking her head.

"Something wrong?" Gabrielle whispered, coming up just behind her.

"Nope." The queen switched her sword to her other hand. "Smell that?"

Gabrielle obediently sniffed. "All I can smell is you." She said, after a moment. "Was that what you meant?"

"Do I smell bad?"

"No."

"Then it wasn't what I meant."

"Oh."

Xena paused at a wider part of the path, to allow her companion to come up next to her. "Look." She pointed at the water, which was carrying a swirl of debris past them. "See that?"

Gabrielle nodded. "It's trash." She agreed.

"Army trash." The queen said. "That makes it different. Villagers would never chuck cloths away like that."

The soldiers stood patiently behind her, their heads never ceasing to move as they watched the forest around them. One stepped onto the rocks near the water, and extended his sword, snagging a bit of the debris and bringing it closer for Xena to inspect.

Wow. Gabrielle looked at the sodden mass. She could barely see what it was, and Xena knew right off. "You're right." She said. "Those are hearthclothes." A scene flashed into her mind, of her family's spare little firepit and her mother carefully folding her cloths to put away. "They never would have thrown them in the river."

Xena nodded. "Okay, listen up." She eyed the soldiers. "I want to find out how many there are, and what the layout is. Then we can bring the rest of the boys in and wipe them out." She lifted a hand and touched Gabrielle's nose with her thumb. "Stick to my ass, muskrat."

Gabrielle grinned unexpectedly. "Lucky me." She agreed, her lips pressing together as she muffled a smile seeing Xena's eyes widen. "Don't you all think so?" She asked the soldiers.

"Shut up." Xena gave them all a look. She gathered what dignity she could muster and turned her back, fluffing her cloak out in case anyone got any funny ideas about looking at anything but where they were going. She picked her path and started forward again, her eyes spotting a narrow, almost invisible path ahead leading up away from the stream and deeper into the forest.

The sunlight slanted through the leaves now, beginning to turn a rich, warm golden color as it passed high noon and moved along its arc towards evening. She stepped between the tall trunks and consciously became more silent, her ears pricking as she listened for the first hints of humanity ahead.

The undergrowth was thick here, and she eased between the branches, pausing every few steps to let her senses catch up with her footsteps.

The birds had fallen silent around them, a definite indication of nearby habitation. She slowed, placing her feet with more care, sensing something nearby that wasn't part of the forest. She held up a hand, then moved forward alone, pressing against the trunk of a tall tree whose branches spread lazily to either side of them.

Slowly, she slid her head around the side of the tree, and peered past the trunk. As she had suspected, there was a guard post there, two men sitting on logs, one whittling a bit of wood in a bored way, the other leaning back on his hands, watching the leaves overhead.

They were young, and anonymous to her, their faces not even slightly familiar from the barracks. Xena studied the area behind and beyond them, detecting no other figures nearby. So. She had two idiots here, and now what to do with them?

If she merely knocked them out, they'd know she was around, and she wasn't sure she wanted that to get out yet. If she cut their throats, delightful as that would be, it would also probably indicate she was around, and it would freak Gabrielle out.

If she went around them, they might come up behind her.

If she went over them, she'd be unable to resist the temptation to have her men piss on their heads. "Life's just a sack of dried pig scat sometimes, ain't it?" She muttered under her breath, just as a huge, though muffled sneeze sounded behind her.

The two guards jumped up, pulling out their swords and bolting towards the trees they were hiding behind. Xena rolled her eyes and ducked out from behind the trunk, letting out a wild yell as she closed with the first guard and met his sword stroke with her own, smashing his weapon aside as he fought to slow his run and failed, crashing directly into her and bouncing off to stumble back, his eyes widening as the rest of the soldiers swarmed out from behind the tree and attacked.

Xena went after her initial victim, grinning when she saw by the look in his eyes that he knew just how much trouble he was really in. She knew leaving him alive would be pointless, but her sword certainly wasn't so she ran him through with it, feeling the grating sensation of steel on bone as her weapon penetrated his chest and spitted his heart.

He slumped to the earth and she moved past him, already looking for another target, but her men had already taken care of the other guard, and now they were searching beyond the log they'd been sitting on, a sense of excitement rising from them as the smell of blood rose in the clearing.

Xena leaped to the top of the log and dropped to the ground on the other side. A short, mossy slope lead down towards a little dell, and she could see smoke rising from the center of it. "All right." She motioned to the two men closest to her. "Take the bodies, and put them in the river." Her long finger pointed to a third man. "Straighten this little cesspit up, so it looks like nothing happened."

"Aye." The men set to work.

"You." Xena swiveled her head and regarded Gabrielle, who was standing quietly nearby. "That sound you made killed those men. You realize that?"

Gabrielle's eyes went to her face in sudden, wary shock. "Bu.."

"That was you, right? Or did one of my men grab his crotch first?"

The blond woman's gazed moved to the limp bodies being dragged out, then she looked back at Xena in horror.

"It's not a game, out here." The queen turned her back and started through the trees again, scanning the forest for several seconds before her mind actually acknowledged what she was seeing. She wasn't really mad at Gabrielle for sneezing, after all, people did, and she hadn't minded killing the soldiers, she just hated that the choice had been taken from her that way.

She took several steps more before she glanced behind her, to find Gabrielle following, her eyes firmly on the ground, and her face stony and expressionless.

A brilliant attempt at composure completely ruined by the tears rolling unchecked down her cheeks.

Xena sighed, and kept going, annoyed that a little water could do so much to ruin what had been turning out to be a pretty nice day.

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The guard outpost was surprisingly far from the main encampment. Xena had led the way for almost a candlemark before she started hearing voices, and the sound of wood being chopped through the trees in front of her. She held her her hand to stop the progress behind her, then she unclasped her cloak and extended it in Gabrielle's direction. "Hold that."

The cloth was taken from her, and she took a long step towards the last tree, crouching, then leaping up to catch the lowest branch and pull herself up onto it. After she took a moment to catch her balance, she walked along the branch, placing her boots carefully as the limb swayed under her a little.

New the end, where the tree limb extended into the next, before she crossed over she stopped and turned to look behind her, seeing her six men crouched in the bushes, watching alertly all around them. Leaning against the trunk of the tree she was in was Gabrielle, Xena's cloak tucked over her arm, her eyes looking off into the distance unseeingly.

She hadn't said a word since they'd started off again. Not even a grunt or a clearing of her throat, not even when Xena had directly addressed her.

The queen suspected it was going to take some effort to reverse that, but if she learned the lesson Xena had intended, it would be worth it.

Right?

Xena frowned, as she acknowledged a sense of unease that was tied in to the glum expression on her lover's face and the fact that she herself was unhappy about it. "Xena." She slapped herself in the head, turning and continuing on, jumping from one tree to the other and moving along the long branch heading for the center.

First things first. She would have time later to make nice.

As she reached the trunk she stepped around it to a branch on the other side, pressing her hands against the bark and feeling its roughness against the palms of her hands. She stopped, then, as she peered around and could see below her, where a large group of men were surrounding a big cookfire.

They were haggard and worn looking. The clothing they wore was ripped and filthy, and Xena's nose wrinkled as a gust of wind brought their scent to her. Most had beards, many had cuts and wounds visible to her watching eye that were testament of a very hard winter.

They were intent on the cookpot, and oblivious of anything else around them. She suspected she could have done a country jig and sang a tavern tune on the branch above them and not made a stir, the sunken looks on their faces make her suspect they hadn't eaten in a quite a while.

"Git that fire made." One man said, with a hoarse cough.

Several around him licked their lips, and then, curiously, peered around as though embarrassed. Xena was content to lean against the bark and watch, not entirely sure of what was going on. On the face of it, they appeared to be assembling for a meal, but there was an avidness, and intentness in their manner that pricked her warning instincts.

What were they up to?

There was a stir at the back of the crowd, and a buzz of excited conversation rose. Xena eased around the trunk and stepped a few paces along the branch, holding the leaves aside with one hand so she could see better. Three men were struggling to lift a pot full of water onto the newly set firepit and several drew daggers, looking past the fire to the rear where the sounds were coming from.

Xena edged forward a little more, trying to see what the noise was. She could spot a cluster of men shoving themselves forward, and then, the others were helping them, the excitement unmistakable. They reached the firepit and suddenly the crowd parted, and she saw two of the men, with a figure bound between them, its pale but dirty skin naked save where the ropes crossed it.

What the? The queen blinked, then blinked again, as she realized it was a young girl they had tied up, with tow brown hair and wide, terrified eyes. She was struggling weakly, but her mouth was gagged and as she was shoved forward, the men surged forward anxiously, one reaching in and testing the pot's water.

"What in Hades?" The queen whispered.

Xena had seen a lot in her lifetime. She'd seen torture and deprivation, and depravation and dirty little tricks the likes of which would scare grown soldiers into screaming babies but one thing she'd never experienced was cannibalism and so it took her almost a hundred heartbeats before she realized that was what she was about to see.

And then she realized that thought totally horrified her just before she released the leaves and was jumping forward, letting out a loud, urgent yell as she fell through the air towards the crowd just as they dumped the kid into the pot and stoked the fire.

She hoped her men would come running. There were too many daggers and too many men who were too frenzied for her to stay unscathed and she pulled her sword as she landed and started swinging. It

was like cutting through thick brush, the men were almost oblivious to her as they swarmed around the cookpot and she caught a brief glimpse of the child jerking wildly.

“Son of a bacchae! Get the Hades away from her you damned scumbag perverts!” Xena hacked an arm off, and kicked it’s owner right into the fire. A stench of burning flesh went up and that sent the crowd over the edge. They started clawing at the still twitching body as Xena fought to get closer to the pot, the smell of the filth and the hair burning turning her stomach. “Yahhhh!!”

An answering yell came to her ears sweet as baklava and she swiped her blade into the head of the man in her way, the blade sticking suddenly in the bone of his skull. Impatiently she yanked it out, and a loud crack sounded as her elbow smacked something as her arm swung back.

She half turned and saw blood and pale hair and then Gabrielle went down, dropping like a sack in the crowd of surging men. “Oh.” Xena exhaled. “That was a screw up.” She turned back and reached into the pot, feeling the scalding water against her skin as she grabbed the child and hauled her up over the pot’s lip, hearing the sizzle as her bare skin touched the hot iron.

Then one of her men was at her side and grabbing the girl, his eyes huge and horrified as she knew her own were and she felt a sturdy back press against her own as she side stepped to where Gabrielle had fallen and bracketed her with a leg on each side of her slumped body.

“What d’we do?” The man at her back yelled. “T’animals!”

Xena fought off two men who were clawing at the girl’s body, their eyes so fixed they paid no attention to her sword cutting them to shreds, or the blood now spurting everywhere. What do we do? She knew of only one solution to this particular situation. “Kill em all!” She bellowed, ignoring the fact that they were outnumbered ten to one. “Die! Die all you bastards!”

Some of them were ripping into the first man she’d killed. Xena saw two of her men start on them with war axes and she resolutely stood her ground, gutting a man trying to get to the child then jerking her sword back and whipping it over her head to slash across the face of a second.

“Xena, there’s too many of em.” The man at her back said. “They’re crazy!”

Xena had no doubt of her own courage. She also had no doubt of her own intelligence. “Cover me.” She sheathed her sword despite the gore on it and knelt, gathering Gabrielle’s still body in her arms and lifting her up. Her face was covered in blood. “Move out! To the river!”

The rest of the men formed a wedge around her and they fought their way towards the treeline, losing most of their attackers as they turned back towards the fire and their other victim.

“Damnedable thing, Xena.” One of her men grunted as they ran.

Xena drew in a breath tinged with her lover’s blood and expelled it. “Half assed hero bullshit.” She muttered in response, feeling her teeth grind.

Damn it.

**

Gabrielle slowly awoke to the smell of spiced wine and leather nearby. She took a breath and tried to open her eyes, with very mixed results. “Ow.”

“Don’t move around.”

Xena’s voice sounded tired, but calm, and she could feel the softness of the furs on their sleeping pallet under her fingers so Gabrielle figured they were safe. “Wh..” Her head hurt a lot, and she could

only open one eye, but that didn't help much because something was covering the other one and blocking her view. "Wh.."

A candle neared, and she felt Xena's presence, the warmth of her body coming closer as she leaned over the pallet and her darkened profile came into Gabrielle's limited view. "Do me a favor?"

Her throat hurt too. Gabrielle merely nodded in agreement, and waited.

"Let's not talk about today until tomorrow."

After a moment, Gabrielle nodded again, her head hurting so much not talking was actually a very appealing idea. She remembered what happened up to a point, that point being Xena's sudden attack of the campsite by herself that had sent them all running.

She remembered finding Xena's tall form, and fighting to get to her side.

She remembered seeing the child, being boiled.

Then she remembered hearing a crack, then... then nothing. Obviously, she'd gotten hurt in the fight. She looked up at Xena, remembering what had happened before that and she was abruptly glad there wouldn't be any talk of today until tomorrow.

Maybe tomorrow would be so busy they couldn't talk about it then, either. Maybe Xena would forget about today, since things would surely be very hectic. "Patches okay?" She managed to rasp out, figuring that was a safe question.

"He's fine." Xena smiled. "You're gonna be fine. You just hit your face on something hard and pointed and you're eye's all swollen up."

Gabrielle nodded, since that was easier. After an awkward silence, she looked back up at Xena, the queen's pale eyes catching glints from the candlelight. "Sorry."

"Shut up."

The blond woman pressed her lips together and let her eye close. "You should send me back to the castle." She said.

"Yeah, I should." Xena agreed.

Gabrielle kept her eye closed, but she could feel the damp warmth gathering underneath her closed lids. She waited for Xena to continue, but the queen didn't seem to have anything else to say and so they just sat there together in silence, just the fluttering of the candle between them.

**

Xena leaned back in her camp chair, her long legs splayed out before her and her hands behind her head. She could hear a lot of activity outside, but for now she had no desire to go watch it. It was peaceful here inside her tent, with the brazier softly hissing, and the smell of hot wine nearby.

Next to her right leg, Gabrielle was sleeping on their pallet, one hand tangled in the quilt covering her the other lying on the top of that, it's knuckles just brushing Xena's thigh.

Xena watched her lover's face, her eyes running over the swollen bruise across her nose and still closed eyelid, but also noting the reddened state of the uninjured side indicating she'd shed some tears from it. Even in sleep, the blond woman's face was tense and as the queen watched her she could almost feel the upset in her own guts.

That annoyed her. She knew she didn't owe any apologies either for her rough speech or her inadvertent elbow but she was pissed off to find herself wanting to stop Gabrielle from being upset even though it was right that she was.

Ugh. Xena gazed plaintively at the tent roof. Love was too gods be damned complicated. She hated the dependency of it, the obligation it left her under, and the ambivalence it produced. It had no place here in the middle of a campaign.

A touch almost made her jump, before she looked down to see Gabrielle's fingers curl around her knee. She stared at the hand, thinking very hard about how that touch made her feel inside. Was it worth risking everything for that? She kept coming back to the question but now as she asked it, she suddenly felt like she was on the other side of the answer and wanting it to be yes, and not no.

Gabrielle's one good eye opened, and blinked, then tracked to her face. Without thinking, Xena reached out and stroked the uninjured side of her face, absorbing the look of simple, mute gratitude she got for it. "What am I going to do with you?"

Gabrielle shrugged faintly, then looked away.

"You know something?" Xena tapped the blond woman's chin gently with one finger. She waited for Gabrielle to look back at her. "It'd be better for both of us if I send your cute little butt back to the stronghold." She saw the reaction in the bloodshot green eye. "But if I did, I'd miss you so much I'd never be able to think straight."

Gabrielle's fingers tightened on her leg.

"How in the hell did I let that happen?" Xena wondered aloud. She sighed, and shook her head. "Anyway, listen. It was my elbow you ran into so next time, watch out, willya? I got a knot there the size of a walnut now."

Gabrielle rested her cheek on the pillow and watched the queen's face, half in shadow, half fire lit, cherishing this moment of Xena's raw humanity. "I'm sorry." She said, after a long pause. "For everything."

Xena seemed to understand what she was saying. "Me too." the pale eyes lifted. "But I'm not sending you back." She covered Gabrielle's hand with her own, and clasped it. "So we're just going to have to live with whatever happens."

Gabrielle's face eased into a tiny, hesitant smile.

"Or die with it. Whatever." The queen added, lifting their joined hands up and kissing Gabrielle's knuckles.

Footsteps approached, but the queen didn't move, not even when the polite rap came on her outer tent support. "Yeah?"

"Y'called for us, Mistress?" Brendan's voice answered.

Had she? Oh yeah. "C'mon in."

The flap opened and the men filed in, a round dozen of them. All her troop captains, who clustered near her map table and and tried not to stare at the two of them.

"Report." Xena said, in a crisp tone.

Brendan cleared his throat. "Got most of them wagons back going." He said. "Ready to head on in the mornin. Most of the stuff got patched up, lost some frillies though and whatnot torn and such."

“Good.” Xena crossed her ankles. “Send four men along with them. With any luck, they’ll meet the poor bastards I sent back the other day and they can follow after us.”

“Aye.” Her captain agreed. “Did all right for em. Men had a few dinars, picked up a thing or two to give em road coin. Bastards already taken that from em to let passage.”

Xena snorted. “Someone agree to take that kid?” She asked, after a moment. “She’s got some bad burns but with any luck she’ll last to the stronghold, at least.”

Brendan nodded, his lips compressing together. “Poor bugger.” He said. “Wagonmaster said he’d see her there. Not a word from her yet, scattered brains, I think”

“At least.” Xena said. “She might end up an idiot. May have been one to begin with.”

“I don’t think so, M... Xena.” One of the other, younger captains said unexpectedly. “She hasn’t said much, aye, but I was watching her as they took care of her before and she knows what’s up.” He glanced around diffidently. “Would have been better for her, maybe, if she hadn’t.”

“True.” The queen grunted. “Okay. Tomorrow, we’re going to take a little detour and wipe out every living thing in that cesspit I saw today.” She announced. “No sneaking, no strategy, we’re just riding in there and letting loose. Everyone understand me?”

The men nodded somberly. “Y’don’t want to just run em off?” Brendan asked, with a touch of hesitation. “Seemed more crazy than dangerous, from what them all said.”

“No.” Xena replied. “I don’t want to run them off. I want to obliterate them.” She glared at the men. “They were eating children, Brendan. I’ve been there, and done everything and if something shocks my hoary old battle scarred ass, it needs to be sent to Hades. Understand?”

Brendan nodded. ‘Aye.’

“Ugh.” The queen shuddered in remembrance. “I”m certainly not leaving them here to prey on what few poor bastards are left living in these parts. So tell everyone to sharpen their edges, and just be ready. We move out at dawn.”

“Aye.” Brendan repeated. “Will be done, Xena.” He paused. “Merchants left us some good feed. Men’ll bring in some for you.”

“Us.” Xena still had Gabrielle’s hand in hers and she squeezed it lightly. “Gabrielle worked hard to day. Bring three of everything.”

Gabrielle peeked at the men through her good eye. She could barely distinguish them in the shadows and she had to wonder what they were thinking right now about Xena, and about her, and about how everything was going. It wasn’t what they’d expected, she figured.

Wasn’t what she’d expected, in fact, and probably not what Xena expected either. But life was like that, and when she lost track of that fact she only had to think of that girl being thrown into that pot to understand that things could always, always be worse.

“That’s it. Scram.” Xena dismissed the men, and waited for them to leave before she turned her attention back to the figure on the pallet. “Any comments from you?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “Not really no.”

Xena’s eyebrows lifted. “Nothing? You think I should leave those guys alone too?”

The blond woman held her gaze for a very long moment, before she shook her head no. "That was horrible." She said. "I can't imagine anything more horrible than that was."

"Even lots of dead people?"

"Even."

"Hm." Xena mused. "YOu and I agreeing on a moral issue. I think I hear Hades having a snowball fight somewhere." She reached over and gently turned Gabrielle's head towards the light, studying her injury. Aside from the swollen eye, she'd hit her lover in the nose and that's where most of the blood had come from.

At first she'd thought she'd broken it, but now she could see the swelling had gone down, returning more of a normal shape to it. "Breathe." Xena instructed, watching Gabrielle's nostrils flare a little as she obeyed. "Stuffed up still?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle murmured. "Like I have a cold, but I don't." She blinked a little, wincing as her closed eyelid cracked open. "Ow." She reached up and touched her eye, feeling the puffy swelling. "Maybe I need armor for my head."

"Maybe." Xena leaned forward, moving her hand aside as she gently kissed the spot her elbow had smacked into. She heard Gabrielle inhale in surprise, then she felt the blond woman's hand touch her neck, fingers lightly stroking her skin. She shifted her head a little and their lips met, a sweet warmth that soothed the dark, edgy restlessness she'd felt since they'd gotten back to camp.

Yeah, it was worth it.

She lifted her head a little and looked down into Gabrielle's eyes. Then she straightened up again as she heard someone approaching the tent, and touched the blond woman's lips with the edge of her thumb. "Know what the bummer is about this whole thing?"

Gabrielle looked around the tent, at herself, then at Xena, both her pale eyebrows lifting sharply. "No." She said. "What?"

"You didn't see me get that kid out of that pot." Xena sniffed reflectively. "Damn well done, if I do say so myself." She waved in the guard peeking into the tent, having smelled his errand in the form of something roasted and tasty. "Put it on the table. I'll take care of it."

The man set the tray down, and scurried out again.

"I should go get that set up." Gabrielle started to sit up, only to find herself held in place with a casual, yet inflexible hand. "I'm okay, really Xena."

"One of these days we're going to have to get this whole 'I'm the queen and you do what I say' thing worked out." Xena ignored her protests and got up. She walked over to the tray and examined it's contents. "Damn good thing they decided not to do boiled beef, huh?" She peered around and gave Gabrielle a rakish grin. "Hungry?"

Gabrielle's face wrinkled up into a grimace. "Got any fruit?"

The queen chuckled, low and deep in her throat. "Ever tell you how much cherries look like eyeballs when you pluck them out?"

"Xena."

“Want some bread? I think that’s pretty harmless.” Xena tossed a couple things into one of the wooden bowls and came back over to the pallet. She handed Gabrielle a bit of travel bread, and waited for her to take a bite of it. “Unless I start talking about grinding bones for flour, that is.”

Gabrielle stopped chewing, and just looked at her.

Xena popped a berry into her mouth and bit into it, giving her companion a wink.

**

Dawn rose and brought a thick fog with it. The heavy gray white cloud covered the landscape, rendering it’s profile mysterious and silken. In the dim, misty light, silence reigned in the stand of trees as no breath of wind or birdsong broke it, the only motion the occasional settling of the fog that revealed a bush top, or the dark reality of a trunk before being obscured again.

The hollow at the bottom of the slope was completely covered, nothing stirred in the silent, destroyed village at it’s center and the only sound was the odd half snore and the softest of pops from a dying fire.

As the light went from twilight to dull gray, a breeze finally rose, puffing through the trees and sending the fog swirling back across the top of the rise leading in to the hollow to reveal a motionless figure on horseback, inky black in shadow and obscured by the lines of a long, heavy cloak.

A morning bird sleepily chirped.

“Go.” Xena said, remaining still as the army rushed past and around her, moving in three directions into the dell in a silent, deadly rush. There were no yells, no sounds of triumph - just the rustle of leather garments and the light thump of boots against the dew moistened earth.

It took a hundred heartbeats before they all went past her, and she placed her hands on her saddle horn and gazed thoughtfully down into the dell, cocking her head to listen as the sounds of destruction began to reach her.

“Aren’t you going to.. Um..” Gabrielle moved Patches up next to her.

“No.” Xena said quietly. “I disgraced my steel enough yesterday. This isn’t a fight. It’s the queen pronouncing sentence.”

Gabrielle pushed the hood of her cloak back, and the freshening breeze lifted her pale hair off her forehead. “Do you know if all of them down there were like that?”

“No, and I don’t care.” The queen answered. “If they weren’t doing it, they were standing by and letting it be done, and in my eyes - same thing.” She settled her cloak around her with an impatient twitch, then she looked sideways at her companion. “Thats your place down there.”

To her surprise, Gabrielle shook her head. “No.”

Xena turned in her saddle. “I thought you said...”

The blond woman played a bit with Patches bristly mane. “It’s the next little valley over.” She finally said, in a reluctant tone. “The path is just past that big rock on the ridge there, but I don’t want go.”

“Hm.” Xena faced forward again. “Yeah, with these guys here around, I’d give it a pass too.” She settled her boots a little more firmly in the stirrups. A hoarse cry sounded suddenly, cut off midway, then she heard the sound of running steps. “C’mon.. C’mon...ah.”

The distinct thwack of an ax burying itself into a human back came to her knowledgeable ears and she nodded in approval. “Nice.”

“Do you think that boy was from here?” Gabrielle asked, suddenly. “The one who shot at you?”

Xena nudged Tiger along the slope, idly examining the trees. She could see the remains, outlines only, of homes, and what might have been a fence, but it was only her sharp eyes that were able to distinguish them from the mossy bark and underbrush along the ridge. “Doubt it.”

Gabrielle followed her, trying to stir her memories of what this place had been like before. Just a neighboring town, she remembered. One her father had taken them to once, or maybe twice - for harvest festival. She remembered that, chiefly for the few moments of pleasure she and Lila had gotten from it the two of them sitting side by side watching the dancing as they shared a precious honeycake.

She remembered it being a much more innocent time and she thought she might even have been happy then. It was hard to say. With a sigh, she pulled Patches up next to Tiger and resisted the urge to rub her aching eye. “Do you maybe think he though you were from here?”

“Hm.” Xena settled back in her saddle as the fog started to thin and part, and shadows resolved into soldiers heading back towards her as the sun broke over the ridge and bathed them in light. “Interesting thought.” She waited for the first man to reach her. “Well?”

“T’is done.” The man said. “Sleeping, all of em.” He ducked his head and moved past the two women, reaching out to grab a handful of leaves and rub them along his red stained blade.

“Was good killing, your Majesty.” The second man said. “That place was evil, no mistake.” He was cleaning off a well used battle axe. “Bad things, there.”

“Bad things here, sometimes.” Xena pointed at her own chest. “C’mon, Gabrielle. Let’s see if I can get shocked two days running.” She nudged Tiger with her heels and headed down the slope. “This is confusing me.”

Gabrielle wasn’t at all sure she wanted or needed to see the village, but she followed Xena anyway. “It does?” She asked. “I mean.. Well, it confuses me, but almost everything does.”

“Men attack the wagons.” The queen said. “We track along the path they tried to run back to, and we find a kid out hunting... me, apparently.” She ticked off her fingers. “Then we track along where he came from, and we find what I thought was a guard outpost.”

“Uh huh.”

“Kill those guys, and track the path from where they are, and I find a village full of cannibals who might have been some of the guys who left with Bregos, but sure weren’t the raiders that attacked the wagons.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle murmured “That is confusing.”

“So where did the rest of the raiders go?” Xena asked. “It’s almost as if they...” She stopped speaking and fell silent, her eyes narrowing.

“As if they what?” Gabrielle moved closer to her as they cleared the trees and entered the destruction of what had once been a poor, but surviving town.

“Later.” The queen said. “Because if I’m right, I’m gonna be really pissed off.” She passed several more soldiers on their way out of the dell and she paused as she reached what had been the entrance to the village, her thoughts momentarily forgotten as her eyes fell on what was making the crude gate.

Gabrielle gasped.

“Two damn days in a row.” Xena eased the now unsettled Tiger past the bone gateway, the long, algae covered bones lashed together with what looked like gut and probably was. She could see bodies in the leaf litter, and she passed them right by as she saw a cluster of her men ahead of them.

The fight was definitely over. There were dead men everywhere, but Xena could hardly imagine the stench being any worse even if they’d already started to decay. A glance behind her confirmed her suspicion that Gabrielle wasn’t dealing with the sights very well, and she regretted her decision to investigate in person. “Wanna go back?”

Gabrielle had one hand clamped firmly over her mouth and she was green where she wasn’t pale. She shook her head no, regardless of that, and guided Patches right up next to Tiger’s tall form.

“Xena!” Brendan’s voice carried over to her. “Found something over here!”

“Yeah yeah.” Xena dismounted and strode over to the crowd of men, which parted as she approached. “Whatever it is, make it snappy because I think we’ve got other pr..” She stopped in mid word as she reached the front of the crowd and saw what her men were clustered around.

She blinked, then she turned instinctively and grabbed Gabrielle, covering her eyes as she pulled the blond woman against her and tucked her head against her shoulder. “Make that three times in two days.” She said, briefly. “I’m on a roll. Hope it stops.”

In the center of the ring there was a pile of human bodies, most missing chunks in various spots. The stench was unspeakable and even Xena, who had seen worse on the battlefield, came close to chucking her breakfast. “Start a fire.” She managed to get out. “Burn everything.”

“Already started.” Brendan’s face was pale under its weathering.

The bodies had been sorted in rough piles and some were pulled near the firepit where a smoke cover had been placed. “Guess they were packing to leave.” Xena glanced down at Gabrielle, who was showing no signs at all of resisting her benign stranglehold. “Everything else done here?”

“Aye.” Brendan pressed his sleeve over his mouth as a gust of wind stirred the stench. “Found a few as might have been hangers on with Bregos, but not fighting types.”

Xena nodded. “Let’s get finished up here. I’ve got a feeling this isn’t what it seems.” She glanced around. “Whatever that is. Things don’t add up.” She tucked her cloak around Gabrielle. “Move out soon as you can.”

The soldiers looked more than glad to comply and they broke up rapidly, moving away from the charnel pit as fast as they could. The queen took one more long look at the pile, then she turned and started back to where the horses were, releasing Gabrielle to face forward as she turned her back on the bodies. “All right.”

Gabrielle raked her hair from her eyes and exhaled. “Ugh.” She leaned forward as they climbed up the slight slope. “I can’t wait to get out of here.”

“Me too.” Xena glanced around furtively, to make sure no one was listening.

“Xena, how could this happen?” The blond woman asked, as they reached their patiently waiting mounts. “I know it was a tough winter, but that wasn’t just lack of food, for the sake of the gods there were sheep and goats out here they could have caught or rabbits, or..”

“People are easier to catch than fish.” Xena said. “But yeah, takes more than a little tummy rumbling to make you go over the edge that way.” She gathered up Tiger’s reins and prepared to get on his back.

"It was terrible. That was like they were sorting out lambchops by that pit." Gabrielle shook her head. "I couldn't hardly believe it."

Xena stopped. "You saw that?"

"Just before you grabbed me, yeah." Gabrielle put her foot in the stirrup and pulled herself up on Patches back. "Ugh."

"Oh." The queen seemed embarrassed. "Sorry, I was... I thought I'd.."

"Yeah, it was really sweet of you but kinda too late."

Xena cleared her throat and hoisted herself up into her saddle. "Well, why in Hades did you let me do that then?" She asked. "If you'd already seen the damn thing?"

Gabrielle settled herself and eyed Xena. "Uh, Xena?" She guided her pony closer. "If you really think I mind having my face pressed up against your breasts, we need to talk."

Caught in the act of taking a drink of water, Xena responded by spitting the mouthful of it over Tiger's head, making the stallion shy in startlement. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and turned her head to glare at her companion, both eyebrows hiking right up to her hairline. "You little muskrat."

Gabrielle tilted her head and grinned, a little lopsidedly due to her bruises. She laid a hand on Xena's knee and then, leaned forward and kissed it, despite the mud liberally coating her leggings. "Thanks." She said. "It's so horrible here I have to keep thinking about what's good in my life to get me through it and you're the best part of that."

Xena blinked back at her, caught very offguard. She looked up as she heard the army coming back towards them, and for a moment, put out her hand and cupped Gabrielle's cheek. "Likewise." She said, then she gathered up her reins and clicked her tongue at Tiger, starting him forward as the men filed out from between the trees.

Behind them, a soft crackle was growing into a roar and the fog on the ground was being replaced by smoke billowing through the trees. Brendan rode up next to Xena, turning his head to spit on the ground. "Bastards."

"Mm."

"Think there's more around, then, Xena?" The troop captain asked. "Go look around for em, we could."

"No." The queen shook her head. "Soon as everyone's out of there, we ride for the pass. No stopping."

"Xena?"

Pale blue eyes fixed on him. "Did I start speaking Syrian and didn't realize it?" Xena said. "What part of that didn't you understand, old man?"

"Aye, I'll get the men moving." Brendan turned his horse and headed back the way they'd come. He let out a shrill whistle and started yelling orders as the men caught up with him. "Let's go! Let's go! Move!"

Xena rewrapped her waterskin around her saddlehorn. "Brendan!" She yelled back over her shoulder. "I'm going to get the camp moving. Meet you on the road."

"Xena!"

“C’mon.” The queen motioned Gabrielle to follow her. “Let’s ride.” She urged Tiger into a gallop, hearing Patches smaller hooves rapidly tattoo as he chased after them. “Places to go.. People to terrorize.. “ XEna muttered under her breath. “Let’s just hope I’m wrong and we’re not on the ugly end of that.”

**

Part 7

Xena sat on Tiger’s back, resting her elbows on her saddlebow as she waited impatiently for the motion to begin behind her. Ahead of where she was, she could see the end of the valley leading down past the edges of her realm, and though the lands between were empty and quiet, her senses were tingling like spiders were crawling over her and she really really really wasn’t enjoying it.

To one side, Patches was cropping grass calmly, his rider wandering among the bushes apparently in search of something. Xena kept her companion in her peripheral vision, but left her to her ramblings as she contained herself from turning around and yelling at the camp.

The sun was climbing overhead, and she wanted to be out of their boundaries before it started slanting west, to give them enough time to send out scouts and plan a safe route before dark fell.

Ah. She heard the creak of wheels moving at last. With a grunt, she straightened up and half turned, seeing the camp moving out behind her along the rutted path. “Hey, muskrat!” She called out. “Get your butt on the scruffy runt and move it!”

Gabrielle came trotting out of the brush immediately, stuffing something inside the pouch connected to her belt. “Okay, coming.”

“Hey! Not in front of the men!” Xena turned back around and resettled her seat.

“What?”

The queen snickered to herself. “Never mind.” She waited for Gabrielle to scramble back into Patches saddle, then she neatly turned Tiger and started down off the little rise she’d been perched on to take her place at the front of the army. “What’dja find?”

“Hm?” Gabrielle came up next to her, still fiddling with her pouch and trying not to steer her pony into Tiger’s way. “Oh, just some herbs.” She got herself settled and faced forward. “Where are we going?”

“To Hades.”

The blond woman digested this in silence. “Are we going down the River Styx to get there?” She asked. “That’s going to be tough on the horses, isn’t it?” She asked, after a brief moment of reflection.

Xena was glad of the distraction. “Make a damn good story won’t it?” She asked. “You going to make one about those kid eaters?”

“Can I leave out getting punched in the nose?” Gabrielle rubbed her face in reflex, wincing at the tenderness. She could once again see out of both eyes, but her breathing was still stuffy, and everything still hurt. “And I missed the really good part.. You’ll have to tell me about it.”

Xena angled Tiger into the lead and urged him into a rambling walk. She was glad they were moving, but wished they’d already cleared the somewhat desolate valley and exited to the other side. She already knew what she had here, what she was interested in was what she didn’t have and that was knowledge about what was going on outside her borders.

A motion far ahead caught her eye, and she tilted her head back, watching tiny specks in the air drift in a lazy circle. It was too distant for her to identify what kind of birds they were, but the pattern didn't look like hunting to her.

So. As she rode, Xena started to check her armor out, snugging tighter the buckles that held it across her body, and reseating her various daggers in their sheaths. She glanced at Gabrielle, noting the staff tucked under her knee strapped lengthwise across the pony's body.

Useless, mostly. Xena knew that. But she appreciated the thought and the care Gabrielle took in carrying the big old thing everywhere. She ran her experienced eye over her companion's armor, then returned her attention to the ground head of them.

Brendan rode up next to her. "Moving in good order, Xena."

"Finally." The queen retorted. "If I didn't know better, I'd have thought I had half the realm's useless windbag nobles back there."

"Give em a bit to get used to the pace." Her captain advised. "Boys can handle it, them cooks and such never had to yet."

"Yeah yeah." Xena lifted her waterskin and took a sip of the contents, pausing with the spout to her lips and her mouth full. Slowly, she turned her head to one side and looked at Gabrielle, who was returning her gaze innocently. The queen swallowed, then she put the skin back onto its ring. "You." She licked her lips. "Are so toast."

"You don't like it?" Gabrielle was trying hard not to smirk.

Xena licked her lips again, and shook her head, wondering where in the Hades the little stinker had gotten milk out in the half wilds. There was also a touch of sweetness in it, some of her jealously hoarded honey, she suspected. "Wench."

She could taste the richness of it on her tongue, and it turned her temper a bit. She relaxed into her saddle and patted Tiger's shoulder, looking ahead to what they might find down range. "These bastards we found?" She turned her attention to Brendan. "I got a theory."

The old soldier cocked his head, his reins tucked into one hand and his posture slouched in the ease of a long time horseman. "Thought they were t'bother us." He said. "Bregos ain't got enough fellers to come up on us in real battle, so he sent them to the fringes."

"Mm." The queen grunted. "That's all probably true.. But it's not what I think is going on." She turned in her saddle as a shout went up from the rear. "Now what?"

Brendan whirled, and stood in his stirrups. "Ah, see there!" He pointed, where a group of men were swarming out of the trees to attack the army's flank. "Bastards.. See?" He let out a yell. "Get em boys!" He dropped down into the saddle and took off. "After em!"

Xena stood in her own stirrups, knowing she was too far for the archers she could see in the trees to hit her. "Stay behind me." She ordered Gabrielle, as she watched the action, the small attack group fanning out to take cover behind the heavy scrub and pepper her troops and the defenseless support crew with arrows.

Two of the drovers went down, tumbling off the seats of the wagons with hoarse cries, and Xena suddenly doubted her decision to turn her back on the obviously troubled valley and push on to the unknown spaces pulling her in the other direction.

Gabrielle for once listened, staying close to Xena's side with one hand resting on the queen's calf. "Oh!" She saw the drover hit and gasped. "But he's not fighting with them!" She said. "Xena! Why would they do that? He's just..."

"Yeah. So stay behind me because you're a lot more just than he was." Xena drew her sword, her agitation traveling through her knees and making Tiger shift his big feet nervously. "Everyone get down off the wagons!" She yelled at the top of her voice. "Get behind em!"

The drivers wasted no time obeying, scrambling off the seats and diving behind the big rolling transports. Xena saw the arrows shift their targets, and she cursed, sending Tiger into a gallop. "Stick with me, Gabrielle!"

"Duh!" Gabrielle was doing her best, swinging Patches out to the far side of the queen and urging him to keep up. "C'mon Patches.. You don't want to get hit by one of those things!" She kept in Tiger's shadow, unable to see what was going on until she passed one of the wagon teams, and then just as suddenly Xena was stopping, and throwing herself off her horse and to the ground.

Confused, Gabrielle swerved and went around to the other side of the wagon to give Patches some shelter, as she kept her head down and looked frantically over the back of the team to see what the queen was doing.

What the queen was doing was standing there in a hail of arrows, her sword moving so fast Gabrielle couldn't see it, just a blur as she knocked the missiles away from the animals. She could just see sharp profile, jaw clenched as Xena shifted to one side to catch one arrow on her blade, and reach out to grab another from thin air coming from the opposite direction.

It was amazing. It was incredible, and what was more so was that Xena was doing that, risking her life to protect the horses behind her.

"Fire!" Brendan had a archer line ready and they returned a volley, then reloaded as a second line, tucked behind brush of their own, let fly. "Fire!"

After a few minutes, the arrows tapered off, and as they did, a legion of horsemen bolted from behind the wagons and thundered towards the ambushers, firing from close held crossbows as they stayed low on their horses necks.

Their targets were gone, though, the bushes and trees now empty with nothing but impudently waving leaves to mark where the ambushers had been.

Xena whistled, and as Tiger galloped over she caught hold of his saddle and pulled herself up in one easy, fluid motion as she seated her sword in its sheath and rode down the supply line. "All right.. Get out! Get ready to move!" She commanded. "Put the bodies in the wagons and lets go!"

Gabrielle grabbed Patches reins and emerged cautiously from behind the big wheels, watching the rest of the workers do the same. One of the men straightened slowly and shook his head, not realizing she was behind him.

"B'gods, did you see that, Helfan?" He slapped his neighbor on the arm. "Did you see her? Like nothing those arrows! Saved the horses!! The horses! Did you see it?"

"Hush, Lars." The man said. "We all saw it. Keep your mouth quiet, there's ears listening."

The man turned, and saw Gabrielle standing there. His eyes widened. "Meaning no ill to the queen, mind!" He stammered. "Honest!"

Gabrielle smiled at him. "I know." She said. "I saw it too.. It was amazing." She said. "I couldn't even see her sword, it was moving so fast." Her hand lifted, and she stroked the nearer cart horses' neck. "I'm not sure what was more incredible.. That, or her pulling that poor girl from the pot in that village.. That was pretty awesome too."

"Mm." The carters were slowly gathering around her. "We heard a that." Lars said. "Heard she faced all them by herself."

Gabrielle nodded. "She did. I saw it." She craned her neck, to keep Xena in view. "She was in a tree, watching to see what they were doing, and when she saw what was happening she just jumped right out of it into the whole lot of them and started fighting."

"Gabrielle!" Xena's voice rose over the murmuring of the drivers. "Get your butt over here!"

"Sorry. Gotta go." Gabrielle got up onto Patches' back. "But you know what? I think you guys should be careful. Those men out there don't care about brave people." She clicked her tongue and steered Patches around the wagon, heading for Xena's tall form.

She reached the queen just as Brendan did, going around to Xena's left. "Okay, I'm here."

"Xena, I'll take a squad and go after those bastards." Brendan said. "Sneaking up behind us.. Scared fish."

"No." Xena shook her head. "Get the men in, and let's get moving again towards the cut."

"But.."

"Just do it." Xena snapped. "We're wasting time here. They're not trying to harass us.. They're trying to draw us off course."

Brendan moved his horse closer. "Xena, we can't just let those bastards go. They'll be back shooting at us." He lowered his voice. "Where's the sense in it?"

"Brendan."

"Xena." The old captain's face was serious. He moved closer to the queen, closer to the danger he knew was building behind those ice blue eyes. "We can't leave em behind us."

Gabrielle saw Xena's eyes narrow and she quickly ducked under Tiger's neck, pushing Patches between her queen and her queen's very much in danger captain. "Wait. Brendan." She said. "I think Xena's right."

It was a ludicrous bit of interference, and maybe even Gabrielle knew that. Brendan stared down at her, his lips twitching as he fought to keep back the words to answer her with.

"I think they're trying to stop us from going. I think they're trying to distract us." Gabrielle spoke quickly. "They want us to follow them."

Brendan looked at her for a long moment, then he looked over at Xena. Xena was seated on Tiger's back gazing down at Gabrielle as though she were a new species of rabbit that had stood up and started talking. "How in the Hades do you know that?" The queen asked. "I didn't tell you what I was thinking." She paused. "Did I?"

"It just makes sense." Gabrielle didn't stop to think about what she was saying. "It's like.. All the stuff that's happened... like the attack on the convoy. They didn't take stuff, they just made it a pain for us to deal with, and then lead us off to that village... and now they come out of those bushes and shoot at our wagons to slow us down and then run away.. Like they want us to follow them."

It was a long speech. Brendan scratched his jaw at the end of it, and looked at Xena.

“Exactly.” Xena closed her jaw after the word, with a slight clicking sound as her teeth hit.

The captain nodded. “Sense it is, then.” He raised his fist, clenched, to his chest and turned, then he started towards the gathering archers, who were picking up fallen shafts and readying themselves to move off after the ambushers. “Form up!” He yelled across the field. “Form up and move out!”

Xena watched him go, before she turned and looked at Gabrielle. “I talked in my sleep.”

“Um..” Gabrielle ran her hand through her hair. “Well, you do sometimes but not about that.” She confessed. “At least I think you’re asleep.” She added, in an undertone.

Xena’s eyebrow hiked. “Save that for later.” She said. “Right now.. How did you know?” She leaned over and went eye to eye with her companion. “Spill it.”

The blond woman started to answer, then paused to think. Finally she just shrugged. “I don’t know.. It just made sense to me. Like a story.”

“Like a story.” The queen exhaled in frustration. “Save that for later too.” She pulled Tiger around in a tight circle. “Let’s go before you decide you’re an oracle and I have to start paying you for commentary.” She let out a yell, and pointed towards the end of the valley. “MOVE!”

**

They were halfway down the valley before the attack came. Xena sensed it before it happened, and she turned her horse and stood in her stirrups, letting out a piercing whistle and throwing her fist in the air in warning.

The army reacted without hesitation this time, the horsemen racing to circle the supply wagons as the archers swiftly found cover in the hillocks and boulders the path wandered through, their heads turning to spot where the attack was coming from.

Xena knew. She sat deep into her saddle and drove Tiger towards the jumble of rocks they’d just passed. A volley of arrows arched from it, going over the line of bowmen in a wide arc. Xena’s men returned fire, but there was nothing visible to fire at, as the rocks provided an excellent cover.

Gabrielle hesitated, then she chose prudence and urged Patches down the protected side of the wagons, keeping her head down but not far enough that Xena was out of her side vision. The ground before the rocky patch was loose gravel and steep, and as she watched another withering rain of arrows came out of it.

“Stay down.” The blond woman said, as she passed the biggest of the wagons, pulling Patches up as she stayed just behind the backboard and put her hands on it, peering over the wood as the motion around her became uncertain and chaotic.

An arrow got a soldier in the throat, and he reeled backwards, stumbling into the wagon and turning, crying out hoarsely as he pulled at the shaft buried deep inside his neck. Another arrow sped after him, thunking into the wagon wheel not far from Gabrielle’s hand.

Her eyes were drawn to the shaft, and she blinked at the feathers fastened to it, a flash of memory bringing to mind a candlelit scene of terror and fascination where a similar arrow, with much the same feathers had protruded from the bloodstained skin of Xena’s back.

A shock to her eyes. A shock to her senses, to be drawn into Xena's very personal need that way, to cross a line so quickly, and in such a pivotal moment when her own departure from the stronghold had been whisper close; a caprice of the Fates that made her shake her head again just to think of it.

A defining moment for both of them, it had turned out. She could still smell the sharp copper mixed with spice and feel the pressure of her hand around the dagger poised at Xena's back as she came to terms with where her heart was leading her.

She'd never looked back. "Xena! Watch it!" Gabrielle let out a yell, her eyes widening as she watched Xena knock aside two shafts as a third caught a bit of her hair, carrying it into the wind. She saw the queen gracefully duck her head to one side, then her hand whipped across her body, a sparkling item flickering from it towards the rocky hideout.

A hoarse yell sounded. Xena smiled, and glanced around, spotting Gabrielle behind her wagon and giving her a big smile of approval. "Good girl!" She yelled, as she continued down the line. "Keep moving! Don't stop! Get those wagons moving again!"

Uh oh. Gabrielle saw the eyes of the men widen. Quickly, she reached out and pulled the arrow from the wood, tugging hard to remove the barbs before she tucked it into her saddlebag. She moved away from the wagon as the drivers scrambled to grab the horses headstalls, keeping behind the carts as they started to move them.

It was going against the grain of the soldiers, Gabrielle realized, since Xena was asking them to run from a fight. She eased between two of the wagons and followed the queen, who was urging the troops to abandon their positions and head up the road.

"Crazed!" One of the men shook his head. "Somethin's gone wrong with her maj, it's the truth."

Gabrielle hesitated, then she sped after Xena, hoping she was a small enough target to be ignored by their attackers. She evaded several of the soldiers moving back, firing their arrows into the rocks as they returned a volley that arched towards her, some whirring dangerously close.

"Gabrielle, get down!" Brendan was galloping towards her, his sword swinging in his hand. "Hurry!"

The blond woman saw Xena's head turn at the words, and one look at her expression alerted Gabrielle to the fact she was in real danger. She turned Patches and angled him back towards the wagons, but even as he shifted direction she felt a hot fire sear across the back of her neck, and she lunged forward with a gasp, nearly throwing her pony offbalance.

Two impacts on her side nearly knocked her off his back right after that, and she felt herself loosing her grip on the reins just as the thunder of hooves echoed loudly in her ears and she was yanked right out of Patches saddle up into the air.

Painful and very disorienting. Gabrielle scrabbled around with her hands just as she landed on her stomach with her head thumping against a moving, hair covered shoulder. She felt a grip relax on her belt just before she was spanked sharply on the butt, making her yelp in surprise.

"Move!" Xena's voice was right above her. "Just keep moving! I'll take care of the damn arrows!"

Oh boy. Gabrielle just held on, grimacing as Tiger's stride jarred her body with every step. Sitting on horses was one thing, laying down across their shoulders was something else entirely, and not at all comfortable. "Xe.."

"SH!" Xena spanked her again. "Don't you damn move!"

Gabrielle could hear something passing over her head, a whirring sound that was almost like birds wings, accompanied by soft pings and thwacks and the occasional sound of splitting wood.

Arrows? She decided staying very still was a good idea. "Sorry!"

Xena didn't have time to debate her lover's relative merits. She had one hand holding the blond woman down and the other was fully occupied in deflecting a hail of arrows, which she'd been successful in so far though her shoulders were beginning to ache a little. "Pull back!" She ordered the soldiers in front of her. "Get your asses moving down the road before I filet them!"

The men weren't happy about turning their backs on the bowmen. Xena didn't really blame them, but someone had to be the queen, and it apparently was her turn this lifetime. "Go! Go!" She booted one man in the shoulder, as he hesitated. "Don't trust me?"

The man backed away, still firing his crossbow, before he finally turned and headed after the wagons which were trundling into motion, moving past the rocks and towards the end of the valley. The horsemen were already circling around the back of the wagons, putting their beasts on the far side of the wood as the drivers hurried the animals forward.

The arrows kept flying. Xena knew she couldn't deflect them forever, so she decided on a more direct approach. She tightened her knees around Tiger and directed him straight for the rocks, letting out a wild yell as she spurred him into a gallop.

Crazy, maybe. Xena ducked as an arrow came flying out from near the top of the rocks and came close to hitting her. One more volley came at them, a thicket of barbed missiles that ripped past her, some bouncing off her armor others scraping past the skin on her bare, muscular arms as she swept her blade in a tight circle.

Tiger's big hooves scattered the loose rock, and he lunged up the slope to the boulders, tossing his head as Xena clamped her legs down and leaned forward, searching the rocks intently as they bolted forward, almost reaching the rocks before she heard the sounds of running feet, and snapping branches.

Follow them? A reckless laugh bubbled up from Xena's darker side, and she urged her mount up the last of the slope, intent on chasing down the ambushers until she heard a faint gasp from the figure laying in front of her saddle, and better sense took over.

And arrow nearly reinforced that. Xena only just barely deflected it, as she turned Tiger's head and started back down the slope, to follow the last of the army moving past.

"Xena!" Brendan's voice sounded a warning, but Tiger's hooves slid in the loose stones and she dared not make a fast move, least she unbalance the horse and send them all helpless to the ground. Instead she ducked her head and squared herself over her saddle, protecting the animal's head and her mostly helpless cargo.

A sharp, solid thwack nearly sent her right over onto the stallion's neck, and she sent a silent thanks to her new armorer, whose work had probably just saved her back if not her ass. She turned her head to see a big man standing in the clear, raising his bow for another shot at her with an attitude of supreme insolence.

Taunting her.

Xena almost turned her horse and headed after him, but after a moment she released her hand off Gabrielle's belt and drew her dagger instead, whipping it across her body with a twisting wrench, making him duck quickly out of the way and dive behind a boulder. "Bastard."

Brendan rode up next to her. “Xena, you all right?” He sidestepped his horse and she rode forward, the hail of arrows momentarily abating.

The queen reached behind her and pulled the arrow out of her back, examining the tip with a sour eye. It was stained black, and she didn’t think it was with charcoal. She put it to her nose, sniffing delicately and finding herself relieved the scent was acrid but with no hint of copper. “Yeah.” She indicated the road. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Y’dont’ want to just clear em out?” Brendan asked, in a quiet tone. “Leaving em behind us to take pot shots.. Xena.” He glanced behind them, as they put distance between themselves and the rocks. “That one, that last, he was aiming for ye.”

“Wlth poison.” The queen agreed. “Just the thing to piss me off and make me chase after him, huh?”

Brendan sighed, and shook his head.

“Leave em.” Xena tapped Gabrielle on the shoulder. “Wanna get up now?”

Gabrielle slowly lifted her head, which was crimson with blood from hanging downwards. “I”m kinda dizzy.”

“Yeah, but I love you anyway.” Xena hauled her upright, as they caught up with the rear of the army. “Let’s go find that runt of yours.” She said. “And go find more trouble to get into. Sound like fun?”

“Um...”

“Thought you’d think so. Next time keep your butt behind the wagons.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle replied.

Xena exhaled, looking around with a wry expression. “Why don’t I believe that for a minute?”

“Um.”

“Yeah. Um this.”

**

Xena felt a sense of anticipation building as she approached the end of the valley, glad enough to be leaving the troublesome scrub behind her with it’s assortment of disgusting residents and cowardly ambushers.

The army had salved their egos by perching bowmen in the back of the last wagon, their bows trained on the road behind them to discourage anyone from attempting to come after them. So far it had worked, and they’d been left to travel the road in peace.

The end of the valley was thickly forested, and took a dogleg to the right before it sloped downward as though saving the view of what was beyond it tantalizingly until the last moment. Xena impatiently wanted to get there and see it, her nerves were standing on end, and the instinct that was driving her towards the unknown was getting more and more intense.

It made her want to ride around the army and lash out at them to hurry, a sense of urgency churning every fiber of her being.

“Xena?”

Speaking of churning. “Yes?” Xena schooled herself to patience and regarded her companion. “How’s your neck?” She eyed the neat bandage just visible under Gabrielle’s pale hair.

"It's okay." Gabrielle refrained, just, from reaching up to mess with the bandage. "It burns..feels like I touched a hot coal to that spot."

"No it doesn't."

Gabrielle looked up at her. "Do you know what that feels like?"

The queen nodded, but didn't elaborate. "So did you want something, or were you just practicing saying my name for your story?"

Gabrielle frowned, then her expression cleared. "Oh yeah." She said. "What's past that bend there?" She shifted in her saddle, easing her knees forward a little. Her chest and belly were still aching and the arrow burn was really bothering her, but she held her tongue about it, not wanting to irritate Xena further.

"Trouble." Xena replied succinctly.

How did Xena know that? Gabrielle leaned forward, resting her weight on her saddlebow to give her back end a little rest. Everything had been quiet since the last attack, and the army had settled down to it's marching and everyone was starting to relax again. She could hear casual talk around her and in the lead wagon, some of the cooks were making trail sandwiches to pass around.

And yet, Xena thought they were in trouble.

Gabrielle watched the queen from the corner of her eye. Xena was, in fact, acting a little nervous. She had resettled her sword a few times, and was fidgeting with Tiger's reins, her body posture tense and her eyes watchful.

Was it really dangerous, or was Xena just overreacting? She knew the queen thought a lot about what had happened to them the last time, when she'd led not an army, but a column of her men into a trap and almost gotten them all killed.

Well. Gabrielle pursed her lips. Almost gotten herself killed getting them all out alive, really. Xena had stood her ground and fought the ambushers, realizing almost too late it wasn't the men they were after, it was her alone.

Bregos had wanted her dead. Xena had admitted to her much later that she'd come close to welcoming it, since she'd been so stupid in her own eyes as to walk into the snare the way she had. It would have been a fitting end to her life, she reckoned.

Gabrielle reckoned not. "If trouble is that way, why are we going towards it?"

At first she thought Xena was going to give her a sarcastic answer. She did that often, but most often when she didn't have a really good answer to whatever Gabrielle was asking. But Xena leaned back and hooked one leg over her saddlehorn, taking up her waterskin and sipping from it thoughtfully before she answered.

That meant, Gabrielle knew, that she'd get a serious answer. She liked that. She liked when Xena took her seriously, since so very few other people did.

"If we ignore it." The queen said. "And either go back to the stronghold, or go the other way, the trouble'll still be out here."

Well, that certainly made sense. "Right." Gabrielle nodded. "But maybe it'll go the other way."

Xena smiled, grimly. “Gabrielle, listen to me.” She said. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my hoary old age it’s that you never, never turn your back on trouble.” She tilted her head and regarded her companion. “It never goes the other direction. Specially not around me.”

That also made sense. “You’re not old.” Gabrielle said. “I don’t know why you say that all the time.”

Xena chuckled softly, unhooking her leg and straightening back up again in her saddle. From the corner of her eye she caught sight of members of her personal guard inching up on either side, their attitudes studied and casual as they army approached the tight bend ahead.

Everyone fell silent, the sound of the horses hooves on the rough, rocky path loud and echoing and the creak of the wagon wheels grating on the ears. Gabrielle began to feel a little nervous, and she eased closer to Xena’s side, sensing the rising tension around her.

Slowly, almost absently, Xena checked the daggers strapped to various parts of her body and armor, ending with a casual flip of her cloak to expose the round, beautiful round weapon set on a hook at her belt, it’s jewels winking in the afternoon light.

The soldiers around her were also making ready, stringing bows and taking hold of maces, and Gabrielle found herself breathing a little faster in reaction to it as the contrast between the nervous energy around her and the peaceful surroundings they were moving through stood out in stark contrast to each other.

Once again, she had to wonder what she was supposed to do if something bad suddenly happened to them, and they were fighting again. Would Xena have to rescue her, or get her out of the way, nothing really but an annoyance to the queen?

She hoped not. Belatedly, Gabrielle untied her big stick and managed to get it out from under her leg without dumping herself out of her saddle. She settled it across her thighs, studying the slightly scuffed, wooden surface that her fingers were curled around.

It had a nice feel, really. She could feel the carving marks under her touch, where Xena had used her breast dagger to shape a place for Gabrielle’s hand to rest, so she’d know where to hold it when she was using it to keep Xena from hitting her in the head when they practiced.

“What are you doing with that?”

The blond woman looked up. ‘Um.. Just holding it.”

Xena studied her. “Do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Don’t hit me in the ass with it.”

“I’d never do that.” Gabrielle felt better for having her stick out, since everyone else was getting ready for a fight around her. She could feel the tension rising as they moved closer and closer to the bend and just before they got there she heard the very distinctive sound of Xena drawing her sword from the sheath clipped to her back, a soft whisper that ended in a metallic rasp.

She could almost smell the metal, a rich and complicated scent that sort of reminded her a blood, a little. Which also made sense. She tightened her grip on her stick and wiggled her butt into her saddle, deciding she was ready for whatever they were going to find when they turned that last bend and saw what was past it.

They moved into the bend, and as the soldiers closed in around them they lifted their weapons and made them ready, eyes blinking behind the leather and metal helmets protecting their heads.

It occurred to her to wonder why Xena, who was the queen after all, didn't have a metal hat to protect her head also. Gabrielle looked up at her tall companion, seeing the a look of stern watchfulness take over her expression as her chin lifted and her eyes swept constantly before them with fierce intensity.

They were going towards trouble, the queen had said. Well. Gabrielle tightened her grip on her big stick and put as fierce an expression as she was capable of on her face as they turned the last corner in the path and the end of the valley was upon them.

Xena pulled Tiger to a halt, and the soldiers hastily stopped behind and beside her, staring past the queen's imposing figure to the long plain ahead of them

For a moment, nothing but the wind sounded, laying down the thick grasses near their horses feet. Then Gabrielle gently cleared her throat. "It's.. Um.." She cocked her head. "Pretty."

Xena swept her eyes from one end of the empty of any attacking army or anything else more threatening than a hunting owl river plain to the other. She didn't really know what she'd been expectiing...

Okay. That wasn't true. She'd been expecting the scene she'd seen in her dreams the last month, a valley covered with unfamiliar troops and a threat to her realm she could really sink her teeth into. The danger she'd driven her army towards for the past week, ignoring, perhaps wrongly, attacks from a known enemy in her haste to get to this unknown one.

So.

Xena let her sword rest on her shoulder, as she tasted a hint of crow on the back of her tongue. "Yeah." She said. "Not bad." Her knees tightened around Tiger's barrel and she started moving forward again. "Want me to name it after you?"

"Um.. No thanks. Not really." Gabrielle felt a little disappointed, which shocked her when she thought about it for a minute. She followed Xena as the queen led the army out of the valley and into the wide open space.

Xena snorted softly, sheathing her sword as she studied her new environment.

There was a river crossing through it, and long swaths of river grasses, topped with several shades of flowers and in the afternoon light, it was in fact quite pretty, even to her eyes. Birds were flitting over it, and there was an air of peace that surrounded them and made her very eyeteeth itch.

Damn it.

**

Xena sat on a rock at the edge of the river, watching the sun set. Behind her, in a clearing the army was setting up camp for the night in a somewhat dour and grumpy manner that reflected her own mood fairly well.

Tomorrow morning they'd ford the river, no small task, and then continue on across the lands on the far side towards a rolling range of hills on the horizon. It was quiet, and wild feeling here, and Xena felt that the land hadn't been farmed or inhabited for a long time, bringing the obvious question to her mind of why not?

Why not? The river was broad, and thick with fish, strings of which were laying by the cookfire waiting to feed her army. The land was fertile, and the scrub rockiness of the previous valley was nowhere to be seen.

Why scratch for a living with some scraggly sheep when you could plant a good crop here? Xena scratched her nose, feeling a touch bewildered. She turned her head as Brendan walked up to her, brushing his hands off on his leggings. "Why the Hades aren't there any farms here?"

Brendan looked around, as though appreciating the surroundings for the first time. "Good land." He agreed. "Figure you never said t'come here, so nobody did." He leaned on a rock near hers. "Good pasture out there."

Xena mused on that for a moment. "Do you mean to tell me I rule over people that stupid?" She inquired.

Brendan shrugged.

The queen studied him from the corner of her eye. "Men still griping?"

Brendan shrugged again. "Tis not griping, really." He said. "Doesn't sit well to leave enemies behind us." He glanced across the river. "Men's got families back there, here we are leaving them by themsselves."

"They're safe. Those stragglers won't go near the stronghold." Xena disagreed.

The troop captain looked behind them, back towards the valley. "They could hold that passage, though, if we've got t'come back through it fast."

Xena drew her knee up and rested her elbow on it, giving him a long, steady stare. "You saying we're going to be running back here?" She asked, in a flat tone. "I don't think I appreciate that impression of my leadership, Brendan."

Brendan refused to meet her gaze. He kicked at a rock embedded in the dirt near the river and chewed on a bit of grass, the metal of his armor chiming softly as he moved.

The queen sighed, and shook her head. "Whatever." She fell silent, and after a brief wait, her captain wandered off again, since they apparently had nothing else to say to each other.

Which wasn't exactly true, but it was the end of a long day and Xena didn't really feel like dealing with touchy soldiers and disappointed expectations. She looked around, and spotted Gabrielle coming towards her, moving through the riverside grasses with a slow, deliberate stride.

Xena suspected she was trying hard not to limp. "Hey."

"Hey." The blond woman came up to her resting place, and removed her hands from behind her back, holding out a handful of wildflowers. "These are for you."

The queen took the flowers, folding her long fingers around the stems and gazing at their vibrant color thoughtfully. "What's this all about?" She asked. "Did I look like I needed a fistful of weeds or something?"

"No." Gabrielle leaned against the rock, her shoulder brushing Xena's thigh. "They were just beautiful, like you are, so I decided to pick some and give them to you, that's all." She let her head rest against the queen's side and watched the sunset glisten off the river's surface.

Xena draped her arm over her companions shoulder. "Everyone else here thinks I'm nuts, and you bring me flowers and tell me how good looking I am. What in Hades would I do without you, my friend?"

Hm?" She felt Gabrielle exhale, and heard the tiniest of snuffles from her. "Been a damn long day, hasn't it?"

The blond head nodded.

"Tired?"

Gabrielle nodded again.

"Hurting?"

A faint hesitation, then a third nod.

"Me too." Xena said. "So why don't you and I go and make each other feel better?" She ruffled Gabrielle's hair a little. "I can fix your bumps and you can tell me how wonderful I am since I've done little but screw up the last seven days and make the army think I can't do this anymore."

Gabrielle gave her a hug. "That sounds great." She admitted. "I'm really sore."

Xena was more than glad to toss off worrying about tomorrow to focus on this here and now problem beside her. She slid off her rock and encircled Gabrielle with one arm, steering her up towards the campsite and away from the wide, wind ruffled river.

The men watched her as she came back through them, with her lover and her handful of flowers and Xena herself had to wonder, really, what it was she was doing out there.

They walked to the royal tent and ducked inside together, trading the rich russet of sunset for the candlelit interior. Xena went over to the washing table and poured water from a jug into a travel mug, then stuck her handful of weeds into it.

She glanced behind her, watching Gabrielle as the blond woman went over to her small chest of belonging and dropped to her knees beside it, then leaned over onto it for a long, painful moment.

Immediately, Xena was across the tent and kneeling next to her. "Hey." She put her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders and eased her back off the chest. "C'mere muskrat.. What's wrong? I didn't think you were that banged up."

She half guided, half lifted Gabrielle up and helped her sit down on their pallet. "Lay down."

Without any resistance, the blond woman obeyed. That rattled the queen, who was expecting at least the usual token protest from her lover. She straightened out Gabrielle's limbs, then she put a hand on her thigh. "Where's it hurt the worst?"

Gabrielle laid her hand over her stomach. "Stiffened up.. I was okay when we were riding." She murmured. "But ever since we stopped... it's like I was rolled under a wagon wheel."

Xena grimaced, as she unbuckled the belt holding Gabrielle's coat of armor on. She removed it, then she unlaced the leather surcoat and eased it back. "Does it hurt when you breathe?"

"A little."

The queen peeled back the quilted shirt her lover wore under her armor and sucked in a breath as she spotted the extensive bruising underneath it. A dark, mottled stain spread from Gabrielle's hips up to her breasts, roughly the same color as the one still gracing her face and after a moment, Xena exhaled in something close to horror when she realized most of the damage had been at her own hand.

"Laying down feels a little better." Gabrielle volunteered. "Taking that belt off too, I guess."

“Yeah.” Xena hadn’t quite felt like such a complete failure in a very long time. She could remember the moment, in fact, when she’d sat down on a very cold stone floor next to a very cold, stiff body she’d once shared her innermost thoughts with.

She hadn’t been able to protect anyone close to her. But at least she hadn’t hurt him with her own hands. Ever since they’d left the stronghold she’d been doing nothing but screwing up and at some point now, she had to wonder when the army would realize it and simply turn on her.

If they hadn’t already.

Quietly, she turned and sat down on the floor of the tent, leaning back against the pallet. “Sorry about that, Gabrielle.” She murmured. “Didn’t mean to do that to you.”

There was silence behind her, but she could feel a faint, intermittent tug on her hair and then the warmth as Gabrielle’s hand curled around her shoulder.

“I know.. You were trying to save me.” Gabrielle said. “It’s not your fault. I should have stayed where you told me to.”

Xena stared across the tent, feeling very tired. “It’s always my fault.” She replied. “It has to be my fault, Gabrielle. I’m the queen.”

The warmth behind her increased suddenly, covering the back of her shoulders as she felt Gabrielle’s breath against the back of her neck. “I’ve got some herbs... I’ll give them to you. It’ll let you sleep.”

Gabrielle traced her finger down the back of Xena’s neck, breathing in the scent of her and simply enjoying the closeness. She’d been so uncomfortable all day long it was pure bliss just to lay quietly in Xena’s presence, and let the aching subside a little.

Her head hurt, and her body hurt, and her back hurt where the arrow had hit her, but hadn’t penetrated her armor. And her neck still stung, where the shaft had skimmed across it, taking a piece of her skin and some hair along too.

It had been okay when she was riding, she’d had Patches to distract her, and all the new things to look at and Xena to keep an eye on, but once she’d dismounted and had to wait for the tent to go up, it all started catching up with her.

She knew Xena was very upset at something, but she didn’t think it was her or at least, it wasn’t something she had done. She could just tell from Xena’s body posture, and the tone in her voice that her friend was hurting inside about as much as Gabrielle was and she didn’t really know what to do to fix that.

Ergo, the flowers. She knew Xena wasn’t particularly fond of flowers but she knew that the queen understood there was love behind the giving of them, and Gabrielle knew from the shifting emotion on her face when she’d taken them that the sentiment was something Xena had needed right then.

Now, Xena turned back around and rolled her over onto her back again, gently touching the sore spots on her middle. Gabrielle was glad enough to let her head rest on the pillow, so tired she wasn’t even hungry for dinner. “Are we going to have to swim across the river?”

“Yeah.” Xena answered softly. “But not for a few days.”

Gabrielle looked up at the queen’s profile, shadowed and serious in the candlelight. “I thought we were going to the other side tomorrow?”

“We were.” Xena pulled the quilted shirt closed and leaned on the pallet, studying her companion. “But I’ve got some things I want to take care of here now. So we’ll stick here until that’s done. That all right with you?”

“I thought you were in a hurry to go on.”

“Changed my mind.” The queen said. “Which probably means I’m not completely obsolete as a warlord, eh?”

Gabrielle watched her friend’s face. There was a complex combination of emotions there, but Xena was never simple. Impulsively, she reached out and laid her hand along the queen’s cheek, feeling the pressure against her skin as Xena leaned into the touch. “I love you.”

Xena’s expression softened, and a reluctant smile appeared on her face. “Even though I beat the tar out of you on a regular basis? Kinky, muskrat.”

“Not on purpose.” Gabrielle said, then her eyes dropped. “I know the difference.”

Xena took Gabrielle’s hand in hers and kissed the back of her knuckles. “Do me a favor.” She waited for the blond woman to look back up. “Stay here and relax. I’ve got to go knock some heads together and get my new plan started. Understand?”

Gabrielle briefly grinned. “No, but I’ll stay here anyway. Promise.” She said. “Will you be back soon?”

Xena snorted softly under her breath. “Maybe.” She kissed Gabrielle’s hand again and then set it down, rising and shaking herself a little. “Get some rest. You might have to be giving me herbs when I get back.” She ran her hands through her hair and ducked out the tent flap.

Gabrielle gazed after her, wriggling a little into a more comfortable spot in the pallet. “Wonder what she meant by that?”

**

Xena walked slowly through the camp, lightly slapping an arrow shaft in one hand against her leg. When she reached the center of the soldiers’ encampment she found a fallen tree and sat down on it, sorting out her thoughts as she waited for everyone to notice she was there.

It didn’t take long. After only a moment, soldiers started to turn towards her, bedding and gear forgotten in their hands as they exchanged glances with each other and word began to spread.

Xena merely waited in silence, uncomfortably aware that she’d allowed her ego to override her judgement, and risked the loyalty of the army around her by forgetting one simple principal.

Back in the stronghold, she was the queen. Out here, she was, as she’d told them point blank, just Xena and the leader of an army had to earn that position every minute. She couldn’t assume everyone would keep obeying her just because and she’d given everyone good reason to think her judgement might not be all that trustworthy.

There would be no apologies. That wasn’t in her nature, and it would only make the men more uncomfortable with her. But it was time she started acting like the field leader she imagined herself to be and talk to the soldiers as one of their own.

A crowd gathered around her, men appearing from between the trees to crouch nearby, as others sat down on the ground across from where she was perched. Xena waited for the numbers to double, then she shifted and rested her elbows on her knees, holding her stick between her hands.

Brendan appeared, and came the closest to her, kneeling down and resting his hands on his knee as he, too, waited for her to speak.

“All right.” Xena said. “Now that we’re out here, on our terms.”

A little prickle of reaction went through the men, not so much a sound, but a stirring she heard as a rustle of leather and a soft clink of mail. Looking up, she caught the expressions on the faces of the men closest to her and she realized to her bemusement that there was a willingness to believe there she hadn’t expected.

“Aye.” Brendan remarked, placidly. “Didn’t expect us to leave em.”

Xena put the end of her branch on the dirt before her boots. She quickly sketched in the valley, and the scrubland they’d just left. “Okay.” She studied her artwork, then put in a few more details. “We’ve got some time. I figured we’d be occupied once we got here, but leaving early bought us some planning space.”

The men looked at each other, obviously at a loss. They looked at Brendan, whose face was blank to avoid advertising he had no idea what Xena was talking about either.

“So.” The queen went right on. “We’ve got a day or two to send three teams back down that valley and clean up the scum.” She let her eyes flick to the watching faces. “Anyone interested?”

The relief she saw in many eyes made her nose wrinkle and she mentally kicked herself in the ass as hard as she could. “I want three teams of a score each, going here, here and here.” She indicated directions on her map. “Everyone else is going to work on the ford.” She paused. “With me.”

The men hesitated, then started to slowly nod.

“We know they have the biggest presence here.” Xena drew a circle. “They won’t be expecting us to come back.” She said. “So tonight you go back through the valley, and get down into this area before sunrise. I’d guess you’ll find them gathering there, probably to follow us out.”

“Seems like.” Brendan agreed. “We get here, they won’t see us.” He touched a spot near the end of the valley. “Should be fast.”

Xena nodded. “Assemble the three teams.” She told her captain. “Get them moving a candlemark after dark.” She instructed Brendan. “And listen, all of you.” She turned her attention back to the men. “This is just clean up. I need every one of you for what we’re going to face ahead of us. Don’t get careless.”

She waited until they all started nodding, then she stuck her stick into the ground in the middle of the drawing. “All right. The rest of you get ready to scavenge. I want every resource we can find packed in those wagons before we cross the river.”

The men dispersed, but she remained sitting there as Brendan leaned closer, studying her drawing as the light started to fade. He waited for a space to clear around the two of them, before he looked up at his queen somberly. “Xena, twas no need to do that just for some nattering.”

“Wasn’t for that.” Xena braced her elbow on her knee and rested her chin on her fist. “I just decided to pull my head out of my ass. “

To his credit, Brendan neither demurred nor looked embarrassed at her words. “Didn’t think that.”

“Sure you did. They all do.” The queen said. “Wasn’t a man in damn camp who didn’t think I’d left whatever leadership skills I ever had back in the bedroom in the castle.” She gave her captain a direct look. “So dump the act.”

Brendan blinked at her. "Been a lot of changes for all of us, Xena." He said. "No one doubts you."

"I doubt me." Xena got up, giving her shoulders a little shake to settle her armor. "And that's a dangerous thing, old man. Very dangerous." She dusted her hands off and walked off, stepping over the log on her way back towards her tent.

Brendan put his thumb down in the dirt next to her sketch, as two of the other soldiers came up beside him. "Got a chance, Ev, t'make your mark eh?" He said, in a casual tone. "Maj aint' stupid."

"Good chance." The man nodded. "Musta been the plan all along, yah?"

Brendan studied the drawing. "Yah." He agreed, without looking up. "Always was her way. Never tell everything till it needs telling." He stood up and dusted his hands off. "Let's get to moving, then. Pick your squad quick like, before her Maj changes her mind and does the job herself."

"Huh." Ev nodded. "Ain't it the truth. C'mon." He motioned to his companion. "Get them blades sharpened."

"Looking for dark tonight." The man agreed. "For sure, a good chance."

They walked away, leaving Brendan to face the setting sun, squinting quietly into it.

**

Xena paused in the entrance of her pavilion, leaning against the front support as she gazed inside. Gabrielle was curled up asleep on the pallet, still in her unbuckled armor. The queen didn't want to wake her up, but she didn't want to stay outside her tent either, so after a moment she eased inside and stepped quietly across the ground.

Safely on the other side of the tent, Xena started to unbuckle her armor, loosening the chest plate and lifting it off over her head as a gust of wind fluttered the tent flap and chilled her shoulderblades, damp with sweat where the heavy pieces had rested.

She felt a little sore, and she flexed her arms, grimacing a little over tightness of the muscles across her back. There hadn't been much fighting, she recalled, so what in...

Ah. Catching the damn arrows. She flexed her hands and turned them over, examining the scrape marks across her palms from shafts and feathers. She barely remembered the action, just a swirl of motion and her body reacting through instinct it had taken her long years to build.

Well, at least that still worked.

She unlaced her bracers and stripped them off, then she turned and sat down on the camp stool near the brazier to unbuckle her leg armor, rubbing her thumb along a closed gash she didn't remember getting. Had it been in the first fight, or the second?

With a shake of her head, the queen unlaced her boots and eased out of them, tossing them to one side as she stretched her feet out towards the fire, dressed now only in her leathers. She wanted a bath badly, but that meant getting up and splashing, so she remained where she was, reaching out for a wineskin and pulling it over in the meantime.

She sipped the early, harsh wine without really tasting it, letting her head rest back against the trunk and allowing her mind to go blank after the long, difficult day.

After a moment of quiet, though, her ears twitched as she heard a faint sound from her sleeping companion and she cocked her head towards the pallet as it was repeated. It wasn't quite a cry, and it

wasn't quite a whimper, but with a little imagination it could have been and before she really thought about it Xena was across the tent and kneeling at Gabrielle's side.

What the Hades was up with that anyway? The queen rested her elbows on the pallet. 'Where did all this nanny Xena crap come from?' She asked aloud. 'I used to step on ants. Crap, I used to step on puppies. Now I feel like I'm nursing them.'

'Oh.. Xena! No!' Gabrielle blurted, suddenly. The blond woman's hands were twitching, and her breathing was uneven, and as the queen watched, she inhaled sharply again, and the cry was repeated.

Ah. 'Hey.' Xena gently tugged Gabrielle's ear. 'No bad dreams, you punky muskrat.'

Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open in confusion, and she looked up at Xena blankly, then her expression cleared and she exhaled in relief. 'Xena.' She lifted her hand and wrapped her fingers around the queen's forearm. 'You're here.'

Xena looked right, then left, then down at herself before she looked back at Gabrielle. Her eyebrow hiked with delicious sarcasm.

'Sorry.. Of course you are.' The blond woman murmured. She scrubbed her face with one hand, her fingers shaking a little. 'Ugh. Thanks for waking me up.'

'You okay?'

After a moment, Gabrielle nodded, her lips pressing together into a thin line.

Xena knew her lover had bad dreams sometimes. Usually she'd talk about them, but sometimes she wouldn't, and she realized this was one of those times. Queen or no, she'd never been able to wiggle the explanation out of her and wasn't in the mood to try this time. She could see Gabrielle was still shaken though, so she fell back on something she had a good degree of confidence in when it came to making her feel better.

It worked well. Gabrielle crawled practically into her lap as she got up and settled on the pallet, holding out her arms and offering a hug that was very readily reciprocated.

It was hard to say, though, which one of them needed or appreciated it more. 'How are you feeling?' Xena asked, after a long moment, suspecting it might actually be her that did.

Gabrielle let her head rest against Xena's shoulder. 'Not so great.' She admitted, after a pause. 'I thought maybe if I took a nap I'd feel better but I don't think it was a good idea after all.' She touched her stomach. 'Ow.'

Xena rearranged her long limbs, climbing all the way into the pallet and cradling Gabrielle in her arms. 'Relax, muskrat. Don't move around. You got pretty banged up there.' She rested her cheek against her lover's hair. 'Most of the people I beat the crap out of do.'

'You didn't do that.' Gabrielle said. 'Stop saying that like it's your fault.' She added. 'I didn't want to be shot full of arrows out there.'

'Yeah, I know.' Xena exhaled. 'Sometimes I look at you and remember my brother, that's all.' She said. 'I know I did the right thing but seeing you here looking like my horse kicked you up and down isn't making me feel real great.'

“Mmph.” Gabrielle grunted softly, thinking about riding in the morning. Just the image made her feel sick to her stomach, and she quietly buried her face into Xena’s shoulder, taking her comfort where she could find it.

Maybe Xena would let her ride in the wagons. That seemed pretty safe. “Hey, Xena?”

“Yeeessss?”

Gabrielle hesitated, as a spike of insecurity prodded her. “Thanks for waking me up.”

“You said that already.”

“Yeah, I know.” The blond woman replied. “But it was a really bad dream, and I’m really glad you woke me up from it.” She put her arms around the queen and hugged her. “Don’t worry about the bruises. I’m sure they’ll be okay tomorrow.”

Xena’s pale blue eyes twinkled just a little. “They better be, or I’ll tie you up in a tree fork and leave ya here.” She warned. “So heal fast.”

Gabrielle looked up at her. “I will.”

“I’m not kidding.” The queen said.

“I know.”

Xena leaned over and gave her a long, passionate kiss on the lips. “Good.” She relaxed, pushing the days disappointments away for the time being. “You’d look stupid hung in a tree.”

“I know.”

“But you know what?”

“What?”

“I’d love you more than my horse anyway.”

“Wow.”

“You have no idea.”

**

Part 8

Gabrielle opened her eyes, staring ahead of her in bewilderment as she saw a stripe of bright sunlight entering the half open tent flap and heard the distinctive sounds of the camp outside.

She was lying on her side, and she turned her head quickly when she realized she was alone in the fur covered bed, her eyes searching for signs of Xena’s presence.

Ah. The queen’s armor was draped neatly over its holder, and her washing kit was there, near the basin. With a soft grunt, Gabrielle let her head drop down onto her pillow again and studied the strip of sunlight instead, incredible in its warm vivid brightness.

“Wow.” She rolled over after a minute, biting off a gasp as her body protested the motion. “Oh, ow.” It was like every inch of her body was being poked with something sharp and she pulled herself back over onto her side, as tears sprang to her eyes.

When she could open them again, she saw a waterskin perched on a stool right near her hand, with a note next to it. Her mouth was dry as a bone but she reached out for the note first, unfolding it one handed and bringing it closer to read it.

Hey. Drink what's in the bag, and keep your ass in bed or I'll spank it raw. X

Gabrielle smiled, despite her discomfort, and she tucked the note under her pillow before she reached out and took the waterskin from the stool. It gurgled, and was fairly heavy, so she rested it on the edge of the pallet while she worked the stopper out.

Obviously, Xena had arranged things to her satisfaction. Obviously, the queen expected Gabrielle to remain hanging around in bed, presumably until she felt better. Obviously she also had some inkling of how bad Gabrielle would wake up feeling.

She took a gulp from the skin, then paused as she tasted the mossy tang of herbs on her tongue. The taste wasn't unpleasant, but it wasn't entirely pleasant either, however she remembered the note so she kept drinking anyway.

It slaked her thirst, at least. As soon as she finished it, she put the stopper back in, and as soon as she'd done that, she felt a wave of reaction come over her from the herbs she'd drank on an empty stomach. It wasn't quite dizziness, it was more like when she imbibed a little too fast something a little too strong for her and the world just took a step back unexpectedly.

Strange. Not really uncomfortable, because the other thing it did was relax her body at the same time. As she sank into the mattress, her muscles went limp and the pain eased considerably and she exhaled in relief, closing her eyes in a moment of grateful love of her queen's thoughtfulness.

Of course, Xena would brush off the idea she'd been thoughtful at all, but the fact was, she was often very thoughtful especially when she thought no one was watching her.

Gabrielle opened her eyes again and watched a few dust motes float through the sunlight. What had happened? She wondered, a bit foggily. Why were they still by the river? Had Xena gotten word of more trouble back in the valley?

She listened to the sounds coming in the tent opening. Creaking, and the sound of wood being chopped were loud and clear, somewhere nearby. She could also hear men's voices, and the sound of the river nearby; everything sounding normal and almost ordinary.

It didn't sound dangerous, and it didn't sound like the army was getting ready to move either. So what had changed?

Gabrielle felt a soothing lethargy settle over her, and she only just kept her eyes from closing again. Would Xena expect her to get up and help with... whatever... was going on outside? She touched the note with her fingertips. No, she clearly wanted Gabrielle to stay in bed.

Given her herbs to make her stay in bed, in fact. Gabrielle blinked. So she guessed they weren't going anywhere too soon.

Maybe Xena had just changed her mind, she finally decided. "M'sure there's a good reason for it." Gabrielle let her eyes close, unable to hold them open any longer. "Xena's always got a good reason for e'vrything."

**

Xena turned her face to the wind, surveying the work going on before her. The supply wagons had all been drawn up together in a train, and their yokes removed. Soldiers were working with the carters to

fasten the wagons together, leaving the lead cart with its yoke intact, but adding pins and ropes to the sides of the wagons and letting them trail on the ground.

Near the river, more men were shifting boulders out of the way to clear space for the wagons to travel, and already a short stretch of poles extended into the river with bits of cloth attached to them marking the way.

The queen was moderately pleased with the progress. She could have ordered the army across the river without the preparation, but she'd learned back in the bad old days that preparing a decent ford you could get back over was a prudent precaution no matter what she'd said to Brendan to the contrary.

She wasn't much for retreating, but she'd done it when she'd had to. Always better to turn tail and kick ass the next day, than die for your ego, wasn't it?

Xena tightened her knees around Tiger's frame, and headed him off towards the river crossing. She was dressed in a sedate, for her, tunic of crimson velvet that bared her arms to the spring sunshine and she'd taken the opportunity to wash her leathers out and leave them drying in the tent.

She wondered if Gabrielle had woken up yet, and for a moment she almost turned Tiger's head around to go see. "No." She shook her head, stolidly continuing on instead. "Work first, then you can be a nanny."

Tiger shook his head and snorted.

The more she'd worked at preparing the way that morning, the more Xena had convinced herself it had been the right decision. The troops were happier, the carters were much happier, the slaves she'd brought with her weren't happy exactly, but they weren't cowering anymore, the raiders she'd sent back into the valley were presumably deliriously happy and she managed all that without letting on the whole reason she did it was she wanted her lover get a rest.

"Damn, Xena." She commented to herself. "Maybe you didn't lose it and get all stupid after all." She directed her horse over to where the wagons were and started down the line, inspecting the joins with a critical eye. "'Get that collar linked. You'll crack the wood if you dont'."

The man holding it looked up at her. "Stuck, ma'am." He held up the iron collar, with an apologetic expression. "Got the smithy comin."

Xena obligingly threw her leg over Tiger's neck and slid down off his back, landing with a light hop as she dusted her hands off. She walked over to the man and held her hand out for the part, hefting it when he timidly handed it over.

She curled her hands around the metal, then she lifted her forearms so the interlocked links were almost at chest level before she twisted them in alternate directions, her biceps standing out as she felt her body rise to the occasion, her shoulders tensing as she strained against the rust encrusted collar.

After a second, she realized two things. One, that she'd drawn a crowd with astonishing quickness, and two, that she was about to make an absolute fool out of herself.

A quick look around, told her that the second thing wasn't going to cut it, especially since she caught sight of Gabrielle's head poking inquisitively out of their tent not that far away.

Damn it. Xena closed her eyes and concentrated on her insane task, feeling an ache in her shoulders as she strained against the immovable metal, wondering why in the Hades she hadn't just waited for the gods be damned smith.

Behind her, she heard a soft sound, and her body reacted with unexpected violence, her hands going for her weapons instinctively even though she wasn't actually wearing them. With a shearing crack, the collar twisted in her grip and loosened, and she dropped it as she spun, her arms coming up to ward off the attack she'd heard coming at her.

Tiger nosed her chest bemusedly, whuffling into her skin as she let her hands drop onto his head and her hands uncurl from their tight fists. She leaned forward and looked him in his big, liquid eye. "You're lucky I like you, or you'd be dinner tonight, you big bastard."

She kept her voice low though, and gave the horse a kiss on the nose before she turned and faced the crowd again. She looked down at the now separated collar and lifted her eyebrows. "You waiting for me to put it back together too? Sorry. Only one party trick a day from the crown. It's in my declaration scroll."

The men were all staring at her, eyes wide. "Wow." The man she'd taken the metal from finally murmured. "With such strength to lead us, we will surely take what we will wherever we go." He knelt, and almost reverently picked up the thick pieces of metal, holding them carefully in his hands. "Thank you, your majesty."

Life really was just so incredibly stupid sometimes. Xena inclined her head graciously, regardless, and lifted a now aching arm to dismiss the gaping watchers. "All right, then get on with it! We don't have all moon for this!"

The men dispersed, talking amongst themselves in low, excited tones.

Xena held the pose a moment, then she let her hand drop and stifled a groan as she turned around and started heading back towards her tent. "Ow, ow ow." She uttered, as her overstrained body protested. "On second thought, I am that stupid."

The flap was once again empty, and as she tied Tiger's reins to the nearest tree, she rubbed one elbow with her opposite hand, the joint hot and already painful to the touch. 'Xena the Merciless idiot.' She muttered, under her breath.

The tent was quiet, and she poked her head inside, looking around as her eyes adjusted to the semi darkness. "Muskrat?"

"Over here." Gabrielle answered, tucked under the top set of furs with her head on her pillow.

Xena stepped inside, and let the flap close. "Get my note?"

"Uh huh."

"Drink the herbs?"

"Uh huh."

The queen walked over and sat down on one of the stools. "World's ending. It's snowing in Hades." She sighed. "And I've barely scratched the surface of people to kill and torture."

Gabrielle's brow creased. "Huh?"

Xena rested her forearms on her knees. "You did what I told you to do." She eyed her lover. "I'm expecting Aphrodite to walk in any minute asking me for tips on sex."

Gabrielle decided there was nothing really she could say to answer that.

Except. "Bet you could give her some."

Xena paused in mid motion. “How would you know?” She spluttered. “You’ve had sex with me and a sheep!”

“I never did anything with a sheep!”

“Mmm..... You talk in your sleep.”

“So do you.”

Xena drew a breath to continue the argument, then she paused, considering the relative experience level of the two of them. “Wench.”

**

Xena paused with her back to the fire, her eyes scanning the path up from the valley behind them. It was dark, quiet and empty there, with just the moon to illuminate it but her eyes had no problem making out the outlines of the rocks and the gullies between where she was and where her soldiers would be coming back from.

She wasn’t expecting to see them tonight. She’d told Brendan to make it a three day foray, and she had every confidence her old captain would take every moment of that three days to run rampant in the hills with the blood thirsty men.

That was good. He’d taken most of the really antsy ones with him and it would give them a chance to get the battle hysterics out of their systems. They’d be spectacularly successful, of course, and their confidence in the mission and in her would be restored.

Xena nodded to herself. Or they wouldn’t, and she’d have to adjust, and adapt, and move on. She walked to the perimeter of the camp, watching the guards watch her from the corners of their eyes, approving of the placement of the watch, and the orderliness of the camp.

Not surprising. She’d arranged it. She turned the corner and started back towards the center of the campsite, where most of the army was gathered around the big cookfire. The scent of cooking fish and odd soup floated in the air, and the rich tang of ale to go with it.

Nothing fancy. Xena ambled quietly up behind where the cooks were ladling out portions into wooden travel bowls and peered over one woman’s shoulder in idle interest.

“Here now, give some room, will ah!!!” The woman looked around and ended in a high pitched squeak. “Oh!”

“Hey!” Xena barked back. “Spill that and I’ll cut your hands off!”

The woman froze in place, soup dripping from her ladle, eyes huge as hens eggs. Her lip started to quiver.

“Just kidding.” Xena gave her a pleasant smile. “Carry on.” She strolled round to the other side of the cookline and went over to the big grills, only to realize she had nothing to put any food on, unless she wanted to lay the hot stuff in her cupped hands.

“Not very good planning, Xena.” She clucked her tongue. “Maybe you should order yourself beheaded.”

“Ma’am?” One of the cooks turned towards her. “Did you need something?”

Xena put her hands on her hips. “A plate.” She said.

“Plate, Majesty?” The cook repeated.

“A plate.” The queen said. “I want to sit on it, and present myself to my saucy little lover for dinner. Got one around?”

The man looked at her, then he looked around, clearly wanting to rise to the occasion. He walked over to a pile of supplies and started pulling things out of it, as two of his companions wandered over to join him. He turned and held something up. “Biggest we got, Majesty.”

Xena folded her arms over her chest and regarded him from under lowered brows. The bent and battered metal barrel cover looked like she’d ridden her horse over it for a few hours, and then been thrown off a cliff.

Several times. She wasn’t sure if she should be insulted or just laugh, and she compromised by snatching it from the cook’s hand, and without a glance to aim whipped it from her through the air with a whirring sound.

It struck a barrel, then bounced off and hit a rock, two soldiers diving out of the way as it skimmed past them and headed right for the fire, passing through it and catching its edges alight as it zoomed right back towards Xena’s head.

The queen dropped to one knee gracefully, reaching up to tap the spinning platter as it reached her, bouncing it up in the air then catching it in the center as it spun on one finger, its edges still burning off the old grease crusting them.

It was a surreally amusing moment, and Xena enjoyed it to the fullest, laughing as the platter slowed to a stop and sat on her fingertips, sputtering. She stood and looked over her shoulder at the cooks, who were standing there watching her in wide eyed astonishment. “I can work with this.”

Loud whistles greeted her words and she smirked, as she walked over and tossed the platter onto the grill. “But my hoary old ass ain’t fitting on that so put some fish on it instead and make it quick.”

She walked over to a nearby log and took a seat on it, stretching her legs out and crossing them at the ankles. The sounds of the camp rose around her again, and she felt a sense, finally, that she was settling back into this old life of hers with some sort of balance.

It felt good to be in the middle of the army. Felt good to be in the camp, surrounded by soldiers and workers instead of mincing nobles and bored guards. Felt good to be in leathers and armor rather than silks and embroidered slippers.

“Majesty?” The cooks had returned with her platter, which was now practically draped in fish and roasted tubers, with a wooden bowl of steaming soup in the center.

Xena stood up, pausing as two soldiers approached. “Yes?”

“Can we carry that for you, Xena?” The one in the lead asked, diffidently.

“Sure.” The queen said, waiting for them to take it before she turned and lead the way back towards her tent. They passed through groups of soldiers having their own dinners, and though none stood, they all acknowledged her passing and Xena drank that unstated deferment in like sweet wine.

“Wish’t we call coulda gone on the raid.” The man holding the platter nearest her said. “Lucky, them were.”

“You’ll get your chance.” Xena replied.

“Think there’s more of em out there, then?” The second man asked. “Cross the river?”

Xena's eyes swept the shadows around her as she walked. "I think there's more of something out there." She said, as they reached the tent. "And we're gonna find it." She pushed aside the flap, and glanced inside, before she gestured them to enter. "Forget about what's back there."

The men both grinned as they ducked inside. Xena looked around for a long moment before she grinned as well, and followed.

**

Gabrielle watched the flames in the brazier as they popped unevenly, having no desire to do anything else. She could hear the sounds of the camp outside, but they seemed muted, and her fingers slowly moved along the furs she was lying on in a near hypnotic fashion.

Xena had left a little while ago, and she was hoping the queen would come back soon because just having her around made Gabrielle feel better. At least then, she knew what was going on. Or.. A faint smile twitched the edges of her lips.

At least Xena knew what was going on. She licked her lips, tasting a bit of wine and herbs on them and wondering if she was hungry at all.

It didn't feel like she was. She sort of remembered drinking some soup before, but she really wasn't that sure about that. Was it soup? Or was it the herbs?

Soup had herbs in it. They didn't taste like wine, though.

Honey would taste good. Maybe Xena would find some berries to put in it. She could suck the honey off the berries and she thought her battered body could just about stand that.

The herbs were taking the edge off the pain, but she could still feel it, making her breathing shorten every time she moved and giving her a faint, nagging headache that was just enough to keep her awake and be annoying.

She didn't even want to think about stories, or remember their adventures so far. She was at that point where she was wondering if their adventures were always going to be this painful, and if they were...

She sighed.

The flap opened and Xena popped her head in, then she stepped back and two soldiers entered carrying something. They went over and put it down as the queen reappeared, turning her head to look at Gabrielle and giving her a smile.

MM. Gabrielle loved that smile. The men left, and Xena came over to the pallet, kneeling down and putting her hand on Gabrielle's head.

She could smell woodsmoke on the queen's clothes and her fingers left the furs and reached out to the linen shirt sleeve Xena was wearing. The fabric felt soft to the touch, and she liked it.

"Feel like eating?"

"No." Gabrielle answered honestly.

"Too bad." The queen said. "You're going to anyway if I have to chew everything first and spit it down your throat."

That got a reaction from her. Gabrielle turned her head and looked up at her lover, her tall frame outlined in the firelight. "Ew." She murmured. "That sounds awful."

“Probably.” Xena pushed the hair back off her forehead. “Fish might be too much but there’s some soup there you could probably swallow.”

Soup. Hm. “Could I get some milk?” Gabrielle asked, watching her face.

“Not from me you can’t.” The queen replied. “Xena the Mooceulous” doesn’t have quite the same ring to it.”

Unfortunately, Gabrielle started laughing, clutching her middle helplessly as the motion sent jolts of pain through her until Xena gathered her up in her arms and held her still, both of them still chuckling as the grip turned into a gentle hug, and then they both paused for breath.

Gabrielle exhaled. “Soup, huh?”

“Mmhm.”

“Okay.”

**

Gabrielle eased herself to an upright, seated position on the pallet, letting her feet rest on the ground as she as the ache subsided in her guts. The sun was streaking in the tent again, enticing her out of bed almost as much as her urge to bathe was.

She felt better, at any rate, and after a brief pause to gather herself, she stood up, straightening very slowly as she stretched out the cramp in her back from staying in bed for so long.

She still ached, but the pain had subsided to something she could bear without the herbs, and so she’d persuaded Xena she didn’t need them so she didn’t have to lose another whole day to that fuzzy twilight.

Perversely, she thought Xena approved of that, just from the shifting expression on her face when she’d said it, despite the fact that the queen had been dousing her with the musty tasting things the entire previous day.

So here she was. Gabrielle gingerly shuffled over to where the water basin was, dipping her hands into the water and splashing it on her face. The cool liquid felt wonderful, and she scrubbed her skin with it for a bit before she picked up a small square of linen and the bit of soap Xena had left nearby.

She carefully removed her sleep shirt, draping it over the stand that held Xena’s armor. The bruises across her chest were a bit on the scary side, and she passed the damp cloth over them quickly, moving on to her arms and shoulders since her middle was too tender to press against anyway.

She had to put the cloth down and lean against the dresser for a moment as a stretching motion nearly made her double over. “Ow.” She closed her eyes until the pain faded again. “Boy this sucks.”

After a few minutes, she sighed, then straightened up and dipped her hands on the water again, lifting them up and dousing her head with the cold liquid, grimacing a little as it soaked through her hair and chilled her scalp.

Resolutely, she added some soap and scrubbed for a minute, then she rinsed the soap out just barely making it in time to let her elbows fall the top of the dresser again as the pain became too much to bear.

“What in the Hades are you doing?”

Still leaning, Gabrielle turned her head and saw the tent opening filled with Xena's tall form, the queen's hands planted on her hips and an exasperated expression on her face. "Washing?" She answered. "Sorta."

"Sorta." Xena walked over and joined her at the dresser. "You look like you're about to fall over."

"It hurts." Gabrielle admitted. "But so did lying there." She slowly pushed herself upright again, inhaling a little as a breeze from the open flap chilled her bare, damp skin. "I wanted to go see what you were doing."

Xena was in something of a quandary. As a healer, she knew she should dump her cute lover back into bed and make her stay here. However, since she'd spent her own amount of time hurt and she knew she'd never try to keep herself in bed it was hard for her to be too pissed off at the little scamp. "Oh you did, did you?" She reached out and grabbed a length of linen and started drying Gabrielle off. "Gonna go out there like this?"

"Well, I figured I'd dry off first.. Oh. You mean naked." Gabrielle belatedly got the joke. "Um.. No, no I wasn't."

"Too bad." The queen ruffled her lover's damp blond hair. "But since you're up, let's get a shirt on you and I'll show you what I've been doing and you can tell me how clever I am."

"Okay." Gabrielle's expression brightened. She took the linen as Xena went to their clothing press and opened it, rooting around inside it. "Is Brendan back yet?"

"No." Xena selected a light, loose tunic and returned with it. "Tomorrow. So you better be ready to ride by then, muskrat." She eased the shirt over Gabrielle's head, and helped her get her arms through the sleeves. "Cause we gotta go."

"Where are we going?" Gabrielle pulled laces tight at her neck and tied them.

Xena stepped around behind her, and ran a wooden comb through her hair. "Past the river, across that next valley and through those hills there's a route to the biggest seaport anywhere around here."

"Okay."

"We're gonna go there, and take it over." The queen said. "Right now, it's a free port."

Gabrielle hadn't really expected so forthright an answer to her question. "Is.. Is that where those merchants came from?" She finished arranging her clothing and waited, as the strokes continued through her hair. "From that place?"

"Yes." Xena replied. "Once I control that, I control all the trade going up the river and the coast. We start from there."

Gabrielle turned and faced the queen, looking up at her half lit, half shadowed face. "Where do we end?"

Xena smiled. "Good question." She said. "Get your boots on. Maybe we'll end up on the other side of a rainbow somewhere. Ya never know."

Ya never know. Gabrielle mused. How true that really was.

**

The sun did feel good, and she was glad to be in it a short time later as she stood near the river and watched what was going on there.

It was amazing. Gabrielle shook her head again, as she leaned against Patches warm, shaggy hide. Amazing what Xena had gotten done in a just a day and a half. The river had two solid lines of poles leading roughly a third the way across, then a line of chained logs stringing from there across the depths, to another stretch of solid poles near the other bank forming a channel to cross between

The ground on this side of the crossing had already been cleared, and dragged to allow the wagons through, and if she squinted, she could see men on the other side of the river with two horses and a dragging log doing the same on that side.

The smell of boiling tar drifted past her, and she turned her head to see men working around the wagons, slathering the outside of the wooden surfaces with the black, sticky stuff. "Wow."

"What do you think?" Xena came to stand next to her.

"You're amazing."

"Besides that."

Gabrielle watched the work proceed. "It's so organized."

The queen laughed. "That's how it should be, muskrat. A disorganized army is a dead one. I learned that at a very, very young age."

A shout made them both turn, and Xena stretched herself taller to look past the cookfire towards the back of the camp. "Now wh.. Horses."

"Horses?" Gabrielle looked at Patches, then at the queen.

"Horses. Coming this way." Xena started towards the back of the camp.

"Want to ride Patches?" Gabrielle called after her. "He's pretty quick."

The queen turned, running backwards and making a rude gesture at her before she turned around and continued on, her stride lengthening into a powerful relentlessness.

"Guess not." Gabrielle led Patches over to a stump and climbed up onto it, hitching herself onto her pony's bare back and straightening up. It was uncomfortable, but not unbearable, and she tightened her knees and headed after the queen.

The pony's gait was thankfully smooth, and she only bounced a little as they raced up past the wagons joining a rush of men also heading that way.

As they rounded the cookfire she could already see past the edge of the camp, and just as Xena had said, there were horses coming. She recognized the banner the foremost one was holding, though, and the shouts were turning to cheers as the men in the camp welcomed their returning troopmates.

The leading men were raising their fists and pumping them. She wasn't sure what that meant, but the cheers got louder so she figured it wasn't bad. Gabrielle leaned forward a little and after a moment, she spotted Xena.

The queen leaped up onto a fallen tree and ran up its slanting path, letting out a whistle as she did so. Before anyone around her realized what was happening, Tiger appeared from nowhere, plowing through the crowd and kicking in every direction.

Xena reached the top of the fallen tree and stepped off into space, landing on the stallion's back as he rocketed under her, finding her seat and hauling his head around with a yank on his mane. "Yeahhh!" She let out a yell and steered him towards the oncoming army.

Men dove out of the way as fast as they could, conveniently clearing a path for Gabrielle without really intending it. She clucked her tongue at Patches as she tried to keep Xena in sight, still shaking her head over the woman's acrobatics. "How does she do that?"

Patches snorted and cantered after his big black friend.

"Xena!" Brendan was in the forefront, and standing in his stirrups. He was close enough now for Gabrielle to see the glee on his face, and the men around him were obviously in very high spirits.

"I said three days!" Xena called back, halfway out to meet them. "Get bored so fast?"

"Got something else!" Brendan pulled his helm off and held it up. "We've got Bregos!"

Xena sat back on Tiger, lucky her knees were clamped tight or the surprise would have sent her head over ass into the bushes.

Bregos?

"Alive?" She yelled back.

"For now, Mistress!" Her captain yodeled back. "For now!"

Ahhhh. Xena did a little dance of delight, almost startling her horse into rearing. Now things were really looking up. "Yeah!" She pumped her fist in the air. "Wonder how many different ways I can kill him."

Yeah.

**

"Tell me." Xena forced herself to relax in her camp chair, lacing her fingers behind her head as she watched Brendan remove his gauntlets. "I want to hear all the details."

Gabrielle was seated on the bed, her legs pulled up crossed under her and a flat bit of wood resting on her lap. She had a piece of parchment and her quill and ink, and she was waiting to take whatever notes Xena wanted her to, glad in any case to be sitting down again.

The army captain sat down on a stool before Xena and cleared his throat. "Twas like this, Xena." He said. "We came through the pass, yeah? Those bastards were gathered and making for trouble, didn't expect us to come at em."

Xena nodded, with a knowing expression.

"Were they going to come after us?" Gabrielle asked.

Brendan glanced over at her. "We didn't stop to ask em." He replied, bluntly. "Just took the troops and ran em down proper." He looked back at Xena. "Killed em all."

"Good." Xena said. "So then what?"

"Well." Brendan half shrugged. "Ye told me to stay out for three suns, so's I had to find something else for the men to do. Asked em if they wanted to go take care of them cannibals, and they were all for it so we took off that way."

Gabrielle fiddled with her quill, dipping its point into the ink and drawing a small circle on the parchment. She thought about the raiders dying, there in the early dawn light. She thought about what it would have been like to have been with them in the fight, with all the yelling and the blood and she was glad she hadn't been.

“Find any more of them?” Xena’s voice cut through her meanderings.

“Ran when they saw us comin.” Brendan said. “But we followed em, see, over to the next valley there and we found a rats nest like you never did see.”

Next valley?

“On the far side of where we found them?” Xena asked. “Just past that ridge?”

“Aye.” Brendan answered. “Another town’d been there, I guess, couple of old walls left. Anyway, we got near there and all Hades like to have broken loose..”

Next valley. Gabrielle looked up, and found Xena watching her, and she knew that Xena knew what she was thinking about.

“Anything left of the old townsfolk, or just scum?”

“Wasn’t nothing we saw of ‘em.” Brendan seemed unaware of the silent communication going on. “But then, we were’nt lookin.” He added, with a faint snort. “We hadn’t come up there more than a candlemark and they was all over us, making noise like crazy men.”

“Okay. Then what?” Xena said. “Did you fall back?”

“Aye.” Brendan said. “Fell back to the treeline, just to get together and then we...”

Her home. Gabrielle tried to picture in her mind what it had looked like. A couple of lanes worth of mud wall huts with thatch roofs, she remembered. Some crooked fences, and hens walking between their posts.

The well she’d almost drowned in.

“So they were holing up there, that was their base?” Xena’s voice rose a little. “How many?”

The little dell behind where they’d lived, where she’d been punished so many times.

“Three score, at least.” Brendan said. “Never expected us to be there, for sure. Guess them other guys were supposed to take after us, but..”

“Were they planning for something, or just camping there?”

Gabrielle let out her breath slowly. It hadn’t been totally bad, though. There had been the little glade near the river she and Lila had played in, and the wildflowers blooming everywhere in the spring, and the clear spot on the hillside she’d lain in at night, just to watch the stars.

“Put up some battlements, they had.” Brendan said. “Seems to me he was building up a base.”

She remembered the night she and Lila had been taken. There hadn’t been much left, after the slavers went through and the fire went up.

“So then what?” The queen asked. “Did they attack you, what?”

“Dug in to defend themselves.” The army captain said. “We took a sweep around, came in from t’other side. Left a squadron out front of there to make em think I was sieging.”

“Nice.” Xena complimented him. “Find anything in there worthwhile other than that bastard?”

Gabrielle remembered the screams they’d left behind them, and the terror she’d felt as the ropes had circled her neck and rough hands had shoved her along.

“These, here.”

“Hm.”

Something in Xena’s tone made her look up again. She saw the queen tilting her head, examining something in the palm of her hand. They were small, and round, and she realized she recognized them. “Oh.. Aren’t those pearls?”

Xena wiggled her fingers, making the objects clink lightly in her palm. “So they are.” She replied. “Now, where do you suppose Bregos got them?” She mused. “And when?”

Gabrielle slowly eased off the bed, setting down her little desk before she walked over to where Xena was seated. In the light from outside, the pearls had taken on a radiance and the beauty fascinated her. “Wow.”

“Like them, huh?” Xena spared her an affectionate look. “Typical.”

“They’re beautiful.” Gabrielle agreed. “I’m really attracted to beautiful things, what can I say?”

Xena paused in mid breath and raised her eyebrows. She darted a look at Brendan, who covered his mouth to muffle a smile, then she cleared her throat and tried to ignore the fact that she was quite possibly blushing. “Right. Well, first thing is, we need to find out where he got these, and second..” Her lips quirked into a grin of her own. “Where we can get more of them.”

“Think he’ll say? Wouldn’t cough a bit up whole way here.” Brendan said. “Thought maybe you’d cut his tongue out instead of somthin else back then.”

“He recognize you? He knows who has him, right?”

Brendan laughed, a full, joyous sound that rang through the tent “Oh.” He said. “Aye. He knows.” He assured the queen. “When we busted through the walls there, he took one lookit me, and turned and went to hide hisself.” He put his hands on his hips. “Men found him in a grain store, behind a box.”

“No kidding.” Xena snickered. “Gods, wish I’d been there to see it.”

“Xena, you’d a been there, man woulda dug himself a hole in the middens and hid.”

“Probably.” The queen handed the pearls to Gabrielle. “Here, put this with the rest of your collection, you sweet talking little lambchop.” She rested her elbows on the chair arms and steeped her fingers. “So. You have him tied up near the outhouses?”

“Aye.”

Xena smiled. “Good. Leave him there for a candlemark, let him think I’m ignoring him and give him a chance to relax. Then bring him here.”

“Aye.” Brendan’s voice changed even though the word was the same. The meaning darkened. “Here, Xena?” His eyes shifted to Gabrielle, then back to the queen. “We could set up a place for you, to one side.”

For a moment, Xena almost dismissed the offer. Then she paused, and regarded her lover. “Do you mind if I kill that bastard in here?”

Gabrielle blinked, obviously startled.

Xena didn’t wait for her to answer. “Nah, I’ll just squeeze any intelligence left out of him here. I’ll kill him in front of the men.” She said. “Like that plan, Brendan?”

The captain nodded vigorously. "Was what I was gonna say, Xena. After all that, the men should see him die, like the dog he is, in the dirt pile he belongs in. Scum whore of the earth." He dusted his hands off and stood up. "I'll go give the orders. Men are in a fine mood tonight, for sure, and more when they saw the ford all done."

"Good job, Brendan. Tell the men I'm damn happy with them." The queen replied. "This is only the start of what's to come."

Brendan saluted, and then he ducked out from the tent and left Xena and Gabrielle alone together. After a moment of silence, Xena held her hand out, and patted her lap with her other. "C'mere."

Gabrielle complied, putting her arm around Xena's neck as she fingered the pearls. "A lot of stuff is happening."

"A lot of good things." Xena said. "This was a very, very good thing, Gabrielle. It answers a question that was left in a lot of minds."

"In the army."

The queen nodded. "I didn't expect Brendan to find him, but sometimes the gods just make things go your way, you know what I mean?" She watched Gabrielle's profile. "But I do have to kill him this time."

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, I figured."

"You don't have to watch." Xena brushed her lover's pale hair back. "You don't have to be here when I torture him either." She said. "You can go out and get me some flowers or nuts or whatever you want out in the woods."

No, she didn't have to. "I want to be here." Gabrielle answered. "I want to know why he was where he was, and what he did." She said. "I want to know why he spent all winter out here, and why he let those people do those horrible things so close by."

"Ah." Xena grunted. "Yeah, me too."

"And about the pearls."

The queen smiled briefly. "Okay." She said. "Stay if you want. I figure if you haven't figured out what I'm all about by now, you're hopeless."

Gabrielle gave her a hug. "I think I'm hopeless anyway." She said. "I'll be all right."

"Mm." Xena put her arms around her lover and looked past her, out the flap of the tent into the late afternoon sun. "We'll see, muskrat. We'll see."

**

It was almost sundown before Xena sent for Bregos. Gabrielle brushed a little bit of dust off her leather armor coat, which she'd been told to put on as two soldiers rearranged the tent a little at the queens instructions.

Xena's camp chair, previously settled next to the brazier had been set up on four sturdy half crates, and draped in a rich, plush fur, with her battle armaments placed around its foot and her sword draped across the back of it.

Most of their trunks had been moved against the tent walls, clearing a space in the very center, in front of the elevated chair. Two torches were now planted on either side of that, flickering away and shedding curls of smoke up through the chimney hole opened in the top of the tent.

All of their small, personal, things had been tucked away, even the washing basin and Gabrielle felt a definite difference in what the space now represented.

She turned and picked up a comb, running its tines through her hair to straighten it a little. With the impending arrival of Bregos, she was glad she was in her armor, even though she'd needed Xena's help to get it on over her bruised and battered torso.

She'd also pulled on her heavy riding boots as well, and now she flexed her toes as she settled down on a stool to the rear of Xena's makeshift throne, setting her quill and ink down on the garment press next to a fresh sheet of parchment.

"Okay." Xena entered, pausing to look around the tent with her fists balled on her hips. "This'll work."

Gabrielle leaned her elbow on the garment press. Xena had donned her full armor as well, after brushing out her dark leathers and working the travel dust out of them. The queen was now a vision in black and metal, her round weapon at her waist and daggers bristling out of the unlikeliest of places.

Definitely, the armor made Xena look a lot bigger than she was. It outlined and extended her already broad shoulders, and the layers of metal and leather, tightly fitted, made her powerful body very evident. The leathers stopped at her thighs, and her leg armor started at her knees, and there was just enough bare flesh showing to flaunt the fact that she had the skill to keep herself whole without covering it.

Impressive.

"All right, boys. That's enough." Xena told the men. "Go on and take up a guard outside."

"Mistress." The nearer one saluted, and they both quietly left.

Xena looked over at her. "Ready, muskrat?" Her blue eyes took on a sardonic glint. "Last chance to take off.. Remember the last time I warned ya."

Gabrielle did remember. But whether it was the aggravation from her injuries or just something that was changing inside her, she really felt no need to turn her back on this. "Thanks." She told the queen. "I'm okay."

"Hmm."

"You look really .."

"If you say I look pretty in this I'm going to kiss you senseless." Xena circled the field throne, and straightened the furs a bit.

"Oh, absolutely you look pretty in that." Gabrielle responded immediately, smiling when the queen looked up and over at her. "And sexy."

"Why Gabrielle." Xena walked over and leaned against the press, gazing at her with a little grin on her face. "I like the way you're growing up, y'know that?"

"Do you?" Gabrielle answered, in a soft voice. "I'm not getting too cheeky?"

"Never." The queen assured her. "The cheekier the better. I love it when someone can surprise me and you've been doing that a lot lately." She exhaled, cocking her head a little. "Here he comes. So

listen.” She reached over and took Gabrielle’s hand. “I mean that.. Listen. Don’t talk. Don’t say a word to him. Got me?”

Gabrielle didn’t think she had anything she really wanted to say to Bregos. The few times she’d encountered him he’d seemed slimy, and she wondered again if he’d just known about the attempt on her life, or been behind it. “Okay.”

“No matter what.” Xena insisted. “It’s important, understand? There’s information I need from him and he’s not going to tell me if he thinks I’m just going to kill him so I need to be tricky.”

Tricky. That meant Xena was going to be subtle, and honestly, Gabrielle didn’t think the queen was very good at that. “I’ll stay right here, quiet as a mouse.” She promised. “Unless you tell me to say something.”

“All right.” Xena straightened up, leaning over to give her a kiss on the lips before she moved away, going over to take a seat on her makeshift throne, placing her elbows on the chair arms and affecting a relaxed pose.

“Want some wine?” Gabrielle suggested. “You look like you need something in your hands.”

A blue eye rotated her way. “Other than my sword, you mean?” Xena grinned briefly. “Yeah, got some over there? Gimme a cup.”

Gabrielle picked up a wineskin and pulled one of the ornate cups the men had taken out over, filling it and lifting it in one hand as she slipped something else into her other one. She walked over to the queen, careful not to spill the wine, and offered her the cup.

“Thanks.”

“And...” The blond woman moved quickly, lifting her hand and touching Xena’s ear. “I’ve got something else here for you.. “

“Hey!” The queen’s eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

“It’s an ear cuff.. With those pearls you gave me. I had it made for you but I was... “ Gabrielle finished fastening it. “Anyway, since he had those pearls I thought it would be good if he saw you had some too.”

Xena’s ear twitched, and the queen watched her, nostrils flaring a little. “I can’t see it.” She said, hearing the men closing in.

“I can. Don’t worry. It looks beautiful.” Gabrielle told her. “I’ll go over there and be quiet now.” She moved quickly back to her stool and settled onto it, watching Xena lift a hand to touch her new adornment.

It was pretty. They had taken the pearls and wound them with silver and gold, forming little cups the round gems were nestled in. The metal curled around Xena’s ear, winking in the torchlight as it gathered into the pearls like tiny glowing embers.

Xena looked at her. Then she laughed softly, and took a sip of her wine, tipping the cup in Gabrielle’s direction before she straightened and turned her head, as the tent flap filled with Brendan’s stocky form. “Yes?”

“Your majesty.” Her captain said, in a crisply formal voice. “You asked the prisoner be brought here to ye.”

“So I did.” Xena set aside thoughts of green eyes and pearls, and extended her legs, crossing them at the ankles. “Bring him on, Brendan.”

Brendan saluted, then he turned and held the flap aside, motioning to someone outside. He watched as two men dragged a third forward and past him, coming into the tent and dropping their burden in front of Xena as if it had been a trussed hog.

It could have been one, from the dirt and grime covering the man’s body. Xena could scarcely recognize her old general, and she had to blink a few times, and focus hard before she could see the formerly tall, proud figure in the huddled form near her feet. “Well.”

Bregos looked up at her, and now there was no doubt. His face hadn’t changed, just grown a thick beard and wild hair around it. His eyes were full of loathing and by that alone, she’d have known him.

Other than that, there wasn’t much left of him. He was perhaps half the weight he had been when she’d last seen him, and his body was twisted in on itself, she wasn’t really able to tell if it was because of how he was tied or what was left after she’d buried her knife in his groin and cut his hand off.

Surprising, really, that he’d survived it all.

Xena smiled, and took a sip of her wine. “Look what the cats dragged in here.” She said. “A big, stinking piece of trash.” She got up and jerked her chin at the soldiers, who backed up obediently. “I won’t say I bet you didn’t think you’d see me again because you stuck around here for some reason, Bregos.”

“You.” He rasped.

“Flattering, but horse crap.” Xena responded. “But then you were always stupid enough to let your ego get in the way of whatever few brains you had.” She walked around him, and he turned his head to watch her, stopping when he caught sight of Gabrielle sitting there quietly watching.

He stared at her, his jaws working.

Xena kicked him. “Pay attention, jackass.” She said, sharply.

He turned back and looked at her. “Why?” He asked. “Kill me. Get it over with.”

The queen knelt down next to him, in a rustle and clash of leather and metal. She grabbed a thatch of his wildly overgrown hair and pulled his head back. “Want me to?” She asked, in a light tone. “Does it make you sick to be here in front of me?”

He drew in a breath as though he was going to spit in her face.

“Ah ah ah.” Xena warned him, softly. “I can kill you an inch at a time, you piece of nothing. Take a square inch of your skin off every candlemark and let you out in the sun so it burns, and burns and you can’t do anything but scream about it.”

Bregos stared into her eyes.

“You know I can.” The queen said. “And for someone who betrayed me, I will, and I will enjoy every single moment of it.” Her eyes narrowed. “Dying’s easy. Too easy for you.”

His eyes shifted, at that, and she could see his breathing increase. “Wasn’t me who betrayed you.” He said, after a long pause. “You were dead, already, to all of them. I talked them into letting me try it my way.”

“Your way?” Xena laughed. “Oh, you mean where you beat me in that fight and took over?”

“You’d have lived.”

“Hello, stupid?” Xena yanked his head back again. “I didn’t need your help for that.” She snapped. “All you did was give them a reason to want me dead and I should have killed you on the field that damned day.”

Bloodshot eyes stared back at her from Bregos haggard face. “So why didn’t you?”

Xena abruptly stood up and went back to her seat, picking up her wine glass again and drinking from it. “Why didn’t I?” She answered. “Because you weren’t the most important thing happening to me that day.” She glanced briefly at Gabrielle, who was still sitting amazingly quiet on her stool with her hands clasped in front of her. “I just wanted you out of my face so I could take care of something I cared a Hades of a lot more about.”

Gabrielle smiled a little, as if to herself. Xena wondered if she was remembering that time the way Xena was. Remembering that kiss, and that flower, and how shattering life changing it all was.

Ah well.

“You’re a fool then.” Bregos said. “You’re the fool they all say you are.”

Xena refocused her attention on him. “Mm.. So that’s why you’re the one on the floor and I’m the one trying to decide how to remove your insides through your ears the slowest way possible.” She said. “Nice.”

Her former general half turned on his side, and looked steadily up at her. “At least I’ll die knowing I got you back, Xena.” He smiled at her. “Even if I won’t see it.. I’ll know it and I’ll die laughing at you.”

A prickle went down Xena’s spine, that almost knowledge that nailed home the gut sensations that had driven her from the stronghold to this path out in the wilderness. “I don’t think you’ll be laughing.” She remarked, in a mild tone.

He laughed.

Xena didn’t.

**

Gabrielle emerged from the tent and looked around, finally spotting Xena ostensibly enjoying the sunset down near the river. She flexed her hand around her staff and started after her, glancing sideways at the group of men busy at a nearby tree as she passed.

They had Bregos, and they were lashing him to the trunk. He was struggling weakly, but he was gagged, and the men were mostly ignoring them as they tightened the ropes that held him. He saw Gabrielle and stopped fighting, staring at her as she walked past the tree with haunted, intense eyes.

She wondered what that was all about. She’d barely had time to talk to Bregos before he’d left the stronghold, and she didn’t think she’d done anything to get his attention like that. Had she? Gabrielle thought about those early days, and realized she didn’t really remember anything other than Xena.

Being scared of Xena. Being angry at Xena. Falling in love with Xena. Pretty much in that order, and that fast.

Thoughtfully, Gabrielle made her way down the footpath to the river’s edge, seeing the twitch of Xena’s shoulders that mean the queen had heard her coming. “Hello.” She came around the boulder Xena was leaning against and joined her, glad enough to rest after the somewhat painful walk.

Xena tilted her head and looked over at her. "Is there a reason you dragged your butt all the way out here?"

"Sure." Gabrielle settled her staff between her knees and rubbed her thumb along the wooden surface. "You're here." She said. "And it's a pretty sunset."

Xena faced forward again, gazing across the water. "Yes, it is." She agreed. "So, what did you think?"

"About what?"

Xena looked back over at her, raising an eyebrow.

Gabrielle found herself somewhat flattered to be asked, and in such a straightforward way that made her think Xena actually wanted to hear the answer. "He's up to something."

The queen grunted with comprehensive eloquence.

"He said he got you back. What do you think that meant?" Gabrielle asked. "I thought he did that, sort of, before. When we were attacked, and you got hurt."

Xena didn't answer. She had her arms folded over her chest, and a pensive, thoughtful expression on her face.

"I mean.. You almost died, Xena." Gabrielle went on, feeling her throat tighten. "Those guys would have killed all of us.. If anyone needed to get back at someone it's you, not him."

The queen nodded. "I know." She said. "The problem is, he's so damn satisfied he's going to die with whatever it is he did a secret, there's not much I can do to him to make him talk."

"Ah."

Xena stood up and let her arms drop to her sides. "So, you know what?"

"What?"

The queen rocked her head back and forth, cracking her neck a little before she wiped her hands on her leggings and drew her dagger. "I want to take you to bed, so I'm gonna go kill him and get it over with." She spun the knife in her fingers and started towards the tree.

Gabrielle was left looking at the river, blinking for a moment, before she had to decide whether or not to turn and follow Xena back. It was tempting, so tempting to just sit where she was, letting her aches subside and watch the sunset while Xena went and did what Xena was going to do back at that tree.

"Xena! Xena! Xena!" Many male voices suddenly rose up, making the glade echo.

"You don't have to watch." Gabrielle said aloud. "Xena said so. She said you didn't have to be there, didn't have to watch him die, didn't have to watch her do whatever she's going to do to him." She could hear the chanting growing louder behind her, and before she really could think about it she was turning around, responding to that tingle in the air and the thrumming in her guts that wanted to be with Xena, be a part of what she was doing.

Whatever that something was.

She could see Xena's tall form making it's way through the gathering crowd of chanting soldiers and she went after her, using the staff to lean on as she caught up with the queen and walked along beside her in silence as the soldiers parted to let them through.

They stepped up next to the tree as the chanting faded off, and a waiting silence descended. The area was now thick with soldiers, and beyond them, Gabrielle could see the drovers, and the cooks, and the other servants Xena had brought with them.

Bregos had affected them too, she remembered. He had enticed them to join in his revolt against Xena, and because of that, because Xena had won out in the end, many of them had died outside the walls when she'd expelled them from the stronghold.

Men had lost sons. Women had lost husbands. The servants that were with them were the ones who had stood fast, who had helped Gabrielle open the gates to let the army out, who had proven their loyalty in the most basic way and that loyalty had sometimes been split across families and blood in unexpected ways.

Now Xena stood, there in the dying light of the day that bathed her in crimson as she took on the mantle not of a killer, but of the avenger Gabrielle could see reflected in the eyes of the men and women around her.

She was their queen. She had bled for them, risked her life for them, and put everything on the line to defend her place, and their place against the man who was now trussed up to the tree, staring at everything with a seething, festering hatred.

Xena regarded Bregos briefly. Then she looked around at the troops. "This is a traitor." She raised her voice. "Who betrayed us."

Us. Gabrielle stood a little straighter, watching Bregos watch Xena. In his eyes there was a hunger behind the enmity and she understood that at some level, it hadn't all been hate driving him and now when his eyes turned to her and his face crinkled in reaction, she knew why.

"He betrayed us, and caused the death of many of your brothers in arms, who he led down a very, very stupid path." Xena took a step forward, a light, almost bouncy motion. "Because he's a very very stupid man."

Bregos fought against the gag, chewing at it as he tried to wrench it from between his teeth.

Xena took another step and she was within reach of him. She paused and considered, her head cocked to one side, letting him wait and wonder what she was going to do.

But not too long. With the faintest of shrugs, she flipped the dagger from her left hand to her right, and with a roundhouse motion she arched her back and whipped her arm around in a tight arc that ended with the dagger buried right under his ribcage, in the center of his chest.

He jerked hard, in utter shock.

Xena looked him right in the eye. "This is what I should have done." She jerked her arm back in the opposite direction, cutting his chest wide open and releasing a spurt of rich, red blood over her hand. She waited for his body to stop arching and then she flipped the knife back to her left hand and she surged forward, slamming her hand up into his body with savage force.

His eyes rolled up into his head as the blood ran out his body.

"Just think." Xena reached up, shoving her hands through the lungs she felt against her fingers. "You get all that time in Hades to have the shit scared out of you knowing I'm going to do this all over again there." She grabbed the beating heart and closed her grip around it, pulling back with all her strength. "So goodbye, asshole."

It came away in her grasp easier than she'd imagined, and she pulled it out, a messy chunk of still beating flesh spurting blood over her, over the ground, and over everyone in arms reach. The body across from her slumped in it's bonds, and she took a step back lifting her hand and displaying it's contents.

She looked at the quivering flesh, then she tossed it lightly away from her to land on the ground. "Hmph." She let her gaze travel steadily around the crowd. "Didn't actually think he had one of those. Learn something new every day, don'cha?"

The chant started up, after a long moment of shock. Her name, once again ringing through the camp. Xena basked in it for a moment, before she turned and looked at the blond woman standing next to her.

Gabrielle had both hands wrapped around her staff, and she was standing, steady as a rock at Xena's side, most of her body spattered in blood. She looked up at Xena through dark red freckles and gravely studied the queen's face.

Xena looked just as gravely back at her. "So." The queen said. "You up for grilled kidneys for dinner?" She wiggled the fingers of her right hand, which were covered in crimson gore. "Rare?"

Gabrielle was caught between a gag reflex, a laugh, and tears. She compromised by clearing her throat, and glancing at the now dead man on the tree. "He caused a lot of people harm." She said. "I'm glad he wont' be able to do that anymore."

Xena lifted her other hand to acknowledge the chanting, her dark humor fading. "Me too." She said, in a quiet voice. "Now we just have to find out what torment of Tartarus he's let us in for." She closed her fist and the chanting faded. "All right. Take the trash out, and let's get dinner on. We move out tomorrow so everyone be ready by dawn."

A loud cheer rose, and then the men started to disperse, several moving to the tree and drawing their knives to cut the body down.

Xena watched for a moment, then she turned her back and headed for her pavilion, careful to step on the tattered scraps of flesh on the ground and twist her bootheel on them as she passed.

**

Part 9

Gabrielle stood next to Patches as they both surveyed the river crossing, the surface ruffled with wind driven ripples as it surged past them. "Hm." She laid an arm over the pony's neck. "That sure looks cold, Patches."

At least the sun was out. She glanced up, to where it was just breaking over the trees and held her hand out to catch it's warmth in the chill of early morning, glad she had her armor on and the long sleeved undergarment that protected her skin from it's tough surface.

Glad too, that she hadn't been wearing it the night before, since the blood that had washed readily off the armor surely wouldn't have done the same for the shirt, and wearing it damp wouldn't have been much fun at all.

Wearing it bloody was something she didn't even think about. She leaned against Patches warm side and exhaled, feeling still very stiff and sore and not much like riding. She'd woken with a headache, and an upset stomach but had clamped her jaw down tight on all of that and pushed herself to get ready to go like everyone else was.

The army was already on the move around her, gathering near the crossing and working to shift the now floatable wagons into position. Everyone was busy, and their pavilions had all been packed up and were added to the row of supplies waiting to go across the water.

Xena was across the way from her, on Tiger's back, trotting back and forth and shouting directions as though nothing could possibly happen correctly without her involvement in it.

Which might be true, Gabrielle pondered, but she suspected the more experienced of her queen's soldiers had done this at least once before and she wondered if Xena wasn't being just a little too much of a worrywart about it all.

However, she certainly wasn't going to ask her about it. "Patches, are you ready to swim?" She asked her shaggy friend. "Do you even know how to swim?"

The pony was chewing a mouthful of grass, and he looked back over his shoulder at her, stalks sticking out from between his lips. His expression seemed skeptical and Gabrielle chuckled a little at it, pretty sure she wasn't looking forward to the ordeal either.

A loud, long whistle caught her attention, and she looked over to see Xena sitting with her hands on her hips, looking right at her. "Uh oh." She sighed. "I think that means us." She walked Patches over to a fallen log and stepped up onto it, sparing her body the stress of mounting in a more conventional way. She eased into the saddle and gathered up the reins. "Okay, let's go."

Obediently, her mount started forward, ambling through the underbrush with a thankfully gentle pace as he made his way towards the small rise the queen was perched on. Gabrielle leaned forward and tightened her knees a little, getting her center of balance over her boots so her body didn't move too much with her pony's strides.

It was bearable. Just. She glanced up at Xena as she came even with the queen, and realized in an instant she wasn't fooling her for a second, but rather than impatience she found wry understanding in the queen's eyes. "Hi."

"Riding in the wagon would be worse." Xena told her. "Just try to hang in there."

"I will." Gabrielle said. "I'm okay."

"No you aren't." The queen reached over and ruffled her hair. "Don't feel compelled to lie to me like everyone else does." She turned her head and surveyed the field. "All right! Let's move out!" She bellowed, nearly making Gabrielle's ears ring.

Everyone started to move, the soldiers on either side of the wagons pulling them forward towards the water by ropes fastened to rings on the sides. Xena watched for a moment, then she led Gabrielle to a break in the flow and fell in behind one line of wagons, in front of a large mass of troops.

Gabrielle exhaled, and steeled herself for traveling. Since they were moving slowly, it wasn't that bad, and after a moment she relaxed a little and straightened, watching the army moving in front of her. There was a splash as the first row of horsemen entered the water, and the snort of horses rose also, as the animals felt the cold bite of the water.

Brr. She could already feel it herself, and her toes curled inside her boots as she anticipated the soaking, and knowing she was going to spend most of the rest of the day drying out wasn't making her imagination any happier.

"So." Xena kept one eye on the progress of the wagons and the other on her companion. "Hear anything good about what I did last night?"

Gabrielle found her attention torn from her own discomfort, and she sorted through all the things she'd heard before she answered. "Well." She said. "I think the thing I heard most often is that no one ever saw anyone do what you did to him before."

"Uh huh." The queen nodded. "I like a little originality in my slaughter. What else?"

"That he deserved it." Gabrielle thought for a moment about how she felt. "I thought so."

"Did you really?" Xena asked, eyeing her as the first of the wagons reached the ford. The initial soldiers were part way across the river, their horses swimming in the strong current but guided by the ropes and poles.

The blond woman nodded briefly. "I mean.." She paused. "I guess that sounds so cold, and I'm such a hypocrit for feeling like that after I said so much about killing not being the way to do things."

"Mm."

The first wagon entered the water, it's tarred exterior enabling it to float. Gabrielle was momentarily distracted by the bobbing hulk, and she shook her head a little. "I never would have thought to do that." She said. "How did you figure that out?"

Xena's brow puckered. "I didn't really think about it, to be honest."

"Really?"

"Nah, I just wanted him to die fast and I was bored with just cutting people's heads off." The queen said. "But considering you have trouble killing ants I'm not surprised it didn't occur to you."

Gabrielle swivled her head towards her companion. "Uh.." She made a face. "I meant the wagons." She pointed at the train. "Sorry.. I was thinking about how clever you were about that.. Not about.. Uh... him."

"Oh." Xena chuckled softly. "One of my many skills is boatbuilding." She half stood in her stirrups to watch the progress. "I also throw a mean fishing line... remind me about that later on and maybe we'll have something squiggly for dinner."

Was there anything, Gabrielle wondered, that Xena didn't do well? "Okay." She squiggled a little more deeply into her saddle as they approached the ford, the ground before it now trampled and muddy. Across the river, the first troops had emerged from the water and were fanning out, a squad of them starting to ride ahead as a point guard.

Actually, the men had all been very happy with Xena's choice of fates for Bregos. Gabrielle's nose wrinkled as they approached the water, leaning back as Patches started down the slope the men had made into the river. She could smell the sharp tang mixed with manure from the horses, and sweat from both men and beasts.

Ick. Her already upset stomach roiled, and she had to swallow a few times as the handful of crackers and water she'd eaten threatened to come back up on her. She pulled herself forward by her saddlehorn as Patches reached the water, his shaggy legs splashing through it as he snorted and tossed his head.

She could see the current now, shoving against her mounts legs and causing him to stumble a little. She patted his shoulder anxiously. "Easy, Patches. Take it slow, okay?" She glanced at the river, and hoped her pony could manage it, even with the supports in place.

Was it time to mention she wasn't really that much of a swimmer herself?

“HOLD IT!” Xena held her hand up, and pulled Tiger to a halt, turning and waving at the troops behind her who likewise stopped. She waited for the motion to all cease, before she turned and looked at Gabrielle, who was peering back at her, with a miserable, though puzzled expression. “Let me ask you a question.”

Gabrielle looked around. “Okay, sure.”

Xena leaned to one side and lowered her voice. “After last night, does anyone here still think I’m a softie?”

The blond woman blinked several times. “Uh... no.” She rapidly shook her head. “No.. No I don’t think so. They were all really.. Uh... “

“You sure?”

Was she sure? Gabrielle was feeling a little too sick to her stomach to really decide one way or the other, but she nodded anyway.

Xena half turned in her saddle. “Good.” She said. “Take your foot out of the stirrup on that other side, and swing your leg over to this side.”

Bewildered, Gabrielle did as she was told, ending up sitting on her saddle sideways in a somewhat precarious balance. “Okay.” She said. “Now what?” She looked up at Xena with a puzzled expression, as they stood together in the current, the cool wind whipping at them.

The queen sidled her horse over a few more steps, then she offered her arm down. “Grab hold.” She waited for Gabrielle to reach up and clasp her arm, then she casually grabbed her belt with her other hand and lifted her right off Patches back. “Leg over. Move it.”

Gabrielle scrambled into Tiger’s saddle in front of the queen, too surprised to even pay attention to the ache in her guts. She felt Xena’s arm tuck itself around her with comforting stability and she leaned back against the tall body behind her with a sense of relief so significant it almost squeezed a few tears from her eyes.

“All righty then.” Xena tied Patches reins off to one of her saddle rings. “Move out!” She nudged Tiger on into the water. “The things I gotta do to protect my image around here.” She added, with a clucking sound. “Shoulda brought some kittens along to roast.”

“Thanks.” Gabrielle tipped her head back and gazed up at her lover. “You’re so awesome.”

“I know.” The queen smirked. “You’re still gonna get wet, but at least I know you won’t fall off that damn little runt and make me swim after you.”

Gabrielle felt the water cover her boots, but safe as she was, leaning back against Xena’s body with the queen’s grip on her, the chill was a bearable annoyance instead of the threat it might have been. Tiger was a lot higher off the ground, too, and she had time to fold her hands around Xena’s arm before the water hit her knees and started to soak through her leggings. “Xena?”

“Yees?”

“You wouldn’t really roast kittens, would you?”

“Nah.” The queen grimaced as the river water rose and hit her in the ass. “Fur gets caught between your teeth. It’s a mess.”

Gabrielle tipped her head back again and looked at her. “Was that what you meant by saying you didn’t know how to cook? You should have shaved it first.”

“Ooo.. You’re catching on..” Xena grinned and started humming under her breath, glad enough to be leaving her realm well and truly behind her no matter what troubles now loomed ahead. She glanced behind her, where the bulk of the army was starting into the river, and then she faced forward again, letting her chin rest against Gabrielle’s head as Tiger started to swim, with Patches churning sturdily along beside him.

**

They were moving through a thick field of tall grasses as the sun came to it’s highest point. Gabrielle was still perched up on Tiger’s saddle, her leggings almost dry and her spirits rising from having spent the morning with Xena’s arms wrapped around her.

The queen was relaxed behind her, breathing with a slow, even motion as the long grasses just covered her boots, having fallen silent for the last while.

Gabrielle wondered if she wanted to hear a story. “Hey, Xena?”

“Mm?”

“Want to play a word game?”

“Was I acting bored?” The queen asked. “Maybe I just wanted to snooze back here.”

Gabrielle turned her head and looked up at her companion. “Were you sleeping?” She asked, in a surprised tone. She studied Xena’s face, and detected a faint inattention in her eyes. “Really?”

Xena chuckled and shrugged a bit, glancing around as if embarrassed. “It’s warm, you kept me up late last night, and there’s not much else to do, so yeah.” She stretched her body out and then relaxed back into the saddle again, looking past the wagon train towards the front of the army.

“I didn’t know you could sleep on a horse.” Gabrielle said. “What if you fall off?”

Xena removed her waterskin from her saddlery and took a sip from it, rolling the liquid around in her mouth before swallowing it. She hadn’t fallen asleep on a horse in a long time, but then she hadn’t really been riding all day in a long time either.

Maybe she was getting decrepit after all. “You don’t fall off.” She answered. “At least, I don’t fall off. You probably would.”

“No I wouldn’t.” Gabrielle wriggled a little, and tucked her hands over Xena’s. “Not with you here. How could I?” She peered over Tiger’s rhythmically bobbing head. The weather had warmed indeed, and it was a bright sunny day, the light spilling over the long plain they were traveling across.

Around her she could smell the bruised grass and the animals around her, and the mixture of leather and metal from her armor and the queen’s. “It’s pretty out here.”

“It’s boring out here.” Xena resisted the urge to kick her heels into Tiger’s sides. “I forgot how much I hated the actual getting there part of getting somewhere.” She exhaled. “I used to... “ She stopped, and laughed, shaking her head. “Anyway. What was that about a game?”

Gabrielle let her thumb rub absently across the top of the queen’s index finger. “You used to what?” She tipped her head back and looked up. “Did you make word games, like we do?”

Xena looked very carefully around, peering to the right, and then to the left, before she inclined her head so her lips were right near Gabrielle’s ear. “I used to knit.”

The blond woman blinked. Then she blinked again. “Knit?” She repeated, as though the word were in some foreign language. “You don’t mean.. My mother used to knit.” Her nose wrinkled. “YOU don’t mean that.”

Xena’s eyebrow lifted.

“Do you?”

The queen cleared her throat. “Forget I mentioned it.” She said. “Or I’ll have to go find some baby rabbits and bite their heads off or something.” She made a show of studying the terrain around them, shading her eyes and peering off into the distance where the plains slowly rolled up into shallow hills again.

Gabrielle fiddled with a bit of Tiger’s mane, glancing to one side to where Patches was ambling along, shaking his head as the grass stalks tickled his nose. Every so often, Tiger would look back at him, and she imagined the big stallion was muttering under his breath about ponies who got off scot free while he had to carry double.

Oh well. She patted his neck. Then she half turned and looked up at Xena. “So, what did you..”

“Socks.” The queen said, succinctly. Then she put her fingers between her teeth and let out a long whistle, then let loose two short ones after that. There was a stir in the lines ahead of them, then Brendan’s distinctive figure split off and circle back towards them.

Socks. Gabrielle tried to imagine Xena riding along with her army, with her armor and her sword, and her muddy boots and her wooden knitting needles making socks. “Ow.”

“What’s wrong?” Xena peered at her.

“I just made my head hurt.”

The queen gave her a kiss on the top of her apparently aching head, just as Brendan arrived at their side. “How far ahead are the scouts?” She asked, in a businesslike tone.

“Four leagues.” The troop captain said. “Had word half candlemark back. Nothing ahead. Real quiet.”

“Damn. Too bad.” Xena sighed. “Have the men break out rations in the saddle. I want to keep moving. Rotate them back to the wagons if they need anything.” She studied the line stretching ahead of her. “We need to make up time from all that lollygagging back there.”

“Ah, Xena. That was well spent minutes, surely.” Brendan protested. “Got rid of a saddle burr size of a cocks egg.” He shifted in his saddle. “Wasn’t time wasted, in my view.”

Xena made a show of pondering the thought. “Well.” She half shrugged. “We didn’t lose any supplies in the river crossing so I suppose it was worth building the ford, in any case. I wasn’t really worried about Bregos.”

Brendan’s eyebrows lifted.

“But it gives us less crap to clean up later.” The queen concluded.

“Gave Gabrielle here a bit of recovery too, eh?” The old captain’s eyes twinkled. “Lucky for her we were caught up in all that.”

Xena’s nostrils twitched, and she watched her captain from narrowed eyes. “Are you insinuating that I kept the army cooling it’s heels and sent you on a wild goose chase just to give my consort some sack time??”

“Ah, no majesty.” Brendan solemnly shook his head. “Not at all.”

Xena suspected she was being tweaked. She peered down at Gabrielle, who had her head cocked to one side, with a puzzled expression on her face. “You don’t think that, do you?”

The blond woman turned her head and looked around. “Well...”

“Never mind. Brendan, take off.” Xena knew a losing battle when she saw one. “Just for that, we keep going until moonrise, I don’t care if the horses end up walking into trees and bats crap on our heads.”

“Aye.” Brendan nodded, giving Gabrielle a wink. “Having a good ride then, your grace?”

Gabrielle was, to be truthful, sort of tired of the ride. However. “I’m just learning things right and left, thanks.” She replied. “It’s amazing all the things Xena can do.”

The old captain eyed his queen, then he merely saluted, and rode off, his seat on his horse almost as natural as Xena’s was.

The queen chuckled briefly, her arms reaching back around Gabrielle’s body and snuggling her close again. She was looking forward to making good time through the day, and her mind was already reaching past the bivouac, toward what they would find when they passed through the hills and prepared to attack the port city.

That was getting her a little excited, and if she worked at it, she could already smell the brass and horseflesh and torches of the men, and hear the yells of bravado ringing in her ears past the plains placid silence.

The city would be shocked, and dumbfounded. They’d been relatively innocuous neighbors for years now, and the port was a popular place for ships to put in when they had goods to trade bound for Xena’s tables.

For years, she’d spent her martial energies, or rather, her generals, in the opposite direction. They’d done respectably, adding leagues and leagues to her realm without losing a high percentage of her conscripts and going just far enough not to trigger mass reprisals.

Not too bad. But Xena hadn’t gotten where she was by doing things over and over again. She wanted the port city for two reasons, one, that she’d told everyone about, and the other, because before she’d killed him in somewhat spectacular fashion her last spy master had told her something very interesting about rumors the men had heard that Bregos hadn’t wanted them to talk about.

So. She’d see what she’d find when she started heading in the direction everyone had told her was just empty lands, nothing to see, nothing to interest her. In the direction that Bregos had dismissed as unimportant.

“Xena?”

The queen looked down at her adorable saddle warmer. “Yes?”

“I know you want to keep going until t gets dark, but could we stop for just.. Well, for a drink or something?” The blond woman asked. “Just to walk around a little?”

“We are walking.”

“Um.. The horses are walking.”

“Ah.” The queen glanced around her. “Butt hurt?”

“Yeah. Sorta.”

“Want me to kiss it and made it better?”

“Um. Oh! Oooo! Yow!”

“Beats knitting socks, doesn’t it?”

“Yeek.”

**

This time, Xena picked the camping spot very carefully indeed. She cantered back from the point sentries and paused, checking the sight lines to the main watch fire built in a curve of the hill hidden from the road.

The army was camped in the dell beyond it, likewise hidden. Xena stood in her stirrups and surveyed the scene, then nodded in satisfaction before she turned Tiger and headed back to the lines.

She felt the attitude difference as she threaded her way through the camp, a rising, but low grade tension she welcomed likely as much as the men did.

Fighting was ahead, and soon. Xena rode up to where Brendan was standing, and motioned him over. When her captain came and set his hand on her stirrup, she leaned on her saddlehorn and met his eyes. “Tonight, I want a scouting party.” She said. “We’re going to go see what kind of trouble we’re up against.”

Brendan nodded in agreement. “Aye, when the moon sets.” He said. “I’ll take the men myself.”

“No you won’t.” Xena grinned briefly. “I will. See if anyone’s brave enough to volunteer for *that*.” She straightened up and threw her leg over Tiger’s neck, sliding down to the ground and offering up her reins to a groom that came hurrying over.

She left Brendan standing there as she walked among the trees, glancing to her right and left as she passed the tiny fires in the various campsites, all of them well tended and clean burning. “Nice.” She murmured to herself, tipping her head back to review the slowly darkening sky, twinkling stars starting to appear between the branches that a cool wind was stirring.

She could hear weapons being sharpened, and it reminded her she had her own task to do along those lines. She changed her course and headed for her tent, newly set between two huge oaks. She gave the guard outside the flap a nod, then she ducked inside, her eyes adjusting to the candlelight as she looked around. “Gabrielle?”

“Right here.” Her lover emerged from one corner, carrying an armful of folded linen.

“I thought I told you to get your ass into bed.” Xena put her hands on her hips.

Gabrielle sat down on a stool near the brazier, putting the linen in her lap. “Well.” She folded her hands and gazed up at the queen. “I tried that.”

Xena’s brows edged up. She walked over and patted the furs covering the bed, poking the frame experimentally. She then turned and looked at Gabrielle in obvious question.

“I really want a bath.” The blond woman replied. “I’m really tired of smelling like a horse.”

“Ah.” Xena chuckled. “I like the way horses smell.” She half shrugged.

"I do too." Her lover agreed. "But I like the smell to stay on the horse and not follow me home." She exhaled. "So, I thought I'd just sort of find some water and. Um.."

Xena walked over and sat down next to her, extending her long legs across the travel carpet and gazing down on her mud spattered boots. "I'm taking a scouting party out tonight to see what we're riding up against." She said. "No sense in getting clean just to get dirty again."

Gabrielle absorbed this. "Oh." Her brow puckered. "I guess you're right."

The queen laced her fingers together and put them behind her head as she stretched her body out, crossing her ankles as she gazed at the tent roof. "Tired?"

"No, I'm okay."

Xena tipped her head to one side. "Shut up and stop lying to me or I'm going to cover you in honey and sit you down in red ants."

The blond woman gazed quietly at her. After a moment, she managed a smile, ducking her head in acknowledgement. "I am tired." She admitted. "And lots of stuff hurts, but I don't want to miss going out with you tonight."

Xena wiggled her boots. "You're catching my insanity." She informed her companion. "Why in Hades would you want to go out in the middle of the night on a horse if you feel like crap?"

Well, it was a good question. Gabrielle didn't, truthfully, feel like going anywhere any time soon and she suspected Xena knew that. "I don't think you're insane." She demurred. "You just have stuff to do, and I don't want to miss anything."

"Mm." The queen steepled her fingers and rested them against her lips as she watched Gabrielle from over the tips. "If I asked you to stay here and relax, wouldja?" She studied the conflicting emotions on the expressive face across from her. "How about if I said please?"

"You don't do that a lot."

"No, I don't." Xena agreed. "So you better pay attention when I do."

Gabrielle smoothed her hand over the top of the linen. "I.." She peeked up at Xena. "I don't want anyone to think I'm a wuss."

"A what?"

"A wuss." Gabrielle said. "You know, like a weak, useless person?"

"You???"

"Yeah." The blond woman said, seriously. "All those army guys, and all that. I don't want them to think I'm just this little.. Wussy person."

The queen started snickering. "Gabrielle, you keep me fully occupied sexually. No one thinks you're a wuss." She laughed harder as her companion turned brick red. "There are a bunch of guys out there I used to sleep with that hold you in total awe."

"Oh..whoa.. What???"

"Do you know how many people couldn't even walk out of my tent in the morning?" Xena asked. "You're lucky they don't leave offerings to Aphrodite behind you."

Gabrielle felt positively lightheaded, imagining all those guys out there thinking she was... Oh gods. "Uhm... okay. I'll stay here." She managed to stammer out. "I don't want to go outside and see those guys right now anyway."

Xena laughed all the harder, holding her stomach and half rolling off the stool.

Gabrielle shook out one of the linen towels and put it over her head, closing out her view of the chortling queen and the candlelit space around her. She rested her elbows on her knees, and her chin on her fists, and waited for all the embarrassing noise to stop.

It was so crazy. She didn't think she did anything really special and in fact, she'd wondered if Xena didn't just humor her when they were in bed together.

The edge of the linen lifted, and a pair of twinkling blue eyes peered at her from behind it. "Hey."

Gabrielle felt herself blushing again.

Xena extended her hand into the open space. "C'mon." She said. "I saw a little spring on my way back from the forward watch.. Let's go get clean."

Oh well. Gabrielle took the queen's hand, and let her remove the cloth from over her head. A cold spring wasn't really what she had in mind, but she was ready at this point to take what she could get.

And after all, how cold could it possibly be with Xena there?

**

Not cold at all, as it turned out. Gabrielle sucked in a breath with a small, surprised sound as she dabbled her toe in the ominously dark water and found it warm to the touch. "Oh. It's warm."

Xena was sitting on a rock, divesting herself of her armor. "Of course it's warm." She laid her bracers down next to her chest armor and started working on her boots. "You don't really think I'm stupid enough to enjoy putting my ass into ice cold water, do you?"

Gabrielle sat down on the side of the pool and stuck her bare feet in, exhaling at the sheer pleasure of it. The scent from the water was mossy, and had a strong hint of minerals, but the warmth was easing the aches in her legs and she wouldn't have cared if it smelled like a sheep pen. "Mm."

Xena tossed her boots to one side, and stood, unlacing her leathers and letting them drop. She stepped out of them and into the pool, undoing her underwraps and tossing them on top of the armor. "Ahh." She felt her way cautiously into the center of the pool, pleased when the bottom was relatively smooth. "Nice."

Gabrielle found her eyes captured by the queen's lithe form, outlined in moonlight. "Yeah." She murmured. "Gorgeous."

The queen glanced up at her. "You talking to me, lambchop?" She inquired, a quirkly half grin appearing. "Or about me?" She looked down at her naked body, then back up.

"Yes." Gabrielle wiggled her feet in the water. "You're so pretty."

Xena put her hands on her hips and regarded her companion. "You sweet-talking little muskrat. Get in here." She waded over to where Gabrielle was sitting and scooped up a handful of the water threateningly. "Or else."

Gabrielle got the message. She undid the belt holding her tunic shut and slipped it off her shoulders, adding her own wraps to it before she scooted into the warm water and immediately sank to her knees, letting the liquid cover her up to her shoulders. "Oh, wow."

"Sure beats a washcloth soaked in rotgut." Xena agreed. "Good thing I saw the moss."

"Why is it warm?" Her lover asked, suddenly. "Did you make it like that?"

The queen cupped a handful of the water and let it trickle through her fingers. "Offshore, once we get past these hills you'll see a mountain, in the middle of the water."

A mountain? Suddenly, the idea of seeing places and things unknown to her sparked Gabrielle's interest. "Really?" She said. "But what does that have to do with warm water?"

"It's a volcano." Xena smiled at her reaction. "At night, you'll be able to see the top glowing."

"Wow!"

Xena eased down next to her, sliding back to rest her shoulders against the rock wall of the pool as the pungent mineral warmth soaked into her bones. She waited until Gabrielle joined her, then nudged the blond woman in the ribs gently with her elbow. "This was a damn good idea."

The blond woman sank down a little more, closing her eyes blissfully as the spring eased the aches all over her body. "Oh, wow." She repeated. "This is almost as good as you kissing me."

Xena turned her head and blew in the pink ear close by her shoulder. "You sure?" She asked. "Maybe it's better than that." She half turned her body and studied her companion for a moment, before she leaned over and tested her theory.

A gentle touch warmed the skin high up on the inside of her thigh as Gabrielle turned towards her, and she smiled as she kissed Gabrielle again. "Hope that's your hand." She murmured. "Or this is going to get more exciting than either of us can handle."

"It is." Gabrielle brushed her body against the queen's. "After all, I have a.. Um... reputation to keep up, right?"

Xena snickered, as she felt Gabrielle's hand slide higher. "Lucky me." She cupped Gabrielle's breast in one hand and rubbed her thumb over the blond woman's nipple. "Or maybe lucky you.. Cause so do I."

**

The moon set, and the landscape was drenched in darkness. Over the ridge near the road a small party of riders emerged from the trees, gathering in a cluster before they headed towards the hills lead by a horse conspicuously larger and one just as conspicuously smaller than the others.

Xena pulled her dark cloak around her and tucked its end under her knee. "Put your hood up." She said. "That head of yours'll show for six leagues."

"But I can't see with it up." Gabrielle nonetheless tugged the fabric up to cover her blond locks. "Besides, Patches is partly white."

"Don't remind me." The queen sighed. "There's that insanity, raising its ugly head again."

Gabrielle fluffed her cloak so it fell down on either side of her, draping over Patches sides. Then she resettled her knees and looked ahead of them, into the deep shadows of the night they were riding

through. The air was cool, and she felt a spurt of excitement as she headed off into the unknown with Xena.

She felt okay. The bath had done her well, and though she was still sore, the urge to see and explore was overriding the discomfort and she was glad Xena had experienced one of those inexplicable changes of mood and asked her to come after all.

She was funny that way. She'd spend hours telling Gabrielle all the reasons she had for her not to do something, and warning her against disobeying, and then, when it came down to it, she'd turn around and tell her to hurry up and get ready to go.

Weird. Gabrielle wondered what would have happened if she'd said she hadn't wanted to go still this time. Would Xena have gone along, or would she be riding across the back of Tiger's butt trussed to the queen's back like a dressed boar?

Interesting question. She steered Patches to follow Tiger's lead, as Xena moved off the road and into the grasses, the sound of the horses hooves muffling as she did so.

The soldiers around her were all dressed in dark armor, and their horses coats were shadowed as well, though few were the deep, pitch black of the queen's stallion. Only her pony stood out from the rest, and Gabrielle was worried about that, after what Xena had said.

She didn't want anything to happen to Patches. The pony had endeared himself to her, and she was fond of his antics and his cute shagginess that was so different from the other horses. He was smart, and he was brave, and he was a lot more comfortable for her to ride than Tiger, that was for sure.

Nice as it had been to ride in front of Xena, her legs ached from it. "Hey Xena?"

"Hey what?"

"Will we get to see the volcano tonight?"

The queen chuckled shortly. "Maybe." She glanced ahead, picking her path carefully. "We'll see."

They rode through the dark night for two candlemarks, at a softly rolling canter that ate up the ground with deceptive speed. Xena stopped only once, to catch her bearings and watch the fold in the hills she was aiming for, her sharp eyes focusing into the shadows looking for any motion out of place.

None was. "Okay." She turned her head and spoke to the soldiers surrounding her. "Here's the plan. Once we pass through that gap, we'll be in sight of the port. We'll have to be on the road for a while - this late we shouldn't meet anyone."

"Aye, but if we do?" Brendan asked.

"If we do, just let Gabrielle do the talking." Xena told him. "She's a rich merchant's wife on the way to do some shopping."

Gabrielle's eyes opened wide in some surprise, having no more warning on the plan than the rest of them.

"Good deal." Brendan agreed. "Tell em a good tale then, your Grace."

"Right." The queen went on. "Soon as we clear the narrows, we'll hit the woods on the coastal side and come up that way, there's a narrow path we can take they shouldn't spot us on."

The men all nodded. Gabrielle just scratched her head and hoped she didn't have to put her acting skills to the test since she had no real idea how a rich merchant was supposed to act, having only experience with noble aristocrats and slave peasants.

They rode on, the atmosphere becoming more tense as they approached the pass, and had to move from the shelter of the trees into the road again, exposing themselves to anyone coming in the other direction.

At this time of night, Xena knew, anyone on the roads would likely either be trouble, or looking for it. She wasn't entirely sure how she'd categorize her little band, but she loosened her sword in its scabbard and checked her daggers just in case.

She stopped just shy of the pass and held her hand up, cocking her head and tilting her ears into the wind.

The men, and Gabrielle, waited in silence, as the queen stood in her stirrups and focused her senses forward of where they were, searching for trouble ahead. After a long moment, she resumed her seat, and jerked her head towards the pass, moving out on Tiger with the rest of them following.

The sound of their hooves on the road seemed loud, and Gabrielle glanced around nervously as they all started forward through the pass.

It was more a crooked fold in the hills, not at all like the passes closer to the stronghold. Those had tall, overarching cliffs on either side, and jagged cracks any number of ambushers could hide in. These, however, were just gentle hills that sloped mildly to either side, with a wide open path between them perfectly suited to merchants wagons and slow, ambling oxen.

The inland road to her realm, Xena accepted a moment of doubt, wondering if she wasn't just going to shoot an arrow into her own ass doing this. Controlling the port city would definitely give her an advantage on one hand, but on the other, it could chase trade away.

"Damn it." Xena sighed. "Willya cut out the wishy washy horsecrap?"

Gabrielle moved closer to her. "Did you say something?" She asked, in a low voice.

"No." The queen muttered. "Shh."

They were through the pass not long after, and facing a stretch of dark, empty road ahead of them. Xena studied it, then tipped her head back to look at the sky, and decided to change the plan. "We'll stay on here for a bit." She said. "We'll make better time. It's later than I wanted."

Brendan nodded. "Aye." He motioned the rest of the men forward, and they continued down the road. On either side, heavy stands of forest stretched up to another set of hills, and at the very end of the road, they could see the slope turn downward as it started towards the coast.

"Good thing we're putting a foot in here." Brendan commented, in an undertone to her. "Big wide hole at our back, this is."

Xena eyed him. "Exactly." She said, after a brief pause. "Couldn't leave it like that. We've been lucky."

"Aye." The old captain agreed. "Seems quiet."

"Late watch." The queen said. "Should be." She swept her head from side to side, catching the normal sounds of the night around them, the crickets off in the grasses, and the rustling of wildlife moving in the trees beyond that.

Xena paused. Was it wildlife? She suddenly knew another moment of doubt, realizing she was taking for granted that her long unused skills in the wild were going to be as reliable as they used to be.

Was she leading them into a trap, again?

Her throat went dry, and she almost pulled Tiger to a halt again, when she spotted a natural break in the trees not far ahead. "Let's get off the road there." She indicated the break. "I want to make sure that seaside path is still around. We're not going to parade up the road with the damn army."

They angled off the road a quarter candlemark later, and traveled down a small slope towards the trees. They'd barely gotten there when the sound of hoofbeats made them all turn, backing quickly into the trees as a dimly seen figure on horseback appeared on the road, riding at a steady, though unhurried pace in the direction they'd come from.

The men all looked at Xena with something like awe. "Coulda seen us, sure." One muttered. "The gods blessed us with those ears."

Xena sat quietly on Tiger's back, watching the lone rider. Though it was hard to see details, she could make out his outline, and the lump over his shoulder and the way he sat in the saddle suggested to her that he wasn't an idle merchant on his way to market.

Interesting. "Jax." She projected her voice softly. "Follow him."

One of the soldiers, an old hand of hers, nodded and pulled out of the group. "Just follow?" He asked, holding his horse back a moment.

Xena's eyes were colorless in the starlight. "Make sure he doesn't come back this way." She amended. "But I'd like to know where he's going and what he's doing before you gut him."

"Yes, Majesty." The man half saluted, and started off, keeping to the edge of the trees as he worked his way along in parallel with the unaware rider.

Satisfied, Xena watched the road a bit longer, to make sure the lone rider was truly lone, before she turned and started off into the forest, hoping the trees hadn't grown so large it would keep the horses from passing between them.

As she felt the darkness of the forest close around her, her shoulders relaxed and she was able to concentrate on finding the path, rather than thinking of the one they'd so recently left.

Lucky. She'd gotten lucky again. But how long could she depend on luck to cover up what she was beginning to suspect might be a terminally lethal fading of her generalship?

Well.

"Boy, it's creepy in here." Gabrielle suddenly spoke up. "I can't see a thing."

"Sa'llright, your grace. Xena can see just fine." Brendan told her, with a faint chuckle in his voice. "Damned if that didn't get us out of the gods know what in the old days."

Xena let her eyes scan the forest, the branches so thick they blocked out the starlight and left the space under the canopy in what was, to her eyes, silver and gray shadows. Regardless, the trunks and the underbrush were outlined clearly in her eyes, and she was grateful that that, at least, seemed to be working up to expectations. "Yeah, we're fine." She concluded. "Just follow me."

"No problem." Gabrielle reached up and firmly grasped Xena's stirrup. "I'm just glad I can't see all the spiders."

Xena's head jerked up, and her nostrils flared, unseen. "What?"

"What?"

"What made you mention spiders?"

"Aren't there always spiders?" The blond woman asked, reasonably. "But it's okay, if you can see them, right?"

Xena's eyes widened to their fullest, and she started peering around furtively. "Sure."

"Then we're okay, right?"

"Yeah, we're great." Xena drew her sword from its sheath, and fingered the hilt. "Just keep your head down."

"Okay."

"And don't tickle my leg, if you like your head on your shoulders."

"Um..."

**

Xena cursed under her breath as her cloak caught in a tangle of branches for the nth time. The forest had gotten far more dense since she'd last been this way and she could barely force her way through the foliage as she led the way through the trees.

They were on foot now, and she could hear Gabrielle just behind her, the blond woman's hand latched firmly around a fold in Xena's cloak as she followed close in her shadow. "Watch out for that stick."

"Okay." Gabrielle could see absolutely nothing except a vague shadow that was Xena in front of her. She edged up closer to the queen and wished the forest would end, hearing the soft curses of the soldiers behind her as they struggled to make their way through. "Is it almost done?"

Like she knew? Xena peered ahead of her, seeing only interlaced branches as dark, silver outlined annoyances and wishing she'd just stayed in her tent. "Soon." She said. "Hey. Pass me up that stick of yours, willya?"

Gabrielle willingly did so. That freed up her other hand to find a place on Xena's hip, and she felt better immediately at this additional contact. "It's going to be hard to get the army through here, isn't it?"

Xena was busy beating branches into a splintering death. "No." She grunted. "If it pisses me off enough I'll just burn the gods be damned thing down."

"Oh."

The queen was glad it was only just spring. If the branches had been full summer sap filled ones, the staff she was wielding would have been bouncing back and smacking her in the head and making her mood even worse than it was.

She grimly moved forward, levering two slim trunks apart to admit her tall frame, slipping between them and finding herself thankfully in a wider, more open space. She tipped her head back and saw stars overhead, their silver light casting shadows around her. "Okay."

Gabrielle squirmed into the opening, blinking her eyes a little and rubbing them. Here in the starlight, she could just make out Xena's outline, and looking up she saw the pale eyes watching her. "I like it better here."

Xena half smiled, then she drew Gabrielle to one side to make room for the rest of the soldiers. Once they'd joined her, she turned and faced them, one arm draped over Gabrielle's shoulders and the other curled around the staff. "We're about halfway through." She said, briefly.

None of the men with her said a word, but the unheard groan was clear. Xena didn't grudge it to them, having the same inner moan herself going on. "Just stay close to me." She advised them, before she turned and went to the far edge of the small clearing, letting one hand rest on the trunk of the nearest tree and leaning forward.

She could hear the soft sounds of animals moving head of them, but that had been so for the whole trip already. The sounds would halt when they neared, and resume when they passed, and that, she knew was normal.

Her nose twitched, and she caught the scent of musk, then underneath that the welcome scent, faint and irregular, of salt on the air. She closed her eyes, and exhaled, that smell bringing back the best and the worst of her memories.

"Xena?" Gabrielle put her hand on her back and leaned close. "What's wrong?"

And how did she know something was? Xena turned her head. "Nothing. Just checking the way out." She told her companion. "Ever seen the ocean, muskrat?"

Gabrielle shook her head at once. "No.. but I'd really like to." She said. "One time, I heard a man telling people about it and it sounded amazing."

Amazing. "You'll see it." Xena started pushing forward again. "C'mon."

"Right behind you." Gabrielle resumed her hold, and stuck close to the queen, ducking as branches smacked into them.

Just following gave her a lot of time to think about things. Like how musky the air smelled, and how scary it was to walk through the darkness with all kinds of things rustling and moving around her.

She hoped it would be over sooner than Xena thought.

She hoped the horses would be okay, back where they'd left them, with only one soldier to guard them. It was a wild world, and she was a little worried about Patches. "Hey Xena?"

"Yeah?"

"Was that an owl?"

The queen paused, and looked around. "Where?" She cocked her head, as she spotted two big, yellow glowing eyes watching them. "Ah." She studied the eyes, which blinked slowly, as though the creature was evaluating her. After a moment she could make out the outline of it, it's thickly tufted head and square body. "Yeah."

"Wow."

Xena glanced at her and then she shook her head and kept forcing her way through the branches. "C'mon."

Gabrielle watched the owl a moment more, before she followed. The big birds had always fascinated her, and it was the closest she'd ever been to one. "They're supposed to be really smart." She said. "I know a story about an owl. Want to hear it?"

“Sure.” Xena levered the staff against a set of branches, splintering them as she leaned her weight against their stubbornness. “Better than hearing myself curse. Start talking.”

“Well, once there was this owl..” Gabrielle was glad of the distraction, and of the chance to be useful. She thought the men were also glad for something to pass the time, and she spun the story out a little longer, adding some details and a dove as the owl’s love interest.

It was mostly a children’s story, really, she’d heard it from a wandering storyteller long ago, who’d stopped in her village one night and traded some tales for a plate of stew and a mug and given them his dinner’s worth for sure.

She remembered sitting by the fire in the common room at the inn, far past her usual bedtime and just listening to all these strange and new images that tumbled from the man’s mouth and it had ignited in her the desire to be able to do the same thing.

“So one day, the owl and the dove were walking out near the creek, and along came a hungry wolf.”

Storyteller. Now it held a value, but in her family it had been a curse and she touched with her tongue the scar on the inside of her lip from the smack she’d gotten the first time her father had caught her doing it.

The men were all silent, listening to her, no longer cursing even under their breaths.

“The wolf said, Owl, you are a sage of the forest, and I respect that, but I am hungry and so, I will eat your companion instead.” Gabrielle said. “But the owl spread his wings, and opened his beak and flew right at the wolf, right into his teeth and his claws, and a horrible noise came up.”

“The owl was an idiot.” Xena called back. “Doves are a quarter dinar a dozen.”

Gabrielle gave the queen’s back a little scratch with her fingers. “The wolf was huge, and the owl had no chance.” She went on. “But he was brave, and he kept fighting, and then all of a sudden, the dove flew in, and started pecking at the wolf’s eyes.”

“Good for ‘er!” The closest soldier said.

“There is no way a dove would ever peck the eyes of a wolf.” The queen shook her head. “Where do you get this stuff from?”

“Well, if you were a dove, you’d peck a wolf’s eyes.” Gabrielle said, reasonably.

“If I was a what?” Xena paused in her relentless mangling of foliage and glowered at her lover, who ruined the moment by giving her an unseen hug. “I’ll give you a dove, you little...” She turned and shoved past a dense thicket, almost overbalancing when it gave way and she stumbled onto a white path double the breadth of her shoulders.

“Oh.” Gabrielle scrambled out after her. “You found it!”

Xena settled the staff at her side. “Of course I did.” She covered her startlement, realizing she’d headed into the forest at a deeper angle than she’d thought. Now out of the trees, she could see the irregular edge of the rise that hid the coastline, and, as she turned around, the far entrance that would let the army through in some semblance of order. “There. See?”

The men nodded, looking around. “Good path then, Xena.” One said. “Could take the whole army here, nobody’d see a thing.”

“Exactly.” The queen nodded. “All right, let’s get a move on, now that we can get a move on.” She started down the path, pathetically glad to be out in the open again, even if it was on a narrow path between hedgerows and a forest. “So. You gonna finish telling us how the owl croaked?”

Gabrielle settled her cloak around her shoulders and ran her fingers through her hair to rid it of the twigs and leaves that had settled over her. “Well, he didn’t.” She said. “See, the dove blinded the wolf, and he let go of the owl, because he was afraid of the dark.”

Xena rolled her eyes, out of sight of the rest of them.

“So the owl and the dove escaped into the forest, and they became heroes to all the other little animals who were afraid of the wolf.”

Xena rolled her eyes again.

“And so, I guess the moral of that story is.. “ Gabrielle’s voice was suddenly different, a touch deeper. “That with love, anything is possible.”

The queen could feel the silence behind her, as her consort’s words faded quietly into the shadows, altering a foolish child’s tale into a truth that hammered at the skin on the back of her neck as she thought about what those words really meant to her.

Did Gabrielle know, truly know, how relevant those words were? Did she understand that it was only that nit piggly detail that had kept Xena from giving in to death’s coaxing, under that mountain, all those months ago?

She’d been so tired. So shamed, at leading them into that trap. Death would have been all too welcome, rather than face that disgrace except she’d had to listen to that little voice pleading with her not to leave.

Her pride, surrendering without even a token whimper. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.” The queen said, with a faint chuckle. “Now come up with something less sappy and more gory before I start puking.”

“Xena.”

“C”mon, c’mon, middle of the night in a forest full of spiders aint’ no time to be sappy.” Xena cut her off.

“Well.” Gabrielle took an extra step to keep up. “I know one about a warthog.”

The men behind her started chuckling.

“A warthog?” Xena’s voice was a mix of resignation and disbelief.

“It’s gory. Trust me.”

**

The breeze shifted, freshening and fluttering their cloaks as it came straight down the path now. Xena lifted her face into it, striding ahead across the path, a mixture of sand and rocks that shifted faintly under her weight with a soft hiss and crunch.

Gabrielle caught up with her, having run out of stories for the moment. “What’s that smell?” She asked, lifting a hand into the wind.

“Water.”

The blond woman frowned. “I’ve never smelled water like that before.” She objected.

“No.” The queen chuckled softly. “You’ve never seen water like this before either, trust me.” She twitched her nose at the familiarity. “Listen, you hear that?”

Gabrielle tilted her head, hearing at first nothing but their own footsteps. “No, well.. “ She paused, then, as she detected something else. Behind the rustling of the forest to their right, and the sound of the wind against the scrub to their right, she heard something strange.

Something soft, and rhythmic, a roar and crash unlike anything else she’d ever listened to. “What is it?”

Xena came to a break in the scrub, and she turned, giving Gabrielle a nudge. “Climb up there.” She indicated the rise. “Hold up, the rest of you. Take a break.”

Puzzled, Gabrielle looked at the queen, then she shook her head and did as she was told, going to the rise and starting to scramble up it. She’d made it a few steps before she heard Xena behind her and then a hand gripped her belt and she was being carried up ward like she was little more than a sack. “Urf!”

“Haven’t got all day.” The queen said, as they reached the top of the rise and rose into the full strength of the wind coming off the ocean. “There.”

“There what? I ..” Gabrielle managed to get her feet under her and she stood up, pulling aside the folds of cloak that had covered her head as she turned her head into the wind. The scent was far stronger now, and she could see why. “Oh, my gods. Wow.”

Spreading before them was a rocky escarpment that plunged down into what seemed to her an endless, shifting, surface full of white highlights and motion, reflecting the starlight back at them in a rush of restless surging waves.

It seemed to go on forever, from the curving coastline that jutted out ahead of where they were and blocked their view that way, back past where she could see anything but darkness in the direction they’d come from.

“That’s the sea.” Xena remarked. “Water as far as you can look, and you can’t drink a drop of it.”

Gabrielle was loathe to turn her head. “Really? Why?”

“Full of salt.” The queen answered. “Bitch to travel on. There’s your damn volcano.” She pointed to a shadow on the horizon. “See?”

Gabrielle blinked a few times, then she stared at the shadow, seeing a sudden glow on the top of it, and a flash as sparks blew up into the formless clouds. “Wow.” She murmured. “It sort of looks like our campfire in the morning.”

Xena had folded her arms over her chest, her eyes regarding the sea, and it’s mysteries with an enigmatic calm. “Yeah.” She said. “C’mon. We’ve got ground to cover yet.” She turned and started back down the rise, using the staff to ease her path.

For a moment, Gabrielle stood alone in the face of the wind, and she allowed the feeling of being on the edge of all that vast unknown fill her, closing her eyes and spreading her arms out to it as she filled her lungs with that strange, pungent air.

This was what she’d hoped for. This was what her imagination had been craving, sights and sounds and smells to feed her inner eye with new possibilities.

“Gabrielle.”

“Sorry.” She turned around and trotted after her companion, who was waiting impatiently a few steps down the slope. “It’s just so amazing.”

A sarcastic response trembled on her lips for just a moment, then Xena smiled instead, belatedly remembering her own first reaction to the sight. She put her arm around Gabrielle as they half slid, half climbed back to the path, and rejoined the soldiers. “Maybe I’ll take you sailing on it sometime.”

Gabrielle grinned in pure reaction, winding her arm around the queen’s waist as they joined the others. “Awesome.”

Xena chuckled as she led the way around the bend in the path past the break, and started on a slight downslope she knew would lead to the plain and the port city that was her ultimate goal. She relaxed a little, tossing her head to clear her wind blown hair back and sniffed a little as the wind shifted again, this time coming from the landside.

At once, she stiffened. “Hold it.” She lifted her hand and stopped in the middle of the path as her senses fought to make sense of the new information flooding into them.

She’d expected trees, and earth, and perhaps livestock. To find the scent of men, and horses, and field tent hides shocked her, and she considered the possibilities carefully before she spoke. “Okay.” She finally said. “Now here’s what we came for.”

“Majesty?” One of the men asked, hesitantly.

The queen started forward, moving now with more caution. She held a hand up for silence, and made her way along the path to the edge of the trees, where they could see an opening. She slowed as she reached it, and tucked her body behind the last tree before she peered out, the faint pearl gray of the coming dawn outlining the plains below them.

And, then, she slowly exhaled. In the faint light, an army was revealed, spread across the plains in all its brutal, functional glory, its source and intent and direction focused clearly on the valley they’d just come from.

“Bigods.” Brendan whispered. “Bigods, you knew it.” He turned his head towards Xena. “All the hurrying.”

“You did know.” Gabrielle blurted. “You said something was out here.”

So I did. Xena leaned her cheek against the bark, reviewing the mass of men, easily triple the size of her own force. “Well.” She sighed. “I was looking for a challenge.”

“Bigods found one.” Brendan exhaled.

“Mm.” His queen agreed. “Next time maybe I’ll just try learning croquet instead. This is going to be a bigger bitch than I am.”

Gabrielle stared at the army, and swallowed, unsure she’d wanted quite this much new experience in quite so graphic a way. “Oh boy.”

“Mm.” Xena felt a moment of wry self knowledge. “Guess we’ll find out if my rep’s worth anything anymore, huh?” She muttered. “Just goes to show ya, Gabrielle. Be careful what you ask for.”

“Yikes.”

“Hm.”

**

Part 10

A thousand things were going through Xena's mind, as she threaded her way back through the trees they'd so laboriously fought through earlier, heading back to the horses.

Were the horses still there? Had they been found by the army's scouts? Why hadn't the merchants said anything about an invasion? How could she have been so...

So what? The queen brushed a bit of moss out of her way with an impatient motion. She'd sensed there was something out there, practically driven everyone nuts to get out here and find it, and who knew? Here it was.

They hadn't been there long. There was no smell of a long encampment, and she'd seen no permanent structures, just travel cookpits and a few hanging waterbags and now that made her wonder if her timing had just been that perfect that she'd met them just as they started her way?

Incredible. Absurd. Almost as absurd as Bregos ending up hiding in Gabrielle's hometown cesspit.

The men walking behind her were silent, their mood sober as they undoubtedly absorbed the knowledge their spring campaign had just altered into something else entirely.

Gabrielle, too, was quiet as she stuck to Xena's heels, once again holding her staff and using it to walk with.

It was all very serious, Xena thought, appropriate to the situation. She bore the somber silence for a few steps more, before she glanced behind her. "Hey." She spoke in a normal tone. "Lighten up, willya? You're making me think you doubt my ability to get us out of this damn mess."

Gabrielle squirmed up next to her, scraping herself against an inconvenient tree. "I think we're all just so amazed that you knew all about them." She explained. "Or.. Well, at least I'm amazed."

Xena snorted.

"But, Xena, that's really incredible." The blond woman insisted. "How did you know? I remember you telling me back in the castle you knew something was going to attack us,"

How had she known? Xena turned sideways to get between overgrown limbs. There had been hints, yes, word of new traders from afar sniffing around and a lack of the casual traders she'd always come to expect from the port city. Merchant trains had come through, but in smaller numbers, and the odd lone traveler had vanished leaving this route conspicuously barren.

Something hadn't felt right about that, but it had been winter, and the passes were difficult, and it could have been coincidence at any rate. Maybe there were more lucrative markets up the river past the port, after all.

So what had put that nightmare in her thoughts? Xena had almost believed it was her own insecurity, right up until the wind had blown in her face and made the images all too real. She glanced around, then looked at her smaller companion. "Damned if I know." She admitted, in a wry whisper. "Sometimes you just get a feeling in your gut."

Gabrielle looked thoughtful at that, then she nodded a little bit, as they started through the last layer of trees.

It was now almost dawn, and the impenetrable darkness had been replaced by a gray, misty light that showed just how overgrown the forest was and just how incredibly clever Xena had been in guiding them through it.

On either side of the path they'd taken were rock filled gullies, and Gabrielle shook her head again in amazement as she watched her boots scuff the broken bits of wood they'd caused out of her way.

"Sh." Xena raised her hand and slowed, as they neared the edge of the forest. "Let's make sure we don't have any surprises waiting." She stopped entirely, and turned. "Everyone.. " Her eyes went directly to Gabrielle's face. "Stay here."

Once she was relatively sure she was going to be obeyed, she turned and started forward again, this time with far more caution. For a moment, it felt strange, and then as though the years were peeling back from her senses, she twitched her shoulders and remembered what it was like to be the scout the army was depending on.

She felt her breathing slow, to the pattern of the wind around her as she moved in rhythm with the limbs to either side of her, pulling her cloak around her body to conceal her armor and weapons.

She focused her attention ahead of her, flicking her eyes back and forth across the edge line of the trees looking for motion that didn't belong there. Her ears cocked, catching a faint rustling, and she cursed the still air that remained mute of the telltale scent of horses.

She went still, listening, catching the soft rustling again, but it was too vague for her to identify the source. Horses? Or men waiting to spit her with a spear? Xena laughed silently at her bravado and eased forward again, ducking under an overhanging branch and as a precaution, drawing her dagger from it's forearm sheath and closing her fingers around it's slim, balanced hilt.

In these trees, branches so close around her, her sword would be pretty much useless. The dagger, with it's razor sharp double edge and center blood channel was just a flick of her wrist away from a more productive protection.

She wasn't sure it would do much if she ended up facing a line of crossbows but it wouldn't be the first time and she doubted it would be the last, either. Her luck seemed to run that way. "Okay." She murmured to herself. "Let's see what we got."

Around her, the forest was silent, with not even a bird or cricket to distract her from the narrow path ahead of her. She walked down it, boots automatically silent on the leaf strewn dirt as her fighting instincts woke and her skin started to tingle.

Ahead of her there were two trees, with just enough space between them for her to squeeze through. She aimed for them, moving from trunk to trunk to keep as much of her body hidden as possible from anyone peering in from without.

Just as she got to the trees, she let her cloak slip off her shoulder, freeing her sword arm that she cocked, the dagger held lightly between her fingers as she rested her other hand on the trunk of the forest's edge tree and cautiously eased her head around it, peering out into the overgrown clearing where they'd left the horses.

It was empty. Xena cursed under her breath and studied the ground in front of her, watching the tall grasses for any sign of motion, and turning her head a little to listen as hard as she could for any signs of trouble.

Nothing. Behind her, as though chastened by it's tardiness, a bird burst into song nearly making Xena burst into the clearing with every hair on her head on end. She barely stifled the urge to turn around and nail the little bastard with her dagger and decided to cut to the chase instead.

Boldly, she stepped out into the dawn light, clearing the trees and sweeping her eyes around just as a motion to her left alerted her and her reactions triggered into a violent response. The onrushing

motion was large and she dropped the dagger and went for her sword before she'd even completely turned to face it, drawing the blade and extending it in a sweep.

She let out a yell, as her mind recognized what her instincts were reacting to and only just barely scared her horse into shying left just as he would have had his ears cut off. "You stupid bastard!"

Tiger snorted and hopped off the ground with his front legs, shaking his head at her reaction to his greeting.

Xena sheathed her sword as she fended off the stallion's head butt, grabbing him by the mane and growling in his ear. She looked past him to find Patches trotting up, and behind the pony, as if being led by him, the rest of the horses.

The queen watched them approach, glad they seemed unharmed, then she looked behind her to find the space between her and the forest empty.

She looked at the horses, then at the forest. "They pick a damned time to actually listen to me, huh?" She sighed as she turned and stomped back over to the trees. "Get out here!" She backed up as Gabrielle appeared, peeking up through her blond bangs with an expression remarkably like her pony's.

"Well, you did say..."

"And when did that ever matter to you?" Xena turned and surveyed the grasslands. The challenge now, she knew was to get them all back to the army without giving away their presence. The road they'd ridden on before the forest seemed now far too exposed to her, given the growing daylight.

Should she make a run for it, and hope for the best, or try to find some back pathway, with its unknown dangers?

Should she break up the group and send them back one by one?

Gabrielle eased past her, letting her hands rest on Xena's hips before she went over to where Patches was now stolidly cropping grass. "Boy, I'm glad to see these guys." She gave her pony a hug around his neck. "That would have been a really long walk back."

Xena studied her lover, whose back was turned to her, letting her eyes flick over the set of her shoulders. "All right." She made a show of looking at the sky. "We can't risk losing our jump on them." She leaned on Tiger and indicated an escarpment to the right of where they were, still shy of the slope to the road. "We'll hole up there for the day, get back to the army once it gets dark."

Brendan nodded. "Aye, 'sgood idea." He said. "Send the lad here back to warn em, maybe? One should get through, and tell em to keep hidden. Good thing you had us camp in the trees there, Xena."

"Mm." The queen eyed the soldier in question. "Yeah, but take the armor off. If you do get caught, better you be a goatherd."

The soldier touched his fist to his chest, then started taking off his rugged leather and chain mail armor. Xena watched him a moment, then she walked over to where Gabrielle was standing and leaned against her, putting her hands on Patches back on either side of her lover's. "So."

"What are we going to do now?" Gabrielle asked, softly. "Will they come and attack us?"

"Looks like that's their plan." Xena said. "So we have to figure out a way to stop them, and run them back wherever they came from."

Gabrielle turned around to face her, leaning back against Patches shaggy hide as she was pressed belly to belly with the queen. She looked up into Xena's eyes, and managed a small grin. "I'm sure you'll figure it out." She said. "But boy, there was a lot of them there, huh?"

There sure were. "Meh." Xena shrugged. "Size isn't everything." She smiled at her lover. "As I've found out."

Gabrielle blushed, and her eyes dropped, briefly, then lifted again. "When we get to the rocks over there, I can make some tea. I brought a packet of leaves in my bag." She said. "I think everyone would like that..it's been a long walk."

"Mm." Xena mused. "It's gonna get a lot longer." She warned. "So let's get moving." She took up Tiger's reins and pulled herself up into his saddle. "Sooner we get under cover, the better." She marked a route up to the escarpment. "Stay near the trees."

The youngest soldier, now stripped to his leggings and undershirt, swung himself aboard his equally stripped down horse. "Majesty, I will tell them." He said. "And too, I will watch for Jax, he should be headin after us b'now."

Xena nodded, raising her hand and sending him off, waiting for him to get to the edge of the forest before she turned and lead the way up towards her chosen hiding spot, those same thousand thoughts still buzzing through her mind.

Was she holing up just to delay having to decide what to do?

She looked sideways at Gabrielle, who was seated on Patches back, leaning against her saddlebow as the pony ambled along at Tiger's side. After a moment, the blond woman straightened up, releasing a long breath and lifting a hand to rub her eyes.

No, it was worse than that. "Shave the kittens first, huh?"

"Did you say something?"

"No."

**

Gabrielle knelt beside the tiny, shielded fire, tipping the tin of boiling water over the leaves she'd carefully crushed in the bottom of Xena's travel mug, breathing in the scent of the herbs as it rose to bathe her face.

They were on the lee side of the escarpment, both the forest, and the road invisible from where she was sitting, meaning they were out of sight from any watchers as well.

The sun was spreading over the landscape, and a cool breeze blew against her body, reminding her all over again of just how tired she was. Her eyes were burning, and it was hard to keep focused, when all she really wanted to do was curl up somewhere and go to sleep.

This wasn't a camp like she was used to with the army. The soldiers had hobbled their horses in a small patch of scrub grass, and chosen places to watch from, leaving her to fiddle with the fire once it had been made after accepting her offering of tea leaves.

Xena had chosen a flat topped rock whose top was even with her head to sit on, the position giving her a view of the road heading to the port city and she'd settled herself atop it with her back to the fire, her expression a trifle distant as she gazed down the slope.

Gabrielle felt a bit out of place, not wanting to intrude on Xena's thoughts, and not being comfortable sitting with the soldiers. She decided she'd bring Xena her tea, then go join Patches in his sun drenched area for a while.

She added some honey from her small hoard and stirred the tea, then she slowly got to her feet and walked over to where Xena was seated, holding the cup between both hands. The queen looked around as she approached, and Gabrielle nearly tripped and dumped the tea as she found herself caught in that pale blue regard. "Oops."

Xena chuckled briefly, reaching out to steady her and take the cup. "Thanks, muskrat." She slid over and patted the rock at her side. "C'mon up."

Gabrielle looked at the rock, then up at Xena, then down at herself. "Should I go get my horse to stand on first?" She tipped her head back and peered at the queen. "How am I supposed to get up there?"

The queen could hear the faintest edge of exasperation in her companion's voice, and it intrigued her. She set her cup down and swung her legs over the other side of the rock, bracketing Gabrielle between them. "Grab on."

Gabrielle just had time to take hold of her legs before Xena clamped them firmly around her, then flexed her thigh muscles and lifted her lover up into the air, watching her eyes widen as she extended her legs straight, then she slowly rolled onto her back, bringing Gabrielle even with the top of the rock. "There."

Gabrielle got her footing as she was released, and promptly sat down next to the queen. "Thanks." She said, with a little sigh. She stretched her legs out and watched the sun make warm patterns over fabric over them.

Xena picked up her cup and sipped her tea, easing herself back to lean against the rock wall behind her and crossing her ankles. "I'm gonna climb the side of this hill here. You up for it?"

Gabrielle turned her head and looked at Xena.

The queen waited, simply watching her face.

"Not really." The blond haired woman admitted. "I'd probably fall off and end up down there in a dozen piieces." She pionted at the bottom of the escarpment. She leaned on her elbows again, drawing her legs up crossed under her. "Sorry about that."

"Ahh." Xena reached out and threaded her fingers through Gabrielle's hair. "Nice move, muskrat. We finally took a step forward instead of going round and round with each other." She saw Gabrielle peeking at her from the corner of her eye in a mild apprehension, and she added a smile to reassure her.

"You're not going to climb the wall?" Gabrielle asked, after a moment's hesitation.

"Nope." THE queen took another sip of her tea. "I'm going to sit here and try to figure out a battle plan."

"You're going to stay right here?" Gabrielle asked. "For a while?"

"Sure."

"Great." The blond woman lay down on her side and put her head down on Xena's thigh, exhaling in blissful relief as she closed her eyes. "I'm so tired my eyes are crossing."

Xena looked quickly around, then down at this unexpected intrusion on her person. The other soldiers were carefully not looking at her, and she felt somewhat hoisted on her own gallows at the result of her

teasing. When she'd coaxed Gabrielle up on the rock her intention had been to get a little snuggling in but damn it, it was supposed to have been on her terms.

Gabrielle put her hand on Xena's knee, rubbing the surface just above the heavy armor covering the joint. The back of her head was pressed against Xena's stomach and before she could really think about it the queen ran her fingers through the thick blond locks again, dismissing the incongruity of it all.

As her companion's body relaxed, and her eyes closed, Xena could feel an odd sense of peace settle over her as well, and as she took a sip from her cup her thoughts began to fall into order, long dormant instincts coming alive again as she studied the ground before her.

It was odd, having to switch from the mentality of an attacker, to one of a defender. Xena wasn't dumb enough not to realize that's exactly what she was now, her force the only thing standing between the invaders and her realm.

So there would be no attack on the port city. The queen ticked that ambivalence off her list. She had perhaps a day to put together a plan to beat the other army and figure out past that what their support was so there wouldn't be an unpleasant surprises coming behind them.

Her eyes swept over the slopes, finding spots to put troops, and places she could build quick redoubts for her archers to hide behind. She could send a force through the path they'd found and ambush them from the side, and she could even pull back behind the pass, and wait to ambush them there.

The one thing she couldn't do is meet them in force head to head. Xena had confidence in herself, and in her men, but the odds were tipped too heavily and an all out attack would end up with a lot of dead bodies and she hadn't that many to spare.

Damn Bregos. The queen cursed under her breath. Damn the man for fracturing her army right at the worst possible time and...

Xena blinked, her body going very still as her eyes flicked over the landscape almost unseeingly. She heard Brego's laughter in her mind's eye, and felt a chill go down her back. Was that what he'd meant? That he'd sold her out?

Sold them all out?

She kept up her gentle sorting of Gabrielle's hair. After a minute or two, she shook her head and went back to scanning the horizon. Bregos hadn't been that sharp, to think that far ahead. Surviving on scrub, someone had probably made him an offer for information, and he'd jumped at it.

Brendan came over to her makeshift throne and leaned his arms against it. He looked at Gabrielle, now fast asleep sprawled over Xena's leg, then gave his queen a smile.

"Shut up." Xena responded pleasantly. "Just be glad I didn't decide to get a pet snake again."

The old captain chuckled, then he sobered. "Figger they should start sending patrols through here, Xena. Surprised they haven't already."

"Mm."

"Don't get that."

Xena drank the last of her tea. "They were waiting for something." She said. "Probably a report from our slimy ex general"

Brendan reacted a little in surprise. "You think he was in with em?" He asked. "A traitor?" He seemed doubtful. "Didn't set him for that, Xena. If nothing, he loved the land here. "

"Exactly." The queen said, dryly. "Why else hang around here all winter? You don't think he was going to knock on the gates at spring solstice and bring me flowers, do ya?"

Brendan shook his head. "Bastard."

A soft, birdlike whistle brought both them to alert silence. Xena's eyes caught the motion first, and she pointed across the forest to the road, where a mounted force was emerging and heading towards them. "Ya jinxed us, damn you."

Brendan cursed softly, as first two, then four then eight pair of horses rode into view, mounted by armored riders who fanned out as they cleared the trees in a an attitude of watchful alertness. "They get past into the next valley, they'll find us, for sure."

"Mhm." Xena agreed. "They look like they know their business." She flexed her hand. "So I guess they just won't get into the next valley." She added. "Tell the men to take off their livery, and get their weapons ready."

"Eh?"

The queen's eyes twinkled. "Theres supposed to be a band of raiders in the damn valley, Brendan." She booted him in the shoulder. "So let's go raid." She watched her captain retreat, then she waggled one booted foot in contentment. "It's always good to draw the first blood. Remember that, Gabrielle."

Oblivious to this bit of wisdom, Gabrielle remained in her dreams, not stirring when Xena put her arm over her sleeping shoulders, the pale blue eyes watching the troops with undisguised anticipation.

**

Gabrielle felt very conspicuous, riding ahead of the soldiers and Xena towards the road. She wasn't at all sure this plan was really a good one, but Xena hadn't really given her a choice so here she was, on Patches back, heading for this armored troop that had so far not noticed them.

She was scared. She felt very exposed, and for the first time since they'd left the castle it ocured to her that chances were getting better that she'd never live to return to it.

Suddenly, they were noticed, and she drew in a breath as the last set of mounted soldiers from the enemy army turned in their saddles to watch their slow approach.

Behind her, the soldiers were all talking casually, as though they were the household guard of the merchants wife she was supposed to be. Xena was near the back of them, her cloak pulled over her armor and her dark hair pulled back into a knot and tucked out of view.

Gabrielle watched as the entire enemy force stopped, and turned to wait for them. She kept her hands on her reins, resting against the saddlehorn and wished fervently that she was still sleeping on Xena's lap, and it all was some sort of bizarre dream.

"Keep steady."

Xena's voice, low but vibrant, reached her. Gabrielle concentrated on taking deep breaths, and tried to figure out how a merchant's wife would act if they were out on the road in the middle of the wilderness - assuming a merchants wife would actually be out in the middle of nowhere, of course.

But, Xena was counting on her. So. Gabrielle tried to stay relaxed, studying the group of soldiers ahead of her. They were all wearing chain mail armor and they had a red surcoat over it, with some kind of design in black on the front, and they looked very organized and well kept.

Not like all Xena's men, in fact. Gabrielle pondered. Their army had good armor, and everyone took good care of their weapons, but their gear was obviously from different campaigns and eras, and some had leather scale armor like hers, while others had chain, and still others, metals plates.

The enemy soldiers were uniformly bearded, and their skin was darker hued, as though they'd spent a lot of time in the sun. The one nearest to her now raised his hand in her direction. "Halt."

What would a merchant's wife do? Gabrielle kept her reins loose, and allowed Patches to amble on as though she hadn't heard the man though she thought she heard a familiar, melodic chuckle from behind her.

The soldier rode out a little ahead of his troops, and came directly across her path. "Hold up there!"

Gabrielle continued riding, hearing hoofbeats coming up a little closer to her and recognizing Tiger's distinctive snorts. She could see the man much more clearly now, and she noticed he wore a silver chain around his neck. Did that mean he was in charge?

The rest of the soldiers had turned and now they drew up in a rough circle, watching them approach with wary eyes. Gabrielle waited until Patches' hooves hit the road before she slowed him up a little, pulling him to a halt almost nose to nose with the enemy captain's horse. "Hello."

The man stared at her. "What road do you take?" He asked, gruffly. His voice held an accent strange to her ears, but after all, since this was the furthest she'd ever been from her birthplace that wouldn't have taken much.

"What?" Gabrielle asked.

"What road do you take." The man repeated, giving her erstwhile guard a cursory look.

Gabrielle looked to the right, and then to the left, and then behind her. She turned her gaze back to the soldier. "How many are there around here?" She asked, in a reasonable tone. "I only see one. Is there some other road you know of?"

The man reined in his horse, who was tossing his head. "What direction are you traveling." He clarified. "We didn't expect to see anyone on the road. Where are you bound?" His voice became more insistent. "To the sea? Or inland."

"Why do you want to know?" Gabrielle countered, aware at the edge of her senses that Xena was edging up on her right hand side, and somehow she knew the queen was pleased with her. "Who are you anyway, and what are you doing here?" She asked, raising her voice a little. "I've never seen outfits like that before.. Where are you from, and where are you going?"

"That's not your affair." The man said. "Do you live around here?"

"I have business to attend to." Gabrielle tried to sound like some of the nobles wives she'd heard around the castle. "Please let us pass."

The enemy soldiers had gathered closer to listen, watching her curiously as they fingered their weapons.

"We also have business." The lead soldier said. "Have your guard put down their weapons. You best come with us." He motioned to the other men. "Take them."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Gabrielle started to back Patches up. "Really, I.."

The soldier's eyes flicked over her, and then past her and as his hand went to his sword hilt she felt motion to her right and she instinctively flattened herself over Patches neck as Tiger surged past her and there was noise, and yelling and clashing metal, and right almost in her ear, the sound of a crossbow.

It was sudden, and very violent, and she had to force herself to lift her head and peek up and over Patches head, to find the enemy soldiers battling ferociously against Xena and her much smaller force.

Chaos. Random motion and once again she was lost in it, helpless and useless in the melee where her companions and Xena were battling.

Brendan was on foot next to her, shooting over his mounts back at the close in battle, releasing and reloading his crossbow with stolid precision. Gabrielle stared at him for a minute, then she turned and saw Xena in a horrific fight with two of the enemy soldiers with two more charging right at her and..

She didn't really know what was happening to her, but the next thing she knew she was throwing herself off Patches, and sliding her stick out from it's holders as she bolted right at the four men who were pouncing on her.

Xena was fully occupied with one man's sword pressing against hers, and a second's mace she'd just deflected with a kick and she didn't have a spare arm to grab the third man about to crash into Tiger's side. "Yah! Ya bastard!"

Gabrielle lifted her stick and squeezed between the shifting horses, aiming at the third man and whacking him on the arm as hard as she could, oblivious to her own safety. She saw his head turn, and realized it was the guy in charge as he jerked to one side, reaching for where she'd hit him.

She hit him again, and then again, as he tried to haul his horses head around and get away from her, raising his sword but unable to get an angle on her as she jabbed him in the side with the end of her stick.

Another man rushed at her. She turned and started to back up, but the other end of her stick hit some thing hard, and then the man coming at her ran right into the front end of it as she jerked and almost tripped.

The soldier's horse reared, and he toppled off backwards and Gabrielle only just escaped being trampled by his horse as the animal bolted past her. She looked frantically around, finding bodies to either side of her and Xena a length away, standing in her stirrups to meet the full speed charge of an enemy soldier, with a lance, heading right at her.

Gabrielle froze, the scene slowing in front of her as she watched the barbed lance tip careen directly for Xena's chest, and as the queen's name was ripped from her throat Xena gracefully tucked her shoulder down and let the tip go past her, then she straightened and swept her blade around in a backhanded motion that caught the man's neck just above his armor and separated his head from her shoulders with a sound like branches cracking.

The head flew free and tumbled in the air, and she watched it bounce within a hand span of her in horrified fascination, the eyes rolling and their lids fluttering as blood spattered everywhere.

A yell. Her head swung around to see the last two soldiers breaking off and lashing their horses, heading back the way they'd come as two of Xena's men chased them down.

Brendan let out a long whistle, and the men peeled off, clearing the way for a well placed bolt to take the first of the two right out of his saddle. He started to reload, but Xena let out a whistle of her own,

and half stood in her stirrups, unhooking the round weapon from her hip and letting it fly with an almost casual flick of her wrist.

The sun caught it, sending brilliant sparkles everywhere as it whipped across the grass, catching the lone runner across the back of his neck and exploding in a halo of blood, then, incredibly, arching away as he fell from the saddle and whirling back the way it came, coming to rest in Xena's hand as she caught it in one gloved fist.

For a moment, it was quiet over the tiny battlefield. Then Xena sniffed, and let her round weapon drop back onto its hook after she wiped its edge on her cloak. She half turned in her saddle to look at Gabrielle. "Well well."

Gabrielle put the end of her stick down and leaned on it, as she looked around her. Xena's men were riding back over to them, and she realized they all were looking at her with very peculiar expressions.

"The muskrat has fangs." Xena chuckled. "Who'd have guessed?" She reached over and ruffled Gabrielle's hair. "You all right?"

Gabrielle decided what she really felt like was throwing up. She walked over to where Patches was standing and leaned against him, burying her face in the thick coat on his neck as she felt her whole body begin to shake.

Brendan came over to stand at Tiger's side, settling his crossbow onto his back. "Brave, that little one." He commented soft. "Went right at em."

Xena studied the results of her ambush, counting herself relatively pleased with them. "Wish wars were all this easy." She slid down from Tiger's back and dusted her hands off, wiping some of the dried blood from them as she walked over to where Gabrielle was standing and putting her arms around her.

"W.. Was that wrong?" Gabrielle asked. "What I did?"

"No." Xena gave her a warm hug, men be damned. "You did great." She released the blond woman enough to let her turn around, so they were facing each other. "You kept those bastards focused right where I wanted them until we were in their faces. Good job."

Gabrielle tried not to look around at all the dead bodies.

"And then." Xena leaned down and touched her forehead to her lover's. "And then, you finally put that damn stick to some use."

"I just wanted to keep them away from you."

The queen smiled. "I know." She lowered her voice. "Gabrielle, there's two kinds of people. Runners and fighters. It's not something you choose."

Gabrielle remembered, a little, how it felt to swing her stick and try to hurt someone. "I don't think I'm a fighter." She admitted, drawing in a shaky breath. "I just didn't know what else to do."

Xena tilted her head and gave her lover a kiss. "Exactly." She patted her cheek. "Get up on the runt. Long as we're out here, we might as well ride, in case they send anyone out to remind this bunch what they were supposed to do."

"Get the horses." Brendan ordered, swinging up on his own mount. "Leave the bodies where they lie. Let em wonder."

Gabrielle slowly got up onto Patches back, lifting up the stick she'd leaned against her pony's shoulder. She looked at it, then she looked at Xena, watching the queen watch her. She knew the men were also watching her, and now there was something a little different in their eyes when they did.

Was it respect? Gabrielle exhaled, as she awkwardly tucked the stick under her thigh into it's holders. She didn't think she'd done anything to be respected for.

"See?" Xena said, her voice carrying back on the wind. "What the Hades do I need an army for? I've got Gabrielle the Mad Muskrat watching my ass."

Gabrielle managed a smile, at the low hoots of approval, and decided to put the feelings aside until she had time to sit quietly and figure out what to do about them, since she knew she really wasn't a fighter, and Xena seemed to think she wasn't a runner.

Maybe she was just nuts. That would probably explain everything.

**

Xena found herself glad to see the army's camp when she rode past the fringe of trees that hid it from the road. She was already thinking about how to move the troops, and where to station them, and the thought of the oncoming war had pushed past her uncertainties to a core of thrumming excitement.

She sensed the same level of excitement as she rode into the camp, men were making themselves ready all around the central firepit and a muted cheer rose up as she was spotted.

She dismounted and handed Tiger's reins to the groom who ran up and stripped her gauntlets off as she turned in a graceful circle, approving of the activity around her. "Glad to see everyone didn't just go fishing while I was gone."

Brendan dismounted next to her, also in a visible good humor. "Not for dinner, at any rate." He chuckled. "Move out at dusk, then?"

Xena nodded. "Double time on the arrows." She said. "We're gonna need every damn last one of them."

"Aye."

The whirl of motion circled around Gabrielle as she quietly got off Patches back, and murmured a thanks to the man who came to take him away for her. She took her stick from it's holders and walked past the men busy sharpening swords and banging dents out of armor, passing between tall, moss trunked trees until she reached the door to Xena's tent and passed inside it.

It was quiet in the tent, and cool, the thick hide blocking out most of the light and rendering the inside in a dim, ochre peace. Gabrielle went over to one of the camp stools and sat down on it, letting her feet slide forward and cradling her stick in the crook of her arm.

She studied the surface of the thing, slowly reaching up to touch the dents near one end and the scuff marks along the place where she'd struck the soldier. The events of the morning now seemed like a dream to her, and she struggled to remember what had happened, and what she'd said.

She remembered being scared, and then just being in the moment with no time for anything but following her heart right to Xena's side into the teeth of the fight. Where had her fear gone then? Had she even thought about what would happen if that soldier she'd smacked had turned around and gutted her?

Gabrielle exhaled, and leaned her cheek against the staff. "I don't understand what's happening to me." She said aloud. "I'm not a fighter. I don't want to fight with anyone or hit people. I'm not that kind of person."

She leaned back against the center support pole, deciding to just rest a few minutes before she started getting things ready for Xena to come back to. She was sure the queen would want a wash, and some clean things to wear, and...

Xena paused in the entrance to her pavilion, holding the flap aside as she peered inside. The sunlight behind her spilled in and over the small, disheveled form asleep against the tent pole, staff cradled in her arms.

With a faint chuckle, she stepped inside and let the flap close, walking over to her clothing press and sitting down on the top of it and resting her elbows on her knees.

"Ow." She straightened back up and rubbed the point of elbow where it had impacted against her knee armor, then she unbuckled the piece and removed it, setting it aside to unbuckle the other one. Half of her wanted to wake Gabrielle up so she could talk to her, and find out what was going on inside that little muskrat head.

But the other half of her, that annoying nanny half, realized the kid needed to get some rest if Xena expected her to climb back up on her scrub runt pony at dusk in a few candlemarks and ride out to war with her.

So she kept herself quiet as she took off her armor, standing up to unclasp her cloak and lay it half folded on the garment press. She unclipped her sword and set it down, her fingers brushing affectionately over the well worn hilt as she went over the recent ambush she'd arranged.

It had worked perfectly. Gabrielle's babbling had let them get within sword's reach of the soldiers, and her lover had so distracted the bastards they didn't even know what hit them when Xena and her men attacked.

Perfect. Brilliant. She hadn't even lost a man to a hangnail and they'd killed all of them. She couldn't have asked for a better result if she'd thought of one and to then have Gabrielle top it all off by getting all cutely ferocious in her defense..

Perfect. Xena unlaced her boots, a grin twitching over her lips. She eased the leather off her feet and wiggled her toes, tossing the footwear gently aside as she stood up and unbuckled her chest armor. The metal was splotted with blood, and she debated leaving it that way to ride into battle with, then wrinkled her nose and set it down next to the water basin for a cleaning.

She plunged her hands into the basin and lifted them up, scrubbing her face with the liquid and running her wet hands through her hair. When she put her fingers back in the water, they stained it red, and she realized the small basin wasn't going to really cut it.

Ah well. She picked p a piece of linen and wiped her face off, then wiped down her arms as best as she could from the battle grime. She had a feeling she'd just be getting doused with more blood later in the evening, so was washing it off really worth the time?

She half turned, and glanced back at Gabrielle, then chuckled under her breath again and continued washing off. When she was done, she wiped her hands on the linen and dropped it next to the basin, then she went over to where Gabrielle was slumped and knelt down next to her.

For a brief time, she merely studied her lover, fixing in her mind's eye the gentle innocence of her expression, before she got her arms around Gabrielle's shoulders and under her knees, and stood up with her in her arms.

So deeply asleep she didn't even stir, her breathing slow and regular as Xena crossed the tent and knelt again, letting her burden down onto the fur covered pallet. She unbuckled the hawk's head buckle holding Gabrielle's armor on, then undid the side laces and eased the heavy leather scale off her body.

There were bloodstains on the leather. Xena reached over and draped it next to her own for cleaning, then she leaned on her folded forearms and studied the equally bloodstained undershirt Gabrielle was wearing.

She could take it off, she reasoned, but she knew that would likely wake Gabrielle up even though removing her armor had not as the blond woman was very sensitive to Xena's touch on her bare skin.

On the other hand, she suspected Gabrielle wouldn't really like sleeping in a gore encrusted garment. With a sigh, Xena reached over and unlaced the neck ties on the shirt and started to gather it in her hands, her knuckles brushing over the blond woman's ribs and resulting in an immediate stirring and opening of her eyes. "Hey."

"Uhm.." Gabrielle blinked at her in confusion. "B.. Wh.."

"Shh." Xena put a finger against her lips. "I'm just taking your clothes off."

Gabrielle blinked a few times more. "Just?" She finally asked, reaching up to rub her eyes. "I was dreaming about you."

"Naturally." Xena got the shirt over her head and tossed it over by the armor. "I'd be pretty pissed off if you were dreaming about anyone else." She leaned over and gave Gabrielle a kiss on the lips. "Now, go back to bed. You've only got a candlemark or two and we gotta ride again."

Gabrielle's eyes expressed her reaction to that without words being needed. Xena lifted her hand and traced the still fading bruises on her lover's face, feeling the pressure as Gabrielle leaned into the touch and a bit of surprise as she was suddenly pulled back down for another, longer kiss.

Unexpected, but not unwelcome. She felt Gabrielle's tongue tease against hers and her lungs filled with the blond woman's scent, mixed with a bit of leather and pony still clinging to her skin. "Thought you were tired." She whispered into her ear.

"I am." Gabrielle answered honestly. "But you're better than sleep for that."

"Ooooo." Xena chuckled wickedly. "I love it when you talk dirty to me."

"Is that dirty?"

Xena chuckled again, then drew in an irregular breath as Gabrielle's lips returned to claim hers.

Her body reacted as she felt the warmth of Gabrielle's hands through her leathers, and she gave into the pull and slid onto the pallet, tumbling over her lover as she pulled her over onto her side. "C'mere."

Gabrielle needed no further prompting. She started to work on the laces holding Xena's leathers on as she felt Xena's knee slide between hers, and the queen slowly pulled the drawstring that snugged her leggings around her waist.

She wanted this. She welcomed Xena's lips moving from her face to her neck, teeth gently nipping at her pulse point and sending it racing. Her body was craving sleep, but her soul was craving the

intimacy more, needing it as a bolster against the strangeness and the fear she could feel coming closer and closer to her.

No matter what the danger was, she knew she could find safety in this, in the two of them, and she peeled the leathers back from Xena's powerful shoulders as the queen removed her underwraps and cupped her breast in one hand, rubbing the edge of her thumb over her nipple.

She could smell the faint copper tang of blood on Xena's skin, but the knowledge slid past her consciousness as she tugged the queen's leathers down past her hips and Xena rid herself of them with a sinuous motion, then pressed her body against Gabrielle's in a rush of sensual warmth.

She could hear Xena's breathing quicken, and it started a burning in her own guts as she explored the queen's body and Xena's hand slid up the inside of her thigh.

They would go off to fight again tonight. Maybe they would even meet the other army before the dawn of the new day. Maybe the fight would be horrible.

Maybe they'd get hurt.

Gabrielle felt a pressure building inside her, and she gasped softly as Xena's touch became teasing and intimate.

Maybe as Xena had said to her once, life was better off being lived in the moment you were in. "Gods."

"They wish." The queen snickered. "And whatever you're doing there, keep on doing it."

"You're the queen."

"Oooooo."

**

Xena rested one booted foot against a tree branch as she sat on a fallen log, scooping a spoonful of stew from the wooden bowl resting in her hand. Around her the camp was packed and ready to move, the men all taking this last bit of time to feed themselves and drink their fill of water.

Her pavilion was packed in its wagon, and she was dressed again in her newly brushed out leathers and polished armor, tended by Gabrielle despite her arguments to the contrary that she wanted her lover to rest.

The whole 'you are queen' thing apparently had its limits. Xena ripped off a piece of journeybread and dipped it into the stew, taking a bite of it and enjoying the rich, earthy taste that came from the common pot filled with all the previous days hunting.

Simple food, peasant stuff, but she'd found over the years that whether through preference or just being born what she'd been born as, her body tolerated it better than the frilly constructs and carefully plated fancies of the castle kitchen.

Gabrielle had figured that out right off, much to both their relief since simple things were all the kid knew how to put together for very obvious reasons. It had made for a very pleasant winter since she enjoyed being catered to and Gabrielle seemed to enjoy doing things for her and it certainly gave the tasters a break where they didn't have to risk death for a season.

Worked out for everyone.

Xena popped the last bit of bread into her mouth and picked up her mug, taking a swallow of the ale inside it. She spotted Gabrielle coming back from the cookpit and she started to let out a whistle,

when as though by some sort of magic, the blond woman looked up and turned her head to peer right at Xena, altering her steps in the queen's direction.

She had a bowl and cup in her hands, and she set down the cup as she took a seat on the log next to Xena, and started to pluck chunks of meat from her stew. "I guess we're all ready to go, huh?" She glanced up into the crimson light of the setting sun. "Pretty sunset."

Xena obligingly looked over towards the west. She studied the light and the trees it was disappearing behind, and the sky around it. "What's pretty about it?" She asked, after a moment.

Gabrielle paused in mid chew. "Huh?" She swallowed hastily. "The sky." She said. "It's all those colors, and the sun going behind the trees.. It's beautiful." She added. "Don't you think so??"

The queen selected a bit of meat from her bowl and bit into it. "No." She answered. "Matter of fact, I don't. It's just a damn sky, and some stupid trees, and a bunch of color." She licked her fingers neatly, gazing up over them at Gabrielle. "Get eating. We're almost outta here."

The blond woman put a piece of stew into her mouth and chewed it. "Well, okay." She said, after a brief silence. "So, what do you think is pretty?"

Xena set her bowl down and picked up her mug. "My horse." She said. "My sword."

"Ah."

"You." Xena winked at her, and drained her mug. She got up and reversed the cup, setting it down on top of Gabrielle's head before she patted her on the cheek and swaggered off. "Hurry up!" She called back after her, as she headed for where Tiger was not so patiently waiting.

Gabrielle reached up and removed the cup, her face still tingling from the gentle pat. "Me?" She snorted and shook her head. "That sunset's a lot better looking than I am, Xena." She propped her chin up on her fist. "Especially after not hardly sleeping for two days. I feel like a sheep turd."

The thought of riding all night again made her ache just to think about it. Her bruised body had taken a little solace from her short nap and their lovemaking but now as she tried to get herself ready to travel she wished she'd had just a little while longer to stay in her dreams.

She sighed and plowed her way through her stew, glad of it's filling warmth regardless. She suspected another meal would be a long time coming and she made the most of this one, wiping the bowl clean with the full knot of bread she'd taken from the cooks.

The sunset caught her eye again and she sat there watching it as she finished her mug of ale, as the sky above her started to darken into twilight.

It was pretty. The rich colors painted everything in deep hues, and she allowed herself a long moment of peaceful introspection, one last bit of peace before she gathered herself up and stood, stretching her armor clad body out and giving herself a shake.

"Your grace?"

Gabrielle turned, to find one of the grooms standing there, holding Patches reins. The pony's coat had been cleaned and brushed out, and he was saddled up and ready to go. "Oh. Thanks." She smiled at the groom. "I'm sure he really appreciated that."

The groom grinned at her. "He's a good one, he is." The man said. "Her Ma.." He paused and made a face. "I mean.."

“It’s okay.” Gabrielle went over and scratched Patches between the eyes, smiling when the pony shoved his nose into her stomach. “She just wants everyone to treat her like one of the soldiers, that’s all.”

The groom’s face wrinkled up into confusion. “But she’s the queen.”

“Yeah, I know.” Gabrielle took her waterskin and rinsed a little water into her bowl and cup. “Were you going to say something about her?”

The groom patted a saddle bag on the far side of the pony. “Had this put up for you.” He said. “Be a long ride tonight, I hear.” He lifted a hand and ducked under the nearby tree limbs and disappeared.

Gabrielle put up her utensils and scooted around to the other side of Patches, opening up the bag and peering inside. The scent of bread and fruit rose to her and she felt inside to find mysterious wrapped packets of something or other there as well. “Oo.”

Patches turned his head and looked at her.

“I think there’s a couple of apples in here for you too.” Gabrielle found her good humor magically restored by this bit of thoughtfulness on the part of her queen. It would be a long hard night, to be sure, but Xena would make it bearable somehow. She always did.

Gabrielle led the pony over the log she’d been sitting on and climbed up onto it, shifting herself into the saddle with more or less some kind of ungainly grace. At least she didn’t fall off, and she got her feet into her stirrups and her reins sorted out before she straightened up and started looking around for Xena.

Instead, she found Brendan emerging from the trees, heading her way. She waited for the troop captain to join her, giving him a friendly smile as he came to Patches shoulder and rested his hand on it. “Time to go?”

“Aye.” Brendan agreed. “Ride gets tougher from here now.”

Gabrielle studied his face. “I figured that.” She said. “Will we be fighting soon?”

The troop captain patted Patches neck. “Not long now.” He said. “You had a taste of it this morning, a bit. How did that seem to you?”

How did that seem to her? Gabrielle shifted her leg, feeling the bump of her staff under her knee. “It was scary.” She finally admitted. “But it was all right. You had the hard part.”

Brendan gazed quietly up at her, his gray eyes steady and intent. “Got a good leader.” He said. “Except her Maj’s one blind spot is herself. Doesn’t give a care for her own, eh?”

Gabrielle heard a whistle, and she looked up and over Brendan’s head to see Xena just to one side of the army’s main column, looking her way. “Sometimes, I guess.” She said. “She’s a really great fighter though.”

“Best there is.” The captain said. “But even the best needs someone to watch over em.. And you did that, for sure.”

“Oh, well..”

“Gabrielle.” Brendan leaned forward. “Feller woulda hurt her, if you hadn’t done what you done. She knows it. We wondered, some of us, why she brought you, and now we know.”

“B..”

"None of us, she'd have let do that." He patted her leg. "But you're her lucky charm, you are. Long as you 're with her, she'll be just fine."

Gabrielle watched him walk away in some bemusement, not at all sure Xena would agree with or even appreciate the sentiment. She clucked her tongue and got Patches started, heading over to where Xena was impatiently waiting to start off.

The sun was setting behind them, as they moved through the trees, the horses hooves and the wagon wheels sounding soft and muted in the coming twilight. It was scary, a little, as though they were moving from the light into the darkness and for a moment Gabrielle wondered if that wasn't more true than she knew.

She fell into step next to Xena, looking up to see the queen's sharp profile outlined in the fading light, seeing a somber expression there that made her reach up and touch her companion's leg. "Thanks for the stuff in the bag."

Xena's expression eased, and she smiled. "Gotta take care of my muskrat." She said, then went serious again. "Whatever happens now, you stick by me, okay?"

"Of course." Gabrielle replied. "Like a tick." She added. "You can't get rid of me."

Xena put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder and squeezed it, then they rode on out of the trees, and onto the road, and into the dark.

It was a lot more boring to ride at night than during the day. Gabrielle had little to look at around her, and nothing to take her mind off how tired she was as she swayed along with Patches rhythmic steps.

She wondered if Patches got tired of walking, the way she would have. Did he get half as tired, because he had four legs to share the work, or twice as tired for that reason? When she walked, both legs got tired, so she figured it was probably the latter.

Was it fair to make him carry her? Gabrielle was in general pretty realistic about the place of domesticated animals in her life, being born in a sheep raising family and all, but she had grown to think of Patches as almost another person, with his cute personality and funny ways.

"What are you thinking about?"

Xena's voice almost startled her right off Patches back. "Um." Gabrielle cleared her throat a bit. "I was wondering if my horse hated me because I'm riding him all the time."

The queen shifted in her saddle, leather straps softly creaking in the dim light. "Why should he? I don't." She responded, in a dry tone.

"But I don't...oh." Gabrielle rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Uerf. Yeah. Okay. I get it."

"Yes, you do, on a regular basis." Xena chuckled. "You lucky thing, you."

Ah well. Talking about sex was more fun than wondering about Patches feet, she guessed. "My mother talked to Lila and me once about what it would be like when we were married and all that." She related. "I don't know if she was more embarrassed or we were."

"She told you about sex?"

"No." Gabrielle said. "We knew about sex. We grew up with sheep." She reached into the sack behind her and drew out an apple. "She told us what we had to do to make our husbands happy."

Xena reached up and put the tip of her finger into her ear, convinced suddenly she could feel whatever was inside her head leaking out of it. "Did you want to get married?" She asked, in an effort to shift the subject to something less weird. "Have kids, raise sheep, sleep with sheep, all that?"

"Xena." Gabrielle bit into the apple. "Let's get something straight. All we did was shear the sheep, and then sometimes eat them. We didn't sleep with them, or keep them in our bedrooms, or have sex with them, or wash them or anything like that. Okay?"

Xena chuckled again.

Gabrielle was quiet for a brief moment, as she chewed her mouthful of apple, thinking about what her companion had asked her. "I'm not really sure what I wanted." She finally admitted. "Lila wanted that. She liked to dress up, as much as we could, anyway, and play with dolls."

"But not you, huh?"

"I collected frogs and wanted to be a pirate." Gabrielle said. "I heard a guy who came through one winter talking about pirates, and I wanted to be one after that for a while."

Xena tipped her head back and laughed. "You were the weirdo of the village."

"Yeah."

The queen kept chuckling, reaching over to take the apple from Gabrielle's fingers and steal a bite of it, before passing it back to her. "I never had time to think about any of that." She said. "We were so young when they burned us out.. Never occurred to me to even think about what I wanted to be after that. I was too busy learning to be a bitch and trying not to die every minute."

"Sounds really scary."

Xena shrugged one shoulder. "I had Ly with me." She said. "At least we were in it together." She gazed off into the gloom. "We had some good times, when we weren't getting kicked half to death."

Gabrielle rolled a bit of Patches mane between her fingers, then she leaned forward and offered him the rest of her apple. "You had one up on me then." She said, after the pony accepted the treat. "I just got kicked half to death when I was caught doing anything that wasn't my father's idea of what I should be doing and locked up somewhere."

Xena studied her companion from the corner of her eye, surprised at the statement. She'd known her companion had been treated badly by her family, but she'd refused to talk about it before now. "He put those marks on your back?" She asked, in a casual tone.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Gabrielle didn't answer for a long time. She rode along at Xena's side, her face almost a mask in the moonlight. At last, after they'd started down the slope into the long valley beyond, she exhaled, half turning her head to look at Xena.

Xena was riding along, her head tilted slightly down, ears cocked in her direction. Just waiting, with a patience very surprising for her.

It made Gabrielle smile, a little. "I'd been gathering up the wool scraps, making some little toys, and selling them for a little bit to the kids around."

"Ah. A born merchant."

The blond woman snorted. “Hardly. I had enough scraped up though, on my birthday I went and got a pair of boots the tanner’d made, new ones. The first new things I ever got.” She said. “I wanted them so bad.”

“Mm.”

“I brought them home, and my father saw them.” Gabrielle paused. “He said I’d stolen the money I’d paid for them, from him. Because it was his house and everything I guess.. Anyway.” Her shoulders twitched. “He took me to the sheep pen and tied me up and beat the shirt into my back with a whip.”

Xena opened the top of her waterskin and took a long drink from it. She wiped her lips with the back of her gauntlet and regarded her companion wryly. “Know what?”

“What?”

“Your father was a bigger bastard than I am.” She passed the skin over to Gabrielle, who took a drink from it. “Sorry about that, my friend.” She said, with a sigh. “Bad enough when asshole strangers are beating the crap out of you, worse if it’s family.”

Gabrielle handed the skin back. “Yeah.” She licked her lips. “I laid there for such a long time just crying and crying because I hurt so much and I’d worked so hard for nothing.” Her voice faltered. “I almost wished he’d just have killed me.”

They walked along in silence for a moment. “I’m glad he didn’t.” Xena said. “I’d hate to have missed out knowing you.”

A faint snuffle came from Gabrielle’s direction. “Thanks.” She murmured. “You know aside from everything else, you’re the first one in my life who actually treated me like a person.”

Xena now counted herself well and truly distracted from the long ride. “I fell in love with you.”

“Before that.” Gabrielle smiled anyway, visible in the bright moonlight. “When you were having Stanislaus give me those clothes and everything, then.”

“I was in love with you then.”

Gabrielle looked at her. “You were?” She sounded astonished.

“Mm.” Xena nodded casually. “Pretty much from the minute I met you my ass was gone into Aphrodite land.” She leaned back in her saddle. “Scared the Hades out of me.”

Now it was Gabrielle’s turn. “Why?”

“Didn’t have any control over any of it.” The queen replied. “You know how much I enjoy that.”

Gabrielle did know. “I think I did too.” She said, finding the ride far more interesting than she’d dared hope. “And I felt so bad about it, at first.”

“Because of your sister?”

Gabrielle nodded silently. Then she cleared her throat again. “But I couldn’t help it.” She added. “That night I almost... it was like my heart was ripping in half.”

The night she’d almost left. Xena had very purposefully blocked that night out of her mind for a number of different reasons, not the least of which was the fact that she’d almost left. “Yeah.” She looked past Gabrielle. “Okay, enough sappy crap. Got a good story?”

Gabrielle gazed at her, then a look of sudden compassion appeared on her face. She nudged Patches closer to Tiger and put her hand on Xena's knee. "Sorry."

"For what?" Xena said. "Listen, we might end up fighting before the night's up. You got that stick ready?"

The blond woman leaned over and kissed the skin on Xena's thigh, bare between her leathers and her knee armor. "Sort of." She straightened up. "I'll do the best I can."

Xena cleared her throat and nodded. "Got any more of those apples?"

"Sure."

"Xena." Brendan's voice came out of the darkness, and a moment later, the captain rode up to them. "Watchfires ahead."

"Near?" The queen stiffened.

"Far pass."

Xena straightened up and nodded, this time with a sharp decisiveness. "Slow the pace. Bring the squad leaders here, and pass the word down the line to shut the Hades up."

"Aye." Brendan reined his horse around and cantered off.

Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other. "Wish we were still in bed?" The queen asked, with a rakish grin.

"Yeah."

"Fight really hard and I'll make you make those noises again. "

"Promise?"

"Promise."

**

Part 11

Xena studied the torches ahead of them, gathered in a circle around the spot they'd ambushed the advanced guard at. The moon had gone down, and the plain was drenched in darkness broken only by the flickering lights that moved erratically back and forth.

"Alright, listen up." She told the troop captains, clustered tightly around her. "Benas, take ten men and circle around to the far side. "

"Will do."

"Eran, take another ten and come up the near side here." Xena continued. "Then we'll.."

"Xena, look." Brendan touched her arm. "They're leaving."

The queen observed the motion, as the torches took on purposeful direction and roughly outlined a column that started to move away from them at a decisive clip. "Ah." She said, after a pause. "All right, scratch all that. Let's get moving so we're in place if they decide to come back through that gap with a force."

A soft command sent down the line, and the darkness was full of shifting horses and the sound of muffled footfalls as the army responded to Xena's command. She turned to face Brendan. "Leave the supplies and wagons here. Have them set up camp, and get ready for action."

Without a word, Brendan turned and disappeared, moving through the darkness as the soldiers began to separate from the rest.

They were at the edge of the forest, the wagons tucked behind the first line of trees in as much protection as was possible given the circumstances. Xena ran her eye over the shifting motion in the darkness, before she peered down at the blond woman perched on the other side of her. "So."

Gabrielle looked up at her. "You know what?"

"What?"

"You can sleep on the back of a horse." The blond woman's voice sounded somewhat surprised.

"That's pretty neat."

Xena smiled, unseen in the darkness. "Feel better now?"

"Yeah."

"Good." The queen gathered up her reins. "Stay awake now. We're going to ride fast." She pressed her knees into Tiger's sides and they moved out from between the trees as the army moved out around them. It was almost ghostly, she mused, all those dark horses and men in armor flooding through the pale grasslands.

The castle seemed very far away. Xena tugged one of her gauntlets on a bit further and went over her plan inside her head again, debating whether sending a force through the back route was a good or bad idea at this point.

The enemy army knew something was up, finding their advance guard dead in the road. She suspected the enemy leader was going to have to make a tough choice, either move his forces through the gap at dark and risk not knowing what was on the other side, or wait until sunrise and risk whatever it was that killed his men getting closer and ambushing him.

Interesting choices. Xena leaned back in her saddle and pondered what she'd do if it were her decision, then she realized her army was moving through the night and that was a good indication of what. She could feel her throat going a little dry, and those little twitches in her belly and she was caught between hoping the enemy captain would be cautious and give them time to get set, and wanting him to be reckless as she was and bring the fight to them in a predawn clash her bloodlust was itching for.

She had to catch him in close quarters. She didn't have the manpower to meet them head on in the open, but she reasoned if she could get him at the pass, where he had to fight her with a limited front line, they'd handle the battle with reasonable casualties.

Reasonable casualties. Xena glanced at Gabrielle, who was riding quietly at her side, her head turning from side to side as she peered through the gloom. "Your sewing gotten any better?"

"What?" Gabrielle flexed her hands, and exhaled, seeing a touch of frost on the chilly, night air. "Oh, well.. I haven't had much time to practice." She admitted. "What made you think of that?"

"Just wondering." The queen slowly let her gaze sweep the ground ahead of them. "If they start carving slices in me, I might need you to stitch me up." She waited for a response, and got none, so she looked down again. "What?"

Gabrielle was looking up at her with slightly widened green eyes.

“C’mon, Gabrielle.” Xena chuckled a little. “You’ve seen me naked enough times to know I don’t walk away from fights unscathed.” Her face twitched, as she remembered her last true battle injury, before she’d ended up taking the stronghold. “Bet you do a better job than the bastard who sewed up my back.”

Gabrielle seemed to be thinking about that. “Will a lot of people get hurt?”

“Yes.” Xena answered promptly. “People will get hurt, and people will die. It’s part of the package. That’s why they call it war, not ballroom dancing.” She leaned forward and urged Tiger faster. “C’mon.”

Patches needed no instruction. He broke into a canter to keep up with his big friend and they threaded their way through the moving troops, first the foot soldiers then approaching the line of horsemen near the front.

The horses cleared space for Tiger. A good number of the animals were geldings, but the core cadre of horse soldiers, the ones Xena had personally trained, also rode stallions who were trained to fight right alongside their riders.

They gave the Queen’s mount a wary respect, and stayed clear of his path. His temper was almost as bad as Xena’s was, and he topped the rest of them by at least a hand. He mouthed his bit as they reached the front lines and hopped a little, as though checking to make sure his rider was awake.

“Stop that.” Xena gave him a slap on the neck. They settled into the pace of the leading line, a rolling amble that ate up the ground with good efficiency. She looked right and left, to see the long line of mounted soldiers stretching to either side of her, the outside of a huge box that held the foot troops in the center.

It was a safe way to travel, and let the mounted troops protect the bowmen and footsoldiers in the middle since they could respond to any sudden attack but it also meant the non mounted troops had to hustle to keep up with them.

Also meant, of course, that they had to dodge the horse crap left behind. Xena regarded her position high up in the air, in the front with a sense of wry satisfaction. She loved horses, and was a realist about their physicality but hiking through manure up to her knees wasn’t her current idea of fun.

They approached the road, and Xena urged Tiger up onto it, gripping with her knees as the stallion gathered himself and leaped up over the small ditch that ran alongside it. The road stretched in a pale ribbon in front of her, broken in the faint distance with the dark splotches she knew were the enemy bodies.

The torches had disappeared past the edge of the hills, and only starlight laid it’s faint silver sheen over the landscape. She looked to her left, seeing the curve of the forest bending toward the coast and lifted her hand, whistling softly.

Brendan swerved over to her, coming up on the far side of Tiger’s moving legs. “Mistress?”

“Take fifty men.” Xena decided. “Down the coastal path.”

Brendan grimaced a little. “Hard road, that, without you t’guide it.”

“Cope. I broke enough branches for you to get the horses through.” Xena replied. “When you get to the end of it, figure out what to do and do it.”

Brendan nodded. "Will do." He lifted his hand and snapped his fingers, then let out two whistles of his own. Twenty horsemen peeled off, and in a flurry of somewhat confused motion, bowmen and foot soldiers sorted themselves out to follow.

Xena whistled, and the line closed in again, and they continued on.

Gabrielle watched the soldiers leave, halfway wishing she and Xena were going with them. She wanted to see the ocean again and all Xena's talk about having to be sewn up was making her stomach hurt. Riding through the darkness was getting on her nerves and she was beginning to wish for just a normal morning with a bit of breakfast to look forward to.

Though she'd gotten some rest on the ride in to the valley, her body was aching from all the constant motion and she had a headache throbbing at the back of her skull that the chill air wasn't making any better. She took a drink of water from her waterskin and then tied it back to her saddlery, and exhaled, giving Patches a pat on the neck. "Good boy."

"You say something?" Xena asked.

"Not to you, no." Gabrielle said. "I'd never call you a boy."

"What?"

"How long do you think it will take us to get where we're going?" Gabrielle asked, to distract Xena so they wouldn't end up talking about sex in front of the other soldiers again.

"Just before morning." The queen replied. "I want to get bowmen up on those heights, and get the horses back behind that one ridge before it starts getting light, long as we don't have jerks firing at us through the pass before then."

"Do you think that will happen?"

"Maybe." Xena mentally figured the time it would take for the scouting party to get back and report, and how long it would take to get an army that size moving. Even using field camps, with no pavilions, unless her counterpart was very very good, she figured they'd have time to hold the pass. "Keep your head down, just in case."

"For how long?" Gabrielle studied Patches neck. "That would be really uncomfortable. I keep hitting my forehead on his mane."

Xena stifled a laugh, though the subject really wasn't all that funny. "Wait until I tell you." She peered ahead, seeing the bodies they'd left in the road coming closer, the scent of blood and decay faintly on the wind blowing into her face.

Her eyes flicked over the road again, then she studied the limp figures intently. "Give me your crossbow." SHE ordered the man riding next to her. "Let's see if I've gotten any better over the years." She held her hand out and took the offered weapon, letting her reins drop as she cocked it.

Gabrielle stared at her, in puzzlement. "What are you going to shoot at?"

Xena raised the crossbow and set the stock against her cheek, sighting down the shaft at the shadows ahead of them. "A whim."

"What?"

Her finger tightened on the trigger and she focused on relaxing her body, watching the tip of the arrow move in the rhythm of Tiger's steps. On the third downshift, she released the mechanism, extending the bow to its owner as she reached to draw her sword.

A moment, and she'd know.

**

In a moment, she knew. The body lying in the road twitched, and she let out a yell, and the road was suddenly flooded with men and horses coming at them with pikes and swords and arrows speeding out of the gloom to catch on surcoats and armor and flesh.

In a way, she was comforted by the knowledge that her instincts still rang true as a bell in winter. However, she lacked time to enjoy the thought as she sent Tiger hurling forward towards the enemy soldiers and hoped his black coat kept him invisible to the bowmen long enough for her to..

Damn. Xena felt the sear as an arrow ripped through the flesh on the top part of her shoulder. She lifted her sword and met the descending one of the first rider, twisting her wrist and deflecting the blow off to the side, then rotating the blade in a fast circle and backhanding it into the rider's ribs as he rode past her.

She felt the steel grate against bone and used her motion and a quick jerk to free her sword as a sixth sense made her duck as she felt an arrow rip loose a lock of her hair.

Ooh.. Too close. Xena didn't fancy herself in a short haircut. She lowered her posture on Tiger's back a little, and conveniently found herself facing off against a footman with a pike, who was trying hard to thrust its point through her horse's neck.

She shoved her blade between her knee and Tiger's side and reached out to grab the pike, taking hold of it as its point touched flesh. Startled, Tiger reared back and nearly unseated her as the pikeman yanked in the other direction.

Only her powerful legs saved her. She clamped her calves against Tiger's side and wrenched herself across his back, fighting to pull the pike from the man's hands. He shoved forward and came close to nailing her in the eye, but Tiger objected to his presence and struck out with both forelegs, taking Xena's head further away from the point and nailing the pikeman in the groin with one huge hoof.

"Yeah! Good boy!" Xena yanked the pike free and twirled it in her hand, then she hefted it and sent it flying into the crowd of shoving, fighting bodies hoping she was close enough for her notoriously bad aim not to gut one of her own men.

Unlucky, to start a war off like that. Xena saw her pike enter a chest bearing a white surcoat, and she grinned in relief as she pulled her sword back out and started hacking at the head and shoulders of a man trying to knife her in the side.

A mace, coming out of the darkness, smashed his head in as she reached past him and gutted the soldier trying to shoot the mace holder in the back. Her man yelled, Xena yelled back and acknowledgement, and they went on.

Tiger slammed against another horse, and she reversed her position, suddenly fighting for her life as the other horse's rider was meeting her sword with powerful competence. She could see intent eyes behind his helmet as he threw his weight into the attack.

Too close to swing her blade, Xena jackknifed her body right back into him, slamming her head into his faceplate and knocking his helmet cocked sideways with a ringing bang. She drew a dagger and ducked his wild flailing, burying its point in his chest as she smacked him in the chin with her head, knocking him backwards off his horse.

The animal shied, and Xena grabbed his reins, holding him as he kicked and bucked, helpfully knocking into two of his own side's soldiers and sending them sprawling. Xena released the animal and smacked him between the eyes with the hilt of her sword, nearly causing him to fall over.

He plunged away from her, creating a whirl of dark chaos as she turned and lifted her sword and released her boot from her stirrup as a flying body hit hers and she barely had time to get her knee up to block the lunge.

Heavy impact on her knee armor. She grimaced as she heard steel scraping against the metal and she twisted hard to push the man off her before the blade left the hard surface and plunged into the skin of her thigh.

Why had she decided not to wear leggings, again?

Sexy, or something? "Grr." Xena got her elbow under his chin and flipped him over, hacking at his neck with her sword in an awkward motion that was nonetheless effective in producing a spurt of blood that arched nearly to her head.

He tumbled over Tiger's haunches, and the stallion bucked and kicked his hind legs out, rolling the man off and onto the ground.

Xena backed the stallion up, and looked around for her next bit of trouble. The front line of her troops were fully engaged with perhaps a dozen horsemen and as many footmen, but a long line of her men had folded around the back of the fighters enclosing them in a constricting circle of destruction.

They knew they were doomed. Xena could see it in their dim, half obscured faces and the scene around her slowed a little as she rapidly sorted out her options. Call her men off and send the survivors whimpering back to their master, or make sure no one lived to tell of her presence?

Ego? Safety? Ego? Safety?

Xena exhaled. "Damn, I am getting old." She shook her head then raised her voice. "Kill em all!" She ordered. "Now!" She made herself an example, by lifting her sword arm high and bringing her blade down straight onto the head of an enemy soldier, splitting his skull open in an explosion of splintering helmet and brains.

Two of the horsemen made a desperate charge at her, hearing the words. She felt a sudden surge of exultance that took her by surprise, and she welcomed the challenge, standing in her stirrups as she whirled her sword in one hand and unhooked her chakram with the other, daring the crossbowmen to fire at her.

They dared. She caught the arrows on the edge of the chakram and sent them arching off to one side, then she met the two men coming at her on the left and the right, engaging one's sword with her own and catching the other's mace inside the circle of her round weapon.

The horses drove past, as the men grappled with her, and she managed to stay in the saddle by the slimmest of margins as she yanked the mace to one side and deflected a slash with the side of her blade.

She let out a yell again, crossing her arms and spitting the right hand side enemy with her sword as she backslashed the edge of her chakram across the left hand side man's face. Blood went everywhere, delighting her.

The men both dropped, screaming, and she whirled her horse around, a niggling detail tugging at her conscience, only to find the little niggle a few horse lengths behind her, trying very hard to stay out of the way. "Gabrielle!"

The blond woman started forward toward her, but Xena's eyes widened as she saw an enemy soldier appear from the darkness, sword raised, within an arms length of her lover.

A hoarse shout of warning erupted from her throat but she was fighting Tiger's sudden plunging as a dying soldier tripped in front of him and she knew in her heart no strength of effort on her part would get her in front of that damn soldier in time.

She yelled again, a ragged curse that split the air and made heads turn.

Gabrielle half turned her head and spotted the man, and the bloodstained blade coming right at her face as she tried to pull Patches to one side and his hooves skidded on the blood soaked mud of the road surface.

Nowhere to go. The fallen soldiers blocking Xena now blocked her as well and she had no place to turn and no where to escape to and...

Desperate, she half turned in her saddle and brought her arm up to shield her face with the hand at the end of the arm clutching her staff in it. The end of the staff swung around with her motion and mud stained, missed the enemy soldier's notice and whacked him unchecked right on the side of the head.

His swing went wide, nearly shaving Patches' ear off and Gabrielle jerked back in surprise, bringing the staff back around to catch him on the bridge of his nose as he grabbed for his helmet in surprise. "Ahh!" The blond woman yelled in shock, as he keeled over and slumped against Patches side, before slithering down the pony's legs and landing in the mud with a splat.

His sword dropped, sliding off to one side and as she looked on in shock she was surrounded by a line of men in hawk's surcoats, letting out hoots of approval as they formed a guard around her and the suddenly present cloaked figure that wrapped itself around her and dragged her off her horse in a bewildering rush of copper and musk.

For a second, Gabrielle thought a storm had come overhead, as a thundering sound pounded through her ears until she realized it was her heartbeat, and Xena's booming like twin, crazed drums. "Poo!" She gasped. "Poo!"

Xena gave her a mindless series of pats on the back, working hard at catching her breath from the sudden shock and the even more sudden morphing of her adorable bedmate into a haplessly unwitting defender of her own skin in such an unexpected fashion. "Thanks."

"Ugh!" Gabrielle exhaled into the skin of her neck. "Why?"

Xena hugged her with a moment's sincere gratitude. "You kept your promise."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Forget it. Let's go mop up." The queen released her. "Strip the bodies." She ordered, her voice rising over the fading battle sounds. The encounter cheered her immensely. "Let's move!"

"Xena."

The queen stopped, as she was about to step over Gabrielle's fallen adversary. "Yeah?"

Gabrielle was clutching her cloak, white as a sheet now that the starlight outlined her features, breathing fast and hard.

"What? Did you get hurt?" Xena dropped her voice in concern, facing her lover. "What is it?"

The blond woman's eyes went to the soldier. "I did that."

“What?”

“Killed him.”

Xena stared at her for a moment, then she tipped her head back and laughed. “You little nitwit.” She rolled the man’s body over with her boot. “You think because I make it look so easy that men die from a tap on the head?” SHE reached down and pulled a dagger from the body, shoving it back in it’s sheath before she retrieved a second, and then a third. “C’mon. You’re not Gabrielle the Killer of the Plains yet.”

Gabrielle let her head fall forward to impact Xena’s chest armor with a thump.

Xena patted her on the butt, and whistled for her horse, smelling blood and death on the wind.

But not just yet.

**

Xena stood on a boulder, the wind coming through the pass whipping her hair back as she waited on the dawn and let her eyes slowly scan over her troops deployment.

In the end, they’d had ample time for her to settle her men where she wanted them, sending the horsemen to either side of the road behind the curve of the hill and finding ridges and crannies to hide the crossbowmen in.

Half the force was on the nearer side of the pass, and half on the far side, and she’d gotten her long bowmen spaced up the hillside overlooking the gap as the eastern sky was just starting to turn pink with the coming dawn.

So she had time to stand her and think, after she’d sent ten men to scout the pass, and give her fair warning before the enemy army marched on through. The wind wasn’t bringing the sound or smell of an army on the move though, and she wasn’t sure if she was disappointed at that or relieved that she’d at least get a chance to get some breakfast before the bloodletting continued.

Life’s little priorities. She turned and walked to the edge of the rock and dropped off it into open space, landing with a slight hop on the rough, mossy ground. She dusted her hands off and walked towards the small ridge she’d chosen as her own.

The wagons had been left behind them with their comforts, but as she walked to the top of the escarpment and stepped down into the half circle of protected hillside below it she found Gabrielle seated on the ground before a small, smokeless fire carefully heating something in a travel pot.

Her staff was lying next to her, and Xena stepped over it to take a seat on the other side, folding up her long legs and resting her elbows on her knees. “Whatcha got there?”

Gabrielle looked up from her stirring. “It’s a stew.” She said. “I have some flatbread, and I thought you might want some hot breakfast.” Her voice was soft, and a little hoarse, and she focused back on the pot, mixing it’s contents with care.

“I would.” Xena replied. “Thanks.”

Gabrielle stirred a bit longer, then she peeked at Xena sideways. Despite all her bravado and pacing, she could see the lines of exhaustion in her companions face and she seemed glad to just sit quietly with an excuse to do nothing more than wait for Gabrielle to finish what she was doing.

“What were those guys doing out on the road?” She asked, just to pass the time. “With those sticks?”

“Masking our tracks.” Xena answered readily. “I like surprises, as long as they’re not happening to me.” She exhaled a little, and rubbed her upper arm, where a neatly tied bandage covered the slice she’d suffered in the fight.

It ached, but in a shallow, stinging way that was more annoying than painful but there were a lot of little things bothering her like that and she knew one of the downsides of having to wait was having to acknowledge them.

Gabrielle picked up a bowl, and spooned it full of bubbling stew, put a piece of the waybread over the top and offered it to Xena. “Me either.” She said. “I hate surprises when I’m having them.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” The blond woman took her own bowl, and put some of the remaining stew in it. “I guess.. I guess because the worst part of growing up in my family was never knowing what was coming before it got there. You could do the same thing twice, and one time it would be okay, and the next time you’d get a beating for it. It was all so.. Um..”

“Random.” Xena was glad to feel the hot food filling her belly. It got rid of one nagging discomfort at least and gave her body something to occupy its attention and stop it from whining so damn much. She suspected she’d gotten soft in a lot of ways that had nothing to do with fighting, and she was beginning to realize she’d run out of time to adjust.

Didn’t that just stink? The queen exhaled, wondering if this was all going to turn out to be on of those ‘wish I hadn’t done that’ kind of things she mulled over in late nights over strong wine.

“Yeah.” Gabrielle said. “Random. That’s a good word for it.”

“Huh.”

“You’re not like that.” Gabrielle added, as if an afterthought.

Xena looked up in surprise. “I’m not?” She asked, her voice rising. “You’re not telling me you think I’m boring, are ya?”

The blond woman dipped her waybread into the bowl and bit into the end of it with a serious expression. “How could you be boring, Xena?” She asked. “You have all the energy in the world in you.”

The queen gave her a wry look. “Not right now I don’t.” She glanced around to make completely sure no one else was in earshot. “Your high and mighty majesty would like nothing more than to be curled up on a feather bed with you at the moment.”

Gabrielle produced a rakish grin at that. “See?” She said. “That sure wouldn’t be boring.”

“Even if we were just sleeping?” Xena’s eyes twinkled a little.

“Even.” Her companion agreed. “But that wasn’t what I meant. You aren’t..” She squirmed a little closer to where Xena was seated. “I trust you.”

Xena slowly chewed a mouthful of stewed so long it was unidentifiable meat as she thought about that. “Do you trust me?” She asked, in a slightly surprised tone. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

It seemed a serious question, so Gabrielle gave it some serious thought before she answered. "I just do." She finally said. "I know in my heart that even if you do something awful, it's because you know there's a reason for it." She took Xena's empty bowl from her hands and refilled it, replacing it in the queen's fingers which hadn't moved an inch. "I trust that."

Xena felt the warmth of the stew through the bowl, leeching into her tired hands. "That might be the nicest thing you ever said to me." She mused. "Except that whole I love you thing."

Gabrielle smiled.

"That's the basis of the loyalty of the army." Xena added unexpectedly. "Trust." Her eyes went a little unfocused, as she poked a bit of meat with her knife tip. "You have to keep earning that trust, you know that, Gabrielle?"

"Is that hard?" Gabrielle watched her companion's face, half lit by faint shadows from the fire.

Xena looked up and their eyes met. "When everyone else trusts you more than you trust yourself? Yeah." Her lips twitched a little. "It can suck." She didn't really know why she was telling Gabrielle that, after all, the last thing the kid needed was to know the person she trusted was running just a little bit scared.

If it was one thing she'd learned, though, was that words needed to be said when they were ready to come out. Waiting served no purpose, and in war, waiting often meant never, as it had for her with Lyceus.

She remembered their last parting all too well. Ly's eyes sparkling as he teased her with some secret he told her he'd tell her over a glass of their special stuff, later than night - only there had been no later for him. Just a cold end, on a cold floor in an uncaring hall that had taken his secret with him into the darkness of death.

Her eyes studied Gabrielle's face. "You don't have any deep dark secrets you're keeping, do ya?"

The blond woman put her bowl down, and got up, walking around Xena's seated form to kneel and slip her hands under the heavy armor plates as she kneaded the skin underneath. "Not from you." She told her lover. "Why?"

"Just wondered." Xena bowed her head and accepted the attention, feeling her neck muscles loosen under Gabrielle's touch. "You got your stick ready for the next round, Killer?"

Gabrielle exhaled, her breath warming the back of Xena's head. "I... I don't know." She admitted softly. "I don't know if I want to do that." She kept up her kneading. "I don't know if I can." Beneath her fingertips she could feel Xena slowly take a breath, then release it herself. The muscles were tense, and she could sense odd areas of warmth where a little too much pressure caused Xena to twitch.

Bruises, probably. She had seen poles and maces descending on the queen's body and there were dark mottled patches and scrapes all over the parts of her body Gabrielle could see. "I get kinda sick just thinking about it."

Xena set her bowl, now empty again, down on the ground and leaned back so their bodies were pressed against each other. She tipped her head back and regarded Gabrielle seriously. "You need to stay alive." She said. "If that means you jam that damned stick up enemy assholes and twist to rip their guts out, you do it."

Gabrielle made a face, and swallowed. "B.."

"I need you." The queen interrupted her. "More than you need to be innocent."

Gabrielle's hands stilled, and she looked down into Xena's eyes, as the queen's head rested against her chest. "Is that the nicest thing you ever said to me?" She asked, a touch hesitantly.

"Yes."

Gabrielle leaned over and kissed Xena on the lips. She could smell the blood staining the queen's armor and the musky scent of leather and horses that covered both of them, and it all just didn't matter as she folded her arms around her lover and hugged her as hard as she could.

A soft whistle made Xena stiffen in her hold and she hurriedly released the queen as she surged to her feet, a shake of her shoulders settling her armor as one of the watch came to the crest of the overlook and peered down at them. "Coming?"

"At the far mouth, mistress." The man reported. "Full run of em."

Xena ran her hands through her hair and flexed her fingers. "Let's go." She headed for her vantage point with Gabrielle scrambling up behind her, the end of her staff thumping the ground like an overactive rabbit's hind leg. "Time to put the dinars on the table and see who walks out with them."

**

Xena watched the approach from between two rocks, her eyes flicking back and forth as the first line of enemy soldiers came into view.

Ah. They were tense, and alert, the first row of horsemen in full armor with helms on and leathered surcoats covered the horses to their hocks, a protective wall pierced by forward thrust spears that bristled with menace.

The queen leaned against the rock, its surface warmed by the placidly rising sun. She looked to her left and then to her right, seeing her captain's eyes fixed intently on her, waiting for her signals. Behind her, Gabrielle was standing, holding onto her staff, waiting for something to happen so she could be yet again scared and bewildered.

Poor kid. Xena watched her companion from the corner of her eye. She had her hands wrapped around her stick, and she was leaning her cheek against it, her fair lashes outlined in the morning sun. "Ready?"

Gabrielle looked at her, and smiled wryly. Xena motioned her forward, and she came to the queen's side, peering through the opening at the oncoming army. "What's going to happen?"

"Well." Xena rested her hands on the rock, her arm encircling Gabrielle conveniently. "I'm going to let them come on through here, and.."

"You are?"

"Sure." The queen said. "And then.."

"All of them?"

Xena frowned. "You going to let me finish telling you how clever I am or what?" She complained. "No, not all of them. Just some of them. Enough to really hurt them." She pointed. "Now look, see that line? They expect trouble. So we let them through."

"Okay." Gabrielle decided to stop asking questions and just enjoy being close to Xena instead. She shifted the staff to her right hand and put her left arm around the queen's waist, knowing that very soon, they'd be parted by whatever chaos was going to happen and she might not have a chance to know that simple peace for a while.

“Then, when they get through the pass and nothing happens, they let their guard down.” Xena chuckled under her breath. “And then, we attack them.”

It seemed so simple. “What if they realize we’re here first?”

“We’ll attack them anyway.” Xena replied. “So hush now, and just watch.” She spread her fingers out against the rock, keeping them still after that.

The wind was blowing towards them, and now it brought the sound of the approaching soldiers to them, the rumbling of the horses, and the clash of armor and weapons but no voices, as the men coming towards them listened in tense silence.

They weren’t nervous, just alert. Xena could see the confidence they had in their own martial skills and she conceded if she’d been in their place, she’d probably feel just about the same way. She studied the leading line of horses, watching the rider’s easy stance, and their motion with the animals and realizing she was going to be facing some true horse soldiers if nothing else.

The first clashes with the scouts had been easy, but she’d had the jump on them and this lot coming towards her were ready for trouble and there were three of them for every man she had.

Xena felt her heart start to beat faster, and her skin prickled as the breeze brushed over it, conscious of the eyes fastened on her from the men around and to either side.

She tapped her index fingers against the rock, and in a silent, fluttering wave a signal was passed and her ears caught the sound of bows being drawn back, the whisper of feathers being pulled even with ears, falling off into silence again after a moment.

The first line of soldiers passed her first line of bowmen. Their heads were slowly turning, looking right and left, but the craggy rocks and stunted pines did their job well, and the moving helmets kept moving though she fought not to hold her breath as the leading horsemen approached the ledge she was standing on and she tried not to believe he could look right between the gap and see her.

She half closed her eyes, as the men came even with her and tapped the second finger of her right hand. A ripple of motion moved away from her down the line, and her soldiers flattened themselves against the rocks, and lowered themselves to the ground, showing a clean, bare line at the end of the pass to the enemy troops as they moved towards it.

Gabrielle was absolutely silent next to her, the hold she had around Xena’s waist tightening as the enemy soldiers passed them by, and the second, then the third, and fourth, and fifth moved past.

As the seventh drew even with her, Xena knew a moment of doubt, as she wondered if the wiser course for everyone would be for her to let the army pass and not risk a face to face confrontation. Men would die here, if she didn’t. Hers. Theirs.

Ah well. The queen straightened her shoulders, and lifted both hands off the rock, slamming them down with an audible smack. “Can’t live forever, now can ya?”

“What?” Gabrielle asked, just as the air filled with the hiss of arrows, and the cries of men, as the attack began in earnest. “W..”

“Stay where you are.” Xena ordered, lifting her right hand and clenching her fist, as the troops near the head of the pass rose up and lifted their bows, loosing arrows at the leading line of horses. “It’s not time for us to have fun yet.”

Gabrielle watched, stunned, as the enemy soldiers milled and hastily raised shields over their heads to protect them from the arrows raining down on them. In the middle of the lines, horses fell, eyes rolling and high screams coming from their throats as arrows pierced their sides.

The constricted walls of the pass kept the men from retreating, as the soldiers behind them tried to come up and help out and the men in front found themselves engaged by a line of black clad, armored men on foot who slipped between their ranks and set to work with short swords and daggers in the confusion.

Xena let out a whistle. From the ridge above her, a line of men leaped, landing on top of the raised shields and throwing men off their horses, but now the enemy lines were closing in and they started to return fire, accurate shafts threading through the trees and some finding their marks.

The queen caught sight of her first loss, as one of the arrows seared through the rocks and caught one of her scouts in the throat, dropping him without a sound and as she saw the blood spurt, she acknowledged that her grace period was over and her luck had run its course.

She gently eased Gabrielle's arm from around her and she stepped back, letting out another whistle before she drew her sword and took a long step then crouched and leaped to the top of the boulder she'd been behind, landing on top of it and twirling her blade in a sinuous circle as she yelled out a challenge.

The army filled the pass, and as she moved to the edge of the rock and prepared to jump into the fight, she caught sight of a group of soldiers with feathered helms, midway back in the lines who were working to maintain control of the troops.

Their captains.

Instinct brought her sword up and she whipped it right to left knocking aside well aimed arrows as her presence was noted by the troops below. From the point she was standing on, she could see the flow precisely, and though she'd intended on jumping into the lines, she paused and lifted one hand to signal, while she held her sword at the ready to shield herself.

A whistle to her left. She looked that way, and saw a line of horsemen charging her foot soldiers. She let out a whistle of her own, and her bowmen responded with a hail of arrows that hit their marks, but didn't penetrate the thick armor.

Her men were trapped against the rocks, and without further consideration, Xena leaped to the next ridge over, then as the horsemen closed in she threw herself at them in a brilliant display of complete idiocy realized just as her feet left the stone.

The air rushed past her, and she got her sword up as she slammed into two of the men, concentrating on keeping her arms moving as the breath got half knocked out of her and she felt hands grabbing at her and the feel of cold steel against the back of her leg.

She twisted, kicking out as she fell half between two horses, one hand reaching out to grab the saddlehorn of the nearer as she took a short hold on her hilt and lifted it over her head to block a downrushing blade and feeling it scrape off the side of her hand as she kept on moving, her weight pulling the horse to one side.

A figure came at her between the two horses and she released the saddlehorn as she got her feet under her just in time to meet his sword with her own, arching her back as she got momentum into the block and forced him back a step.

A tingle, and she ducked his next sweep and turned, sliding sideways as a spear pierced the ground next to her boot, missing her by inches. She drew her dagger and buried it into her ground based adversary, jerking her head to one side as his sword took off a lock of her hair, and she felt a sting on the edge of her ear from it's blade.

No time to worry about it. Xena kept moving, as she felt a heavy presence at her back and she dropped to her knees and dove under the charging horses body, shoving away from the rocky ground one handed as she got her feet under her again and whirled low, standing and bringing her sword up to meet the decending blade of the horses rider as he thundered past.

Her free hand came up and her fingers closed on an arrow shaft, and she discarded it as she turned and grabbed her hilt two handed and swung it around stiff armed, her blade tip slashing through the face guard of the man coming at her then burying itself into the shoulder of a second whose spear rasped along her ribs leaving searing pain behind it.

Argh. Xena took a step back, then she heard her name ring out and she did the only thing possible, dropping flat and rolling to one side as a huge weight slammed down where she'd been a half second ago. She felt another rush coming at her, and she rolled up onto her feet and whirled in a circle again, slashing right and left with her sword to clear enough space for her to get upright. She gutted a man, then she looked past him to see a huge rock split in half on the ground.

No time to wonder. She turned and caught the mounted soldiers arm in her own as he slammed his sword against her shoulder armor and she pulled him off his horse, almost losing her balance as he fell mostly on top of her just as she saw a blade heading for her face as she lurched to one side.

Not wanting to lose either of her eyeballs, Xena dropped her sword and grabbed her horse adversary, levering him over her shoulder and into the oncoming blade with a roll of her shoulders. She saw a hoof kick her blade away from her, and she threw herself after it, going between four moving legs and landing hard on the rocky ground as two of her own men formed a wall in front of her giving her time to get her hand on the hilt and get to her feet again.

A horn. Xena wasn't sure if the enemy or herself was more glad to hear it, and she let out a yell and brandished her sword as her lines surged forward and the invading army started to fall back.

Lines of bowmen forced their way forward, and knelt, to cover the retreat, and Xena let out a whistle as she threw herself to one side, taking the opportunity to bury her dagger in a back moving away from her as she looked over the lines, seeing that the bulk of the enemy army had already moved back out of the pass.

In front of her, men were still engaged, horsemen from the enemy and her own fighters, and the pass was full of fallen bodies both human and equine.

The line of enemy bowmen slowly moved back, protected by shieldmen spaced one for one with them in the line. They were firing steadily, and Xena's men took cover behind the rocks under the withering fire. Xena kept her back pressed against the stone until they backed around the bend in the pass, and the last few battles were winding down.

The battle noises faded. Overhead, a few carrion birds appeared, lazily circling.

Xena exhaled, and let the point of her sword rest on the ground, glancing up to see Gabrielle seated on the rock over her, looking appropriately scared and anxious, but safe. "You okay?"

Gabrielle nodded, but kept silent.

So. The queen spat a bit of dust out of her mouth as she watched the last of the enemy horsemen ride after his mates in retreat. She knocked her blade against her knee armor and rid it of bits of gore and bone as she climbed the ridge and gathered her troops around her. Now the hard part starts.

**

Gabrielle rubbed her eyes from the smoke coming off the battlefield, and moved a little so she was behind a rock blocking the worst of it. It had an acrid stench, and she tried not to think of the pile of burning bodies at the heart of it.

Xena was standing in a circle of her captains around a waist high rock, a piece of leather spread out on top of it as she marked on it with an ink filled quill. After a pause, Gabrielle decided to go over and see what she was saying, so she carefully eased between the listening soldiers and came up on the queen's left side.

On the leather was a rough, but reasonable drawing of the pass, with marks on either side of it from one end to the other. Xena's long fingers were spread out over it, as the queen made yet more marks in the curve of her index finger and thumb.

"All right." Xena gave Gabrielle a quick glance, then she turned her attention back to the map. "I want twenty men to gather up as many decent size rocks they can find, and start building up shield positions for the archers, here, and here."

Gabrielle looked at the map, wondering what was going to happen next. Would the enemy come attack them? It seemed likely.

"I need another twenty scouts to find spots in the pass walls, and disappear into them." Xena said. "Usual signals. Anything moves, whistle and kill."

"What about the upper bluffs there, Mistress?" One of the captains asked, a heavysset man with a thick, peppered copper beard. "Tough, but could get a man or two up in there."

Xena tipped her head back and regarded the wall. There were a few niches, true, but the climb would be right out of Hades and she saw no easy way down. "YOu can try." She allowed. "Have them bring rope with them, and let a line down."

"Aye."

"Get started on that, and gather up whatever we can find in the pass, but watch your asses." The queen warned. "There's plenty of cover for single archers to use coming in from that side."

The men dispersed about their tasks, leaving Xena and Gabrielle alone by the rock. Xena made a few more marks on the skin then she laid the quill down, and flexed her fingers. "Ugh."

Gabrielle partly turned her head, to avoid looking at the pyre. She took Xena's hand in hers and rubbed it instead. "Will they come back?"

Xena leaned her hip against the rock. "Depends how stupid they are." She replied. "There's no way to come through this pass with this end defended and not get your ass kicked." Her eyes flicked to the pyre. "They lost a hundred men. I lost twenty. Unless the guy that's running them has to take his sandals off to count higher than that, they're stuck."

"Oh."

“Of course, so are we.” The queen went on, in a wry tone. “ I can’t go after him without running into the same thing on that side. So we’re probably looking a long ass hen fight, pecking at each other until someone yells uncle.”

“Who’s uncle?”

Xena laughed faintly, a bare shake of her body. Then she exhaled and rolled her shoulders, wincing a bit from the aching stiffness that had settled into them. “Can you get me my saddlebag?” She asked her lover. “And the wineskin?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle lifted Xena’s hand to her lips and kissed the knuckles, then she released the queen and headed back down the slope to the protected dell they’d left their things in.

Xena leaned back against the rock and let her hands fall to rest against her thighs. Twenty lost, and ten more sent back to the camp with yet again ten more of her horsemen who would hopefully drop their charges off and rejoin them before the sun past midpoint.

A hundred of theirs dead, true, but Xena was sobered by the losses her men had faced, given they had been sheltered, and had the advantage. She knew it was the first battle some had faced in a long while, but still.

Still. She ran over the battle in her mind, picking apart her course of action and going over the mistakes she’d made, not the least of which had been her idiotic dive into battle rather than standing back to direct her troops.

An old failing. Her worst, really. Always more a warrior than a general, Lyceus had once told her, meaning it as a strange compliment and she’d taken it as one, but they’d both also acknowledged the truth of it. She looked up as Gabrielle returned, and took the sack from her, opening it up to root inside it for a carefully folded bundle of packets.

Gabrielle stood by, holding the wineskin. “So, if they aren’t going to come after us, and we’re not going to go after them..”

Xena removed her travel cup and dumped a packet of herbs into it, then she took the wineskin from Gabrielle’s hands and uncapped it, squeezing a stream of the rich, red liquid over the herbs. “I didn’t say we werent going to go after them.”

“Oh.”

She swirled the wine in her cup, mixing the herbs well before she swallowed the contents in three large gulps, filling the cup again and drinking from it to clear the aftertaste from her mouth. “We just won’t line up like a bunch of straw targets and March through like they did.”

Gabrielle sat down on a nearby boulder, resting her hands on the sun warmed rock. “Do you have to go in front and have people stabbing at you all the time?” She asked. “That’s really scary.”

“Nah. It’s fun.” Xena poured another cup of wine, and offered it to her companion. “Here, ya look thirsty.”

Gabrielle took the cup and sipped from it. “I meant scary for me.”

The queen eased to a seat next to her, extending her long legs out with a faint scuff of loose rock chips. Wherever there wasn’t armor, there were bruises and cuts and now she felt them. “Scary for you, huh?” She turned her hands over, displaying an ugly cut across her palm, and a puncture near her wrist from a knife point. “Yeah, I guess it would be.”

“Doesn’t that hurt?” The blond woman reached over to touch the broken skin.

Xena remained silent for a bit, thinking. “It does.” She conceded. “But not when it happens. You just.. You just go past it. Past the pain.”

“Were you scared, doing that?”

“No.”

“Really?”

Xena tried to remember if she’d ever been scared, fighting. Maybe when she’d first started, all those years ago. “You just don’t feel anything.” She told Gabrielle. “You’re in the middle of everything, and you just do it. You fight, you kill, you keep yourself alive... there’s no time for being scared or hurting.” She sighed, and flexed her legs. “That comes later.”

“I think those other guys knew it was you.” Gabrielle related, suddenly. “They all wanted to get where you were, and get you.”

Xena cocked her head. “Yeah?” She took the half finished wine cup from Gabrielle’s hands and took a swallow.

“I could see them. The guys in the back were making signals with their hands, sending more soldiers over where you were. “ Her lover kicked her heels against the rock a bit. “So that’s when I got some of our guys and started rolling those big boulder things down on them.”

Xena spit her mouthful of wine against the other rock, splattering it with a wash of burgundy. “What?” She spluttered, turning her head to look at the mop headed innocent sitting next to her. “When was this?”

Gabrielle looked moderately pleased with herself. “When I saw all those guys coming over to try and get you.” She explained. “I got three of our guys and we rolled those big loose rocks down on them, and made them get back.”

Xena remembered something big landing behind her. “Is that why you yelled my name?” Her voice rose in disbelief. “Did you almost take me out with one of those damn things?”

Big, green eyes gazed adoringly at her. “You move so fast.” She said. “You went one way and we thought you were going the other way so...” She shrugged a little bit. “I just wanted to do something to help and I didn’t think my stick would be much good.”

Xena covered her eyes for a minute, then she opened her fingers and peered at Gabrielle through them. “You know something?” She said. “You and I are a damned good match.” She shook her head and chuckled.

Gabrielle grinned, blushing.

The queen’s chuckles faded, and she set her cup down, unbuckling her chest armor. “Okay. Now I need you to do me another favor.” She eased the armor piece off. “I swallowed that crap so I’d be able to stand you sewing me up, so start sewing.”

“Oh!” Gabrielle scrambled to her feet, her eyes widening at the bloody mess across the front of Xena’s shoulder. “Ugh.. Wow, that looks terrible!”

“Mm.” Xena eyed the injury. “Too bad they didn’t hit me in the head. Hardest thing on me.”

Gabrielle grabbed her waterskin and started rinsing the gore off. "I think you should stay with me and throw rocks next time."

"And miss all the fun?"

"Xena!"

"You rock, I chop. How's that?"

**

Xena paced back and forth, remembering all over again why she hated sieges. She hated waiting for anything, and standing around waiting for something to happen was equal in her mind with stabbing herself in the ankle with an ice pick.

She walked over to her favored boulder and leaped up, catching the edge of the rock with her hands and pulling herself up onto the top of it. She stood and looked around, studying the layout of the army. The archers had settled in on either side of the pass, four lines of them protected behind rocks and trees with foot and pikemen tucked between them and ready.

The horses had been taken to safety behind the army, Xena seeing no sense in risking the valuable animals in the constricted space. She'd stationed her mounted fighters at the edge of the pass, ready to provide support if an attack got all the way through.

Not what they liked, really. The horse fighters, like Xena, preferred to be in the front of the action cutting a swath in the enemy and letting the footmen and archers pick off single enemies but in the current situation she had to use her assets where they made the most sense.

She moved to the edge of the boulder and peered through the pass. It dog legged just past the edge of her vision, so she'd put scouts on the walls at the turn, and she could see the faint glint of sun off armor of the man nearest her, knowing he could see the second set of scouts on the inside of the dogleg looking down through the pass.

So far, it had been quiet. Her enemy had set up a watch on their side of the pass much like she had, and she figured they were sitting back there trying to figure out what to do much like she was doing. She was sure the big question on their minds was which one of them was going to make the first move, send the first sally, take the first risk.

Her decision to send Brandon around the back route now seemed more prescient than whimsical, and Xena did briefly wonder if there wasn't some godly influence prodding her instincts since all her wild ass decisions since she'd left the stronghold had somehow worked out right.

Even the ones made for the wrong reasons. She'd overheard the men marveling about how her timing was so precise, she'd gotten them to exactly the right spot at exactly the right time to halt the enemy army in a place where their much greater numbers didn't help them.

She put her hands on her hips and surveyed her troops again. The men were breaking out travel rations and settling in to watch and she could almost feel the confidence as they noticed her standing there and a wave of casual salutes greeted her gaze.

Xena waved back, and sighed. "Idiots." She turned and went to the back of the rock, stepping off it and landing with a jolt she felt unpleasantly through every bone. "Ow." She muttered, pausing to look around the sheltered dell bordered by the rocks on one side, and a thick stand of trees on the other that was as any for her to ponder what to do next.

In a sunny spot not far from her, Gabrielle was seated, with her arms clasped around her upraised knees as she watched some butterflies, her pale hair ruffled in the breeze and bright in the late afternoon glow.

Xena detoured over to where she was and dropped down next to her, leaning one elbow against the rock her companion was seated against. "What are you doing?"

Gabrielle extended her hand, palm up, and smiled as a butterfly landed on it. "Aren't they pretty?" She said. "So many colors."

The queen observed the insects, stifling her initial urge to squash them in deference to her bedmate's sensibilities. "Enjoy them while you can. I'm going to send a squad through the pass tonight. I'm not waiting around here till winter."

Gabrielle looked at her. "Are you going with them?"

Xena hesitated, nibbling the inside of her lip. "I want to." She admitted. "I just keep wondering how smart it is if the person who's supposed to be the brains of the outfit keeps putting their head in the way of an ax."

She had good captains, to be sure, but the truth of the situation was that she knew the plan, she was the only one who knew the plan, and the army would likely fall to pieces without her there to focus them. It wasn't the best way to run troops, but it was her way to do it and at this stage in her life she wasn't likely to change.

Her eyes slid to Gabrielle's face. Much.

The blond woman turned her hand, and the butterfly walked up her fingers, perching on the edge of her thumb. "But you know the most." She said, after a moment. "I think our guys feel really good about that, like you'll know what to do when something happens."

"Yeah?" Xena thought so too, but it was interesting that her martially inexperienced companion had noticed that. She thought about that. Of course, her martially inexperienced companion had actually led some of her troops in battle that morning pelting enemy soldiers with rocks so you never knew, now did you? Gabrielle had a way of surprising her like that.

"Yeah." Gabrielle nodded a little. "I was listening to them talk." She added. "So can I go with you?"

"You really want to go?"

"I do, if you're going."

Xena rested her head against her upraised arm, leaning her cheek against her biceps. "Well, if you're going, you better get some sleep first." She advised. "I don't want you falling asleep and alerting the enemy with your snoring."

Gabrielle watched her insect friend flutter off, and she turned her full attention to her companion. "Do I snore?" She asked. "I didn't think I did." She studied the queen's face. "You don't."

"Old warrior habit." Xena said. "Because only old ones who don't snore survive."

"Ah." Gabrielle said. "So are you going to rest too?"

"Can't." The queen shook her head. "Bad for the image. Everyone thinks I don't need sleep." She paused, and smirked a little. "Though they know I spend a lot of time in bed."

“Well.” Gabrielle studied her companion gravely, then unwound herself and squirmed over to where the queen was resting, curling up onto her side and putting her head down on Xena’s leg. “We don’t have a bed so I guess I’ll just have to make the best of it.”

“B..”

“It’s nice and quiet here, I’m glad you picked this spot.” Gabrielle gently stroked the scraped skin above Xena’s knee armor. “I guess when you’re in a war, you really appreciate a few minutes of peace, don’t you?”

Xena didn’t answer, but after a moment she felt the queen’s fingers start riffling through her hair, and a certain tension in the powerful leg under her cheek relaxed. Gabrielle understood, in a vague way, the restless impatience she could sense in her friend but she also found herself wondering along with the queen when the taking of all these risks was going to catch up with her.

Xena was an amazing fighter. Even Gabrielle, who’d seen all of about a dozen real fights in her life realized that. She was like an unstoppable windstorm in the middle of the battle, totally different than the rest of the army and she’d gotten a really good sense of that earlier in the day.

She never stopped moving, and moving fast, going from fighting with one person to kicking another, or using her sword, or stopping a spear, or.. It was like she didn’t have to think about any of it, where Gabrielle could see the other soldiers pausing in the middle of what they were doing to decide what to do next, or backing off from their enemy to try another tack at them.

With Xena, there was none of that. She was relentless, and after a few minutes of fighting with her the enemy soldiers either were dead, on the ground, or backing away and though the enemy captains had urged their men to come after Xena, after a few surges towards her, Gabrielle could plainly see the eagerness fade as they watched their mates fall under the queen’s ferocity.

So Xena was only one person, but because she was who she was, that one person made a big difference in the fight and she suspected that Xena knew that, and that was why she wanted to be in the battle instead of leading it.

It was an interesting, and difficult question, because Gabrielle knew her lover was also very good at telling people what to do and when she was fighting, there was no one to really do that and though XENA’s men seemed to know what they were doing there were also times when they needed someone in charge.

“What are you thinking about?” Xena asked.

“How do you know I’m thinking about anything?” Gabrielle felt her own body relaxing as Xena idly stroked the skin around her temples.

“You just get this funny look on your face when you are.” The queen said. “Like a constipated sheep.”

Gabrielle started laughing softly. “Xena, have you even ever seen a constipated sheep?” She inquired. “They don’t have a face about it.”

“You’re avoiding my question, muskrat.”

That was the other thing about Xena. She was really sharp sometimes, sharp enough to give you little cuts where you least expected them. “I was thinking about you.” Gabrielle admitted. “About what you were saying before about being in the middle of everything.”

“Ah.”

“It’s complicated for you, isn’t it? Wanting to be in charge, and do everything too?”

Xena started laughing silently, the shaking of her body evident against the back of Gabrielle’s head. “YOu make me sound like such a nut job.” She sighed. “But you know what, maybe I am.” She added. “I want to do it all. Hades, I want it all. Is that so much to ask?”

Gabrielle smiled, as her eyes half closed. “You’re so funny.”

Xena didn’t really think she was funny at all. “So what do you think?” She changed the subject. “You like this better than hanging out in the castle?”

Her companion rolled over onto her back, so she could look up at Xena’s face, and folded her hands over her stomach. “Well.” She wiggled her booted feet. “It was a lot more comfortable in the castle.”

“Mm.” Xena had to agree to that.

“There were less bugs, and less rocks, and we could stay in bed more.”

“All very true. “ The queen admitted. “Especially the last part. “ She laid her hand across Gabrielle’s cheek. “I miss your morning wake ups.” She smiled as the surface under her palm grew warm. “And I miss our bathtub.”

Gabrielle’s expression grew serious. “But I think you’re happier here, doing this.” She watched the queen’s face still. “it’s harder and more dangerous and scary, but I.. “ She hesitated. “Every day is different here.”

Xena’s pale blue eyes studied her in silence.

“Not that being with you was boring.” Gabrielle hastily amended. “Even when we weren’t doing anything at all.”

Not boring, no. “You know what I think?” Xena said. “I think my life was just in a total rut until I met you. You woke me up.”

Gabrielle blinked at her in surprise. “Me?”

“Mm. You.” The queen let her head rest against the surface of the rock. “Crazy, huh? Get your ass to sleep before I spank it.” She ordered, ending the conversation. “We’ve got a busy night ahead of us.”

Gabrielle obediently closed her eyes, finding sleep easy to come by despite the bright sunlight around them. She was beginning to get used to this new life and learning to live in the moment of it and if she had to be totally honest she’d have to admit it was better than hanging around the castle.

Even without the tub.

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Part 12

Xena opened her eyes, blinking a little in disorientation as her mind struggled to reconcile the bright sunlight she’d been in just a moment before, with the placid twilight that was bathing the glade she was in now. “What’n the Hades???”

“What’s wrong?”

She looked down to find Gabrielle peering up at her, the blond woman’s hands folded peacefully over her stomach and her eyes still a touch sleepy. “What do you mean what’s wrong?”” SHe asked, testily. “I fell asleep!”

Gabrielle nodded her head. "You did." She agreed. "Do you feel better now?"

"Was I feeling bad before?" Xena growled. "This is not very damn funny."

Her companion stretched, arching her body before she settled back down in the grass. "C'mon, Xena. You have to sleep sometime. Everyone does." She said, in a reasonable tone. "Especially if you're going to go out with the soldiers later - I saw some of them sleeping. Why shouldn't you?"

"Because I'm the queen." Xena stated.

"Is there a rule that says queens don't need to sleep?"

The queen's eyes narrowed. "Shut up." She flexed her hands and looked around, cocking her head to listen to the area around them. She could hear the soft sounds of the army around them, the clink of armor, the low murmur of voices, and not that far away, the snap and pop of a fire.

Her nose wrinkled, as the scent of cooking meat drifted over, and she felt her stomach rumble, her body slowly shaking off its recent sleep. The battle aches had faded, and though she refused to admit it to Gabrielle, the rest had done her good, easing the exhaustion she'd been trying to shove aside earlier and clearing her head.

Of course she needed sleep. She knew that, she knew Gabrielle knew that, and she knew the rest of the army knew that but she positively hated being in a vulnerable position and being asleep was about as bad as it got for that.

"You look really cute when you're asleep."

Xena's wandering attention snapped back to her companion. "What?"

Gabrielle smiled up at her. "What are you going to do with the soldiers tonight?" She changed the subject. "Just go check things out?"

Xena rested her head against the rock and resisted the urge to go back to napping, since the camp was so obviously in order, and she had time yet, before darkness overtook them. "What am I going to do tonight." The queen mused. "Well, since I can't ravish you until you make those little squealing noises, I guess I'll have to settle for seeing what trouble I can cause those bastards on the other side of the pass.

Gabrielle thought about that. "Why?"

"What?"

"Why do you want to go start trouble?"

Xena looked at her as though her bedmate had grown a third hand right in the middle of her forehead. "Did you get knocked on the noggin while you were throwing rocks?" She asked. "Or did that little runt shake the brains out of you?"

"I guess I don't understand what war is all about." Gabrielle responded. "Cant you just meet with those guys and talk to them?" She said. "Maybe they don't want to fight."

Maybe it was the gentle twilight. Maybe it was her nap. Xena found herself in the unusual position of having enough patience to listen to her lover's babblings and not just send her off with a pat on the ass. "Okay." She crossed her ankles. "Do you think they'd pack themselves up with all that armor and all those weapons and go into someone else's lands just to chit chat with them?"

"Well..."

'Xena.' A soldier appeared at the edge of their clearing. "Begging your pardon, Majesty." He averted his gaze, and half turned.

Xena eyed him. "Am I looking particularly queenlike sitting here in the dirt with my lover in my lap or what?" She inquired. "Spit it out. What's the problem?"

The man peeked at her. "Watch signaled, said they saw something, mebbe a move to us, up forward." He said. "Went back again, but they ain't sure what the next thing is."

"Ah." Xena nodded, pleased. "Great. You learn more when someone attacks you than when you attack them. So let's go see what they've got in mind." She patted Gabrielle on the arm. "Get moving, lambchop, before I start nibbling your edges."

For a moment, Gabrielle refused to budge, a tiny grin appearing as she dared the queen to make good on her threat. Then as Xena's eyes narrowed, she sat up and got to her knees, rising as Xena aimed a mock snap of her teeth at her. "Yikes."

"I'll yikes you, ya little scrubby muskrat." Xena rose to her feet and stretched her body out, grunting a little as her shoulders popped into place. She ran her fingers through her hair and shook herself to settle her armor, then she started up towards the ridge with Gabrielle close behind.

She could feel the energy rising as she crossed through the lines and it made her glad she'd actually lost her mind and taken a nap so she could enjoy the buzz of anticipation instead of just endure it. She sensed an absence at her side, and turned in a graceful circle as she walked, spotting Gabrielle scooting back towards her from the direction of the supplies. "What are you up to?"

"About here." Gabrielle held a hand over her head, her fingers closed over something. She offered the queen the contents of her other fist. "Meatroll?"

Xena took the item and bit into it, chewing as she walked. What was the enemy up to? Just sending out a foray as she'd planned to do, or something else? She lengthened her stride as she topped the ridge, and started down into the pass, the long shadows of twilight spilling out in front of her.

She hoped it was something sneaky and interesting. "I'm in the mood for a good fight." She informed Gabrielle. "But you keep your head down. I don't know what those bastards are up to." Finishing her roll, she checked her weapons as she headed for the first guard station, making sure she hadn't lost any daggers while she'd rested.

Gabrielle hefted her staff, and considered herself as ready as she could be. She followed Xena as they climbed down the small slope, careful not to slide on the loose rocks as she walked. It was getting dark, but there was still enough light for her to see the outlines of the guards, their heads half turned to watch Xena as she approached.

She wasn't sure about her queen, but she sure felt better after getting some rest. She thought Xena did too, since her expression seemed less tired, and there was more of her usual bounce in her steps. The whole not wanting to rest thing seemed kind of crazy to her, but she figured it was just one of those quirks of Xena's that came out when she was in front of other people.

Sometimes, she really was a different person when they were alone. Gabrielle broke into a trot to keep up as Xena scrambled down the remainder of the slope, and they entered the first guard station. There were a half dozen soldiers here, all in dark cloaks with weapons wrapped in black leather.

"What's the word?" Xena asked, her voice altering and dropping to a lower pitch.

"Signal from the relay, Majesty." The nearer man said. "Looks like they's gearing up to come at us."

"Delightful." Xena smiled at him. "All right, don't move. I'll be back." She flicked her cloak around her and started towards the relay point, the forward guard station that had direct view of the enemy front lines. The shadows were lengthening and she took full advantage of them, keeping close to the rock wall and the thick scrub that masked her distinctive outline.

Her nape hairs prickled and she paused, turning her head into the wind and flaring her nostrils. The pass was quiet, in her mind, too quiet, and she drew her sword after a brief hesitation, then she continued on. "Stay behind me." She warned Gabrielle.

"Okay." Gabrielle fingered her staff nervously.

Xena took deep breaths of air, trying to decode the messages on it. Under the scent of men, and horses, and woodsmoke, she detected something acrid, and half familiar, ringing chords deep in her memory she tried to root out to the front and make sense of.

Ahead of her, she could see her outpost, the rocks jutting out and providing a good shelter for the men tucked behind them, and one signaled to her as she approached. She eased through the boulders and squeezed between two tree trunks, arriving among the men as the last of the light started to fade. "Trouble?"

"There, Mistress."

Xena peered over the edge of the rocks, spotting a brief, intermittent glow that brightened as she watched, then went dim again. "How long?"

"Two candlemarks." The man replied. "Started near sundown."

Xena sheathed her sword, then she looked up and crouched a little, throwing herself up and grabbing the lowest branch of the tree they were sheltering behind. She pulled herself up into the thick foliage, then she looked for a handhold, and started working her way up towards the top.

Gabrielle squeezed herself down next to the trunk and peered upward, watching her lover as she moved higher.

"Need a boost up there, y'grace?" The soldier next to her asked. "Do it, no problem."

Gabrielle gave him a wan smile. "Thanks, but I think I'll just wait here for her." She said. "I'm not really crazy about climbing trees." She watched the soldiers watch the enemy. "What's your name?"

"Tab." The man supplied readily. He was young, not much older than she was, and they shared the same straight, pale hair as well. "This your first time?"

Gabrielle blinked at him. "At...what?" She asked, slowly.

The soldier looked at her for a long moment, then blushed a deep shade of red.

"Okay, nevermind. Forget I asked that." Gabrielle tipped her head back and fastened her eyes on the steadily climbing Xena, just barely able to make out her outline in the gathering dark, and glad the same gloom hid her own blush. "Wow.. How high is she going?"

Xena put her hand around a slim branch and moved it aside, to give her a clear sight of the enemy camp. She could see squads of men moving around the front lines, to her surprise, and she realized the possibility existed that her adversary was going to make a full out night assault.

She felt shocked, and for a moment, envious since she'd decided to take the safe route and not do the same herself. "Damn it." She muttered, leaning forward to study the movements. Men, no horses, so

in that they'd thought alike, and the breeze puffed in her face again bringing that odd, acrid scent that...

Xena's pale blue eyes popped wide open. She turned and released the branches, heading downward as fast as she could possibly go without falling outright and hoping no one was dumb enough to be sitting under the tree.

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'What is it?' Gabrielle blurted.

'Very bad news.' Xena had one soldier by the shoulder. 'Get away from those damn trees, all of you!' She yelled loudly. 'Rocks! Get behind the rocks! Bowmen, get moving! Don't use the scrub as shelter!'

Gabrielle had no real idea of what was going on, but she knew that Xena did, and she was really concerned about whatever it was she'd figured out.

Really concerned. She tucked herself behind one of the boulders out of Xena's way, and watched the queen directing her troops, the note of earnest urgency in her voice something new in Gabrielle's experience.

She'd seen Xena a lot of things. Sad, angry, exasperated, happy... but even in the extreme situation they'd lived through during the near insurrection she'd never seen the queen afraid of anything until just this moment.

Wow. It was hard to fathom what would be horrific enough to scare Xena. Gabrielle's eyes widened. Was there a dragon in the enemy army? She'd heard of dragons, but hadn't imagined they were real before. Could they be?

What did that mean for their army if there were? Gabrielle didn't think even Xena's generalship could overcome something like that, so did it mean they'd surrender?

'Move it!' Xena yelled. 'Cut those branches down, and put them in a pile, here, hurry!'

A group of soldiers were hacking at the stunted, half grown trees, hauling down branches with hasty, cracking sounds. They dragged the branches over and piled them into the open space between where she was and the ridge most of the archers were hiding behind.

'Move!' The queen relentlessly went after them. 'Get those rocks in place!'

Gabrielle decided to stay where she was, and just keep quiet. There was an outthrust of rock to one side of her, and her boulder in front, and she squirmed into the corner between them with her stick lodged firmly beside her.

'And.. ' Xena suddenly whirled in place, her eyes raking the area intently until they fell on Gabrielle. She looked at her for a second, then pointed. 'Perfect!' A brief grin appeared. 'Everyone copy the muskrat!'

Gabrielle found herself in an unexpected glare of attention, and she managed a wan smile and a shake of her staff as the soldiers around her scrambled to imitate what she'd done.

'Put your shields over your heads!' Xena bellowed. 'They'll be shooting lit arrows. Don't touch em, or let them touch you! The fire'll burn anything it hits!'

'Gods'fire then, Xena?' One of the older captains called back. 'Is that what they've brought with em, the bastards?'

“Yes.” The queen turned in a circle again, satisfied at last when she saw the bowmen ducking behind ledges hastily denuded of foliage, and the uprooted trees were stacked between lines of soldiers as the dark of night settled over them. “You remember that, don’t you Defan?”

“Aye.” The captain replied, in a grim tone. “That I do.”

“Right. So tell all these kids about it while we wait.” Xena gave him a shove towards the lines then she moved decisively towards Gabrielle’s shelter. “Move over, muskrat.” She slipped into the small space with her lover. “Sons of bacchaes.”

“Are they?” Gabrielle asked, feeling anxious because she knew the queen was. “Is that why you’re scared?”

“What?” Xena peered at her.

“You seem really scared of them so I thommpfh.” Gabrielle peered over Xena’s fingers, which were covering her mouth.

“I.” The queen leaned close to her. “Am. Never. Scared.” She stated slowly. “Understand?”

Gabrielle nodded.

Xena released her. “Don’t ever say that in front of the men.” She said. “Don’t even hint it. They have to believe I’m stupid enough not to be scared of anything so they’ll follow me.” She tapped Gabrielle’s nose. “Follow me?”

“Anywhere.” Gabrielle replied. “But are they really Bacchaes? I’ve heard stories about them and I was wondering if there were any in the other army.” She said. “And that’s why you were.. Um.. Interested.”

“No.” Xena exhaled, leaning her forearms against the boulder. “The stuff they have, what I smelled.. It’s like fire, but you can’t put it out.” She flexed her hands. “I’ve only seen it once, but I lost half an army to it and all those burning bodies are something I’ll never forget no matter how much of a war whore I am.”

Gabrielle fell silent, absorbing the words.

“So there’s your answer, Gabrielle.” The queen went on, in a quiet, serious tone. “To whether they were just out here looking to meet new people and make some new friends.”

“Um... “ Gabrielle felt a shiver work it’s way down her back. “Do you have any of that.. Stuff?”

Xena exhaled again. “No.” She shook her head. “I never could figure out how to make it.” She admitted. “You can buy it.. Had some guy come through last hot season trying to sell me some, but I didn’t.. “ Her lips twitched. “I didn’t figure I needed it and it’s dangerous to just leave around. I wasn’t looking to have my chambers burned around me.”

“Oh.” In the dim light, Gabrielle could see Xena’s profile, and she could feel the tension in the body pressed against hers. “Yeah, I guess that makes a lot of sense.” She murmured, remembering her own first few months in the stronghold. “You would have had to carry it around with you all the time.”

“Mm.” Xena listened hard, but the sounds were still distant, and lacked the rumble of horsehooves that would alert her to the army’s approach. “With my luck, I’d have dropped it down the garderobe and set twenty years worth of crap on permanent fire.”

Despite the circumstances, Gabrielle had to laugh, though she held her hand over her mouth to stifle the giggles.

After a moment, Xena chuckled too, though the brief amusement ended in a deep sigh. "If they have this, what else do they have?" She mused, almost under her breath. "What other tricks should I be looking for?"

"Do they have dragons?" Gabrielle asked. "I thought maybe they did."

Xena turned fully and looked at her. "Do they have what?" She asked. "Gabrielle, couldja live in the real world for a few candlemarks for me? There's no such thing as dragons." She paused, looking more closely at her companion. "Where did you hear about them anyway?"

"Stories." Gabrielle said. "There was this guy who used to come through in the wintertime and he told us lots of stories about dragons, and Bacchae, and Centaurs and all sorts of things." She said. "I guess they don't exist either, huh?"

Xena refocused her attention on the pass. "Centaurs do." She admitted.

"They do? Have you seen them??"

The queen rubbed her hands together and leaned further against the boulder. "Yeah. I have." She stared off into the darkness. "Hope they don't have any of those with them." She added. "When they come at us, you just keep your head down and stay behind the rock."

"Okay." Gabrielle agreed, still thinking about the centaur. "What was it like?"

"What?"

"The centaur.. Was it really a half of a man and a half of a horse?"

Xena tried to call up in her mind the image that had flashed back to her, from a long gone time happening to almost a long gone person. "After Ly and I got captured, they took us to the slave fighting pit." She said, hearing no advance from the other army. "On the way we passed a path through the forest, and when we were crossing it, we saw about a handful of them, with a few Amazons just inside the trees."

"Amazons!"

"Yeah." Xena said. "Bunch of scrubby looking wenches with bird droppings all over them. Anyway, the centaurs, yeah, they were half horse in the back, and big ugly guy in the front."

"Wow." Gabrielle exhaled. "That's so amazing. I wish I could see a Centaur."

Xena looked over at her. "If we lose this war, and you get captured you might get sold to those Amazons. You could ask em to see one."

The blond woman sobered very quickly, and fell silent, taking a tighter grip on her staff and edging into the corner of the rock a bit more. She put her chin down on her forearm and watched the darkness.

Xena could hear the scuffling of hooves against stone far off, and a freshening breeze brought the smell of war to her nose. "Here they come." She said, then let out a low, penetrating whistle. Around her, the sound of men shifting and weapons being readied rang through the air, and with a sense of mild forboding, she drew her sword and let it's point rest between her feet as she clasped the hilt with both hands.

Gabrielle remained quietly in place.

Xena shifted her shoulders to settle her armor, and glanced sideways at her companion. "Gabrielle?"

The other woman turned her head towards Xena, the faint moonlight reflecting off her eyes.

“I’d never let them take you.” Xena stated, simply.

Gabrielle could hear the horses approaching now herself, and she tugged her hood up and fastened it. “I wouldn’t let them take me.” She told the queen. “I don’t care if they do have dragons.”

Dragons. Xena readied herself, and let out two whistles to her troops, hoping she’d done enough to get them ready and she remembered enough to get them out of what she suspected was going to be Hades of a lot of trouble. “Well, Xena, you wanted a war.”

“Did you say something?” Gabrielle asked.

“I said, be careful what you ask for.” The queen replied, as the first line of horsemen appeared, outlined in lurid, green burning light from torches they held high above their heads. “Know what the one thing in my life is I never asked for?”

“WHat?”

“You.” Xena put her fingers between her teeth and whistled as loudly as she could, two short and two long sounds as crossbow bolts outlined in green fire headed her way. “Aint’ life funny?”

“Um.”

“Duck.”

**

Gabrielle ducked. She pulled her head down behind the rock and kept tight hold of her staff, hearing the whistle and scream of arrows as Xena pressed in beside her, neatly trapping her against the stone. That was all right with her, and she watched the queen’s face, just barely visible in the moonlight.

Would Xena jump up and run into the fight again?

She hoped not.

The sharp sound of an arrow hitting rock made her jump, and she looked past her hiding place to see a small bush catch on fire as the shaft bounced off her hiding spot and landed in the leaves instead. The fire rose, a fierce, greenish color unlike anything she’d ever seen before.

She could feel the heat, and the smell was oily and strange.

A loud sound made her jerk around again, and when she heard Xena curse, she couldn’t stay down any longer. She eased her head up and peeked over the boulder, her eyes widening as she saw the entire pile of branches near them burst into flame. “Whoa!”

The enemy soldiers rode through the pass, waving the torches over their heads and letting out wild yells. In a half heartbeat, the entire pass seemed ablaze, the heat washing over them as sparks began flying everywhere.

Xena reached over and tugged Gabrielle’s hood up over her hair. “Look.” She pointed through the pass, where a wall of fire was approaching them. “How’s that for bad news?”

“Are they going to burn everything?” Gabrielle stared, wide eyed. “What are we going to do?” SHE looked at Xena. “You’re not going to go fight with them, are you?”

Xena's profile was still and quiet, as she watched the destruction in front of her. "No." She put her fingers between her teeth and whistled again, then hastily ducked behind the stone as a volley of flaming arrows peppered the rocks around them. "I'm not looking to die today."

One of the enemy soldiers' head whipped around, and he waved his torch at his followers.

A scream made them both look, and Gabrielle gasped as one of their own soldiers stumbled from his shelter, his head and arms lit with the green, relentless fire. He dropped to the ground and rolled around, but the flames just circled around him undeterred, until his screams faded into gasping jerks, his crossbow flying from his hands to clatter across the rocks.

Xena heard the enemy soldiers yell, and she eased her head back over the rocks to see a line of ten of them headed right for her. "On the other hand." She muttered. "I think I'm in trouble."

The fire nearby outlined them clearly, and Xena realized she'd been recognized. She took in the line of horses thundering towards her, heartened when two of them dumped out of their saddles, struck by her bowmen. To one side, she saw a thick patch of shadows suddenly detach from the rocks and head for the horsemen, her foot soldiers intent on throwing themselves into a death trap all just for her.

Not good. Not her style, queen or no queen. Xena unlaced her cloak and started to pull it off, but stopped when Gabrielle grabbed her arm and tugged. "What?" She snapped. "We don't have time to chat."

"Over there!" Gabrielle pointed. "If we go around in back of that fire, there's a place there you could.. Whoa!" Gabrielle yelped, as she was pulled bodily out from behind the rock and hauled along the ground at high speed. "Wh.. Yikes! Oh!"

"Shut the Hades up and run!" Xena debated simply picking her companion up, then realized with the horses catching up to them it wouldn't do her sword arm any good. She ducked past a boulder and got behind the raging fireline just as the horsemen reached it, and stopped there unable to force their mounts past the flames.

"I'm running!" Gabrielle found herself being pushed ahead of the queen and she shielded her face from the burning

Didn't stop them from shooting at them. Xena felt something strike her back, and without a second thought she unhooked her cloak and dropped it behind her, feeling a sear of heat on the backs of her arms she hoped wouldn't increase.

A second arrow landed in front of her, and she leaped over it, catching up to Gabrielle as they put the bulk of the burning wood between the soldiers and themselves. Xena spotted the hidey hole Gabrielle had meant and they dodged into it, just as two of their own bowmen came around the other corner. "Light your arrows!" Xena yelled. "Shoot the damn stuff back at em!"

The two men scrambled forward. "Aye, Majesty! Had to wrap the heads!" One of them leaned forward and let a grass wrapped arrow tip catch in the flames. "Glad they missed ya!" He pulled back and carefully inserted the shaft into his crossbow, lifting it and aiming past the trees into the darkness beyond.

Xena jumped to the top of the rock to see past the fire, and shaded her eyes from the brightness of it. She could feel the heat beating against her skin and there was so much light and so many moving bits of darkness, it was very hard for her to tell what was going on.

She had the protective wall of fire her enemies had so helpfully lit between them and most of her troops and now she could hear the sound of crossbows firing from the rocks around her, as the enemy soldiers were outlined in flame, and pinpointed by the torches they held.

“Xena!”

Ah, into every life a little muskrat must fall. Xena turned and dropped to her knees as a volley of lit arrows went over her head, bouncing off the rocks behind her and falling to the ground. “Thanks!” The queen held up her hand and made a sign, and a line of crossbowman shifted from the rocks towards her. “Keep looking out for me, kiddo!”

The men took up position around Xena’s rock and started returning fire. Xena let out a whistle, then spotted one of her horsemen making his way over. “Get the scaling ropes!” She bellowed. “Soak em in water! Hurry!”

The man ran off, ducking a spear.

Xena stood back up and tried to get a sense of how the battle was going. She knew there were a lot of enemy fighters out in there, the torches they were carrying bright specks in the darkness and she could hear horses and men and weapons clashing out there.

She could see some of her archers, and some of her fighters, but the rest? She hoped they’d listened to her, and were letting the archers attack from a distance and weren’t getting stupid like she sometimes did so anxious to get into the fight it went past good sense.

A group of her men were making their way back over to her now, crossing behind the flames as the enemy rode around the front of them in frustration, trying to find a way through to where Xena was. The queen leaped down from her rock and met them, pulling them into a circle around her.

Their eyes were wide, and she could sense the tense excitement about them. “Okay, here’s where we kick ass.” She said. “Listen up.”

Gabrielle was scared and excited in turns. She could see all the moving bodies, and hear men fighting, but it was very hard to tell what was really going on. She was very glad Xena hadn’t started fighting with the men on the horses, though.

She was really glad Xena was sticking next to her, in fact. Mostly, anyway. The smoke from the fire was making her eyes sting, so she stepped to one side of their rock protection and half turned away from the glare.

A horse screamed in pain, and she thought of Patches safely down in his pasture on the other side of the pass. She wondered if he was thinking about them, hearing all the noise or was he just munching on grass and maybe napping?

She looked up as Xena came back, and then moved to the side as the queen joined her behind the rock. “How’s it going?”

“Damned if I know.” Xena replied. “Everyone’s not dead yet and we haven’t lost yet so it’s not all bad.”

“Oh.”

Xena hopped back up onto the rock, then she went to the edge of it and leaped for the next outcropping, grabbing hold of the corner of it and pulling herself up to a higher position. She refrained from straightening though, as she peered out over the flame and saw arrows heading her way.

"Damn it." Xena dropped to her knees, and pulled her sword from its sheath, meeting the arrows with her blade and carefully deflecting them. She could see as far back as the dog leg, and her heart sank a little as she saw a line of her foot soldiers in the midst of the enemy horse, bravely battling but being cut down and set afire one by one. "Idiots."

A crossbow arrow nearly nailed her in the chest, and she decided standing outlined against the flames wasn't all that bright either. She hopped down in frustration and landed next to Gabrielle, who was investigating one of her deflected arrows, still burning nearby. "Stay away from that."

"I am. I just wanted to look at it." Gabrielle said. "Did you see anything up there?"

"No." The queen sighed. "It's driving me crazy. I can't really see what's going on, and I can't tell people what to do. Life's just going downhill fast." She drummed her fingers against the rock. "Okay, stay here. I'm gonna go stir up some trouble."

"Be careful!" Gabrielle blurted, as the queen disappeared around the boulder, heading for the fighting. She waited for a second, then she picked up her staff and headed after Xena, reasoning that she hadn't actually agreed to staying behind, had she?

She came around the rocks just in time to see Xena bound out into a small clear space between the burning trees behind her, and the army in front of her. She stared in disbelief as the queen waved her arms at the enemy, letting out a loud yell on top of it.

Had Xena gone insane?

"Hey, you sorry excuse for soldiers!" Xena hollered. "You want me? C'mere! You think you can take me? There aren't enough balls in your whole army to make me do anything but laugh!"

The first line of horsemen spotted her, and after a second's pause, they wheeled their mounts around and started towards her, yelling in triumph. Xena stood there watching them, her sword blade resting on her shoulder, her body posture insolently amused.

The flames from the still burning wood to her right outlined her clearly to the oncoming men, her tall, rangy body in its snug armor unmistakable.

Gabrielle stopped behind her, and lifted her staff, holding it up across her body in a position vaguely resembling something martial. She swallowed hard, and watched the horses thunder towards them, hoping just as they reached the edge of where Xena had taken a stand that whatever happened would at least be fast.

Xena spread her arms in welcome, motioning the enemy forward with a curl of her fingers. She laughed as they crossed into the flat area before her and ran right into the nearly invisible ropes spread across the ground, catching the horses around their feet and sending them plunging to the ground.

The soldiers atop them rolled off their backs, some catching on fire from their now definitely two edge torches. One tried flinging his away towards Xena, but the tip caught on a rope and flipped over, landing on a comrade.

The second line of horses tried to pull up, some of them piled into their downed comrades, two tried to jump over them, but as Xena swept her sword up, a line of her archers popped up behind her and fired into them at point blank range.

The standing horses panicked, and the soldiers frantically tried to turn them, forgetting their target, and forgetting the torches some still held in their hands. One of the soldiers let his torch drop and it hit the

flank of a companion's mount, and the horse bucked and took off in the opposite direction, starting a retreat aided by another volley from Xena's men.

Gabrielle bolted forward to Xena's side. "They're running away!"

"Sure." Xena glanced at her, apparently unsurprised at her presence. "They saw you with that stick. I'd be running." She pointed. "But look there."

Gabrielle looked. As the horses ran, some without riders were bucking and snorting, and after a moment she realized that the burning wood they'd set on fire was being dragged after them. "Oh!" She gasped, watching the burning logs thumping across the rocks, bringing chaos into the ranks of the enemy. "Did you do that?"

"Of course." Xena had sheathed her sword, and now she stood in the flickering light, hands on hips. "I did earn that throne, Gabrielle."

The faster the horses ran, the faster the burning logs followed them, and the more the troops behind tried frantically to get out of the way. The fire worked against them now, a bigger danger to the enemy army than it was to Xena's, tucked into their stone shelters at their queen's urgent behest.

A shout went up from Xena's ranks as the men realized what was happening, and now they rained arrows down on the fleeing enemy as fast as they could.

Gabrielle set the end of her staff against the rocky ground and watched them go, stunned at the sudden reversal. She turned and looked up at Xena, seeing the faint smile shaping her companion's lips, and the small nod of the head as she, too, watched the retreat.

"They'll be back." Xena predicted. "But I bet next time they'll think twice before using that stuff against me." She draped one arm over Gabrielle. "There's no weapon on earth, muskrat, that can win out over the weapon we keep inside our skulls."

Gabrielle could smell the stench of the battle, and now, hear the cries of the wounded as the enemy army disappeared beyond the bend, back to their lines. "is there really any sense in this, Xena?"

Xena listened to the same cries, and pursed her lips "Sense?" She exhaled. "There's no sense to it, my friend. It's just what we do." She gave Gabrielle's shoulders a squeeze. "Birds fly, warthogs fart, we kill each other. Just the way it is."

One of the guard appeared, his face grimy with soot from the fires. "Went back beyond the turn, Xena." He reported. "Left a lot of em on the ground."

The queen nodded, glancing to her right. "Got a pyre all ready. Get to it." She turned, and started back towards the higher ground, tugging Gabrielle along with her. "Next move's mine."

**

It turned out the next move was really nature's. Gabrielle wiped the rain out of her eyes and huddled a little closer to the rocks, glancing up at the cloak stretched over her head for a bit of shelter.

The storm had come on suddenly, surprising the men scouring the battlefield. It hadn't put out the still burning remnants of the godfire though, which was finally running out of anything to burn in the clearing nearby.

That was so strange. Gabrielle leaned back and watched the flames flicker steadfastly in the rain for a moment, before she pulled herself back in out of the wet and tried to get a little more

comfortable. With the rain had come a northern, cold wind, and she was wavering between being grateful for her cloak's shelter and wanting to wrap it around her again.

Brr. She rubbed her arms and wiggled damp toes, cocking her head to listen as she caught Xena's voice on the wind.

The queen didn't sound too happy. Gabrielle rooted in her small bag, and retrieved a slightly wrinkled pear. She nibbled it, and wished Xena would come in out of the rain, and let her know what was going on. She didn't think they were going to go after the other army tonight in the weather, but with Xena, really, you never knew for sure.

She wished she had some tea, too. But her cooking stuff was back with Patches in his saddlebags so she made do with her pear, and a handful of cupped rainwater and thought about the fight they'd just won.

It had seemed very confusing while it was happening, and she'd gotten the feeling that Xena had been making it all up as she went along but despite that, she'd made the right choices and they'd come out on top again.

The men were in awe. Gabrielle had heard them talking and they thought Xena was touched by the God of War, ready to follow her right down into Hades and back so sure they were of her leadership.

"Muskrat!"

Ah. "Here!" Gabrielle poked her head out into the rain again, and then followed it with a waving arm. "Right where you left me."

Xena slogged across the wet, charred ground, rain soaking her leathers and dripping off the ends of her long, dark hair. She had a wineskin in one hand, and she slapped it gently against her leg as she walked over to where Gabrielle was sheltering. "Keeping dry?"

"Not really, no." Gabrielle scooted over to make room as the queen joined her, feeling much warmer already as her small refuge filled with Xena's presence. "Wow, this is some storm, huh?"

"Meh." Xena handed over the skin. "Take a drink of that." She leaned back against the rock and rested her elbows on her knees, as a heavy roll of thunder rumbled overhead. "Ain't war fun?"

Gabrielle sipped cautiously from the skin, blinking in pleasure and surprise at the hot, spicy wine that emerged. "Oh, wow. That's great." She sighed in contentment, as the warm liquid slid down her throat. "Do you think this is fun?" She handed the skin back.

Xena sipped from it, swallowing and sticking out the tip of a purplish tongue as she considered the question. "Fun." She mused. "Y'know, I used to think about spending nights out in the rain, and sleeping on rocks and I'd convinced myself it was the good old days." She glanced around their poor, rude shelter. "But y'know something?"

"Featherbed's nicer." Gabrielle nodded solemnly.

"You bet your ass it is." Xena passed back the skin. "Hades, I'd settle for my damn tent."

"I like your tent."

"You like everything of mine." The queen teased, shaking her fingers to rid them of raindrops. "So what'd you think of the fight?"

"I think you're brilliant."

Xena looked sideways at her. "Really?" She smirked.

"Really." Gabrielle nodded. "That was amazing. I thought they were going to kill all of us, and you made all the stuff they did fall back on them. That was really clever." She assured the queen in an earnest tone. "How did you think of all that?"

Xena remained quiet, apparently considering Gabrielle's words. She gave a little shrug finally, and folded her hands together. "That's what generals do." She said. "The army depends on the person leading it to come up with a plan to make them win."

"They are really into believing you you." Gabrielle squirmed a little closer and rested her cheek against Xena's arm. "I was really scared, but now I'm not."

"No?" The queen leaned against her. "Why?"

Why? "Because you just keep going until you do win." The blond woman said. "No matter what, No matter if you need to make a hole in a mountain, or go down a river on a tree trunk, or outsmart everyone. You don't want to lose."

Xena extended her legs as best she could in the small space, her boots pressing against the rock on the far side of it. "Mostly that's true." She agreed quietly. "Sometimes I'm lucky, sometimes I get half assed ideas and they're right, sometimes I just am too damn stubborn to give up."

Gabrielle smiled faintly. "I believe in you."

Xena looked at her. "You're an idiot." She said, in a mild tone. "But that's why I love you so much."

"Because I'm an idiot?"

The queen draped an arm over her shoulders and squeezed them. "So you think I'm brilliant, huh?" She went off in a different direction. "You know, I used to sit in my furs at night and think about what the other guy was going to do, and what I'd do and try to make up little battle scenarios."

"Wow."

"Mm." Xena scratched her nose. "Sex is way more fun." She concluded. "But at least I figured out how to think out of the box. That's what saves my ass most of the time."

"What box?"

"The box other people keep their minds in." Xena leaned over and gave her a kiss on the lips, then half turned her body and gave her another one, effectively distracting them both from rain and boxes. She felt Gabrielle's hands warm the leather over her ribs and for a long, blissful moment, all the discomforts faded away.

Then the rain started coming down harder, trickling down the rocks and running over the tips of Xena's boots. Though their heads were sheltered, nothing else was and Gabrielle felt a new chill against the backs of her legs as the water ran down towards the pass.

She exhaled, glancing up at Xena as thunder rumbled again. "This isn't really a lot of fun."

Xena's lips twitched into a rueful grin. "No. It isn't." She agreed. "Not when you'd rather be someplace else." She reviewed the meagre shelter with a disapproving eye. "Damn it, where's a cave with a hot spring when you need it?"

"Oo." Gabrielle pictured that in her head, and her nostrils flared. "Boy, that would feel good."

The queen chuckled. "Yeah, it would." She ducked her head outside, the driving rain spattering her skin as she squinted into it. "But I don't think we're gonna find one, so let's see what else we can dig up. C'mon." She ducked out of the shelter and stood, half turning to block the weather with her back as Gabrielle joined her, and collected her cloak. "Good thing you kept yours from being fried."

Gabrielle paused with the garment in her hands. "Would you like to wear this?" She asked, offering it. "I mean, you are the queen."

"Put that damn thing on." Xena put her hands on the rock. "Do you know how stupid I'd look with that hanging halfway off my ass?"

"I'm not that short." Gabrielle nevertheless fastened the cloak around her neck, glad of its protection as the wind drove a blast of water against her. She pulled her hood up and snugged it tight, then followed Xena as the queen started climbing up the side of the hill, blinking hard to see through the gloom and the rain.

She passed soldiers in makeshift shelters much like hers had been, cloaks wrapped around them, or fitted over slanting pieces of rock, the men huddled underneath chewing on field rations as the storm raged around them.

"Will those other guys try to come back again now?" Gabrielle asked, as she caught up to the queen. "To surprise us I mean?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it." Xena kept climbing, picking her steps carefully as the loose rock slid under her weight. "This weather works against them as much as it does us, maybe more, because we're in a defensive mode, and trying to attack when you can't see is pretty stupid."

"Oh." Gabrielle sniffed, and blinked more rain from her eyes. "Yeah, that makes sense." She flinched as a crack of lightning lit up the sky, and she felt her hair lift. "Oh!"

"Don't worry. I'm taller than you are. It'll fry me first." Xena squinted into the fading blast of light, and grunted. "Ah. Did us a favor." She changed her direction and angled towards an outcropping, the ground scoured bare by the gods fire giving her boots scant purchase.

Sliding, she made it up to the overhang she'd spotted anyway and grabbed onto the rough, wet rock to steady herself as she reached out to offer Gabrielle a hand getting up the last bit of slope. Then she ducked under the ledge and the rain cut off.

It wasn't much shelter, just two corners of rock with a bit of a roof but there was a bit of dry stone to sit on in the back corner and they were out of the wind and the rain. Xena figured it was as good as it was going to get, and she turned, regarding the dark, rainy landscape with its remaining sputters of godfire with a speculative expression.

Gabrielle took her cloak back off and found a bit of a crack in the rock to hang it from off the floor. She rubbed her hands and looked around. "This is nice."

"Llar."

"Okay, it's nicer than sitting under a rock in a puddle." The blond woman amiably amended. "I have some pears. Want one?"

"Uh huh." Xena caught sight of something moving coming from the other direction, and she turned to watch it. Two wagons were making their way towards the army, horses plodding stolidly along in the weather, with figures hunched in the driver's seats and walking alongside. As she watched soldiers broke away from their shelters and headed towards them. "Hm."

Gabrielle came up next to her. "Are those ours?"

"Better be." The queen observed, crossing her arms over her chest. The soldiers reached the wagons, and then turned to escort them on, and she nodded. "Guess they are." She said. "With any luck, someone had a brain storm and they sent the supplies up I asked for."

They both stood together as the wagon made it's slow way up to where the army was encamped, men gathering around them as they stopped. Even through the rain, in the flashes of lighting it was clear whatever the wagons held was welcome and Xena relaxed as the unloading started.

Two soldiers broke away from the crowd and started up towards where they'd taken shelter, carrying a bundle between them. They made steady progress and arrived at the overhang in short order, skidding the last few steps as the two women made a grab for them. "Majesty!"

"What?" Xena yelled back, startling everyone, as she hauled the nearer of them into the space by the scruff of his neck. "What do you have here?"

The men laid their bundle down, giving Xena shy looks. "Camp sent this up for you, Majesty." The one she'd grabbed said. "We thought you might like it here."

Gabrielle had knelt beside the bundle, and was untying it. "That was really nice of them." She said.

"No it wasn't. I'm the damn queen." Xena retorted. "They better have sent something good or I'll send em all to the dungeon when we get back!" She gave the soldiers a stern look. "Right?"

"Yes, Majesty." The both replied in unison.

"Xena." Gabrielle opened the bundle. "Oh, look. It's your spare outfit. It's dry." She glanced up at her companion. "And your extra cloak, the heavy one."

The queen looked down, then she eyed the soldiers. "Go down there and tell them to tell whoever packed this they're getting a homestead and their freedom when we get back. Got me?"

"Yes, Majesty." The men nodded.

"Now get lost." Xena concluded, but with a smile. "Go get some of whatever the Hades else they sent."

"Thanks for bringing this up." Gabrielle smiled at them. "It was really nice of you."

"Gabbbrriiieeeeellleeee...."

"Your welcome, your Grace." The men grinned back, as they ducked back out into the rain, and half slid, half ran back towards the wagons.

Xena pulled the bundle back to the dry seating and settled down to root in it, as Gabrielle followed and joined her. Along with her spare gear was a set for Gabrielle, and .. "Mm." She pulled out a packet that smelled like sweet bread and handed over. "See what that is."

Gabrielle put her dry clothes to one side and settled cross legged to open the packet. Inside, she found golden brown pan cakes emitting the scent of nuts and honey. "Oh, wow." She said. "That looks great."

Xena was drying her face off with a piece of linen. "Sure does."

"Guess I should eat some before you do, just in case, huh?"

The queen stopped, and looked at her, through damp bangs. "What?"

Gabrielle held up the packet. "It's not from the common stuff." She said, quietly. "And I didn't make it."

Ah. Xena hadn't given that much thought to that rule since they'd been in the field, but now she realized Gabrielle had a valid point. Annoying as a dead cow in summer heat, but valid. The queen leaned her elbows on her knees and regarded both the packet and her lover.

The smart decision would be to toss the damn thing out in the rain. However, Xena was hungry, and she knew her companion was, and if you were out in storm with an army after surviving an attack by godsfire - what was the relative risk of eating honeycake anyway?

"Tell you what." Xena reached over and broke a piece off. "Let's have it together." She waited for Gabrielle to take a piece, then she saluted her with her own. "Gotta take a few risks in life, right?"

Solemnly, Gabrielle saluted her back, then they both took a bite of the cake and chewed it, looking into each other's eyes as best they could given the gloom.

After a moment, Xena licked her lips. "Not bad." She said. "But yours is better." She winked, and went back to rummaging.

Gabrielle chewed more slowly, savoring the taste of the honey, and the spices in the cake as she watched the queen, understanding that they'd just shared something more significant than possibly tainted food. She touched her folded, dry clothes and felt a sense of belonging that surprised her and she thought that maybe she'd finally found her place where she'd least expected it.

She finished her cake and set the packet down into the bundle, standing up to unbuckle her armor. Thunder rumbled overhead, but the pouring rain headed off down the slope and left their shelter dry as she took off her scale and set it to one side.

Suddenly, Xena toppled over to one side, and started grabbing at her throat, gasping. Gabrielle dropped what she was doing and leaped over to where the queen was lying, rolling her onto her back and patting her face frantically. "Xena!"

The queen stared up at her, then winked. "Yes?" She grinned at her companion's expression. "Gotcha!"

"Ugh!" Gabrielle collapsed over her in relief. "Sheeps!"

"Hehehe."

**

Xena relaxed as best she could, her legs stretched out over the rocky ground and her back resting against the stone wall. She decided after a long self argument to sit out the storm and wait at least for morning so she accepted the chance to rest and reluctantly took advantage of it.

She could have led an attack through the pass. The soldiers would have gladly followed her if she had, and there was a certain element of surprise she'd have gained from it, especially after turning back the enemy army after their turn at attacking but the darkness, and the weather warned her against risking her smaller force no matter what the possible advantage from it.

Besides, it gave her men a chance to rest after fighting two battles, and it gave her a chance to think about strategy. She glanced over at Gabrielle, who was lying on her back, her head pillowed on her armor listening to the rain. "Hey."

The blond woman looked over at her. "Hi."

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

Gabrielle rubbed her face, and shrugged one shoulder. "I'm tired, but not sleepy." She explained. "I was just thinking about the fight."

"What were you thinking about it?"

"Those guys were pretty sure they were going to win with that stuff, weren't they?"

Xena crossed her booted feet at her ankles. "Sure." She said. "I would have been. This part of the world.. You don't really expect to find people who've experienced it before."

"Hm."

"I got my ass burned by it." The queen went on. "Before I crossed the sea to this place.."

"Wait."

"What?"

"You crossed the sea?"

Xena chuckled briefly. "Yes, I did." She said. "Running as fast as I could from a huge ass army using Godsfire to burn out everything in it's way." Her profile was lit suddenly from a blast of lightning.

"Unfortunately for them, they showed up in a fleet of ships and I was between the ships and them. I got the ships. They got stuck."

"Oh."

"So I came this way instead." The queen said. "I didn't have anything near what it would take to fight that army off with, and I figured it would take them a while to build new ships."

"Wow." Gabrielle rolled over, and faced Xena. "Did they?"

"They certainly did." Xena half smiled. "They stole someone else's, matter of fact, and followed me madder than Hades. Caught up to me just off the coast."

"And?"

The queen folded her arms over her chest. "They weren't as smart as they thought they were. They'd stolen merchant ships. I blew em out of the water with the catapults they'd left onboard and ended up sending most of them to the bottom."

"So you won."

"Yes."

"Wow." Gabrielle repeated. "So what did you say to them?"

"Nothing." Xena chuckled softly under her breath. "I sailed the ships around in a circle watching them all drown. That's when they started calling me the Merciless."

"Oh. What did they call you before?"

"What didn't they call me before?" Xena responded. She eased down and moved over a little, lying down flat next to Gabrielle. "I wonder what they'll call me after this."

"Xena the Magnificent?"

"How about Xena the Idiotic." The queen retorted. "You better come up with some really good stories to tell about me."

Gabrielle laced her fingers together, her hands resting on her stomach as she shifted onto her back again. "I already have some amazing stories." She protested. "That girl you saved in that village, and finding Bregos, and.."

"You going to tell people how I killed him?"

"Yes."

Xena rolled onto her side, reaching out to run her fingers through Gabrielle's hair. "Really?"

"Yes." Gabrielle answered. "He was a bad person, and he hurt a lot of people, and I think it was because he let his heart make his decisions for him."

"What?"

The blond woman turned her head and their eyes met. "I think he was in love with you."

"He was in love with the queen." Xena shook her head. "Not me. He wanted power."

Gabrielle lifted herself up onto her elbow and got almost nose to nose with Xena. "I don't think so. I think he wanted you. I could see it in his face when he looked at you and I know what it feels like."

Xena blinked, her head dropping forward a little. "Whoo. Saucy muskrat." She murmured. "But you know what? The looks he gave you? You could be right." She tilted her face and they kissed each other, the rocks tinkling a little as they slid together and their bodies met.

It felt wonderful. Xena slid a hand under Gabrielle's loose, linen shirt and touched warm skin, her fingertips running over the bumps of her ribs which expanded sharply as their tongues met and explored each other.

Another good reason for not attacking tonight. The queen felt her guts ignite as Gabrielle's fingers tugged at the laces holding her leathers closed and after a brief pause the snug hide loosened and a warm touch curled around her breast.

In war, Xena knew better than most, every moment counted because it could be your last. So making love to Gabrielle here, in this place, in this time, seemed anything but strange to her. She eased the blond woman's shirt up and felt her leathers peeled back off her shoulders as Gabrielle's lips nibbled gently across her collarbone.

Did Gabrielle realize that? Xena stroked the inside of her lover's thigh and a soft, subvocal sound whispered into ear. Or did Gabrielle treat every moment like it was precious? Xena inhaled unevenly as her nipple was captured, and teased.

Did it matter?

"I love you." Gabrielle paused, and whispered. "So much."

Yeah. "I love you too." Xena replied. It mattered. "More than anything else." She felt Gabrielle go still. "Ever."

For a moment, they simple were still, breathing in the same rhythm, listening to the rain's echo. Then Xena slid her hand higher, and the wonderful tingling returned to her breast, and they went on, bare skin pressing against bare skin.

She could feel Gabrielle's breathing going uneven and she tilted her head a bit to nibble the edge of her ear as her body shifted and moved, responding to the teasing touches and nips that coaxed a soft, appreciable moan from her own throat.

The long winter had given her lover a chance to really learn what she liked, and Gabrielle had taken the learning very seriously. She knew exactly where Xena's most sensitive areas were and she knew just what to do with them.

Ungh. Xena felt her guts clench a little. Like that.

The cool air brushed against her now bare hip as Gabrielle's touch moved up and over it and her knee slid between Xena's and she surrendered herself to the gentle but insistent stroking, her body hungry for the release.

So who cared if they were lying on a pile of rocks? Right now she couldn't even feel them.

**

Part 13

The first rays of dawn spilled over the edge of the rocks, glancing lightly into the pass and chasing the gray shadows from the rocks as the army stirred into its morning activities.

Sounds broke the morning stillness. An ax bit into wood. The sound of steel against a sharpening stone. The clash of pans. The rasp of leather boots against rock and the low rumble of men's voices as the troops gathered and worked at a range of tasks.

The smell of recent death was on the breeze, mixed with woodsmoke and humanity and the odd tang of pine from the nearby forest.

Xena paused, then plunged her hands into the pool of rainwater she'd found just outside her makeshift shelter. She bent her head lower and splashed a good quantity of it on her face, her eyes popping wide open at the chill as it touched her skin.

The mineral tang, and the chill startled her, and she bit down on her tongue before she could let out a yelp of protest.

Unqueenly.

"What a crappy way to wake up." She steadfastly scrubbed her face with the icy liquid anyway, glad of the wanly peeking sun at her back providing some cheer in the early morning gloom as she tried to shake some alertness into her only grudgingly awake body glad, at least, it wasn't raining.

Her bones ached from sitting on little but granite the night through, the stone leeching even the warmth provided by Gabrielle's body, and she silently wished for even one damned feather pillow to park her ass on.

Oh well.

Straightening, she flicked her hands to rid them of the excess water, and turned, to find a piece of linen being offered to her. "Ah. Thanks." She accepted the rag and wiped her face off with it, stepping to one side as she did. "Snazzy granite basin's all yours." Xena gestured grandly at the puddle as her companion eyed it warily. "G'wan. Feels great."

Gabrielle gave her a rueful grin, as she stuck her fingers into the water. "Brr."

"Mm." Xena agreed. She leaned back against the rock wall, surveying the soggy ground below. She was still in just her leathers, the dry set they'd sent up the previous night and she flexed her toes inside thankfully equally dry boots.

The pass was a mess. Between the burned out patches of scrub and only partially burned bodies left from the rainstorm's dousing of the fires it was a nasty sight and it made Xena's nose wrinkle. She glanced to her right as one of her captains joined her on the rise and jerked her chin at the mess. "We've got work to do."

"Aye." Dev agreed. "Lousy night. Kept the lot of them over there quiet though."

Xena nodded. "What's the latest from the forward watch?"

"Stayed b'hind their lines." Dev said. "Get out the rain, like we did, I'm guessing." He studied the pass, as the sun grudgingly started to fill it. "Our turn to get a go at em now?" His voice sounded hopeful. "Kicked their asses twice now on their terms."

The queen stretched her body out, considering the question. "Get the mess cleaned up." She ordered. "We don't need that at our backs. Then.. Yeah. Pass the word to sharpen up weapons, we're going hunting."

"Majesty." Dev saluted casually, then headed off, scrambling down the slope in an undignified haste to get back to his comrades.

Xena chuckled and stretched again, putting her hands behind her and flexing her shoulders as she worked the kinks out of her protesting bones. "Do me a favor?"

"Anything." Gabrielle blinked a few droplets from her lashes, as she patted the water off her face.

"Figure out how we can pack a featherbed in our saddlebags." Xena rotated her head, and rubbed the back of her neck. "You're a bright little thing. I know you can figure it out." She flexed her hands and then rested them on her hips. "All right. Time to put the sharp things on."

"Would you like some breakfast?" Gabrielle picked up the queen's discarded linen and added it to her own as she followed Xena towards their corner of the rocks. "I could go get some."

"Apparently you would." Xena answered dryly. "G'wan, go ahead. Otherwise all that grumbling's going to distract me from thinking about all the brilliant stuff I'm going to have the army do." She waved Gabrielle ahead as she ducked back under their shelter, and went to where her armor was draped.

"Okay." Gabrielle put the linen on a rock to dry and looked at her own armor. "Are you going to stay here?"

Xena peered around, her shoulder armor piece in her hands. "Maybe." She waggled her eyebrows. "Depends if you bring back something really good or not."

Wasn't quite what she was asking, but Gabrielle grinned anyway, and headed out into the morning light, leaving her armor behind confident her lover would keep an eye on it for her. She turned her face into the sun, her mood light despite the battle Xena seemed to be planning.

The air was cool, but she had her quilted undershirt on which came to her mid thighs and her leggings, and she was warm enough as she approached the cluster of men around the very barebones mess area. They spotted her as she approached, and a path opened to the chow fast as a lambs tail shake. "Morning!"

"Morning, your grace." The day's cook held out a piece of wood to her, with a good sized pile of dried meat, fruit slices and two portions of travelbread. "This do you?"

"Sure." Gabrielle took the wood. "But where's Xenas?" She asked, with an innocent look as he stopped in confusion and looked at the platter. The other soldiers eyed her uncertainly, relaxing when she chuckled and waved off the offer of another pile of food. "I'm just kidding. This is great, thanks."

The cook looked relieved. "We heard you were a good cook yourself, your grace." He said. "Her majesty speaks very highly of you."

Gabrielle cocked her head to one side. She knew Xena was agreeable to whatever she usually put in front of her, but she didn't think it was something the woman would have mentioned to her troops. Was it? "Well, I know a thing or two, sure." She said modestly. "I'm glad Xena appreciates my skills."

A little silence fell after that. Gabrielle reviewed her words, and decided to leave before she got lightheaded from blushing. "Ah, yeah, thanks again, bye." She escaped with her platter, not daring to look back as she climbed up the slope to where Xena was waiting. "Sheesh."

"What?" Xena turned as she entered, her hands busy adjusting a buckle.

"Did you really tell the guys I could cook?"

Xena stopped in mid motion, looking over at Gabrielle with an expression that mixed amusement with a touch of guilt. "What?"

The blond woman put the plank down and started sorting out the contents. "I was getting this and the guys down there said you told them I was a good cook." She explained. "So I was wondering.. What exactly did you tell them?"

"Ah." Xena finished tightening her armor. "That."

Gabrielle peered over at her. "That what?"

The queen chuckled quietly. "Yes, I told them you could cook." She walked over to where Gabrielle was and picked up a piece of the dried meat, biting into it and chewing the tough substance. "And that it was something I appreciated among your other." She reached over and traced the edge of her lover's ear. "skills."

"Oh."

Xena watched the mixed emotions on her lover's face. "Would you relax?" She nudged her. "I was beating the daylights out of a bunch of them during that last big storm we had and Brandon was giving me grief about being such a hard ass."

"Uh.."

"So I told em it was your fault."

"My fault?" Gabrielle put her hands on her hips and faced the queen. "How was that my fault?"

Xena nibbled her bread. "I had to push myself like a nut the whole winter just to keep your damn cooking from sticking on me." Her eyes twinkled a little, watching her lover's expression. "That's how."

"Oh." Gabrielle frowned a bit. "Is that bad?"

"Nah." The queen shook her head. "It was a damn good thing, because it meant I was ready for this campaign." She pointed her bread at Gabrielle. "And it's all your fault."

Shocking, really. Having to work that hard after the last few seasons of a gradual slacking off. After all, those gowns hid a multitude of sins, and it had become easier for her lately to accept the distractions

of the machinations of her court and the fascinations of her vintners as an excuse to let things slide at least to a certain point.

But Gabrielle had introduced a distraction of a whole different magnitude and she'd quickly realized she'd had to decide between stepping up her drilling or giving up her lover's pampering and given her body's unexpected addiction to the latter, the former seemed the easier course to take.

The need to teach her adorable but uncoordinated bedmate how to fight had also turned out to be benefit for both of them and after a while things settled down into a pleasing balance of exertion and indulgence that made the cold months speed rapidly by.

It was only with the coming of spring that she'd realized the decision was spurring her towards taking the army out early, and that choice now had gained far more significance in the grand scheme of things. So maybe the Fates were just giving her a kick in the ass.

"Wow." Gabrielle slowly chewed a bit of fruit. "I guess that's not so awful." She said. "I'm glad I can do something pretty well, anyway."

"You should be." Xena abandoned the meat and picked up a slice of fruit instead, with a piece of bread to chase it down. "Damned wish you'd cooked breakfast, that's for sure." She added in an undertone, grimacing a little at the strong, smokey taste. "Remind me to have you go down there and give them some lessons."

Gabrielle chewed industriously on a bit of dried meat, which tasted mostly of smoke and a little salt. It wasn't great, and she had to swallow twice to get the stuff down. "Okay." She switched to the fruit, deciding to save the meat for later. "I see your point. That's pretty bad."

"Uh huh." Xena agreed. "Hungry men'll eat anything, but they fight better on full bellies when they haven't had to fight to choke their dinner down first."

Gabrielle felt that was a very sensible statement. She picked up a bowl and set the dried meat inside it, then she took the wineskin hanging from a crack in the rock nearby and squirted enough in the bowl to cover the meat.

She reviewed the results, capping the skin before she put it back and then used the point of her little knife to move the meat around in the wine, pressing it a little with the tip. "This wouldn't be too bad if I put it in a stew with some roots and those berries you like."

"Shut up unless you're going to start building a fire and finding those berries." Xena told her. "Any reason you're ruining perfectly good wine there?"

"Just trying something."

"Uh huh." Xena swallowed the last of her bread and fruit and swung her cloak over her shoulders and tied it into place. "Stay here and keep trying. I'm gonna go rouse the troops."

Gabrielle continued her poking, turning her head to watch the queen walk away. Xena had a very sexy walk, even in her admittedly biased eyes. Very powerful and rhythmic and she almost stabbed herself in the thumb as her body started reacting to the moving shape she could see through the outline of Xena's cloak. "Sheep. Cut that out."

She forced her attention back to her task, having this new reputation to live up to, after all and if she could make something edible out of the dried horse leathers they'd given her then maybe she could move on to her next task of fitting a featherbed in a saddlebag.

It was shaping up to be a very busy day.

**

Xena climbed up the last steep bit and settled herself next to the watch on the forward sentry position. The two men were faced forwards, studying the enemy lines like twin hawks, one of them taking a slow, even swig from a waterskin.

Xena watched them for a moment, then she casually tapped the skin holder on the shoulder, and he passed the container back to her without looking. She took a sip from it, then passed it back, waiting for him to put it to his lips.

He did. "Thanks." Xena remarked conversationally, ducking to one side as a spurt of water jetted over the man's shoulder missing his mouth as he turned sharply to face her. "What's the matter, never seen a bitch before?"

"Mistress!" The man coughed. "Didn't think ye.."

"Of course I do." Xena caught the other guard watching them out of the very corner of his eye. She reached over and flicked his ear, and he jerked his eyeballs forward. "You didn't think that noise from my tent at night was singing, didja?"

"Mistress?" The man actually squeaked, as she leaned closer and leveled her penetrating stare at him.

"Never mind." Xena eased up onto her knees and put her hands on either side of the opening the men were tucked behind, stifling a laugh as they both inhaled sharply and sat there motionless. "Let's see what we've got here, hm?"

There was some motion going on in the enemy camp. She could see the rustling around of spear tips, and hear the soft, muffled rumble of horsehooves. Was the damn bastard getting ready to attack again? She frowned, second guessing herself on not launching her own attack earlier. "Sex is not worth getting your ass kicked."

"Mistress???"

"Shut up." The queen nudged him out of the way. "Go tell the other guard post something's coming at us. Everyone form up lines."

The guard decided escape was the better part of valor, and he turned and scrambled down from the post without further word, bits of rock skittering out from under his boots as he half slid, half fell to the lower path.

The other guard shaded his eyes and got as close to Xena as he could as he looked over at the enemy lines. "Another try, your Majesty?" He questioned. "Seems reckless."

Xena glanced at him, recognizing the guard who'd kept his post in the forest and hadn't been distracted. "Reckless, or dumb stubborn." She answered frankly. "Neither of which makes sense, based on what I've seen of them so far."

The man nodded. "Seem like a regular troop."

"Mm." The queen watched the stirring intently. "They've got godsfire, good order, good armor... to keep throwing themselves at is either means they think the past two failures are a fluke, or they're being lead by an arrogant megalomaniac."

The man grunted.

“And I wouldn’t know *anything* about that, would I?” Xena chuckled wryly under her breath. She caught motion in the center of the enemy lines before she could continue her commentary, and she tensed as the hastily erected tree trunks lifted aside and a contingent of horses moved out. “Ah.”

It was a small group, and after a moment her heartbeat slowed and steadied, as she realized what was coming at her was an envoy, not an attack. The lead rider held a pole with a standard fluttering in the breeze, and he kept his horse at a steady walk, his armor covered with a rich scarlet overlay.

Five men rode behind him, four surrounding the fifth whose trappings were just a bit finer, and who alone wore no battle helmet.

Xena blinked, then she blinked again and leaned further into the rock.

“Tis a woman there, your Majesty?” The guard asked her, his voice lifting in surprise. “In the middle there?”

“Sure looks like it.” The queen replied. “What are the odds, hm? Two rampaging insufferable bitches in the same pass facing off against each other?”

The guard exhaled, making a vaguely bubbling sound with his lips.

The rider in the center was, in fact, a woman so far as she could tell. Sitting straight in the saddle, she had fiery red hair and her pose was as arrogant as Xena’s on horseback and in that moment of revelation, the situation certainly had become a good bit more interesting. “Well, well.”

“Do you know of this one, Majesty?” The guard asked. “There was talk of that queen to the east, we heard before the cold season, could this be the one they spoke of?”

Xena studied the oncoming riders intently. “No.” She said, after a brief pause. “I’ve seen people from the east. They don’t look like her.” She made a sound not unlike the one the soldier had. “Haven’t seen that banner before.”

“None here have.” The guard said. “We were talking about it, after the battle last night.”

Well. Xena reviewed her options, and ended up slapping the rock with one hand. “Let’s see what they’re up to.” She turned and headed for the edge of the rocks, putting her fingers between her lips and letting out a long whistle, followed by two shorter ones.

She didn’t have much time, and she watched curve in the path with impatient eyes, until a line of her own horsemen swept around it, a faint spray of water dancing off them in the early morning sunlight that reflected off newly washed coats and human skins.

No matching armor. No matching anything, save the hawk’s head planted somewhere and the uniform competence of the riding that spoke of experience and Xena’s own brand of unique training. It made her smile just to see them, but she didn’t have time to savor that, and she stepped off the watch ledge and dropped through the open air, her plan already moving forward almost faster than she was.

It felt dangerous. It felt like things were slipping out of her control, and just when she’d settled her thoughts enough to address her horsemen her feeling was confirmed when a new set of hoofbeats echoed from behind them.

Little hooves.

Pony sized hooves. Xena reached the mounted troop just as Patches came barrelling around the corner, his white and rust coat sparkling in the sun as his rider’s head poked out from behind his ears, bright golden and distinctive.

The queen sighed. "So much for plans." She sighed. "Dev, spread the men out. There are six riders coming towards us, looks like a talking party."

"Aye." Dev said. "Want em bringing the big boy up for ye?"

Xena went still for a moment, then she smiled. "No." She said, just as Gabrielle arrived on her shaggy mount. "Ask them what they want. I'm just gonna listen." She took hold of Patches bridle and led him over to a jagged outcropping, stepping behind it and hiding herself from view.

"Aye." Dev signalled the riders, who spread out across the pass, and went still, as the sound of the approaching enemy echoed loudly against the rocks. "Arms out!"

The horsemen shifted their stances, drawing swords and maces and setting them to rest across their saddlebows, ready for action.

"Xena." Gabrielle whispered. "What's going on?" She peered past the soldiers, not seeing much but twitching horsetails and tense backs.

"Beats me." Her queen responded. "That's what I'm trying to find out. Why are you here?"

"Because you are."

Xena nodded, as though she expected the answer. "When they come around the bend, just watch them. Don't talk, don't do anything, just watch them." She instructed. "There's something going on here I'm not getting."

Gabrielle could see horses now approaching them. "Is that the guy in charge?" She uttered, seeing a flash of golden cloth in the midst of the enemy. It was scary, but the soldiers were between her and the bad guys, and after all, Xena was next to her.

"It's not a guy in charge."

Gabrielle blinked, her eyes focusing on the gold, and then registering the pale, elegant face now visible over it as the line of horses slowed. "Oh." She said, after a long moment. "What does she want?"

Xena cocked her ears and leaned against the rock, her fingers idly twisting Patches reins. "Maybe she wants to trade recipes with ya."

The strange woman stopped her horse. "Who blocks my path!" She called out, in a strong, impatient voice. "I have no time to waste with scraggly minions. Tell your so called leader I would speak with her."

"Um... I don't think she wants to cook." Gabrielle murmured, nervously watching their line of soldiers, who merely sat their mounts, seemingly bored with it all. "She sounds like.. Um..."

"Me." Xena said. "Right?"

Gabrielle didn't answer, as the woman's eyes suddenly slipped past the soldiers and fell on her, the arrogant face twitching a little in reaction as their glances met. She got the impression of a cold and calculating fierceness and an icy beauty that made her stomach churn and her hands clench on Patches saddlebow.

"Wanna be the queen today?" Xena saw the stiffening of her companion's body, and guessed she'd been spotted. "Tell her you're me?"

"Uh uh." Gabrielle grunted, shaking her head minutely. "Scary."

“Who’s askin?” Dev called back, in a lazily insolent tone. “Don’t know if her Majesty wants to talk to vagrants of the morning.”

“Scarier than me?”

The icy eyes left her and Gabrielle was able to breathe again. There were twice as many of their guys between her and the enemy, but she could see their faces, and there was no fear there. She got the sense that their opponents considered themselves the superior force.

“Bring your leader here, or a thousand men will be upon you before the sun is a hand higher.” The woman stated. “Decide now, or die.”

Gabrielle peeked at Xena from the corner of her eye. Her friend and lover’s face was unalarmed, the faintest of smiles twitching around her lips. “Now what?” She mouthed, as a silence fell and everyone seemed to be waiting.

Waiting for her, Xena reckoned, having a wry moment of appreciation for her role as the the hub in this particular Fate’s wheel, and at the same moment wishing it had just rolled on by her.

Soak in a hot tub would have been a lot more fun. She looked up at Gabrielle, making her expression as serous as she could. “Stay. Here.” She pronounced both words distinctly. “Okay?”

“No.” Gabrielle whispered. “But I will anyway.”

“Like I believe that for a heartbeat.” Xena tapped her knee, then she released Patches and turned, starting to scale up the wall still out of sight of the enemy soldiers.

Gabrielle sighed and tried to make herself as inconspicuous as she could, pressed against her rock wall, as those glaring eyes once more targeted her. “You think I can climb that wall up there after her, Patches?”

Her pony snorted.

“Yeah. Me either.”

**

Xena climbed up past the level of the watch post, keeping the edge of the rock wall between her and the waiting enemy contingent. She could feel the granite biting into the palms of her hands, but so far the climb had been manageable and she pulled herself up to a point where she could see into the pass.

The six riders were still there, facing off against her twelve men and one muskrat. She could see Gabrielle’s head peeking out from the rocks, and the impatient shifting of the enemy’s horses feet and she judged she had only a very little time before someone did something stupid.

Coin toss as to who that’d be. Xena eased her body over the ledge and started down the other side, pressing her body against the rock and staying as much in the shadows as she could. She was at an angle that prevented them from seeing her easily, but all it would take was one good look at the skyline and someone would notice a big dark spider clinging to the hillside.

Then probably shoot her in the ass. Xena edged along a small crack, then she slipped into a crevice and inched her way down towards the floor of the pass as she heard laughter from her own lines behind her. That could be good, or bad, but she was glad of the distraction as she found herself entering a thick, spiny scrub whose sharp points penetrated even her armor.

Stifling a curse, she wrapped the edge of her cloak around her hands and eased the spines from her skin judging the distance she had left to travel with a soundless groan. Here near the ground, though,

she had a better chance of moving unseen, and so she soldiered on, reasoning every stab of the thorns would get her a kiss from Gabrielle to fix it.

**

Gabrielle watched her queen disappear, then she grabbed hastily at Patches reins as the pony decided he was bored of the rocks and headed for a patch of sparse grass behind the row of Xena's horse soldiers. "Sss! Stop!" She hissed softly.

The pony merely shook his head and kept walking, stopping just behind Dev's tall bay gelding and stretching his neck out to nibble the few stalks poking through the rocks.

It felt dangerous here. Gabrielle peered cautiously through the sturdy horses' forms to watch the enemy fighters, the man bearing the flag in front visibly impatient. The four soldiers around the woman were also wary, their hands resting on sword hilts as they shifted and turned their heads, watching everything around them.

In contrast, Xena's men were relaxed in their saddles, stolidly blocking the way through the pass and confident in their ability to hold their position. Dev half turned his head as Patches intruded in the line, his eyes flicking behind Gabrielle in a rapid, furtive motion.

He looked at Gabrielle. She held his gaze, then she briefly looked up as though at the sky. His lips twitched, and he faced forward again, leaning forward and easing his boots in his stirrups.

"I am waiting." The enemy woman said suddenly, in a loud voice, waiting for the echoes to fade as she tossed her head, and looked at Gabrielle with a haughty expression, the disdain in her voice stinging the blond woman unexpectedly.

"That's a funny name." Gabrielle heard herself answering, as though the words were coming from some other person. She almost looked around to see who. "You must not be from around here."

Xena's soldiers all laughed. Dev turned in his saddle to look over at her, his posture remaining relaxed. "Well said, y'r grace."

Well, since she'd started something... Gabrielle nudged Patches forward, the men shifting aside to make room for her. As she did, she saw the enemy eyes focusing on her, and she realized she had their attention. "I'm not sure what you're waiting for. Surely you don't expect the queen to be wasting her time looking for you, do you?" She lifted her chin, putting as much of her own brand of arrogance into her voice as she could.

Which wasn't much, admittedly, but she could tell it was making the enemy leader mad anyway. She could see her more clearly now, and beneath her abundant fiery hair was a strong, oddly shaped face and eyes that slanted a little upward.

Unusual, and exotic, and she carried herself straight as a warrior, though even from where Gabrielle was she could tell the woman fell a little short of Xena's measure.

"I expect the inept leader of this rag tag collection of nothings to come when I call her." The woman said, staring directly at Gabrielle. "I do not expect peasant children to answer for her."

Tucked between the soldiers, Gabrielle was feeling pretty secure. "That's really too bad." She replied, in a conversational tone. "It's going to make a great story though, isn't it? If we're a rag tag collection of nothings and we beat you, I mean."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Xena suddenly appear behind the enemy, rising up out of the scrub like a shadow, her dark leathers and thick cloak absorbing the sunlight as she started moving towards the six riders.

In full view of her men, and of Gabrielle, and yet so silent even the enemy horses didn't twitch an ear in her direction. She only barely kept her eyes from widening in reaction to Xena's boldness and she had to wonder what in the world the queen was up to.

The woman's voice had an odd sound to it. "Do yourself a favor, peasant. Bring word to your.. " She paused. "Queen." The men around her chuckled. "That if she wants to survive past this sunset, she will present herself to me before my patience is ended."

Gabrielle found it almost impossible not to watch her lover approach, but she forced her eyes to fix on the enemy leader instead. The men around her had separated out a bit, so the woman could see better and now as she looked through their ranks she saw Xena lift her hand and make a rotating gesture she often used when Gabrielle was telling a story and she wanted her to get to the good parts.

Or, what Xena considered the good parts, which usually included anything with blood and yelling. "You know what I think?" Gabrielle mind was racing. "I think you though it was going to be an easy thing here and.."

"Be quiet, peasant." The woman called out sharply. "I care not what you think."

"Why not?" Gabrielle guided Patches forward a few steps. Behind the enemy woman the last horseman stiffened, then leaned over his mount as it dropped back a pace. "You should be, because I'm the person who's going to tell everyone else how Xena beat you."

"You?" The woman laughed.

"It is as the man said, my liege." The soldier next to her spoke up. "They believe themselves to be far more than they are." He rode forward a few steps, along with two of the others. "Now, stop wasting our time! This is your only chance to avoid your own slaughter. Bring this leader to us or we will return and wipe you from the earth."

"You did try that." Gabrielle said. "It didn't really work out so well though, now did it?"

"This is pointless." The woman said.

"This isn't." A low, amused, purring voice said to her right, as a flash of sun caught Xena's blade, now inches from the woman's neck. "Ah ah ah.." Xena warned the enemy solders, who whirled and started to draw their swords. "Put those up or I sneeze and this gets even uglier than you already are."

The men looked at their leader, who had the sense to keep still, only her head turning to review the intruder sitting horseback next to her. Xena had her arm stretched half out from her body, and the woman's eyes fell to the tip of the blade threatening her, which stayed absolute rock steady, even as the moment lengthened.

After a long holding of breathes, the enemy leader lifted one hand just slightly, and the soldiers reseated their weapons, watching the tableau with wary, angry eyes.

Xena took them all in with her peripheral vision, keeping her focus on the woman next to her. She let them wait until she was sure they were about to do something stupid, then with a flick of her wrist, she moved her sword tip horizontally, slicing free a lock of the woman's hair before she let the blade come round to be neatly seated into her scabbard.

The enemy leader twitched, just keeping herself from a flinch, then she turned her horse to face Xena, putting distance between them with studied casualness. ‘So.’

Xena studied her adversary in relaxed silence, her hands resting lightly on her bare thighs, the enemy horse still and obedient under her. “You wanted to talk.” She said, after a pause. “Talk. I’ve got better things to do with my time than sit here in the company of pompous assholes.”

The woman looked past Xena, to the body of the guard she’d killed for his horse lying now in the dirt beyond them. Then she returned her attention to the tall, dark haired figure in well worn armor before her and folded her hands over her saddlehorn. “That was a good man.” She remarked. “I don’t like losing good men.”

“Then you shouldn’t have brought him.” Xena replied. “This is war. People die.”

Surprisingly, the woman merely nodded. “And yet, death should be worth something.” She said. “The price of that man’s life was a lesson for me. I have learned that not all things I have heard from one I trusted can be trusted. So you are the one they call Xena.”

Xena didn’t feel this required an answer. “If you’re looking for Bregos.” She said. “Don’t bother.”

“I wasn’t.” The other woman smiled thinly. “I was looking for you.” She said. “And now I know why.” She edged her horse a step closer. “You have two choices now. My army is far larger than yours, we both know it.” Her face twitched slightly. “And this is but my vanguard. We hold the port and the river.”

Uh oh. Xena merely shrugged in response, despite the prickle of apprehension at the woman’s words. She could be lying, but somehow, Xena didn’t think she was. . “And?” She replied in a mild tone. “Hasn’t helped you so far.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. To my men, you are just a diversion.”

“Mm.” Xena shot right back. “We barbequed piles of them last night. Hope they were entertained.”

“We could fight until I beat you.” The other woman agreed. “But I think you are not that stupid, so I have a better choice for you.” She pinned Xena with her sharp, dark eyes. “If you have the guts to come to my camp and find out what that is.”

Xena laughed.

“I guarantee your safety.” The woman said.

Xena laughed harder, leaning back in her saddle and crossing her arms over her chest. “You’re gonna guarantee *my* safety?”

The woman straightened up, her expression darkening. “I can.” She said. “I am Sholeh, and my father is the king of Persia. You lay your life on your mocking, I warn you.” Her men shifted, reaching for their weapons and Xena’s men reacted to the motion, as swords rasped from sheaths and rocks skittered under anxious hooves.

Ah. Xena’s nostrils flared. Persia. Not good. She saw Gabrielle taking out her stick, and realized it was going to get very ugly very quickly, and though her men outnumbered the enemy here, a steep gamble of the dice was suddenly held in her fist. “Relax.” She waved her men off. “There’s only five of em.”

Her men reluctantly sheathed their swords, though Gabrielle kept her stick at the ready, and the enemy soldiers glared at her and kept theirs out.

Xena cocked her head to one side and regarded the Persian princess. "Wanna lose five more?" She asked. "Or was that guarantee just more desert hot air?"

Sholeh eyed her thoughtfully for a long moment, then she motioned for her men to stand down. "Then you will come with us."

"No." Xena dismounted from her stolen horse, dusting her hands off as she headed back for her own lines, ignoring the soldiers on either side of her. "I'm going to have lunch. Maybe I'll drop by later." She crossed between the last two enemy riders, daring them to touch her, held high, her back to her enemy. "Thanks for the ride."

"This will be your only chance, Xena." Sholeh watched her walk off. "We will destroy you."

Xena lifted a hand and waved, as she reached Patches, who was ahead of the rest of her men by about a horse length. She turned and laid her arm over the pony's neck and leaned against him, feeling Gabrielle's hand touch her back immediately.

After a pause, Sholeh signalled her men, and they retreated back down the pass, circling the fallen body of their comrade without stopping. The riderless horse snorted, then turned uncertainly and followed his stablemates around the bend and out of sight.

"Wow." Gabrielle exhaled. "That's.."

"A problem." Xena turned and faced her men. "We are so screwed."

"We are?" Her lover asked.

"Oh yeah." The queen nodded. "C'mon. Let's go see if I can figure out a way out of this mess." She started off back towards the army, her hand on Patches bridle. "I knew I shoulda just stayed in bed."

**

Xena seated the last of her daggers into her boot before she straightened up, giving Tiger a pat on the shoulder as he shifted his big feet around on the rocky ground. She exhaled, acknowledging the ball of tension in her guts and considered again the options open to her.

After a frustrated moment she just threw up her hands and walked over to a boulder, sitting down on it and staring across the pass as the afternoon sun bathed her in deceptively cheerful warmth.

A soft scuffle of loose stones made her look up, to find Gabrielle climbing up the slope towards her, her blond hair glistening in that same sun. She had her stick in her hand, and she was using it to keep her balance as she got up the last little rise and joined Xena on her little plateau. "Mind if I sit here with you?"

Xena snorted. "Would it stop you if I did?"

Gabrielle clasped her hands around her staff and gazed quietly at her seated friend. "Yes."

Xena became aware that her little bedmate looked a lot more serious than she usually did, and she pondered if there was something wrong with her. "Sit." She indicated the rock. "What's on your mind?"

"You."

"Naturally." The queen agreed.

Gabrielle sat down next to her. "Are you really going to go to that woman's place?"

Xena had noticed, over the months, that unlike most people her adorable companion was capable of saying far more with the tone of her voice than with the words she was saying, even though she chattered constantly about pretty much everything.

She could also hear the faint rasp in Gabrielle's tone that usually meant she was stressed or upset, which seemed a normal reaction given the circumstances. "Not sure I can't." She answered, slowly. "We can hold them off here, but if she keeps sending attacks we'll end up losing in the long run."

Gabrielle leaned against her staff. "Can't we just run away?"

"We could." The queen agreed. "But they'd just wipe through after us and we'd end up with nothing anyway.. I could hold her at the mountain pass before we drop down to the stronghold but we'd be back in the same place."

"What do you think she wants?"

Xena hitched her knee up and circled it with both arms. "I don't know." She admitted. "She doesn't need an alliance, we don't have that many resources to hand over.. She probably just wants to kill me."

Gabrielle swallowed.

"Maybe I'll try to seduce her." Xena pondered. "That might give me a few extra minutes."

Gabrielle swallowed again.

Xena looked at her. "What do you think she wants?" She asked, fascinated by the mixture of emotions on her companion's face.

"You." Gabrielle answered softly. "I think that's why her men were going after you in the fight."

The queen considered that for a few minutes. "Could be. Bregos might have paid her off to get rid of me." She finally said. "Maybe she'll take me and leave everyone else alone. I could send the army back home, might be worth it." She saw Gabrielle's hands tighten on the staff. "But I guess we won't know if I don't get my ass moving to find out."

Gabrielle turned her head and looked up.

"You coming with me?" Xena asked, after another long silence between them. "YOu two seemed to be getting along so well I figure we might as well piss her off as much as we can before we find out what she has in mind."

Unaccountably, Gabrielle suddenly looked profoundly relieved, and she nodded. "I want to go with you." She said. "I don't care what she does."

Feeling a little relieved herself, Xena put her arm around Gabrielle and pulled her closer, giving her a kiss on the top of her head and enjoying the simple affection of it. "At's my girl." She said. "You and I are going to walk to Hades together, you know that, right?"

Gabrielle set her staff aside and half turned, putting both arms around Xena and hugging her. "I love you." She said, after a minute. "I don't care where we go as long as we both go."

Goofy, but it made her feel a lot less lonely and depressed at the thought of walking into an enemy camp, so Xena didn't question it. She accepted the hug, and the emotion, and cupped the back of Gabrielle's neck with her free hand, savoring the comfort it gave her.

They sat together as the sun started angling to the west, until Xena finally sighed and gave her companion a pat on the back. "All right. Let's get going."

Sniffing a little, Gabrielle straightened and released her, wiping the back of her hand over her eyes.

“What’s that all for?” Xena touched the side of face, damp with tears. “Change your mind?”

“No.” The blond woman stood, and tugged her armor a bit straighter. “Let me go get Patches.” She picked up her staff and started off down the slope, glancing back over her shoulder a few times as though to check if Xena was still there.

Xena remained seated on her boulder, turning her head when she heard another set of footsteps approaching. She spotted Dev heading for her, the soldier’s armor carefully brushed, and his chest graced with a black overlay bearing her crest. “What the Hades is that for?” She asked as he came up to her. “There a parade no one told me about?”

Dev knelt unexpectedly at her feet, and put his hands on his knee. “The dozen of us, Majesty, would go with you.” He said. “Please let us.”

“Did I ask for an escort?” The queen asked, sharply.

“No.” Her captain shook his head. “But you’re due it, and it’s our honor to.”

Xena studied his face, it’s right cheek marked deeply with scars gain in her service. This was no feckless child chasing after her, ignorant of the end game they were playing. “All right.” She answered. “We’ll all go and be idiots together. Someone bring the wineskins.”

“Majesty.” He put his fist to his chest.

“Keep that up and I’ll make you stay here and cook.” Xena warned.

“Xena.” He amended, with a smile.

“G’wan.” His queen smiled back. “Gather the rest of the idiots in the pass, and let me get this huge beast moving. “ She said. “Dev, tell the rest of the men if we don’t come back, scatter.”

“Aye.” Dev nodded, unsurprised. “They know.”

“There’s caves, in the inner mountains. Caches I left there. They can live on that until this all passes.” Xena said, seriously.

“Aye.” He repeated.

“Go.” Xena clapped him on the shoulder. “Let’s get this over with. It’s already been a long damn day.”

Dev stood and saluted again, before he turned and made his way along the ridge towards the encampment. Xena watched him leave, then she stood up and shook herself, walking over to where Tiger was waiting and stroked his neck. “You ready for this, boy? You’re the one who has no say in it, aren’tcha?”

Tiger nuzzled her chest, his warm breath tickling her skin. Looking around quickly, Xena leaned over and gave him a kiss on his soft nose, before she took hold of his bridle and started to lead him down the slope to where she could see Gabrielle and her pony waiting.

She was feeling a strange mixture of emotions herself, as she led her horse towards the pass. Disgust, at being in damn spot the way they were. Shame, that she’d have to walk into her enemy’s camp, and put herself at her enemy’s mercy.

Sadness, that she was taking others into the bowls of Hades with her.

Pride, that they willingly wanted to go.

Gabrielle turned to face her as she arrived at the bottom of the hill, reaching out a hand to pat Tiger's nose as he stopped next to her. "I have an apple. Do you want half?"

"Sure." Xena soaked in the normalcy of it, as they walked together side by side, their horses following behind them. She accepted her half of the fruit and bit into it, the crisp flesh tart against her tongue. Ahead of them, she could see her escort forming up, and with a last sigh, she cast her fate to the winds they were walking into.

"Want me to tell you a story?" Gabrielle asked, as they mounted.

"Sure." Xena was aware of the army gathering around them, and as she pulled Tiger's head around to start him towards the other end of the pass, the men around her, the archers and footmen, the cavalry riders she was leaving behind, all knelt.

Xena paused, in surprise. She looked at Gabrielle, who was looking back at her with a somber expression. "Hold that for a minute." She said, giving the riders a signal to move out.

The pass was quiet, just the sound of their horses as the small group moved through the massed men. No chants, no calls, no motion, just dusty fighters in well used armor kneeling in homage as she went by them.

Were the Fates laughing at her? Xena lifted her head proudly and made a vague, if rude gesture in the direction of the sky. Let them laugh. She hoped it ended up choking them.

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It took a little while, but Gabrielle finally felt her stomach settle down as she rode along next to Xena. They were going at a relaxed, dignified pace, almost as though they were out for an afternoon's ride near the stronghold instead of marching right towards an enemy encampment.

She knew most of that was an act. Even though Xena's face was relaxed, Gabrielle could see in her body posture that she was anything but and she wondered if the queen wanted to just run off the other way as badly as she did.

They had passed their last guard post, and now they were approaching the first of the opposing side's, a line of men visible along the last bend of the pass before it opened up to the lower plateau.

What would their reception be, Gabrielle wondered. Would the enemy soldiers attack them as soon as they came into range? She noticed that Xena was guiding Tiger so that she and the big black horse were between the guards and Gabrielle, so maybe that's what the queen thought would happen.

They were in front, though. Not like how the enemy leader had shown up, behind soldiers on horses. Xena and Gabrielle were at the very front of the line, with no standard bearer prancing in front of them.

Gabrielle reached over and patted Patches' shaggy neck as the guards came more clearly into view, and she could see a line of mounted soldiers behind them blocking the way. "Are they going to fight with us?" She asked Xena.

"Maybe." Xena worked to keep her body relaxed in her saddle when it wanted to react to the tension and her hand was itching for her sword hilt. "I kicked them in the ass when they came at us chances are they want to knock a little pride off me first, at least."

Gabrielle looked at her. "Are you going to let them do that?"

"Nope." Xena played with a bit of Tiger's mane.

"I didn't think so."

The words made Xena smile. "You've sure gotten to know me, huh?" She was glad of the distraction, as the line of enemy riders loomed larger and larger in her peripheral vision.

Gabrielle gave her a wry smile. "Xena, it's going to take the rest of our lives together for me to really get to know you."

"Nah, I'm a simple country gal." The queen disagreed. "You nailed me after the first moon we slept together. Damndest thing, too." She watched a stir happen in the front of the enemy lines, then a round dozen men slowly started moving towards them. "How'd you do that?"

Gabrielle glanced nervously at the oncoming soldiers, then back at Xena, who casually lifted her hand and made that circling gesture. "Oh. Uh." She thought about the question. "How did I do that?" She wondered. "I don't know. I guess I just watched you all the time and tried to figure out what you were going to do next, or what you'd want, or.."

"I remember the morning I woke up and you'd put tea on my bedside table." Xena said. "No one else had ever dared do that. I'd have killed anyone else who tried."

Gabrielle thought about that morning, remembering well the giddy, scary, wonderful and strange feeling it had been to walk quietly into Xena's bedroom, and watch her sleeping, as she set down her cup and plate and reveled in the new feeling of belonging somewhere and to someone.

Xena's confidant. Xena's friend. Xena's lover, who she cherished openly, this wild and unruly queen who had become the most important person in Gabrielle's life in so very short a time.

"Okay." Xena's voice now was quiet, and serious. "Here comes our greeting party. Just relax, and let me do the talking."

Gabrielle watched the soldiers approach from the corner of her eye, and was more than glad to simply nod in agreement. The men coming at them didn't look like they were in a very good mood and she was pretty sure Xena would be much better at handling them.

Xena lifted her hand and made a casual signal, then let her arm drop again as she guided Tiger down the pass and right towards the enemy soldiers. Her horse was a half head taller than theirs were, and she made the most of the advantage that gave her, straightening a little in her saddle to make the most of her own height as well.

The two riders in the middle were the men the enemy leader had brought with her, and they held maces cross their saddlebows as they advanced on her.

Xena wondered, as they got closer and closer, if they were just going to attack her, and frankly, since that would lead to a load of bloodshed and a dash back to her own lines, she was halfway hoping they would.

As she met the arrogant gaze of the guy in front, she spent a wistful moment wishing she was back in her castle, sprawled with Gabrielle on a plush settee listening to Jellaus' latest sappy ballad. She was sorry he'd decided to stay behind after all.

"Halt!" The enemy soldier in the middle shouted.

"No!" Xena yelled back, deciding she was going to extract as much entertainment out of the situation as she could. "Move out of my way or I'll cut your lips off!"

Gabrielle felt her eyes widen, and she took hold of her stick, pretty sure she'd be called on to use it in the very near future. She could see how angry the enemy soldier was, and she urged Patches closer to Tiger as Xena shifted in her saddle and clamped her knees down, freeing her hands of her reins.

That meant, she'd learned, Xena was either going to go for her weapons or grab parts of Gabrielle's anatomy and it was easy to guess which one was going to happen here. She wrapped her reins around one hand and clasped her stick with her other, rehearsing in her mind the motions she'd need to make to draw it from its holder and not smack Patches in the head.

"I said halt!" The soldier yelled again.

"And I said NO!" Xena signalled the men behind her, and tightened her knees, Tiger's walk moving into almost a prance. "So move your ass, buddy."

Really, Gabrielle wondered. Was all the yelling doing good things or bad things? "Hey, Xena?"

"Busy now!"

"But.."

Xena turned to look at her. "What? Make it fast!"

Gabrielle urged Patches up next to the queen. "There's a whole bunch of those guys behind these guys.. Are we going to fight all of them?"

Xena looked at her, then she looked at the enemy lines, who were surging towards them, seeing the imminent fight coming. The twelve men had now drawn their weapons and a goodly portion of carnage seemed to be very imminent.

Wonderful, except that she suddenly realized how incredibly stupid it all was and that they were likely going to die. "Hold that thought." She turned and removed the chakram from her hip, cocking her wrist as the enemy soldiers broke into a canter and then letting the weapon fly.

It caught the sun and startled them, the first man pulling up on his horse's head as the round weapon slashed across the line, slashing across the front of his tunic as it raced past.

He threw himself backwards, and the line of them hauled up in confusion, men ducking and half falling out of their saddles to avoid being cut.

Their leader lifted his hand with his mace in it and started to yell, but the chakram slashed into his arm, making him drop the weapon as it spun past, then curved lazily back towards Xena, who caught it in one gauntleted fist.

The rest of her men had come to a halt in a line just behind her, and now they sat and watched as the enemy soldiers got their horses back under control and their leader clapped a hand to his bleeding forearm and glared at Xena.

Xena kept the chakram in sight. "I don't play games." She said, in a serious tone. "My men have beaten you in battle twice. Either treat us like the guests your princess claimed we were, or we'll turn around and go back to beating you again. You pick."

The enemy captain stiffened. "You haven't done.."

"We have." Xena overrode him. "'Drop the bullshit. I killed your advance party, I ambushed your ambush, I stopped you from coming through that pass, and I turned back your attempt at burning us out. So take yourself back to the chick who's really in charge and either escort me in, or we'll meet over metal."

All the enemy soldiers were listening. Gabrielle glanced to either side of her, where all their soldiers were listening too, their heads held high.

Xena moved forward, letting the chakram rest on her leg as the breeze blew her hair back off her face, and gently fluttered her cape. "What's it going to be?"

The enemy soldiers looked at their leader, who stared at Xena for a long moment. Then he turned his horse back. "Very well." He said. "The great one asked only for you." He said. "We will escort you, then, as she wished."

"No, you won't." Xena replied. "You'll escort all of us, or I am turning around and going back." Her voice was steady and serious. "No more playing around."

The captain studied her in silence. Then he turned his horse all the way around, and started back towards his lines. "Wait here." He called back over his shoulders. "I will see what the great one's will is."

"Wuss." Xena snorted, relaxing back in her saddle and replacing her chakram back on her belt. She took her waterskin off her saddling and took a sip from it. "Someone start counting to a thousand." She ordered her men. "That's all the time I'm willing to give this."

"One. Two. Three. Four.." Dev started counting obediently, loud enough for the enemy soldiers to hear him.

Gabrielle released her hold on her staff and looked up at Xena. "That was cool."

"It was, wasn't it?" The queen remarked. "Thanks."

Gabrielle looked around. "For what?" She asked, in a puzzled tone. "I just asked you a question."

"Ah." Xena was now fairly sure they weren't going to be attacked, at least not at once. "Your question made me ask me a question, and that probably got us out of a big dripping pickle."

"Oh." Gabrielle studied Patches shaggy mane for a moment. "What's a pickle?"

Xena held back an answer, since the big idiot was coming back through the lines. She watched him from the corner of her eye, and suppressed a grin at his lemon sucking expression. She wasn't sure going into the enemy camp was a positive thing, but if he thought it was a bad thing, it probably didn't mean she'd get her throat cut at least for a little while.

"Two hundred six, two hundred seven.." Dev was still stolidly counting. He glanced at Xena as the enemy soldier approached. "Majesty?"

"Enough." Xena relaxed into her saddle, and waited, as the soldier pulled his horse up barely a length from Tiger's nose. "Well?"

"Follow me." He said, briefly. "All of you."

"Good choice." Xena replied. She left Tiger's reins loose on his neck as she guided him after the enemy captain, using only her knees and letting her hands rest on her bare thighs. "C'mon, Gabrielle." She forced her shoulders not to stiffen as they entered the enemy lines, and her nape hairs prickled in reaction to the sullen resentment. "Make sure you take good notes, so you can tell stories about how lame this bunch is."

"I will." Gabrielle responded, keeping Patches as close as she could to his big friend without actually bumping into him. She felt nervous, as they entered the end of the pass, and the other army surrounded them. There were a lot more men there than she'd seen in their camp, and all of them were big, had lots of weapons, and looked pissed off.

Xena's men filed in two rows behind her, one of them starting to whistle as they passed the guard post and the enemy horsemen turned to follow them.

Gabrielle had to wonder, as they were surrounded by enemy fighters, if what they were doing was even remotely a good idea. They could, she realized, be killed at any moment, but she'd seen Xena's face as the queen had sat thinking about it, and she understood that Xena knew the risk, and accepted the idea that she might be laying her life down to save the men back in the pass.

It was absolutely heroic. And what did that say about her being here? She glanced aside at the watching soldiers. Did that make her a hero, too? Or just a silly person in blind love?

"Hey." Xena was looking down at her. "Thanks for being here."

Gabrielle reached over and gave the queen's calf a squeeze. "Where you go, I go." She said, leaving thoughts of heroes for later. "What do you think is going to happen now?"

Xena looked over Tiger's head and spotted a large pavilion on the light slope just outside the pass on the far end. She could see a heavy guard around it, and extending back across the open plains down to the river she could now see long lines of supplies moving forward, and support wagons by the dozens and dozens heading towards them.

Huge. Not three times, but probably ten times the soldiers she had, and not even counting the servants and workers traveling with them. This was the army she'd always dreamed of, instead of what she'd settled for when the chance to take and hold what she'd won came to her.

"I think we're going to be stuck between Hades and a rock wall. That's what I think's gonna happen." Xena told her, with a brief, wry smile. "But you know what?"

"What?"

Xena put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "If it gets too scary, we'll start making out and the men'll escape out the back and get the rest of the army." She patted her lover's back. "We'll be fine."

"Uerm.."

"Just live in the moment, my friend. Hopefully your life won't have too many like this."

"Uerm."

**

Part 14

They were led through the body of the army, past cookpits, and crafts areas, past men sharpening swords and smiths shoeing horses. Xena absorbed the scenes around her as she pretended not to, noting the strong sense of order, and the air of grim professionalism in the men she passed.

She casually met the eyes of some of them, others turning to stare as they rode by. Tough, experienced warriors, and knowing that made Xena all the more prouder of her troops, for holding them off and driving them back.

To one side, they passed an area full of the wounded, healers kneeling amongst them. They stretched out from the edge of the army to the cliffs, another mute testament to the tough fighting they'd been through. Xena sat a little bit straighter, and from the corner of her eye saw her men do the same.

She scanned the faces watching her from the crowd, taking care to make eye contact with as many as she could, a faint smile playing around her lips. They were curious, most of them, line soldiers who were fairly young but well armored and seemingly disciplined.

Very different from the men she had with her. Dev's comrades were older, as he was, grizzled from years of fighting and wearing good, but worn armor without any match in style or color to it.

As was Xena herself. Her gear was finely crafted, the joints perfect, the plates molded to her form and glove fit but it bore years of dents and scratches on it she viewed as a mark of what she'd done to get where she was. It wasn't that she couldn't have had new made for her, or bought new for the troops, it was more she valued things that did their job and survived.

The enemy soldiers in front of her slowed to a halt a few minutes later, on a small, cleared space below the ornate pavilion. Their leader turned and looked at Xena as he prepared to dismount. "You will wait here."

Xena studied him. "Maybe." She allowed. "But don't take long. I get bored easily." She swung her leg over Tiger's neck and slid down, landing lightly on her feet and brushing her hands off. "Gwan. Get moving." She advised the man, who had paused to stare at her. "We don't have all day."

He got down and headed up towards the pavilion with out answering, but his back was stiff with anger. Xena merely chuckled as she circled Patches, arriving at Gabrielle's knee and giving it a pat. "So, what'dya think?"

"About what?" Gabrielle was aware of the rest of the men dismounting around her, taking their cue from their queen. The enemy soldiers had started to gather around to, and she saw that their guys were making a discrete circle around her and Xena.

Xena rolled her eyes around, then looked back at her lover.

"Well." Gabrielle decided to stay on Patches back, since it was the only real way she could see anything with all the hunky soldiers around her. The army was spread out in all directions around them, and she was a little overwhelmed by the size of it. There were more people around her right now than she'd ever seen in her life. "It's kinda crowded."

"Yeah, it is." Xena agreed, propping her elbow on Patches neck. "I'm probably going to have to go talk to the old princess in a minute."

Gabrielle spotted the soldier coming back. "Yeah, I kinda figured that."

Xena cupped her hand around Gabrielle's knee. "I want you to stay here, and do something for me while I go find out what she wants." She said.

Gabrielle frowned. "I'd rather go with you."

"I know." Xena said. "I'd rather you did too, but I need you to stick around out here and.. Um.." She glanced to one side, where a gathering of the enemy was closing in. "Talk."

"Talk??"

"You know." The queen nudged her.

Gabrielle stared at her, with a puzzled expression.

Xena jerked her head in the direction of the crowd. "So they can hear you?"

The enemy captain returned to his horse. “Her magnificence will see you now.” He said, in a loud voice. “Make haste. She doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Gabrielle!” The queen hissed. “Do you get it?”

Gabrielle looked at the crowd, then her expression cleared. “Oh.” She said. “You want me to tell stories about you.”

Xena cleared her throat, and turned. “Took ya long enough.” She said, leaving it up to the captain and her lover to decide who she was talking to. With a twitch of her shoulders, she settled her cape and started towards the pavilion.

The soldier got in her way. “Your weapons stay here.” He held up his hand. “All of them.”

Xena considered the request, then she shrugged, and walked back to where Gabrielle was perched. “Hold onto these for me, willya?” She reached over her head and unclipped her sword, laying it across Gabrielle’s outstretched arms.

Then she unhooked the chakram and dropped it into Gabrielle’s saddlebag, before she removed her daggers and started tucking them into her lover’s armor. “Got all that?”

Gabrielle nodded, looking very serious. “Isn’t it dangerous for you to leave these here?”

Xena patted her knee. “I can’t leave these.” She wiggled her fingers. “I’ll be fine. Just start talking.” She turned and started up the path again, hoping she didn’t regret the bravado. She had a decent faith in her martial skills and knew she was more dangerous with no weapons than most people were with lots of them, but in the middle of an army it didn’t pay to take unneeded chances.

She could feel Gabrielle’s eyes watching her, almost as a warmth between her shoulderblades, and she smiled at that as she came even with the enemy captain who stood waiting on the path. She really wanted to have the little squirt with her, but she’d been honest in her request for stories and she hoped Gabrielle would tell really good ones.

“How do I know you have left all your weapons.” The captain was still in her way, his big body blocking her path.

“You don’t.” Xena kept walking towards him. “You just gotta take my word for it.” She was almost nose to nose with him before he took a step back, reluctantly, and cleared the way for her to pass. She went by him without a glance and started up the slope, very aware of the eyes of the men on either side.

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Gabrielle let the sword rest against her thighs, her heart beating hard in her hearing as she watched Xena walk away, up towards the magnificent tent that held the unknown threat she could sense her lover walking into.

She understood what Xena wanted her to do, but all she could think of was what was going to be happening up there, in a place she couldn’t see. What if they ambushed Xena?

What if the princess wasn’t really there, but a bunch of soldiers were, and they had weapons which her lover had left behind?

Sheeps. Gabrielle looked down at the sword cradled in her arms, and shifted it’s weight, hugging it to her as her eyes followed Xena up the last of the slope and into the pavilion. She went to the flap and

entered as though it was her own, and the blond woman held her breath for a moment as she watched the walls and listened hard, for any signs of a fight.

But it was quiet, and still, and after a moment she looked back down at the sword in its worn leather sheath, the brass rings that held it to Xena's back dented and equally worn. She put her hand on the hilt and rubbed her thumb across the heavy piece that protected Xena's hand, its surface old and well used, and polished to a deep shine.

This sword. Gabrielle studied it. It was drenched in the blood of many, even in her short experience with it, and yet there was a noble beauty about it, the intricately laced leather around the hilt, and the heavy ball at the end for balance. She knew if she pulled it from its sheath, the blade would be a deep, burnished silver gray and if she squinted hard at it, she could almost see the bloodstains from all the battles that somehow surely must have seeped into the metal itself.

She'd seen Xena sit patiently, cleaning and sharpening this blade every time she used it, taking care of it with a serious, intentness that was at odds with her usual attitude. This meant something to her, as did the round weapon in Gabrielle's saddlebag, and she understood suddenly the mark of confidence Xena had given her by leaving it in her care.

"Fine blade." Dev had moved his horse closer to her. "Fine hand that wields it."

Gabrielle looked up at him, remembering Xena's request. "I remember the first time I saw her practicing with it." She said, projecting her voice just a little. "It was amazing. I never knew anyone could move that fast, or be that graceful."

"Aye." Dev agreed. "When we were on campaign, if we was lucky she'd show us a move or two after dinner. Never saw no one do what she does, though."

"You mean the flying through the air stuff?" Gabrielle caught sight of the enemy soldiers edging closer. "And how she jumps high as the ceiling? I know. It's unbelievable."

"Seen her jump from a wall right onto the back of that big un there." One of the other men helpfully chimed in. "Never missed a stroke."

"Well, it was like when she saved that girl from the cannibals." Gabrielle edged Patches around so she was facing the men. "Were you there for that?"

"No." Dev shook his head. "What happened?"

"Well, let me tell you..."

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Xena paused, just a tiny bit, to take a breath and square her shoulders before she pushed aside the tent flap and walked inside, letting her eyes sweep rapidly over the interior before she let the fabric fall behind her and shut off the light.

Inside, it was dim with dappled sun coming through the fabric, and two hanging glass candle globes to either side of a fine wooden desk. Behind the desk sat Sholeh, watching her with cool, intent eyes, her hands resting on the desk's surface to either side of a cup.

Xena deliberately looked around again, noting the chests and tapestries, furs and trappings that spoke of vast wealth and an attention to comfort. Finally she cocked her head at Sholeh and raised an eyebrow. "What do you want?"

The woman behind the desk leaned back in her fur covered chair and regarded Xena. The light reflected off her fiery hair and with her odd eyes, and angular face she seemed exotic and strange, and just a bit dangerous. "You are quite rude."

"I am." Xena agreed. She strolled around the tent, deliberately turning her back to her adversary as she examined one of the globe candles. It was made of colored glass, and she found the blue tint pleasant to look at. "That all you wanted to know?" She turned to face Sholeh.

Sholeh steepled her fingers and pressed them to her chin, her eyes on the tall, shadowed figure across from her. "Bregos spoke at length to me about you." She said. "He told me you were a wild cat with a manners of a pig."

Xena folded her arms over her chest, and her lips twitched. "I'd say that's pretty damn close." She said. "But that was a compliment coming from an idiot like he was."

"Was." Sholeh mused. "He is dead?"

"Very." Xena felt a prickle down her spine at the expression on her adversary's face, and she understood suddenly that she was fencing with someone who was possibly as dangerous as she was. "But then, he knew he'd be if I caught him."

"He did." Sholeh stood, and circled her desk, approaching Xena. She walked with a powerful, sinuous grace and one look at her hands showed she was no stranger to weapons. "He didn't expect you to catch him though. He thought I'd get here first."

Xena remained where she was. Her height was an advantage here, and she knew it. Sholeh stopped short enough from her so that she wouldn't have to crick her neck to look up at her. The red haired woman's head came just to Xena's shoulder, and though she had an athletic build, she was far slighter.

"You don't seem upset he betrayed you." Sholeh said. "He thought you would be devastated." Her eyes studied her adversary's intently.

Xena laughed suddenly, the sound filing the room. "He betrayed me long before he met you." She said. "Bregos was out for Bregos. He'd sell his soul to anyone with coin. I was just a convenient purse for his ventures."

"That is so interesting." The Persian woman said. "So unexpected." She turned and retreated back to her desk, leaning against it to face Xena. "Did you kill Bregos?"

"Yes."

Sholeh nodded, as if to herself. "How?"

"I gutted him and pulled his heart out of his body." Xena replied, with a pleasant smile. "My men found him hiding in a midden. He was all full of himself for selling us out."

"Mm." Sholeh now folded her arms over her chest, mirroring Xena's stance. "You are not what I expected to find you as, a wild cat of the fields." She looked Xena over from head to foot, the faintest hint of a smile crossing her face. "I could kill you."

"You could try." Xena let a smile of her own surface. "A lot of other people have."

"I can well imagine." Sholeh pushed away from her desk and walked around it slowly, in her turn now exposing her back to Xena. She put her hands on the surface of the desk and leaned on them. "But I have a better idea. It makes no sense to waste even such a rough, rude talent as yours."

“What.” Xena now approached her, and leaned her hands on the opposite side of the desk, putting her head on a level with her opponents. “Do you want? Because either you get to the point, or I’m taking my men and my bard and finding someplace more fun to be in.”

Sholeh didn’t move back. If anything, she leaned a little further forward. “I think I want you.” She responded, with a thin smile. “You have talents I need. We will make you and your men a place here.” She added. “And we can discuss how we can best work.. Ah.. Together.”

Xena’s brow creased slightly. “You want us to join your army?”

Sholeh kept her eyes fastened on Xena’s face. “We can collaborate. Surely that’s a more appealing offer than being slaughtered, isn’t it?”

Xena felt her nape hairs lift. “For both of us.” She said. “We can talk about it, sure.”

The Persian smiled wider. “Good.” She said. “I am sure this will be interesting for both of us.”

Interesting. “Yeah.” Xena said. “I’m sure it will be.”

**

Gabrielle let her voice trail off as she spotted the two women emerge from the pavilion and stand together briefly, before they started down towards where the army was. Her throat went dry when she saw how friendly it all looked, and she felt a moment of sick uncertainty, as she watched the enemy leader talking so casually to Xena.

Maybe they’d gotten along better than Xena had expected. She swallowed. Maybe Xena had found someone who was a lot more like her.

Who had a lot more to offer than a peasant shepherd.

As the soldiers around her turned to face the two women, Gabrielle found herself the subject of their attention, the enemy leader motioning towards her and asking Xena a question.

She couldn’t hear what Xena said, but the expression on the other woman’s face was plainly disdainful, and the motion she made with her hand was dismissive, as though she was chasing off a fly. She said something back to Xena, then turned her attention to the soldiers.

Gabrielle felt her face heat in shame, and she had to look away, missing the pair of quiet blue eyes that fastened on her as she focused her attention on the sword still cradled in her arms.

“Warriors of Persia, attend me!” The enemy leader said. “I bid you welcome these visitors in our camp as friends, and no longer as enemies.”

“Huh.” Dev grunted. “Guess her Maj charmed another one.”

Gabrielle felt like throwing up. But she took a firmer hold on the blade resting in her arms and straightened up, forcing her eyes to focus on Xena, almost starting when she found her queen looking right back at her, ignoring the princess’s speech.

Xena’s expression was unfathomable. But a second before she turned her attention to Sholeh, she tilted her head and winked, just slightly, at Gabrielle and she took that meagre comfort to her heart as she waited to find out what was going to happen.

“Make a place for our new allies.” Sholeh was commanding. “They will be strange to you, I am sure, but will make them a part of us soon enough.”

The soldiers didn't argue. They started milling around, captains giving orders as men started to shift things to make some space in the center of the camp.

Sholeh turned to Xena. "Instruct your men to join us. Best be done before nightfall, so no mistakes will be made."

Xena paused, then nodded. "Good idea." She stirred into motion and headed for the small clump of her soldiers. Sholeh's men parted to let her through, and she gave them a brief nod as she eased between two of the horses and arrived at Dev's side.

He leaned towards her, and she spoke to him in a low tone, her hands pressed against his horses' side.

"Xena." He said, when she was done, his eyes never leaving her face.

"Just go." Xena clapped him on the knee. "It'll be fine." She pushed away from him and turned, coming next to Patches head and giving his forehead a scratch. "Hey, runt."

Dev pulled his mounts head around and started edging through the crowd. He looked back at Xena as he reached the edge of her guard, and she jerked her head at him to continue. With visible reluctance, he did, shaking his head as he aimed his horse for the opening to the pass.

"Do you want this back?" Gabrielle asked, after a moment's silence.

"You look good with it." The queen leaned against Patches. "Everyone listen up." She let her voice carry. "Settle down, and relax. We're going to be joining up with these guys on Sholeh's campaign, heading up the river."

Warily, the men nodded. Gabrielle merely sat in her saddle in silence.

"That's it." Xena said. "Stand down, start looking around and getting used to the way they do things." She waited a moment, when no one budged. "Now?" She suggested, with a touch more acid in her tone, grunting when the soldiers finally started getting off their horses and murmuring to each other.

"Xena." Sholeh called out.

Xena turned her head, but remained leaning against the pony.

"I am having dinner brought to my quarters. Join me." Sholeh commanded, giving a last, low order to her nearest captain and striding off back towards the pavilion.

Xena sighed, and turned, presenting her back to Gabrielle. "Clip that thing on, willya?" She felt Gabrielle's hands touch her back, and after a fumbling moment or so she realized they were shaking. "You were right, y'know."

"I was?" Gabrielle answered, in a husky voice.

"Yeah." Xena turned, feeling the weight of the sword fall into place. She put her hands on either side of her lover and looked up into her eyes. "About what she wanted."

Gabrielle swallowed, and just nodded.

"She wants me to be a captain of hers, on her way to taking over this part of the world." Xena went on. "She likes my style. Apparently." The queen paused. "She's what I always wanted to be."

Gabrielle felt a pain in her chest so intense, it almost made her lightheaded. She wondered if it were her heart breaking, understanding that she was watching the most important thing in her life slipping through her fingers.

Hadn't she always expected this though? Even from the start, she'd always thought Xena would find someone more interesting than she was, and even she could see that this Persian princess was very, very interesting.

She couldn't really even blame Xena.

"Doesn't think much of you." Xena went on, then she paused as she caught Gabrielle's expression, and her shaky, fast breathing. Her lover wasn't looking at her, she was looking past her. "Gabrielle?"

"Yes." The answer was just a whisper.

"We're in a tight spot here."

"I know."

Xena studied the painfully tense form, and the tears she could see just trembling on the edges of her companions eyelids. "Sorry I brought you in here with me." She sighed.

"Me too." Gabrielle wished she were anywhere else. She even wished she were back home in Potadeia, being smacked around by her father and surrounded by stinking sheep. She felt a pressure on her leg, and she looked down in surprise to see Xena's head resting there, one blue eye visible looking up at her.

There was something so raw there, it made her stop breathing. The horses were all around them, and it was almost as though she and Xena were alone in the pass, even the sounds of the army seemed to fade out.

"I wasn't looking to get all of us killed today." Xena said, after a long pause.

"Xena.." Gabrielle uttered softly. "Of course not."

"But I will." Her lover whispered back. "Because I can't change who I am."

The blond woman couldn't help herself. She laid her hand along Xena's cheek and pushed aside the anguish, responding to the look in the queen's eyes. "You haven't killed anyone." She said. "You m..made a deal with her, right? Everyone's going to be okay, we're not fighting with them anymore."

Xena exhaled. "That's what she wants." She said. "Me at her side, our armies together, the rest of the world to take over." Her breath trickled out, warming Gabrielle's leg even through the fabric. "That's one screwed up fantasy there."

Gabrielle stopped breathing again. "But I thought...."

The queen laughed faintly. "Thought you knew me better than that." A wry smile twisted her lips. "Gabrielle, I don't play second to anyone."

"Well.. I kinda knew that but.."

Xena lifted her head and looked directly into Gabrielle's eyes. "And neither do you."

In that moment, her wobbling world settled back down into a normal spin, as the words echoed inside her mind, framed by the intense blue of Xena's eyes that filled her vision along with a surge of utter relief.

Neither do you. She couldn't manage speech, but she saw Xena's gaze soften and it was all she could do to stay in her saddle as her body ached for her to throw her arms around the queen and hug her senseless.

"You're such a little idiot sometimes, you know that?" Xena said. "You're so damn lucky I'm in love with you."

The best she could do was produce something like a grin. After a moment of silence, during which Xena looked around them cautiously, she cleared her throat and figured she'd better say something

Anything. "So what are we going to do?" She asked.

"I have no damn clue." The queen sighed. "No damn clue at all." She glanced around again, then back at her companion. "We're probably gonna end up dying, if I can't figure out a way to sneak out of here." She watched Gabrielle nod in response. "You don't give a crap right now do you?"

Gabrielle shook her head, unable to suppress another small grin.

"Goofy little muskrat." Xena had to smile back anyway, aware that the men were coming back, and the time for endearing soulful chats was over.

Now she had to figure out what the Hades to do.

Damn it.

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Gabrielle held a hand of grass out to Patches, watching him as he lipped the stalks from her fingers, bobbing his head a little bit as he chewed. She knew he could have found his own lunch, but she desperately wanted something to do and something to concentrate her attention on as the men settled down around her.

They staked out a small area for themselves, for now. Sholeh's soldiers were milling around them, going about their camp business but they were the center of attention and it was making her uncomfortable.

Well, more uncomfortable than she was already, anyway. Gabrielle exhaled, and scratched Patches between his ears, leaning close to him. "I got really scared there for a minute, Patches." She murmured. "I thought it was going to be you and me going off somewhere, you know?"

Something bumped her in the back, and she turned, half expecting to find Xena there, but it was Tiger, sniffing interestedly after the grass she was holding. "Oh, it's you."

Xena's big mount stepped closer, nuzzling her. She separated a bit of the grass and held it out to him, smiling as the hair on his lips tickled her palm. "You're so pretty." She told the big stallion. "Not as pretty as your mom, but still."

Patches nudged her indignantly.

"Oh, you're pretty too." Gabrielle reassured him. "I'm glad you guys are here to keep me company, because you know, those other soldiers are making me kinda nervous."

"Your grace?"

Gabrielle turned, to find one of their own soldiers there, holding out a wrapped packet to her. "Oh, hello. What's that you've got?"

“Bread, y’grace.” The man said. “Making dinner, they are, but we’d rather have our own.”

Gabrielle had to agree. “Could you do me a really big favor?” She took hold of the package and looked him in the eye. “Could you please call me Gabrielle?”

For a moment, she thought he was going to protest, then he smiled. “As you’d have it, Gabrielle.” He said. “Do you have another story maybe to tell us, over this’n some good water?” He asked, hopefully. “Seems like more than us was listening, last time.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle said, after a pause. “Sure, let’s go over there and I’ll be glad to tell you another story.” She was glad enough of this new distraction, while Xena was off with two of the men scouting the camp. She brought her packet of bread over to where the rest of the soldiers were seated in a circle around a small fire, and they all greeted her with smiles and casual welcome.

It felt good to be a part of them. Gabrielle took a seat on a piece of cut log and tucked her boots up under her, her shoulders shifting under her leather armor as she settled herself with the bread on her knee.

As Xena had said, she had gotten very used to wearing the armor. It felt natural to feel the constriction of the scale around her chest and the pressure of the belt with its hawkshhead buckle around her belly. She no longer felt the weight of it, and the leggings and boots had become familiar and very comfortable.

The men across from her were likewise comfortable in their heavy gear, their unshaven faces wary, but relaxed as they shared the bread they’d brought and toasted it a little, giving the heavy stuff some flavor as she did the same, the late afternoon sun slanting down across them.

They didn’t talk about where they were, or where Xena was, or what was going to happen. The men merely made small talk about the weather, and the height of the river, giving her a chance to chew her trail bread as she listened.

It struck a chord of familiarity suddenly, a memory of her going to the well for water, passing the field workers sprawled in the shade near it, hearing the same relaxed, meaningless talk and watched with the same benign regard as someone who belonged where she was, and was accepted.

Gabrielle nibbled on her toast as she thought about that, and about how she’d never, ever felt that way in the stronghold. Even knowing that Xena wanted her there, and that everyone deferred to the queen’s wishes, she never felt that the stone walls were truly home.

She wondered if Xena felt that way too. But then, she’d never really had a home, not since she’d been a little girl, so who knew?

Who knew. Gabrielle was at least glad there didn’t seem to be any immediate danger of violent battle and maybe they would even get a nights rest before more bad things started happening.

She had no doubt at all that they would. Just the thought of that woman commanding Xena to have dinner with her...

Grr. Now that she’d gotten past being scared Xena was discarding her, she was wrestling with a whole new set of fractious emotions all involving Sholeh and her disdainful eyes and her purposefully sexy walk, and the interest she obviously had in Xena.

Blech.

“Hey.. Ah.. Gabrielle?”

Oh well, Enough of that anyhow. “Yes?” Gabrielle looked up, to find her new soldier friend taking a seat next to her. “You know, I think I remember you from the fight ,when we got back to the castle last year.”

The man grinned. “First one out of the gates I was.” He said. “After you opened em.”

“We all were.” One of the other soldiers said. “I was madder than a wet hen we missed going out with the Maj. Coudla used us, that’s for sure.”

“She sure could have.” Gabrielle straightened up a little, and took a deeper breath, learned from Jellaus over the long winter months how to project her voice for storytelling. “Would you like to hear about how we escaped from the mountains and down the river?”

“Sure.”

“Yea.”

Gabrielle let her hands rest on her knees and she looked past them briefly, her eyes going a little unfocused as she remembered the terror and the excitement of that time, and how scared she’d been, and how brave Xena had been and...

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“Nice setup.”

Xena grunted, as she strode down the rocky path that led from the pass to the center of the camp. Sholeh’s army was spread out halfway to the river, filling the entire delta basin and once the rocks dropped off from the pass there was nothing but open, cleared lands before them.

No place to hide, no place she could easily take the men and Gabrielle and slip off to, they’d have to walk or ride for a candlemark before they’d be out of view even at night, unless she got lucky and a storm caught them.

Aside from that, they were being watched very, very closely. Regardless of Sholeh’s words, her men had not welcomed Xena’s with open arms and she knew any move on their part would be raise an alarm very quickly.

They were clearing a big space not far from where her little band had staked a claim, for the rest of her army. It wasn’t the best location, but it wasn’t the worst - Sholeh’s men were moving grudgingly away from it, and Xena relaxed a bit when she entered the open area, glad she was free of the press of so many guardedly hostile men.

It was almost like being back at the stronghold. She looked around, spotting first the horses, then Gabrielle’s distinctive figure perched on a log with the rest of the men surrounding her.

She was telling a story. Xena could tell by her posture and the way she was moving her hands around if not by the rapt attention of her audience. There in the late sunlight, she seemed to glow, her blond hair catching the rays and briefly putting a smile on Xena’s face.

Very briefly. “All right.” She rubbed the back of her neck, feeling a bone pop into place. “Let’s go pretend we’re impressed with these bastards before I have to go dance with the ice princess up there.”

“Least that one’s respecting you.” One of her men commented, after a brief pause. “Seems like anyway.”

“Respect?” Xena gave him a wry look. “If you respected me that way I’d cut your nuts off.” She shook her head and stepped over a pile of ropes, her ears already cocked to catch Gabrielle’s voice. A ring of

Sholeh's soldiers were standing around listening to what she was saying also, and she wondered what story it was the cute little muskrat had come up with.

Just then, Gabrielle turned her head and caught sight of Xena approaching and her face creased into a smile that made everyone listening to her turn around and look to see what caused it.

Wasn't much Xena could do but give an acknowledging wave, so she did. It was a little embarrassing, but Hades, they were in the middle of an army who wanted to squash her like a bug so who cared? "What are you telling them there, muskrat?" She asked, as she arrived at the circle. "My ten favorite bed positions?"

Gabrielle blushed, her fair eyebrows standing out against her skin, and she stopped speaking in mid word as the soldiers chuckled around her. "Xena!" She gave the queen a pathetic look. "C'mon now!"

Xena moved to the center of the circle, and sat down on the log next to Gabrielle. "You're such a lambchop. These guys all know what sex is. Relax." She draped her arm over her lover. "Everyone find a spot here they liked?"

The soldier nearest Gabrielle shrugged. "Spots as same as any." He said. "Be better when the rest of our lot's in here."

"Aye." Another soldier nodded. "Bare back right now."

"They're not coming." Xena smiled, as though they were making light conversation.

Everyone fell silent, and stared at her, except for Gabrielle, who folded her hands together. "Keep talking." The queen ordered. "Pretend I didn't just say that."

Two of the men half turned and started arguing, one giving the other a friendly shove. The others stirred from their shocked silence and the noise level went back up. Xena watched Sholeh's guards who weren't guards turn back around after a moment, and she relaxed a little.

"You're just gonna have to trust me on that one." She said, in a louder voice, forcing a chuckle. "Right, Gabrielle?"

"Right." Gabrielle agreed, feeling nervous again.

"So just relax, and get yourselves fed." Xena went on. "I'm going to work out how we fit into this circus with the gal in charge, and we'll take it from there. Understood?"

"Aye."

"Aye, Majesty."

"And you.. " Xena turned, and reached over, cupping Gabrielle's cheek with one hand and leaning over to kiss her on the lips with sincere, frank passion." "You keep telling stories until I get back. Got me?"

Gabrielle drew in an unsteady breath, but nodded.

"Good girl." Xena bit her on the nose lightly, then kissed her again, just because it felt so good to.

Sholeh's captain pushed through the crowd and stopped at Xena's side. He stared at the two women sitting on the log and his lip actually curled up in disgust. "You will come with me to her presence." He said. "Though you are not worthy even to wipe her horses foot."

Xena balanced herself against Gabrielle and kicked out with both feet, catching him behind the ankle with one and popping him in the knee of the same leg with the other, dumping him abruptly backwards to land on his ass in the dirt.

He started to grab for a weapon, but she rose smoothly and kicked him in the chest, knocking him back down and then stepping on his belly as she drew her sword from its sheath, knocking the dagger from his hand even as he drew it and sending it spinning. "Careful." She warned, softly. "Or I'll forget we're allies now."

She stepped over him and started up the path. "I'll find my own way, thanks." She sheathed her sword and twitched her shoulders, hoping Sholeh didn't mind her dinner guests a little on the rough side because she was in no mood to be nice.

On any level.

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Patience was still no virtue by the time Xena reached the tent, but she paused as she got to the flap, considering how she'd expect someone to approach if it had been her space. Constant antagonism was something that came very naturally to her, but she'd actually learned from Gabrielle that the odd moment of courtesy often reaped unexpected rewards.

So. Xena rapped on the support pole with the backs of her knuckles and waited, her ears picking up motion inside the tent a moment before the flap shifted and revealed a dimly backlit figure.

"I had wondered." Sholeh said. "What kind of a creature was pecking at my tentpole?"

"Wild boar." Xena replied. "Hope you weren't expecting a bunny."

Sholeh studied her with a blank expression, then she took a step back and motioned Xena forward. "Rabbits don't interest me." She said. "But I love a nice piece of pork. Come inside."

Ah, huh. Xena knew a moment of wondering what she was getting herself into, before she ducked inside and let the tent flap drop behind her. There were a few more candles now, brightening the inside with a rich, golden glow and she paused briefly to let her eyes adjust from the cooler light outside.

The inside of the tent had been rearranged as well. On one side there was a low table, with pillows around it and a covered tray on top. Behind that, what had been hidden by a plain flap was now displayed, a richly made wooden travel bed.

Ah huh. "So what's on your mind?" Xena strolled over to a camp chair, hidden stretched between wooden posts, and sat down in it, extending her booted legs out and folding her arms over her chest.

Sholeh went to her desk and took the stopper from a wine flask. She poured some of the contents into two cups, and picked them up, offering one to Xena as she stepped closer to where she was sitting. "Here."

Xena accepted the cup, swirling it casually as she studied her opponent. Sholeh was dressed in casual leather and furs, the garments oddly cut and almost seemed meant to look like armor without actually being functional as that.

She had rust colored sleeves laced around her wrists that mimicked the bracers Xena wore, but the Persian's arm bands were soft, supple leather and probably wouldn't have turned a butter knife if pressed to it.

She had on a low cut bustier that exposed the top half of her breasts, and long, flowing pants that held a taste of the eastern exotic about them.

She was attractive, and she knew it, and Xena was surprised to find herself not really caring for this subtle show put on for her benefit. She'd always considered herself a woman who knew a good thing when she saw it, and Sholeh was powerful and sexy and should have been right up Xena's alley.

So to speak.

Xena took a sip of the wine, finding it strong, and with a faintly spicy taste. She kept her expression casual as Sholeh circled around her, a sudden memory of her doing that very same thing to Gabrielle springing to mind.

She sensed Sholeh stopping behind her, as she had stopped behind her new slave, and she knew only the thick thatch of dark hair she had over the back of her neck kept her prickling nape hairs from showing much as Gabrielle's had.

Interesting perspective. It had been a very, very long time since she'd been in the presence of someone who not only wasn't impressed by her, but who thought they had her by the short hairs.

So to speak.

"My men say, there's no sign of your army." Sholeh spoke finally, staying behind Xena. "Could they have misunderstood your orders?"

"I doubt it." Xena replied honestly. "They're usually pretty good about listening to me. I tend to kill them when they don't." She took another small sip from the wine, it's pungent scent tickling her nose. "They've got a lot of support people to move up. Might not be here until the morning."

"Interesting."

"In a rush?" Xena tipped her head back, peering at Sholeh with a rakish grin.

The Persian smiled back. "Even more interesting." She commented. "Come. Let's continue over dinner. I find myself starving."

"I find myself with both hands and a wicker bat sometimes." Xena got to her feet. "To each their own, I guess."

Sholeh turned to look at her, head cocked to one side, watching as Xena eased past her and selected a side of the table, depositing herself onto the pile of pillows with the air of a regal cat with very muddy paws.

After a moment, she took her seat on the other side, facing Xena across the table. "Let's see if we can clear up some of the mystery about you, Xena. Where do you come from?" She lifted the cover off the tray and revealed dishes of meats and fruits, all with rich, exotic scents.

"Hades, if you ask most people." Xena selected a grape, and nibbled it, keeping her eyes on Sholeh's face. "What about you?" The candles fluttered around them, emitting a soft, rich scent into the air, a hint of incense she could taste on the back of her tongue.

Sholeh gazed steadily at her. "I think my curiosity takes precedence over yours." She remarked. "So I suggest you answer my question, or this will be a short meal." She drew a small, thin dagger from her wrist and delicately stabbed a piece of meat, the candlelight winking off the blade.

"I come from nowhere." Xena replied, lacing her fingers together. "You wouldn't know the name of it if told you and it's long gone to brush and seed anyway."

“Is that so?” Sholeh extended her knife, with its burden towards her guest. “Try this. My cook prides himself on it.”

There was danger there. But Xena lifted herself up and put her face within striking distance of the knife, taking the tidbit off its tip with a faint snap of her teeth. She eased back down, mouthing the substance before she swallowed it.

It was sweeter than she'd expected, and full of spices she didn't recognize. “Not bad.”

Sholeh speared a bit of meat for herself and spent a moment savoring it, keeping Xena waiting as she swallowed at her leisure. “It tastes like home. My father's palace.” She said. “Though it wasn't to my mother's taste. She came from a different place.”

Xena shook her own wrist dagger into her hand, its blade age darkened and stained with use. She picked up a bit of the meat, then a bit of fruit on the point and brought it back to her lips. “My mother was gutted when I was a kid.” She pulled the bit of fruit off and chewed it. “Never knew my father.”

The Persian paused, her finely arched, dark eyebrows lifting a trifle.

Xena ate the meat on her knife, and licked the blade, her eyes darkly amused. “Thought I was kidding about the wild boar?” She asked. “I might as well have been suckled by wolves I grew up in a pit you had to fight your way out of or die.”

Sholeh slowly picked up her cup and drank from it, watching Xena over the edge of the rim. “So that's where you learned to fight.” She mused. “I came to battle a more usual way. I am my father's only child.”

“Sucks for him.” Xena drawled. “Persian's aren't much for smart assed women.”

Sholeh's eyes narrowed. “You push my good humor too far.”

Xena didn't really think she'd intended to, since she'd been around in this part of the world enough to hear the stories. She studied Sholeh's face, seeing again the odd cant to it. “Wasn't an insult.” She finally said. “Got in one of the biggest fights of my life cause I met one, and I am a smart assed woman.”

The Persian retreated behind her mug again, and the silence lengthened as they both picked at the food and the atmosphere grew more charged between them.

Finally, Sholeh reached over to pour more wine into their mugs. “Did you win?”

“I'm here.” Xena answered, with a faint smile. “That's something Bregos forgot about.” She shifted, pulling her legs up crossed under her and resting her elbows on them as she neatly cut a bit of stewed fruity something in half.

The spicy stuff was all right, but the taste was strange on her tongue and she found herself wishing for a plate of Gabrielle's lamb stew and one of her crusty rolls instead.

“Is it strange, not having a family?” Sholeh asked, suddenly. “I can't imagine it.”

Xena took a sip of wine, rolling it around her mouth before she swallowed. “I dunno. Is it strange having family? I can't imagine that. I had two brothers. One died for me and I killed the other one. Never saw much point in it.”

Sholeh got up and roamed back over to her desk, her body language twitchy. “I have no brothers or sisters.” She remarked. “Now, perhaps I am glad of it.”

Xena swiveled around to keep her in view, leaning back against a support pole and abandoning her plate. She crossed her ankles and thought about what would come next, as Sholeh picked up a riding lash and fingered it.

Was she the kind that liked it rough? Xena felt those eyes lift and fix on her, the soft rasp of leather against skin coming to her ears. Did she assume Xena might also?

Why not? Most everyone else did. She couldn't count the times she'd taken some wretch to her bed and had them earnestly assure her they could stand any amount of pain before they'd even gotten near the bed.

Idiots. "So."

"You know, my mother would be fascinated by you." Sholeh moved closer, leaning against another of the supports, directly across from Xena. "She's from Chin. A war prize of my father's." She stroked the lash, running it through her hand. "I don't think she sees much point in family either."

She took another step forward, her finely made boots almost touching Xena's rough and muddied ones, and her expression took on a hint of the predatory. "But she did teach me many things." She said. "Mostly about how to get what I want when I want it."

Xena remained where she was, working hard to keep her posture relaxed when her battle instincts were sparking, reacting to the seductive threat approaching her. "I figured that one out on my own." She said. "But I found it's more important to know what you want sometimes than how you get it."

Sholeh smiled. "I know what I want."

Ah huh. It was time, she reckoned, to either fish or go swimming, and she had very little time to figure out which would be more dangerous. "So do I." She debated getting up, then decided she was better off where she was.

"Come here, Xena." Sholeh crooked her finger. "Let's seal our partnership like warriors should."

Fish?

Bait?

Xena produced the sexiest grin she was capable of. "Careful what you ask for." She reached up and caught the crossbar of the support and lifted herself up to her feet, arching her back and flexing her hands as she felt the blood move to her skin. She started for the center of the tent, watching an expression of hungry pleasure appear on Sholeh's face. "I bite."

"I guess we shall see which one of us has the sharper teeth then." The whip slashed through the air, cutting a candle flame in two and sending a single spark popping from it. "On your knees."

Ah hah. Gonna be a very long night.

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"That's gonna be a problem."

Sholeh lifted her hand and put the tip of her crop against Xena's throat. "Problem?"

Xena ignored it. "You'll have to break my legs to get my head any closer to the ground in here."

"I can do that."

"You can try to do that."

Sholeh laughed. "Do you truly think you have any power here, Xena? My army surrounds us. A snap of my fingers and you will be dead thrice over."

"Won't save your ass."

A tiny snick, and the end of the crop grew a tooth, now pressed against Xena's skin. "And now?"

Xena's expression, mildly amused, didn't change. "Still won't." She said. "I'm a tough kill, and a vindictive bitch like you wouldn't believe." She kept her breathing slow and even, feeling the faint, deep twitching of her muscles as her body strained against the will holding it motionless.

Sholeh stared at her in fascination. "At my whim, I could cut your throat open. Do you not realize that?" She pressed a little, and the tooth bit into Xena's flesh, drawing blood. "Are you a fool? Or do you think I am?"

Xena exhaled, putting a shred of space between her neck and the blade and reached up in a flickering motion to grab the crop, twisting it from Sholeh's hand as her other arm whipped up and her palm thumped against the other woman's breastbone, tossing her backwards in a short, powerful arc and clearing the space between them.

Sholeh stumbled backwards and turned in the same motion, lifting something from the side of her desk and whirling back around to fire a crossbow bolt at point blank range right at Xena's chest.

Xena's hand caught the bolt inches from her gut, and they locked eyes again in a still tableau. She twirled the crossbow arrow in her fingers and smiled, wagging an eyebrow at her opponent.

"What's next? Got some rocks over there you want to throw at me?" She taunted Sholeh. "Put your toys away. I'm not some pampered court whore."

The Persian slowly put the crossbow back down, her eyes never leaving Xena's face. She lifted her curved, elegant sword from her desk and fitted its hilt to her hand, as she stepped back towards her opponent. "Your challenge excites me." She said. "You are a more worthy opponent than I'd thought. Excellent."

Xena put her hands on her hips. "We gonna go two out of three to see who gets to be on top? Don't take that thing out if you don't wanna lose it."

Sholeh drew her blade and tossed the scabbard behind her, whipping the sword into a tight figure eight as she stalked towards Xena, with a dangerous smile on her face. "We shall see who ends up submitting, boar. Draw your blade."

Ah hah. Well, at least she was going to get some fun in before everything went to Hades. Xena dropped her hands down and wiggled her fingers, taking her tight focus off Sholeh's face and letting her wider vision study her moves instead.

Dangerous fun. The swordmastery was evident, but Xena was relieved to have their combat moving into an arena she was far more comfortable with. She lifted her hands and curled her fingers inward, beckoning Sholeh forward. "C'mere, little girl." She said. "Let's see what ya got."

"You dare!" Sholeh moved into an attack, faced by nothing yet but Xena's bare hands. Her blade sliced towards her opponent and skimmed the air where Xena's body had been, as the taller woman shifted out of the way with sinuous ease. "Ah!"

Xena chuckled softly, and her eyes narrowed, as she finally reached behind her head for her sword hilt and felt her fingers close on its familiar shape.

Baarrrooooo!!!!!!

It was difficult to say, really, who was the luckier person when a loud horn blared nearby, breaking their intense tableau and making Sholeh whirl to face the tent flap, letting out a low, guttural curse. "Now what?"

Xena slowly let her hands relax from the fists they'd curled into, her body trembling under its leather covering as her fighting reflexes eased off just a bit. She licked her lips, and hoped the horn meant something gruesomely distracting. "Problem?"

Sholeh lifted her hand in a shushing gesture, and opened the flap with her crop. "This better be an urgent call, Phenosah. Else, you will pay for the interruption."

"Gracious one." A low, male voice answered from outside. "I bring word from your father."

Xena felt a deep affection for this unknown Persian. He'd given her a moment to step back and take stock of what was happening, a far too fluid and far too dangerous moment having been broken up before she'd been forced to pick one of two unpalatable paths.

"My father?" Sholeh glanced back at Xena. "Go to your camp. I will send for you again." She pointed to the far exit of the pavilion. "There."

Her ego was certainly taking a battering, but for a change, Xena let her better sense take charge and she casually waved at her adversary, winked, and left out the flap into the gathering night with a shiver of relief she wasn't quite able to suppress.

She wasn't afraid of Sholeh. The woman professed herself a warrior and her body show that not to be a lie, but Xena was very secure in the arrogance of her own martial competence and she knew the Persian was no danger to her in a one to one contest.

However. Xena glanced around at the thousands of soldiers around her, their eyes glancing curiously at her as she passed through their ordered ranks and through their legions, past war machines with massive launching arms and forests of spears being lovingly sharpened.

However, she was in the lion's den. Sholeh expected her to bow to her wishes. Xena expected that she'd chew her own arm off before she'd even think about it, and that left her...

Left them, since she had those eleven men and Gabrielle with her, staring death in the face if she refused to go along with the Persians wishes. Arrogance was one thing, thinking she could fight her way out of the middle of an army with Gabrielle tossed over her shoulders was something else entirely.

Even she wasn't *that* arrogant.

Had they battled, there would have been only a few possible outcomes. She'd have beaten Sholeh and they'd become friends, she'd beaten Sholeh and had the army called down on her, and she'd beaten Sholeh and in the process either hurt or killed her and then had the army come after her and cut her up in very small pieces after doing pointlessly horrible things to her body.

She didn't put much stake on the friends option. Two possessive willful bitches generally only ended up chewing each other to death in her experience and so she'd likely have ended up dead or dead, with only the satisfaction of beating Sholeh to show for it.

Satisfying, but ultimately pointless.

In the darkness, she spotted her own group's campfire, the evidence of her eyes backed up by the sound of Gabrielle's voice floating over as her consort sat telling a story to her small band of men, their outlines mostly hidden in shadows.

As she neared, Gabrielle stopped speaking and turned around, her eyes looking right through the gloom and into Xena's nearly making the queen stop in her tracks as she was struck by the elemental difference between the woman she'd just left and the one waiting for her.

With a faint smile, she entered the camp, lifting a hand to greet the soldiers who stirred in surprise and moved aside for her. She crossed over to where Gabrielle was sitting and knelt next to her, resting her arm casually on her lover's knee as she looked around at the rest of them. "Okay."

"Dinner wasn't t'yer liking, your Majesty?" One of the soldiers ventured. "Got some soup here if you're looking for it."

"Dinner made me hack up a furball." Xena said. "And all I could think about was lambchops." She glanced sideways at Gabrielle. "But listen up. The next time I get called up there, I'm going to make a scene, and with any luck, it'll be enough to get us out of here."

Gabrielle's arm settled around her, a comforting warmth out of proportion to the gesture.

"Back down the pass, Majesty?" The same soldier asked, in a doubtful tone.

Xena shook her head. "Last place I wanna go." She said. "We take off towards the water and lead these bastards as far away from home as we can."

All the soldiers nodded. Every one of them understood exactly what she was saying. Even Gabrielle was nodding her head, when she wasn't putting it down on Xena's shoulder and for once she had the experience of sharing a plan and having everyone be totally in line with it.

"If you're going to cause the scene, how are you going to get away with us?" Gabrielle spoke up, ruining the moment entirely. "Wont everyone be running to where you are?"

Ah well. "You just gotta trust me." Xena said. "YOU all just start moving and I'll catch up with you. Everyone got that?"

Silence.

"Got that?" Xena repeated.

Silence. Finally Gabrielle cleared her throat. "I think you're just saying that because you're going to make sure we get away even if you don't."

Xena scratched her eyebrow. "Are we back to this 'I'm the queen and you have to do what I tell you' thing?" She sighed in exasperation. "This is not a group decision."

"Little one's right, Xena." One of the older soldiers said. "None of us is conscripts. We know the deal. We don't want to get out less you're with us." He got up and went to the small fire, filling a wooden bowl with soup and bringing it back for her. "Can't speak for everyone, but my life's not worth yours."

Xena took the bowl and studied it, trying to come up with a smart retort for the sentiment and utterly failing, because at some deep level she understood the honesty of it. Finally she looked back up. "We'll all get out." She said. "I can't die here. It's me they'll chase, Not you lot, and certainly not you." She peered at Gabrielle. "So like I said, you just need to trust me."

The silence this time had a different flavor. Xena lifted the soup bowl and drank from it's edge, savoring the taste as it washed the strange spices from her tongue, which she then nearly bit as Gabrielle leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"The soldiers around here think you're amazing." Gabrielle whispered into her ear.

Xena looked around at her men surrounding them. "I damn well hope so." She uttered back. "I'm the one who pays em."

"Uh uh." Gabrielle leaned against her. "Not our guys. The other guys." She put her lips right up near Xena's ear, tickling it delightfully. "They were all talking after you pushed that big guy on the ground."

"Ahhhh." Xena mused thoughtfully. "Well ain't that interesting."

"I thought you'd like hearing that."

"You thought right." Xena turned her head and gave her lover a quick kiss. "Now you just have to do what I tell you to do and we'll get out of here." She eyed the blond women. "Deal?"

Gabrielle studied her face for a long moment, then she smiled. "Deal."

So that was settled. Xena exhaled. Now she just had to figure out how to actually do it without getting herself cut into little pieces first.

**

Part 15

Xena loosened Tiger's girth strap, letting it fall to the ground before she lifted his saddle off him, half turning and putting the well broken in leather down on the ground right underneath a small, scrubby tree.

She turned back to the stallion, only to find Gabrielle squiggling in before her, a bit of linen in her hand that she started scrubbing the animal's dark coat with. "Hey."

"Hey what?" Gabrielle said. "I'm done with Patches. He's a lot smaller." She wiped the dust off Tiger's hide, smiling a little as Xena joined her. Then she lowered her voice. "Should we take this stuff off? What if we need to go fast?"

Xena fitted a brush to her hand and started brushing the thick, dark coat in front of her. "We keep the tack on, the rest of these guys are gonna start wondering why." She said. "Take it off, get comfortable, so will they."

"Ohh!" Gabrielle peeked past Xena, catching sight of some of Sholeh's soldiers around their own campfire pretending not to watch them. It was getting late in the evening and the stars were out in full force overhead, and the moon was bright enough for her to see a good distance away from where they were. "That makes sense."

"Thanks." Xena worked her way down Tiger's back, taking comfort in the familiar motions as she tried to work off her impatient jitters while they waited. While she waited, for the gods be damned bitch on the hill to decide she wanted a second round.

Moving around Gabrielle and starting on the stallion's neck, she spared a glance for the pavilion, now surrounded by Sholeh's guards and full of shadows as she met with her battle leaders inside.

Upstaged by a note from daddy. Xena was human enough to feel a little ego trampled by that, but it gave her a little more time to figure things out, so she figured it wasn't all that bad in the long run.

And there wasn't much she could do about it anyway, unless she wanted to just bust in there and...

Xena paused, leaning her arm against Tiger's neck, and studying the guards with a speculative look. Hm. She made the picture in her head, imagining herself walking up the slope towards the tent, and facing off against the guards, maybe killing one or two, then busting into the tent and demanding...

The queen chuckled wryly. Demanding clothes to plug the arrow leaks in her body from the rest of the guards shooting her ass.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." Xena shook her head, and continued brushing. She was getting sideways looks from the enemy soldiers, and she knew they were wondering about her, about why she'd clean her own horse, if she had men there to do it, and why she'd set her kit down among theirs if she was, in truth, their queen.

She thought about that for a minute. Of course, if she'd had a choice, she'd have put up a tent and gained herself some privacy but since she didn't, it never occurred to her that she should separate herself from the men.

"It's getting pretty late, huh?"

Xena looked to her left. "Yeah." She studied Gabrielle's face, lit from the side by the firelight nearby. "Tired?"

"Yeah." Her blond companion said. "But I don't think I could go to sleep in here." She looked around. "It's like something is going to happen any minute." Her shoulders lifted and relaxed as she took a deep breath. "Isn't it?"

Xena turned and leaned against Tiger's shoulder. They had the tree and the horse between them and the army on one side, and a patch of rocky scrub on the other, and it was about as private as they were going to get. "I don't know."

Gabrielle glanced apprehensively past her, towards the pavillion. "You think she changed her mind?"

A faint smile appeared on Xena's lips. "You want her to?" She asked, watching Gabrielle's eyes drop a little, and her shoulders move in a halfhearted shrug. "C'mon, muskrat. Make me feel special and tell me you're jealous."

Caught offguard, Gabrielle could only stand looking back at her, jaw dropping a little bit as she tried to summon up an answer. "Buh.."

"You mean you aren't?" Xena's eyes widened in mock innocence.

"No.. Bu.. I..". The blond woman stopped speaking, and scowled instead.

"Maybe I should take you up there with me." The queen mused. "We could do a threesome." She added. "What do ya think?"

Gabrielle's eyes widened, and her nostrils flared.

Even in the dim light, Xena saw the little flinch, and the wrinkle forming on her lover's forehead, and she reached over to tweak her nose. "Relax. I'm joking." She said. "Stop losing your mind."

Gabrielle folded her arms across her chest and leaned against Tiger also. "That's what she wants, isn't it?" She said. "To do that with you?"

"Sure." The queen said. "She wanted me to get down on my knees and make her happy."

Gabrielle blinked at her, her nostrils flaring again.

Xena chuckled, and shrugged. "You know how it is with us despots." She drawled. "Other people only exist for our pleasure." She gave Tiger a pat on his side. "She seemed to expect me to go along."

"Did you want to?"

Xena just looked at her, both eyebrows hiking up to her hairline.

"I don't think you would" Gabrielle hurriedly added. "You like to be in charge." She looked around. "But hey, it's really late. We could sit down over there and just relax for a while, right?"

Xena watched her, a faint, wry smile on her face. She pushed away from Tiger's side and beckoned Gabrielle to follow her, draping her arm over her companion's shoulders as she led her away from the horses and over to the stunted tree she'd left her saddle under.

They sat down together on the sparse grass, leaning back against the leather and facing the small fire the rest of Xena's men were clustered around. Several heads turned as they settled, then went back to their low conversation as the queen waved a hand at them and stretched out her legs.

It was getting late, and now Xena was moving in her mind from wanting Sholeh to lay her cards out, to hoping she'd be kept occupied the rest of the night so she didn't have to deal with her until morning.

Which meant, likely, that she'd not have to deal with what she wanted until dark fell again, which meant there was a good chance Xena could cause her disruption and put her plan in place without having to play Sholeh's game.

Did she really care that much? Xena settled her arm around Gabrielle again and had to admit at least to herself that she did. She was no prude, and the gods knew she'd had her share and more of wild sexual experiences, but...

Gabrielle snuggled up next to her, warming the side of her body in a very nice way.

But. "I didn't." Xena leaned back against Tiger's saddle, feeling the tension of a very long day leave it's aches in her bones. Much as she wanted them gone from where they were, she wanted to stay where she was even more and just chill out a little.

"You didn't what?" Gabrielle said, after a long pause.

"Huh?"

"You said, 'I didn't.'" The blond woman clarified. "You didn't what?"

Xena had to think for a minute before she recalled what she'd been talking about. "Ah." She picked up her waterskin and took a sip from it. "I didn't want to have sex with her."

"You didn't?"

"Nah." Xena flexed her toes inside her boots and was glad to be off of them. "Woulda ended up messy for both of us. Too much crap going on."

"Oh." Gabrielle frowned. "You didn't think she was pretty?"

The queen shrugged. "She was all right. Different." She glanced at her companion. "Did you?"

"I thought she thought she was." Her companion said. "She was pretty obnoxious, anyway."

"So am I."

"No you're not."

"Oh give me a break, Gabrielle I certainly am." Xena laughed. "Hey, Ardos!" She called to one of the soldiers, who turned and half sat up to face her. "Am I obnoxious?"

"Mistress???" His eyes got wider.

"Am. I. OBNOXIOUS?" Xena repeated. "Lie, and I'll cut your damn tongue out!"

"Xena, be nice." Gabrielle nudged her. "Okay, okay, you're obnoxious. Happy?"

The queen peered at her, then poked her lower lip out in a sad face.

"Xena!"

The tall, dark haired woman chuckled evilly, clearly enjoying herself. "C'mon, Gabrielle. Laugh, willya? Life sucks and we could die any minute here." She reminded her companion. "Lighten up."

Gabrielle really didn't feel like laughing, or lightening up for that matter, but she managed a grin, and bumped the queen in the shoulder with her head. The constant tension was exhausting, and she felt a little like she had at the very beginning in the castle when everything was terrifying and every moment could lead to something bad.

She was glad Xena was here. She didn't want to think about being alone in the middle of the enemy without her, knowing she was up in that tent with that woman doing -

Whatever.

"Know why I really didn't want to have sex with her?" Xena asked suddenly, her lips not far from Gabrielle's ear. "Guess?"

Ugh. "She made you mad?"

"Nope."

"She said something bad to you?"

"Nope."

"She smelled like a wet sheep?"

"Nope."

"Okay. I give up. Why?" Gabrielle shifted a little, removing a rock from under her leg and tossing it aside, doing her best to set aside the discomfort of the hard ground. She knew Xena was trying to distract her but there were so many things to be anxious about that she...

"She wasn't you."

Gabrielle paused, then she looked up. "W.. What?"

Xena plucked at Gabrielle's ear. "Something wrong with these? Need a washing like usual?" She teased her friend. "Don't tell me you're surprised to hear me say that."

Was she? Gabrielle thought about that. It was hard to grasp, really, that Xena would prefer her to an exotic, powerful, apparently not sheep smelling princess who had a big army and wanted to take Xena to rule the world with.

She studied the angular face watching her, seeing the mischief in the twinkle of her eyes and that wicked little grin, her body covered in dust from the ground, every inch of it giving off that air of raw, unrepentant energy unique to her.

“No, I guess it doesn’t.” Gabrielle finally said. “You pretty much never do what people expect you to, so I guess that makes sense.” She bumped the queen with her head again. “But thanks - that’s really nice of you say anyway.”

Xena chuckled. “I can’t believe you’re calling me nice.” She sighed in mock exasperation. “All that storytelling going to waste. Damn shame.” She glanced casually to her right, up at the torchlit pavilion. The guards around it showed no signs of motion, and she leaned back again after a minute and tipped her head back to look at the stars instead.

It was a beautiful, clear night for a change and the pinpricks of light spread from horizon to horizon. Xena suddenly remembered laying out in the field, when she was far far younger, and watching those same stars track across the sky night after night painting their strange but distinct patterns.

“Those are pretty, aren’t they?” Gabrielle followed her gaze, letting her head rest lightly on Xena’s shoulder. “Lila and I.. “ She paused a moment. “We used to sneak out at night and look at the sky sometimes and find pictures in the stars.”

“Did ya?”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle pointed. “See that rabbit?”

Xena moved her head so she could sight down Gabrielle’s arm, studying the patch of lights. “No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Really? I can, look, it’s ears are there, and a tail.. You can’t see it?” Gabrielle asked. “It’s so pretty, I can almost imagine him hopping around, chewing some clover.. Can’t you?”

“No.” Xena shook her head. “Looks like a big old fat Tiger turd to me.”

“Xena.”

“Sorry.” The queen turned her head and then her whole body, wrapping her arm around Gabrielle and kissing her instead. “I’m fresh out of romantic platitudes. C’mere.”

“Erf.”

“Know what you can do with a bunny’s tail?”

“Oo.”

**

It was very late in the night or early in the morning depending on what your perspective was. Xena was still reclining full length on the ground, her head pillowed on her saddle. Gabrielle was curled up against her fast asleep, both of them covered in Xena’s cloak.

The camp was quiet. Small fires burned low in the scattered camps around them, and speech had ended, allowing the sound of the torches near the pavillion to drift down across the field, bringing with it the scent of spice and incense.

Still. Peaceful. And yet something had stirred Xena from her uneasy sleep, bringing her alert and awake here in the pre dawn hours as she let her senses spread out to detect what that something might have been.

To her left, she could hear the horses shifting, just a bit, a heavy hoof pocking against the rocky ground in equine discontent. But that was unremarkable, and expected, as were the soft snores of the men and the whisper of the wind through the pass.

Xena felt no desire to be up and about, though the ground was hard and uncomfortable the warmth of Gabrielle's living form draped over her made it bearable and she let her head relax back down onto the leather surface of her saddle again.

The quiet continued, and she was on the verge of closing her eyes when her ears pricked, detecting a sound out of place in the silence around them.

A soft rasp, leather against stone. Footsteps with a deliberate stealthiness so faint it would have been easy to think she was imagining it if she hadn't spent a good portion of her life both expecting and repelling attacks on her life.

Was this another one? Xena sorted through the signals she was now getting, a whiff of sweat and leather on the wind, a touch of fear and another faint scuff of a slow approach.

The approach was coming from behind her. Xena stifled the urge to turn and look, reaching slowly under her cloak and easing her dagger from it's belt sheath as the last shred of sleep was driven from her body and a flush of warm energy replaced it.

She slid one leg outside her cloak, easing the waxed fabric away from her boot and making sure she had room to move her arm. Then she went still again, closing her eyes and waiting.

With her sight cut off, the sounds and smells intensified, and now the camp's muted sounds became much clearer to her as she sifted them to determine the breadth of the threat she could feel closing in on her.

The steps approached, each lifting and placing of a foot studied, and careful, producing only the tiniest of evidence but sounding now as loud to her ears as if the jackass had been banging a club against a nearby tree.

She wondered if it was a rogue in Sholeh's court, trying to gain points with the army's captains, or an assassin sent by the princess herself. Her fingers played lightly with the hilt of her dagger, confident that the position she was in would force the oncoming attacker to come up almost right to her in order to do any significant damage.

The tree and the saddle blocked any decent arrow shot, and her low profile made a rotten target in any case. The assassin would have to circle the tree, and come at her quickly, probably jumping on top of her and trying to stab.

With a dagger, as she had, or a sword? Xena had noticed most of the army held the curved, elegant swords common to their origins which were deadly in battle but remarkably useless in close order pit fighting and so she figured if the man was worth anything, he'd come at her with a dagger, or at worst, a short sword.

So.

Gabrielle shifted a little, and snuggled closer, her arm closing around Xena's stomach and one leg slipping up to pin hers in place. Xena glanced at her adorable mophead and with a sigh, she patted her back, letting go of her knife to reach up and cover Gabrielle's mouth at the same time.

Her companion's eyes popped open in alarm, blinking and looking up at Xena.

"Sh." Xena barely breathed out the instruction.

Gabrielle nodded after a moment, and drew in a breath as her mouth was released.

Xena put a finger to her own lips, then she slowly reached back down and took hold of her dagger again, as she heard motion not far behind the tree they were sheltering under. She could feel Gabrielle's body tense against her, and her breathing increase and she gave her a comforting pat on the back.

Closer. Xena felt a prickle in her senses as the intruder moved into the area they were camping in. Her own breathing sped up just a trifle, and she forced herself to close her eyes and lay her fate into her trust in her own instincts.

She heard the boots scuff lightly against the scrub grass, then the whisper of sound as a hand rested against the gnarled limbs of the tree they were behind. Now she could hear breathing, and the soft rasp of a blade being drawn from leather.

A few heartbeats long, too short for a sword and Xena closed her fingers firmly around her blade and waited, sensing the assassin moving around the tree and into view. She kept her own breathing steady, aware of Gabrielle's fast beating heart where her lover was pressed against her.

A shadow fell across her face, blocking the faint starlight and she knew the assassin was standing over her, the smell of leather, sweat and steel now almost overwhelming to her nose and she sensed a hesitation, caught a whiff of fear as the man prepared himself to strike.

Gabrielle was afraid. Xena tried to remember a time when she'd been that way, and couldn't, but dropped the issue as steel came at her and she simply let her body react to the attack, her eyes opening as her boot slammed upward, catching the man in the groin as his knife headed right for her chest.

He coughed, but it didn't stop his momentum and he drove his arm forward with vicious intent.

She deflected the blade with her own, a tricky bit of fast motion that made her glad she'd picked her fully tanged knife as the man's weapon slid against hers and ground to a halt on the guard.

His weight came fully down on her, but she took a breath and shoved him back, lifting his body up off her and back into the air, and throwing his knife arm hard to one side as he struggled to catch his balance.

She kicked upward again, forcing the assassin back a step, then she started to unwind herself from the ground to go meet him.

A scurry of motion arrested her though, and she eased back as three of her men grabbed the assassin from the back and threw him to the ground, one falling on his knife arm with an armored knee with enough force to send the sound of breaking bone across the clearing.

The would be assassin gasped, as he twisted and fought to free himself. But Xena's soldiers held him down in grim silence as a fourth lit a torch from the watch fire and the light from it spread across the group.

Xena remained where she was, hitching herself up a little to a seated position but maintaining her relaxed pose. She caught sight of a few of Sholeh's men stirring and turning to look at them, as the light drew attention and she gestured for her men to hold the attacker up. "Let's see what brand of mutt they sent over here. Hmm?"

The torch revealed a bearded, older face, dour and scowling. The man was dressed in dark leathers and armor, his attempt at a stealth approach evident too in the soot darkening his skin and the bits of fur wrapped around his armor joinings.

Hadn't helped him. Xena unwrapped her cloak, exposing Gabrielle's tousled head, and bit off a smile as her lover peered around in wary bemusement. "Look what I found, muskrat. A snake."

To her credit, Gabrielle managed to gather herself up with an acceptable level of dignity and got her legs up crossed under her while she raked her hair into some semblance of order. She regarded the would be assassin for a moment, her head cocked a little to one side. "You didn't really expect that to work, did you?"

The man glared at her.

"Wasn't listening to your stories, I guess." Xena crossed her ankles. "That what kind of outfit this is? Guys wandering around with their own agendas?"

The man remained silent.

"Ignoring their leader's orders?" Xena pressed him. "Know what happens to men in my army who try that?" After a bit more silence, she lifted herself to her feet, bored of the unproductive theatrics. She fluffed her cape around her and sheathed her dagger. "C'mon, Gabrielle."

"Where are we going?" Gabrielle scrambled to her feet.

"You and me and the boys are gonna take the snake up to the Persian princess up there and find out what the deal is." Xena decided. "Let's go." She turned and started to lead the way up the slope. She could see the ring of guards still around Sholeh's tent, but the space between where she was and there was mostly empty.

They moved forward steadily. Gabrielle was ambling along next to her, two soldiers dragged the assassin behind them, and the rest of the men were in a ring all around, torches held high as they moved through the startled encampments towards the ridge.

So abrupt was their movement, they made it up to the ring around the pavilion before soldiers started to scramble to intercept them and Xena found herself face to face with Sholeh's personal guard, who drew his curved sword and turned it blade out to her.

Xena drew her own sword, and just kept walking.

"You will not pass." The man said. "The high one is not to be disturbed."

"I didn't want to be disturbed either." Xena said, in a loud voice. "But one of your little pets here decided to try and stab me in my sleep." She twirled her sword and tapped Gabrielle in the chest. "Stay back, cute stuff. You don't look good in red."

"Halt!" The man warned. "The army surrounds you. Do not be a fool."

"Too late." Xena launched into an attack that finally let her release the pent up energy that had been building since she'd woken. She locked both hands around her hilt and whipped it around hard,

smashing the blade against his and driving him backwards a step. "I'll put up with a lot of things but not people trying to stab me. I'm funny that way."

The man parried her stroke and edged sideways. "Wait."

"No wait. Patience is a virtue I never understood." Xena engaged him again, forcing him back another step as she wove her blade in a tight figure eight. "Fight or move, buddy. I'm coming through ya either way."

"We know nothing of any attack!" The man defended himself. "What madness is this? Guards, to me!"

Xena's men drew their weapons and closed in behind their queen, save the two still holding on to the assassin. Behind them, the troops were moving in but for now the focus was on the guard captain and his tall, elegant adversary caught between two lines of torches.

Their swords clashed, and as they did, the tent flap was thrown open and Sholeh emerged, dressed in a beautiful silk dressing gown, but with her hair in an almost comic disarray. "What goes on here??" She let out a respectable yell. "Who disturbs my rest?"

The guard captain drew back from his adversary and half turned, hearing his master's voice. He lifted a hand in Xena's direction. "She tell some wild tale, my princess!"

Sholeh stared at Xena's tall figure, the torchlight fairly blazing off her drawn blade, and outlining the odd group behind her.

Surrounding them were legions of her troops, waiting word to attack.

**

Gabrielle felt the wind stir her hair, as she stood there in that weird, awkward silence listening to the torches snap, and the soldiers pant behind her. She could sense something was going to happen any second and she was surprised to find herself relieved that the tense waiting would be over one way or the other.

Would they die? Yeah, maybe. She took a firmer grip on her stick, which she'd only barely remembered to retrieve and bring with her and pushed her hair out of her eyes, glad she'd gotten a chance at least to get a bit of rest.

She'd been dreaming about sheep when Xena had woken her, and she'd been pretty happy about that, because it was one of those dreams where she was trapped inside the flock of the darn things and it was all over oily wool and stink and not very pleasant.

Of course, waking to find someone trying to kill you wasn't pleasant either, but Xena had made that all right so here they were.

Sholeh held her hands out. "Be still, all of you."

"Bossy thing, an't she?" Xena remarked conversationally, into all that silence that followed. She sheathed her sword with a casual swipe of her arm and then let her hands rest on her hips, "I found a little rat of yours creeping around my campfire. Thought you'd want him back."

The Persian woman's back stiffened. "I know nothing of what you're speaking." She said. "How dare you approach my quarters?"

Behind her, the tall messenger appeared, holding a long, beautiful sword by the hilt in his hand. "My princess, what is this disturbance?"

A tiny, wicked twinkle entered Xena's pale eyes. "You were practically hog tying me to stay in them before." She said. "What's the matter, his tongue get your cat?"

Gabrielle bit the inside of her lip almost through as she saw Sholeh's face freeze and her back stiffen, guessing that Xena had hit a sore spot for sure.

"What?" The man spluttered. "What's that you say?" He took another step forward. "Princess, who are these people?"

"Didn't she tell you about her delusions of conquest?" Xena asked, a rakish grin appearing on her face.

"Watch your tongue least you lose it." Sholeh ground out, glaring at her tall adversary. "Bantar, go back inside. I can handle this." She gestured imperiously at him, and reluctantly he backed away to the entrance of the tent, his eyes fastened on Xena. "What is this about?"

"Mpmh." Gabrielle made a tiny sound, not quite a laugh, not quite a cough, and then she cleared her throat and stepped to one side, revealing the would be assassin. "This man tried to kill us." She announced.

Everyone stared at her, and Xena eased her tall figure out of the way so they could get a good look. She crossed her arms and decided she was enjoying herself, regardless of the danger all around them.

"What?" Sholeh took a step forward. "Who is that?"

"Well, he's not one of our guys." Gabrielle pronounced. "But he crept into our camp in the dark of night, and tried to stab Xena." She paused. "It didn't work out for him."

Sholeh walked between her lines of guards and approached, holding her hand up when the men made a motion to follow her. She brushed past Xena and approached the assassin. When she reached the two men holding him she extended her hand for a torch.

Xena's man looked at her, then he tilted his head and made eye contact with his queen. Xena jerked her head at him, and only then did he hand over his torch, looking Sholeh right in the face as he did so.

"Your impudence could be deadly." Sholeh informed him.

The soldier shrugged. "I'm Xena's." He said. "It's all deadly."

The Persian studied him, then she turned and looked over at Gabrielle, standing pace to one side.

"Oh, I'm definitely Xena's too." Gabrielle assured her. "Is this guy yours?" She indicated the assassin. "He was really kind of lame."

Sholeh stood and looked down at the man. He had his head tipped upward, and he was staring right back at her, with a very calm expression.

The expression vanished as the princess swung the torch down and shoved it's lit end into his face, setting him on fire and burning his flesh off in one long moment of screaming horror.

Her face didn't change expression, even when Xena's men released the man's arms and he fell at her feet, his body twitching and jerking in silent agony. She gazed dispassionately at him. "He is nothing of mine." She said. "I tolerate no failure."

She looked up at Gabrielle again, as she tossed the torch from her, clearly expecting someone to catch it. Then she turned and sauntered over to where Xena was standing. "Do you seek to challenge me?" She stopped even with the taller woman. "You speak to me with disrespect in front of my men. What then would you do to one such in your army, Xena?"

For a long moment, Xena didn't answer. She let the sound of the torches, and the shifting of the army around her fill the night air. "Depends." She finally said. "On why they were being disrespectful. Maybe I deserved it."

Sholeh's eyes narrowed. "What are you saying?" She asked, quietly.

"Nothing." Xena opened her eyes wide in mock innocence. "You asked, I answered. But I'll tell ya one thing." She rolled her head to one side and regarded the now dead man. "I'd have asked that bastard a few questions before I offed him."

"Mm." Sholeh grunted.

"Unless I already knew the answers." Xena's voice went deeper and a bit louder. "I told you I don't kill easy. If that's the best you can do, you're wasting your time with this nice army."

The Persian went dead still.

Xena figured she was going to spend the next candlemark either fighting for her honor or fighting for her life and she was just waiting to see which way Sholeh was going to jump. She caught movement from the corner of her eye and took a half a surging breath before she realized it was Gabrielle as the blond woman came up beside her.

One of these days. Xena forced her legs to relax and she turned to face Sholeh. "So what's it gonna be?" She asked, wanting the early morning theatre to be over. "I'm not your plaything. You want to work with me? Fine. Otherwise I'm outta here."

"Do you truly believe you have that choice?" Sholeh asked, in a quiet voice.

"I do have that choice." Xena responded, just as seriously. "My life, and their lives.. " She spread her arm to indicate her men, and Gabrielle. "Belong to me. Not to you."

Sholeh drew out her long, curved dagger. "Your army isn't coming, are they?"

"No."

"Then I will go and destroy them." Sholeh said. "After I destroy you."

"You can try that." Xena went back to her earlier strategy. "But I thought you needed all the help you could get to run the world. Forget about that?"

The Persian considered this for a moment, then she shrugged her elegant shoulders. "It seems you're not what I was looking for after all." She turned and walked back towards her tent, lifting a hand as she did, and making a signal. "Kill them. I go back to my rest."

"Bout damn time." Xena put both fingers between her teeth and let out sharp whistle. "C'mon, boys, c'min get me." She turned and drew her sword, as the camp erupted into motion around them, her men closing immediately into a tight circle.

From downslope, she could hear the thunder of horses and she glanced to one side, spotting Tiger in the lead bolting her way. She let out another whistle, and the stallion neighed in response, striking out with his hooves right and left as men scrambled to get out of his way.

The rest of the horses were behind him and in the confusion, Xena realized they actually would have a chance to get on their backs, and if she did.. Well..

"Xena!"

Better than a cowbell. Xena turned and let her instinct take over as her nerves felt something coming at her from the rear and she got her sword up into position just in time to deflect a spear hurtling right at her. She swept her arm around and caught the weapon, reversing it with a twist of her wrist and sending it back the way it came.

“Patches!”

Xena felt something much bigger approaching, and she turned back around just in time to grab Tiger’s bridle as the stallion bucked, almost nailing one of her own men in the head. “Cut that out you moron!” She took a long step then jumped up onto Tiger’s back, bringing her sword around quickly to deflect an arrow.

Chaos. Xena pulled Tiger’s head around, spotting Gabrielle scrambling on the back of her pony as her men broke off their hasty battles to get on their own horses. Since she was the only one truly mounted, she sent Tiger down the line between the men and the oncoming army, throwing her sword from her left hand to her right and switching reins at the same time and backswiping the ax out of a man’s hand.

Yeah. Arrows were beginning to fill the air, and she saw two lines of troops forming up and heading their way. “Ready?” She yelled.

“Aye!” Her men yelled back.

“Donthaveachoice!” Gabrielle added, in a breathless exhalation as she guided Patches after Xena’s moving form.

“GO!” Xena gave Tiger his head, and hoped the horse would have the sense not to stick a hoof in a hole and send both of them to their graves. She led the way across where they’d been sleeping, mentally thanking whichever of her men had thought to throw Tiger’s saddle on and clip her bags to it.

The only chance they had was speed. The only hope they had was minimal. Xena let out a wild yell and slashed two arrows from the air, feeling the cold night dampness blast against her skin.

At least she’d be keeping her promise.

**

They weren’t going to make it. Even Gabrielle could see that, as the army’s horsemen were thundering towards them intent on cutting off their escape. Patches’ nostrils were flaring as he reacted to the danger around him and she had a moment to come to terms with the now very real possibility of dying.

And in that moment, she realized she was okay with everything. The past days had been so full of terror and so full of anxiety, that just knowing it was going to be over one way or the other was sort of soothing.

So bizarre. Gabrielle concentrated on staying as close as she could to Tiger and got ready to fight as the army closed in around them. She was glad she was with Xena. She was even gladder that Xena hadn’t gone back into that tent with that woman.

She took hold of her staff, getting a firm grip around the scuffed and battered stick, though she was surrounded by Xena’s men and wasn’t in any immediate mortal danger and she really didn’t think she could do anything with the darn thing anyway.

She saw Xena go up against a rider that came right through their ranks, his bigger horse smashing aside the others as he fought to get to the queen, his hands wrapped around a huge battle ax whose blade, already stained, glinted in the torchlight.

Ah. It was the guy Xena had knocked over. Gabrielle knew that was going to cause trouble. She nudged Patches with her heels and got her stick ready, as she worked her way closer to where Xena was now fighting with the guy in earnest.

She was almost side by side with the taller woman when a rush of motion exploded to one side of her and she was nearly thrown off Patches back as two fighting men and horses smashed into them. Desperately, she yanked her stick from between the enemy horse's leg and her own and got her hands around it, jabbing the animal hard in the ribs with its end.

Patches stumbled to one side, but got them clear and she pulled the stick back close to her and yelped as the pony lurched into a canter as Tiger started to move faster. With both hands on her stick, she found herself falling backwards, and only just barely grabbed hold of her saddlehorn to pull herself upright when she heard her name called, sharply.

What did it mean? She froze, unsure of what to do and that alone saved her life as an arrow whipped over her body, nearly scorching her midriff as it went past to hit one of the enemy soldiers fighting nearby. Her head slammed back against Patches' butt, and it bounced her forward, she caught her balance, then felt something bearing down on her and she ducked and kicked her mount instinctively.

Patches' smaller frame squirted between two of the bigger horses, and amidst all the yelling and motion Gabrielle spotted Tiger's dark, distinctive form. A spear skimmed by her leg, and she felt a sting on her back and the next thing she knew they were all running, fast, down the slope.

She clutched her stick with one hand and grabbed Patches' reins with the other, and clamped down with her knees like Xena had taught her. She was surrounded by Xena's men now, but she could sense the anxiety around her and hear the fierce defiance in Xena's repeated, loud yells.

Patches let out a whinny, as they tore through some scrub, and Gabrielle felt the thorns pulling at the fabric of her shirtsleeves. She heard the sound of steel meeting steel, and she looked up to see moonlight glinting off Xena's raised sword as it descended.

A spray went up, then they were moving on and she heard a horse scream and three of the soldiers in front of her split off leaving a gap open for her to see ahead of them. Her eyes widened at the lines of troops heading for them with spears raised then her view was blocked again by the tightly packed soldiers.

This was crazy. Gabrielle concentrated on keeping Patches as close to Tiger as she could and wondering just how many minutes they had left before they clashed with the enemy and those spears started coming through them and..

She hoped it would be fast. She didn't want to hurt a lot, and she didn't want to see any of her fellow soldiers suffer, or Xena...

A pang hit her chest, and she swallowed back a lump in her throat and knew a moment of unreasoning anger at the enemy, and the chaos, and life that seemed to be battering her so cruelly.

But then she sighed, and gripped her staff more firmly and remembered that at the least, she'd had the past winter and the knowledge of a few people got to experience, and anyway there was Xena ahead of her and you never knew what handkerchief the queen was going to pull out of her ear in the most unexpected of ways.

"LEFT!" Xena's yell, impossibly loud, made her eardrums vibrate and she felt Tiger slam against her so hard it nearly knocked Patches' head over tail down the slope, and the entire group of them turned and headed in a new direction as the noise of the army grew louder and louder.

Yelling. Gabrielle heard the sound of something breaking, then a volley of arrows peppered them, one skimming through to stick, with shocking force, in the side of her saddle. Eyes wide, she tucked her arms close to her body and hoped her armor would protect her from any others.

She could smell water, suddenly, and she just barely had time to tuck her staff under her arm and grab hold as Patches plunged down a muddy bank and into cold running water that rippled against her.

“RIGHT!”

Gabrielle got Patches head around just before she was slammed by the horses on the other side of her and she found herself up to her waist in water, her pony half swimming and half running in a spray of icy cold mist that got in her eyes and filled her mouth.

One of the soldiers disappeared to her left, and she just caught brief glimpse of a spear, and the rolling eyes of his horse before they swept on, an odd spattering of warmth hitting her shoulder before it was washed clear by the chill again.

Something went by her ear, and she ducked instinctively, then had to hang on as Patches swerved to one side, as the man in front of her toppled off his horse with an arrow in the back of his neck. Gabrielle tried to grab him as his body was pushed back by the current, but the bit of his shirt was ripped from her grasp by the fast running water and she had to let go.

It was hard. She felt so helpless. These people, these men she'd started to know were dying around her and right now, with all the arrows and spears and yelling it seemed hopeless. They were just prolonging the end.

Weren't they?

“LEFT!”

Gabrielle felt them shift again, and she could see Patches' eyes rolling in fear as he fought through the deepening water and she focused her fear on him instead, patting his neck and calling encouragement to him. “C'mon, Patches!”

Suddenly they were closed in. She felt the press of horses around her and then a hand grabbed the back of her armor, half lifting her up off her saddle. “No!” She clutched Patches tightly. “Let him go!”

The hold relaxed. She couldn't see anything. Darkness closed in around them and she could smell the harsh, rich scent of moss and the bodies pressed tighter and tighter against her, horse shoulders pressing against hers, and trapping her painfully as her pony fought to keep her feet.

Water swamped her, then the scent of mud gave her a brief warning before she was splattered with it in a shocking wave of damp chill, and she saw a hand reach down and grab the side of Patches bridle as the water dropped around her and she felt the pony change from swimming to climbing, the angle almost throwing her back off his rump.

“HANG ON!”

There wasn't much else she could do. Gabrielle curled her hands around her saddle edge and tightened her grip on the wet leather, feeling the strain in her shoulders as she was pitched almost straight back, looking up at a mass of struggling animals threatening to fall back down on top of her.

Huge, hulking shadows loomed past them and for a moment Gabrielle almost gave into the terror of it all, as she heard horrendous noise behind her, and felt the skim of something over the top of her head that became something clutched in a fist to her right.

The press became unbearable and she felt her shoulders start to give out, as Patches lunging shook her body to it's core. She felt something hit her back, and the pony gathered himself under her and they lurched upward in a spray of icy cold and sickening heat as the smell of copper and moss mingled in her nose.

Then she was pitched forward, and they were upright, and the water was gone, and they were running in the mix of labored breathing and curses and the only thing she was really aware of was the clutch of XEna's grip on her collar and the feel of dry, cool air on her face.

What would come next, she had no idea. All she could do was hold on tight and wait.

**

"Hold up." Xena whirled Tiger around and pulled him to a stop, feeling his ribcage heaving dangerously under her knees.

The rest of her small force obeyed gratefully, men and horses glad of any chance of a rest as they huddled behind a stand of rocks halfway up the slope, now eight instead of the fourteen they'd started out with.

Xena leaned against the stone and looked past it, at the forces fanning gathering on the far side of the creek. She knew they had to keep going, but she also knew the horses were on the verge of collapse and everyone needed a moment to simply stand and catch their breaths.

Even her. Xena could feel her hands shaking from the chill of the water and the exertion and she tucked them under her arms to warm them and tried to ignore the bruises she'd taken in the fight. Her shoulders ached from holding off Sholeh's mounted riders long enough for them to escape, and she had a long cut down one leg that was hurting like crazy.

Not good.

They had little time. The tiny crevice she'd found to escape the creek would be forded and opened soon enough, and she'd already left six bodies behind her.

It was just a matter of time. She could have turned and made a stand, there by the water, but something had driven her forward, and despite the nagging sense she was just prolonging the inevitable, there was part of her that just wasn't ready to give up.

She felt a sudden warmth against the skin of her thigh and she looked down to find Gabrielle leaning quietly against her, her blood and mud spattered skin pale under it's grime. She had her eyes closed and she seemed to just want the contact, though she smiled a trifle when Xena untucked one of her hands and let it rest on her lover's head.

She suspected this was one story her adorable, and surprisingly gutsy bedmate wasn't going to end up telling anyone except for maybe the boatman on the Styx as they boarded. "Nice ride." She commented, as Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open to look at her. "You done good, muskrat."

"All I did was hang on." Gabrielle objected. "I didn't do anything useful."

"You hung on." The queen told her. "Most damn useful thing you could do for me. You know what woulda happened if you fell off?"

Gabrielle sighed, her breath warming Xena's skin. "I probably would have been trampled over and died." She said. "Though I kinda feel like I was trampled over anyway."

"We both would have." Xena told her. "Would have made a romantic, if stupid end to my spectacular life, huh? Cut to pieces protecting my partner in a mud hole." She wiped a bit of gore off Gabrielle's cheek. "They'd have said, boy, that Xena... she could fight but damn she she died a love struck idiot, huh?"

Gabrielle's eyes filled with tears as she watched Xena in silence, in an intensity of emotion that for a brief second made the night horror fade away.

Then Xena looked away, and down the slope, and she exhaled. "Okay, rest time's over." She told them. "Let's just keep going as far as we can." She took up Tiger's reins. "WHen they catch us, we just take as many of them with us as we can."

In silence, they turned, the tired horses stumbling a little as they started uphill again, into a mist colored only faintly with the coming dawn.

**

Xena crouched behind a rock, her hand shading her eyes from the driving rain as she watched the triple line of enemy soldiers sweeping up the slope below her, covering every square inch of ground. They were still far down below where they were hiding, but she knew it was only a matter of time since the path she'd chosen hadn't been the best.

They were in a thick fringe of trees, at the edge of a sharp slope filled with rocks and boulders broken off the nearby cliffs that bordered the sea. Sholeh's army was searching a bit to the right of the path they'd taken, along a more logical route and that at least was given them another brief chance to catch their breath and for her to figure out where to go next.

If they kept on the way they were, they'd have to leave the horses behind. Xena wanted to do that about as much as she wanted to cut her own left foot off, but the way was impossible for the animals and it was marginally their only hope to last a while longer.

Xena looked down at her scraped and cut hands, flexing them. Was it worth it? Maybe she should just take a stand here, and get it over with. She glanced behind her, studying the small group of soldiers crouched by the rocks resting, and Gabrielle's still figure next to the muddy and exhausted Patches.

Was there a point to stringing this game out to the bitter end?

Yeah. The queen exhaled heavily., then she pushed herself to her feet and headed up the slope to where the rest of the group were waiting. The rain drove against her, but she viewed it as a friend since it masked them far more than the morning sunlight would have.

Gabrielle looked up as she approached, her pale hair dark with rain and plastered around her face. She had her arms around Patches neck, and her eyes spoke volumes as she watched Xena approach. "Are we going now?" She asked, a definite hint of misery in her tone. "Up the cliff?"

Xena leaned against the tree she was sheltering under, glad to get a break from the driving rain chilling her skin. "Well." She looked at the men, who promptly gathered around her. "We could start climbing, yeah."

She fell silent, and the rain sounded very loud on the leaves around them. "But I'd rather see if we can find a way along that ridge there." She pointed, making it all up on the fly as she saw the look in her lover's eyes. "Take the horses with us. Never know when we might need em."

The men nodded, relief showing plainly on their faces. They were horsemen all, and they felt about their animals pretty much the same as Xena felt about Tiger. "For lunch, if nothing else."

They all turned and stared at her.

“Just kidding.” Xena produced a ghoulish chuckle. “I’d rather eat my saddle.”

“Hear that Patches, you come too.” Gabrielle hugged the pony, apparently closing her ears to her bedmate’s black humor. “We won’t leave you behind. I promise.”

And apparently how Gabrielle felt the same way about her little runt. Xena reached over and ruffled her companion’s wet hair. The rain had, at least, washed all the mud and battle stains off them but she could see the strain and the exhaustion on the blond woman’s face and she managed a real smile for Gabrielle’s benefit.

Gabrielle released Patches and hugged her instead, the warmth feeling wonderful in all that cold and wet. Xena returned the hug, ignoring the looks of the men around her, though the expressions were merely tiredly amused rather than resentful.

Take your hugs where you can find them, eh? Xena wrapped her arm around Gabrielle’s shoulders and jerked her chin in the direction of the ridge. “C”mon.” She took hold of Tiger’s reins and started leading the way, moving carefully over the rocky ground so the stallion could find his footing.

The rain wasn’t making it easy. The ground was running with water and loose dirt, mud washing over their boots as they struggled upwards through the trees. The trunks rose around them though, blocking the worst of the weather and protecting them from view and after a quarter candlemark it had settled into a steady, even progress.

If you kept your back turned, Xena reasoned, it was almost sort of peaceful. She swept the forest ahead of her, not surprised to find it getting denser since it was a continuation of the thick growth they’d struggled through they night they’d found the path.

Barely enough room between the trees to squeeze the horses through, but by that light, it was also about the only decent place they could avoid detection at least for a little while.

Xena pulled Gabrielle a little closer and gave her a squeeze as they climbed up a short rise together, ducking between a tree and a thick, heavy bush.

“Wait.” Gabrielle tugged her companion to a halt. “Hang on.”

Xena released her and watched in bemusement as she scurried into the bush and started rooting around in it. She glanced at the soldiers, who were pausing and keeping watch, their expressions quiet and reflective.

They’d left six friends behind. The queen knew all the men with her understood the sacrifices war demanded as well as she did, and that they too would likely walk that last walk soon but still and all, it stung.

For them, and for her. Leading any of them out from the middle of a huge army was an astounding achievement to her credit but they were good men and it always hurt to know she hadn’t gotten all of them out with her.

Were they all looking at Gabrielle, and thinking some of them would have survived if they hadn’t been protecting her?

Xena hoped not, since she’d been in the lead in risking her neck right there with them. She doubted it would have made a difference anyway, except maybe she’d have chosen to just put her back against a tree and taken a stand instead.

“Here.” Gabrielle emerged, leaves liberally sprinkled among her damp blond locks. She held out both hands, cupped, towards Xena. “Take some!”

Xena peered at the booty. Big, plump blackberries were nestled in Gabrielle's clutches, and she closed her jaw on a sarcastic comment and just took a few instead. "C'mere, boys." She called the soldiers over. "Might as well grab a handful."

The soldiers clustered near, and spotted what Gabrielle had found. Voices murmured in appreciation, as they took one or two, but then started searching the bushes for themselves, gathering their own bunches before they started moving on again.

Ludicrous. Xena popped another berry into her mouth and shook her head, as Gabrielle caught up to her and they were side by side again. "Just what I needed."

"Breakfast?" Gabrielle asked.

"Purple tongue." The queen stuck hers out, and sure enough it was stained a deep color. "Hey, maybe I can do that to the Persian panic's goons and it'll scare em off. You think?"

One of the men nearby chuckled, then fell silent. Xena continued munching on her snack, thinking about what was likely to come next.

"Hey, Xena?"

"What?"

"Where are we going?"

Xena steered them both around a thick, moss covered trunk. "Away from those guys trying to kill us." She said. "And down towards the river."

Gabrielle thought about that. "Aren't the bad guys down by the river?"

"Yees." The queen agreed. "The bad guys are everywhere. They're behind us, and a head of us, and on both sides." She finished the last of her berries. "The only real way out we have is the one way I'm not gonna take us."

"Back down that path."

"Yees."

Gabrielle considered this in silence for a little while. "So there really isn't a good plan, is there?" She asked. "We're just going to keep on going and see what happens?"

"Yees."

"But it's probably going to be bad, whatever happens, huh?"

Xena put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders again. "Probably." She responded honestly. "But don't think about it. Lets just wait till it all goes to Hades, and we can enjoy it then."

Gabrielle rubbed a few droplets off her face and sniffled, but she wrapped her arm around Xena's waist and kept quiet, gamely keeping up with her taller companion's strides with no complaint.

"Xena." One of the soldiers called out, in a low voice. "S'comin."

The queen disengaged herself from Gabrielle and slid to one side, coming over to where the soldiers was crouched on a boulder and looking past him. "Damn." A line of Sholeh's soldiers were moving through the trees just below them, working methodically up the slope.

"Only got a few arrows, Majesty." The soldier said. "Used em most holding the crick."

"I know." Xena leaned her elbows on the rock and considered. The enemy soldiers were wary, but it was obvious from their attitudes they considered themselves the hunter, and she the hunted.

Hm.

"Okay." The queen licked her purple stained lips. "Let's tie the horses right here, and go for a little walk." She eased around the rock and crouched next to it, peering intently through the trees. "I have an idea." She added, tucking her cloak around her and tying it snug. "And we don't have much to lose."

"That we don't, Mistress." The soldier on the rock slid down and joined her. "That we don't."

Xena smiled. "But they do."

**

Part 16

The rain came down harder, drenching the trees with a mist so thick it almost seemed like fog, drenching the stolidly moving line of soldiers that patiently swept through the forest. They walked with weapons at the ready, their heads sweeping from side to side as they methodically searched the woods.

It was a big force, and they were confident. There were men spread out all along the slope leading down to the pass, with lines of bowmen stationed near the edge of the encampment in case anything slipped through.

"Waste of time." One of the captains muttered, shaking his head. "Should have been through the gap already."

"Think them lot'll give us trouble?" The man next to him asked. "Basin said they'd taken off, all of em."

The first man chuckled. "Made our lives easy. Should be plenty to take once we get through there. Bout time. I'm sick of all the parading around. Time to get us some swag."

"Hope that scruff of theirs told us right, with all that talk of gems and whatnot." The other man grumbled. "Long way to go for nothing if not."

"Think he'd have lied to Her?"

"Mmph."

"Think she really wanted that wild piece of work wi her?"

The soldier snorted. "Maybe to start. But that one's too much for her to put a leash on." He said. "Woulda been a mixup for sure."

Smart boy. Xena eased her boots down another shoulder span, her eyes fixed on the backs of the enemy soldiers less than two bodylengths from her. She judged the amount of space behind the last of them, then she signaled behind her, and started moving again.

Behind her, the men had spaced themselves out evenly much as the enemy had, their rain washed bodies moving with an eerie silence as they shadowed Sholeh's troops.

Gabrielle, for once, was hiding tucked behind a tree, safely upslope, close enough for her to see what was happening but out of range of an errant spear.

The queen flexed her hands, then she drew out two daggers and wrapped her fingers around the hilts, picking up the pace a bit until she was behind one of the soldiers. He'd stopped to adjust a bit of armor, making a small break between himself and the men behind him and the man just ahead.

Xena's men were one tree removed from them, slightly above the path they were walking on and unaware of the silent, mud covered warriors slowly matching steps with them, moving in the rhythm of the forest.

Xena herself made the first move. She glided up and over a boulder, setting her feet down on the ground within arms reach of her target, close enough to smell the leather and metal he was wearing, and the scent of male musk.

The queen lifted her hand, then dropped it. With the rain covering any sound, they passed through the trees and closed in on the enemy soldiers. Xena focused on hers, a big man with a thick beard. She slid behind him and tapped the top of his head, reaching around with a quick, savage motion and cutting his throat as he tipped his head back to see what had fallen on him.

His body stiffened, but her hand was over his mouth and not a sound escaped as she pulled him back through the trees and off the path, his blood warming her forearm as she laid him down behind a rock. A quick look behind her showed her a line of bodies neatly arranged behind his, and her men wiping off blades

Nice. Xena gave them an approving nod and a thumbs up. She glanced to her left, up the slope, but Gabrielle's head was hidden from her by the angle of the ground and she wasn't quite sure if she was miffed about that or grateful for it.

Later.

Eight down, a couple thousand to go. Xena motioned her men to follow, and she started off in pursuit of the next in line, following the hunters down a faint path beaten into the underbrush. They'd started at the rear of the line, and now it remained to be seen how long they could keep up the silent attack.

She stepped up onto the small ledge of rock that lined the path, pacing across the top of it with natural balance, her body totally relaxed. With her cloak wrapped around her body and tied in place, she blended with the gray green of rain and forest, her hair pulled back and fastened off her face.

Stalking her next victim, Xena felt herself slipping into a much earlier version of herself, and it was almost an exhilarating feeling to shuck the weight of being who she was if just for a little while. Back in the days after she'd taken over the pit fighters, there had been many forays like this, just her and a few guys.

Her and a few guys, and a few knives, and some unlucky merchants on the road who had things she wanted.

No nobles to worry about, no precious Persian princesses, just a dark night and a long road and a couple of candlemarks hiding up and eating their fill of the spoils. No regrets, and no consideration for tomorrow.

Ah, the good old days. Xena ducked behind a tree and scrambled up over a set of boulders, reaching up to catch a branch with both arms and swinging over a gap in the ridge before she let herself down, one boot sliding a little on the mossy rock.

Her eyes widened as she felt her body start to slip sideways and she caught motion out of the corner of her eye as the last soldier in line turned towards her.

His eyes widened and he lifted his crossbow to his shoulder, taking quick aim at her as she fought to regain her balance. His finger tightened, and the bow fired and Xena was in no position to do any fancy tricks to stop it.

So she did an unfancy, mostly graceless one instead, getting enough traction with the ball of one foot to send her diving sideways off the rock head first, landing on her shoulder on the path and rolling as fast as she was capable of to avoid a second shaft.

She ended up flat on her back and the only thing that saved her was the slick ground as he lunged forward and pulled his short sword and the tip missed her neck by the slimmest of margins. She hooked her arm around his and rolled again, and he came over on top of her, the two of them struggling in an eerie silence as the rain thundered over them.

Xena's men dove for the ground, laying flat as the end of the line stirred, and started to swivel. The queen caught the motion and rolled again, pulling herself and her adversary down off the path into a thicket of shrubs, as she fought to keep the man's hands from her throat.

He was damn strong, and roughly twice her weight. Xena was a skilled wrestler, but the need to keep her eye over her shoulder to see if she was about to be pincushioned was distracting enough to give him a solid advantage over her.

She got pinned as he grappled with her, his eyes grim and intent as he got a hand free and fastened it around her throat, squeezing hard and shutting off her breathing as he reached for his dagger, his knee leaning painfully on her forearm.

That unbalanced him. Xena wrenched her body hard to one side and got her arm free, raking her fingers hard across his face as she felt for an eye socket.

He jerked his head out of range, but kept his grip on her throat and she was staring to see red spots in bad places. Long as her arms were, his were a little longer, and she realized she was running out of good options.

Covered by the leaves, her men couldn't see her, but on that note, neither could the enemy. Xena tried to twist herself out from under her adversary and she felt his body shift and bear down on her. She grabbed his free arm, holding onto it and keeping his fingers from his knife as he squeezed harder and harder, and the light started to dim.

Oh no. This was not good. There was just no way she was going to let this pinhead kill her, after everything she'd done so far this moon. His body shifted again and she felt his weight come off one thigh and that was enough.

Enough for her to arch her back and contract the long muscles of her torso, enough to whip her leg up and hook her boot around his shoulder and just, just enough leverage to pull his body back away from her and loosen his grip on her throat.

One huge breath, and she turned him turtle in a powerful wrench of her entire body, her fingers trailing over a hilt and yanking it free from his belt as he scrabbled to grab her arms and only got one.

Wrong one. Xena drove the dagger into his side as he squirmed and struggled, sensing the coming blow but unable to evade it. She felt the point stick on his arm, then puncture it under the powerful sweep of her arm and enter flesh, grating against bone before it popped free, and into the lung beyond.

The soldier groaned. Xena yanked the blade free and plunged it in again, and again, as his grip loosened and he started to slump to one side, his body flattening the bushes as blood spurted out, counterpoint to the cold rain pelting them.

Xena shoved his body over and got herself free, her neck hurting like a son of a bitch. She got her feet under her and cocked her head to listen for anyone approaching, but the rain defeated even her ears and she had to end up cautiously peeking from behind the leaves to get a clear view of the path.

She expected, honestly, to find a row of crossbows facing her, and having only empty forest meet her gaze almost stunned her into immobility. Could she really have gotten that lucky? She scanned the forest across the path intently, then exhaled in relief as she saw one of her men slowly raise his head, and give her an all clear sign.

How much had they seen? Xena reached up and rubbed her throat, wincing a little at the lingering pain. The unexpected struggle had shaken her a little, and she slowly leaned out to look down the path, searching for signs of the rest of the army.

Rain obscured the path after about six bodylengths, and beyond that, she couldn't see even shadows. With a sigh, she slowly stood up and let the rain hit her, rinsing the blood off her skin as she skulked across the path to rejoin her men.

They looked up at her as she slipped between the trees, easing up onto their knees and starting to get to their feet. "You all right, M.. Xena?" One asked, timidly.

Xena gave him a wry smile. "Sure." She said. "Aside from croaking of embarrassment because I almost fell on my ass and got strangled, that is."

The man looked about as embarrassed as she felt. "You got up, he didn't." He offered. "Slick here, yeah? All this rain."

"Yeah." Xena wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. "All right, let's go. How those idiots didn't hear us rolling around like mating warhogs I don't get." She checked her weapons and started along the ridge again. "But I'm not looking a gift horse in the ass, either."

"Stinks, that." The soldier fell in behind her, and the rest followed suit, as they hurried a little, trying to catch up. "Close though. Glad it came right."

Yeah, me too. Xena felt a sense of nagging worry, and she paused, puzzling out what it was. Then her expression cleared as she realized her hearing had picked up a motion in the forest heading her way at a good rate of speed and she had very little time to prepare to meet it.

**

"I knew it!" Gabrielle scrambled from behind her tree, grabbing her staff and starting down the slope so fast her feet came out from under her and she ended up sliding in the mud, her eyes popping wide open as she saw a tree coming up at her way too fast.

"Yahhhh!" She yelped, very softly as she skidded and scrabbled for a hold on the rocks, her fingers clawing at the mucky clay soil and the moss covered granite underneath, her staff bouncing behind her perilously close to her head.

She slid to one side of the tree and reached out to grab it, the bark scraping her arms as she swung around and ended up on her back, but still. Her staff rolled down past her and she stuck her leg out, trapping it against the ground as the rain pattered down on her face and made her eyes blink.

"Plg farts." She started to roll over, then she froze, seeing something come into her line of vision she hadn't expected, above her, past the trees she'd slid by between her and her former hiding place.

Six men were creeping along the tree line, dressed in clothing that, with mud and grass stains over it, blended into the surroundings just as Xena's had, only these men wore the barely visible sigil of Persia on their chests.

They had small, strange looking bows and along their upper arm, a strip of short arrows were fastened- their tips a glinting, oily looking black even in the storm.

As Gabrielle watched, they started down toward where Xena and her men were hiding, weapons held at the ready, as though they expected...

No. Gabrielle's eyes widened again, and she held herself absolutely still as the raiding party moved past. They did expect to find Xena, because they were hunting the queen and her men, hunters hunting the hunters hunting the hunters.

Sort of. Gabrielle waited until they all went past her, then she got up carefully, holding on to the tree to keep herself from slipping again. Her skin was covered in mud and she hurt in a couple places, but she put that all aside as she picked up her staff and scampered after the men.

She could see past them, to a swirl of motion through the trees that was Xena fighting, though the silence around all of them was really sort of spooky. She could only just see the flick of her lover's dark hair between the leaves, and then even that was lost from sight.

Unsure of what was really going on, she slid after the enemy soldiers, using her staff to keep her balance as she closed in on the last one, barely stopping in time as the men stopped, and froze in place, looking down through the trees.

From between the leaves, Gabrielle spotted Xena rising up from the ground, the rain blasting against her and a spray of blood tainted water trailing in its' wake. Even from where she was, she could see the shaken look on the queen's face, and before she could think about what she was doing she started to run.

Two steps on, the enemy soldiers heard her, and she caught motion as they all turned and then things became a blur as they started towards her, arms outstretched.

Gabrielle sped up, trying to keep her balance on the slippery ground as she felt a touch on her sleeve, and she half turned, whipping her staff around as she moved and smacking the soldier grabbing her on the side of the head.

Hard to say who was more shocked. He slipped, his hand going for his ear and she almost fell herself, but managed to keep her balance and duck between two trees with the rest of the enemy men pelting after her.

Her jaws clamped shut as she instinctively started to yell Xena's name, remembering the rest of the army creeping up the slope below them. Instead, she dodged between two bushes and a moss covered rock, spotting a bit of movement between the leaves and heading right for it.

The ground suddenly dropped out from under her boots and she stifled a yelp as she sailed through the air, the wet leaves lashing against her skin as something thunked against her back with shocking force. She landed and lunged forward, right into Xena's arms as both she and the queen landed hard against a tree trunk with twin grunts. "Buh.. Beh.. See gu.."

Xena sensed the panic, if nothing else, and she looked over Gabrielle's head to see the empty space between the trees suddenly fill with grim warriors.

"Got it." Xena pushed her lover down on the ground as she drew her sword and met the first soldier's blade, her instincts tingling as she felt the attacks expert force. She swung to the side and let his

momentum move him past her, her eyes widening as his feet tangled in Gabrielle's sprawled legs and he went face first into the tree.

Gift horse, ass. Xena whacked his head off as he bounced off the tree and sent blood and bits of bone spraying in every direction. Then she turned as she sensed another attack, and found a knife blade inches from her as one of the enemy spun past her soldier he'd been fighting.

She slammed her elbow into his face, as the blade punched its way through her guard and into her armor, turning only because she twisted her body violently to one side as she brought her knee up and into his groin.

He gagged and bent over, and she yanked his head down as she brought her knee up again, smashing his chin into her leg armor with enough force to break bone.

One of her men pulled his body back off her, and slammed him to the ground as the rest of the soldiers battled nearby, still in that same, odd silence that suddenly set off a question in Xena's mind.

Why? She shook her dagger from its wrist sheath and sent it spinning through the leaves, nailing one of the enemy in the thigh, her men overwhelming the attacking force with greater numbers and desperate ferocity.

Why not call for help? Xena took a step back and looked down the path. The last soldiers had already disappeared from view, but even with the rain surely they must have heard something.

It wasn't adding up. She turned and glanced down at Gabrielle, who was still seated on the ground, leaning back on her hands with wide eyes, her chest heaving. "You okay?" She sheathed her sword and offered her bedmate a hand up.

Gabrielle gladly took her hand, and a moment later she was standing shakily at Xena's side, her staff tucked inside her arm. "Boy."

"Man." Xena disagreed. "Old enough to be your father." She gave her adversary, now still and lifeless a kick. Her eyes roamed to the others, and she walked over to them, rolling one over with her boot. Another grizzled face, though the slash opening his cheek made it hard to distinguish his features. "Huh."

"What's it about, Mistress?" One of her men asked, in a soft voice. "Seen this bunch in the camp, I did. They kept to themselves, over by the water."

Xena studied the soldier, noting the black cord around his neck, evenly spaced knots around its circumference. She walked over to the man who'd attacked her, and knelt, pulling aside his surcoat to reveal a similar necklace. "Hm."

Gabrielle crouched beside her. "What does it mean?"

"Damned if I know." Xena replied honestly. "But I don't think things are as perfumed and peachy in her camp as Sholeh thinks they are." She mulled that over, a wry grin appearing on her face. "Too bad we didn't have more time. I might have been able to work with that."

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle had finally caught her breath. She stood as Xena did and stepped back as the queen rolled the man's body over into the bushes. "What would you work with?"

"How did you run into these guys?" Xena answered the question with one of her own.

"I.. I didn't." Gabrielle said. "Not really.. Anyway I saw that guy go for you and I.. Um.."

Xena chuckled softly.

"Anyway, but I fell down, and slid behind these rocks." Gabrielle explained, as Xena's men gathered closely around them. "And while I was getting my balance again I saw them going along above where you all were."

"Mm." Xena glanced up at the rain. "Not catching up to the rest of them?"

"No." Her blond bedmate shook her head. "Not at all, like they knew you were there and going after you."

"Mm." Xena repeated the sound. "You sure?"

"I think so." Gabrielle admitted. "I started to follow them, but they saw me and so I just.. Uh.. "

"Did the right thing." Xena said. "If you hadn't led them right into where we were, they'd have picked us off one by one.. Like I was doing with the rest of them." She frowned, and put her hands on her hips. "Something's fishy here."

"You think there's more after us?" One of her men asked.

"I'm sure there are." The queen answered. "Makes it hard to pull off ambushes if you're constantly looking over your shoulder, huh?"

"Aye."

"All right." Xena gathered herself up. "Let's get a move on before we lose sight of them. Maybe we can figure out what's going on before we end up speared to a tree." She indicated the path. "Keep your eyes open all the way around, now."

They moved off in a silent line, this time hugging the trees and moving with more caution than before. Xena nudged her companion to walk in front of her, and had to admit if only privately she was glad she had her lover in her sights again.

Gabrielle twisted her shoulders, grimacing a little. "I think one of them hit me in the back." She said. "Feels like it."

Xena laid her hand on the smaller woman's back then pulled it back, leaning forward to peer more closely between her shoulderblades. She brushed her fingers over the leather of her cloak, then fastened her grip on something and yanked it out, holding it up before her eyes.

Son of a Bacchae. Between her thumb and forefinger was a jagged arrowhead, stained a deep black.

"What?" Gabrielle turned her head. "What is that?"

Xena dropped the arrowhead into a pouch tucked at her belt and without much ceremony grabbed Gabrielle by the scruff of the neck and yanked her cloak and armor back, nearly throttling her. "Hold still."

"Brf." Gabrielle reeled backwards, her arms flailing.

Xena stuck her hand down the back of her lover's neck, feeling her fingers touch damp, cool skin. She felt along Gabrielle's spine anxiously, exhaling in relief when all she encountered was flesh that warmed very quickly to her touch as her companion went still and bend her head forward just a little.

She pulled her arm out and gave Gabrielle a pat on the back. "Guess I knew what I was doing when I made that damn armor. Lucky you." She bumped her into motion again, and they caught up with the waiting soldiers.

“Was I in trouble?”

“If that arrow punctured your back you’d be halfway to dead by now.

“Oh.”

“That really woulda ruined my day.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle felt a sobering chill. “Mine too.” She was quiet for a few steps, as the chill was overshadowed by the chill of the rain, and the gloominess of their surroundings. She felt a sudden urge to be somewhere else, anywhere else, anywhere they could get a bit of warmth, and a cup of hot tea, and be away from the fear and the blood and the uncertainty.

It felt like it had been a very long time since she’d been able to look forward to the next moment. She exhaled, feeling a touch of warmth as Xena’s hand settled on her shoulder and she wished briefly she’d just stayed with the horses.

And yet, there was no where else she wanted to be but by Xena’s side. “I bet that would have hurt a lot.” She finally said. “Wouldn’t it? I remember how much that arrow hurt you.”

“There was poison on it.” Xena replied. “It wouldn’t have hurt for long.”

“Oh.”

“Probably would have hurt me more than you.”

The rain pattered down over them, accompanied by a long roll of thunder.

**

Xena pressed her back against the rock, as she and her small force waited out a spell of overly ferocious weather. The rain had gotten so heavy it had become impossible to see down the path, and dangerous to walk in the racing sheets of water coming down the slope and she’d lucked out in finding a bit of shelter.

Just below them, she could see the main force of Sholeh’s troops huddled in a mass, using trees to maintain their footing as they turned their backs to the weather and likewise waited it out.

They had no shelter but the trees and each other. Xena’s men were happy to have granite at their backs and they shared trail rations in quiet satisfaction as they watched the weather around them.

Xena folded her arms over her chest and stifled a yawn. Over her head she had a stone ledge, and it extended out past her reach, providing enough cover to not only protect them from the rain, but to shelter them from curious eyes and she was glad enough to take the time given her and let her body rest.

Gabrielle was leaning against her right side, providing about the only warmth in the whole situation and Xena took what comfort she could from that, wriggling subtly a little closer as she felt Gabrielle exhale, her cheek leaning against the queen’s shoulder.

Xena felt the warmth increase, as arms slipped around her waist. She relaxed her pose and put her right arm around Gabrielle, her eyes never ceasing their relentless searching of the ground around them. She had no intention of allowing them to be snuck up on again.

In the weather she was watching, though, anyone sneaking anywhere unless they were crawling on their bellies would be unlikely. The rain was coming down so hard it was blowing sideways, and she could see branches and leaves being carried in the wind, which howled eerily through the forest.

Not fit for man nor beast, the old saying went. Xena observed the small waterfall running over the edge of the shelter they were under. Well, she was neither man or beast, so where did that leave her?

Ah well.

So. They'd made it out of Sholeh's camp, and they'd made it through most of one day with her whole damn army searching for them. Xena had to admit she hadn't really expected either circumstance, and so now she was at something of a loss to know what to do next.

She hadn't planned on them having to live rough, and hadn't planned on not being able to hunt, since she'd figured eating would be the least of their worries. But now she had six men and Gabrielle to worry about, and if they continued on they would need food and water, and rest.

Logistics were always the bitch of any war. Sometimes the fighting was the easy part. She exhaled, then a faintly spicy scent came to her nose and she glanced down to find a bit of smoked meat being offered up to her. "Where'd you get that?"

"Well." Gabrielle was nibbling her own piece. "Those guys in the camp liked my stories, so I traded them for it."

Xena paused in mid bite, her eyebrows twitching. "Did you now?"

Her companion nodded. "I figured we didn't bring much with us so we should get stuff if we could." She explained. "I mean, we had some water and nuts, but it sorta made sense to get something we could take with us."

If you figured on going somewhere, sure. Xena cheerfully chewed the enemy booty. 'Of course it made sense.'" She said. "I knew I could count on you to take care of that end of things."

Gabrielle jerked a little bit, in some evident surprise. "You did?"

"Sure."

The blond woman didn't answer, but she squiggled a little, and let out a satisfied sigh. She went back to munching, seemingly content.

Her immediate issue resolved, Xena too found herself content for the moment, free to imagine what course of action they should take next. If the rain kept up much longer, they'd be closing in on twilight, and their chances of evading Sholeh's troops would increase exponentially.

But still, what would that get her? She needed to pull the army away from the pass, which meant she needed to make Sholeh want to follow her rather than plunder the defenseless realm she knew was on the other side of the valley beyond.

That meant skulking away in the dark and making their escape wasn't going to cut it. Xena swallowed the bitter taste of the knowledge, understanding a truth about herself in that moment she hadn't expected and didn't welcome.

A strike of lightning almost over head made them all jump, and Xena correspondingly smacked her head against the granite being the tallest of them. She stifled a curse, then cupped one hand over her ear as thunder boomed, rattling her teeth.

"Yikes." Gabrielle muttered. "That made my eyeballs hurt."

Another crack, and a flash, and Xena winced as lightning struck the trees Sholeh's troops were sheltered under, setting them afire with a loud bang. Suddenly burning branches toppled down on the men, and in a flurry of motion they split apart and started heading in all directions.

One of which being directly towards Xena. "Ah." The queen stiffened. "This ain't good."

"Silly bastards." One of her men sighed behind her. "Stay here, Majesty? We'd be hard to see unless they come right up on us."

"Stay here." Xena decided, after a brief pause. "Stay back against the rock, don't move." She pressed her back against the stone. "Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll pass us by. If not.. " She ducked her head to one side and awkwardly drew her sword lefthanded, straightening up and letting the blade rest against the back of her left leg. "Just kill as many as you can."

The soldiers scrambled up over the rocks as the lightning blasted around them, their concern obviously more with their own skins than with the quarry they'd been after. Even from where Xena was, she could see the almost panic in the men's eyes and a second later, she'd freed herself from Gabrielle's grip and stepped out from under the rock ledge.

Right into the rain. Right into the glare of the stormlight. Right into the path of the running men who a short time before were working very hard at trying to find and kill her.

Insanity. But Xena knew she'd benefited by the occasional fit of insanity, so she went with her instincts, and laughed at the craziness inside her. "HEY!"

A sweep of her arm in the air, and in the flash of lightning off her blade she was spotted. Ignoring the shock and confusion behind her, Xena motioned the enemy soldiers over with an imperious gesture. "Hurry!"

They froze. They stared. Thunder boomed over them and the lightning blasted a tree that toppled over, catching fire even in the storm and then twenty men were bolting towards her at top speed.

"Um." Gabrielle emerged into the rain next to her. "Did you mean to do that?"

"Stay behind me." Xena warned as the soldiers closed in. "Get under there!" She ordered them, putting as much authority in her voice as she was capable of. She glared at them as they came even with her, but not so much as a dagger blade was turned her way as the soldiers skidded past and under the shelter of the stone.

Xena ducked back under herself, bumping Gabrielle backwards as she took in the cluster of crowded men, moments before enemies, huddled against the rock as a blast of lightning struck just outside, cracking the granite path before them and making chips of stone rattle down onto their shoulders.

Outside, a hoarse scream sounded loud and long, and the men all turned to look out as three of Sholeh's soldiers fell, their bodies consumed with fire, and a second tree fell across another line of men crushing them.

One of the soldiers sheltering with her cursed. Xena glanced over her shoulder at him, seeing her own men, tense as bowstrings standing against the rock. The enemy men turned towards her, everyone falling awkwardly silent.

"Hi." Xena said, after a long ghoulis moment. "Mother nature kicks everyone's ass, doesn't she?"

Thunder rolled over them again, lightning blasting them all with a pure, green light that outlined Xena's angular profile and lit the enemy soldier's faces. Their eyes were fastened on her, and after what seemed like an eternity the man closest to the queen blinked, and glanced aside.

As though it was a silent signal, Sholeh's men relaxed, shifting to watch the horrendous weather outside and almost deliberately turning their backs to the silent, armed men behind them.

Xena waited, then she turned and watched the weather too, her eyes widening as she suddenly saw a wash of water coming down the slope, shoving rocks and debris ahead of it. A visible line of soldiers still out in the rain saw it too, and she heard men start to yell and scramble to get out of its path.

A rumble overhead warned her, and she slammed her back against the rocks. "Get back!" She yelled. "It's coming over us!"

Everyone, enemy and friend alike obeyed, pressing their backs against the stone as a wall of water and rock rolled over the top of their shelter and crashed over the path below, slamming against the running men and washing them down the slope in a flurry of limbs and hoarse yells.

"Hades." One of Sholehs' men whispered. "Look at those bastards."

"So." Xena said, after a moment. "Is it worth all your stinking lives to go after me?" She asked. "For someone else's pride?"

The enemy soldiers all looked over at her. Xena returned their stares, and then she smiled at them, as the lightning flashed again, reflecting off the glint in her eyes, and the blade resting on her shoulder.

It was full dark before it finally stopped raining. Gabrielle was so tired of standing in the chill wind in the cluster of antsy soldiers she followed Xena right out into the inky black without any hesitation at all. The air was cold and damp still, and she shivered as it brushed over her, but she latched onto the back of the queen's cloak and kept right on going.

It felt so darn good to be out of the press of bodies. "Wow."

Xena had a careful eye on her footing, as she picked her way along the ridge and swept the silver tinged shadows around her for any movement. She was aware of the men following her from the shelter, and one ear cocked as she heard all the boots sounding.

Twenty six sets, aside from the light patter of Gabrielle's. Xena wasn't sure how long that was going to last, and she was even less sure of how good an idea it was, having twenty enemy soldiers rambling along at her back but so far they'd kept their mouths shut and hadn't tried anything stupid.

Besides it was pitch dark, there were no other visible soldiers out there, and she figured they figured she was as good a guide to follow as anyone.

Going out into the forest in the dark was a chance, but staying under the ledge wasn't an option. Xena paused at a bend in the rocks, turning her ears into the wind before she continued on, hearing little but the pittering of leaf caught rain falling and the rushing trickle of the water still racing down the slope.

Overhead, she could still see clouds racing across the sky, only the occasional star exposing itself briefly before being obscured again. Most of the path had been washed out, and she was going mostly by instinct, having nothing to follow but the curve of the land and her own logic.

"Xena?"

Speaking of logic. "Yeeess?"

"Do you think the horses made out okay?"

Xena could hear the wistful note in her lover's voice, and she had to admit an echo of it in her own heart. "I don't know." She answered. "They're pretty savvy, especially yours."

"Really?"

“Pony’s have brains since they lack everything else.” Xena smiled to herself, imagining the scowl on Gabrielle’s face with little effort. “So don’t worry about them. They’re animals. They’ll be fine.”

Gabrielle sighed audibly. “Can we go back for them later?”

“If we live long enough, sure.” Xena said. “Pass me that stick up here, willya?” She reached back and took the staff Gabrielle willingly handed to her. Pushing it ahead of her, she carefully felt the ground, not wanting to lead all of them into a ditch.

“Oh.” Her companion murmured. “Are we having that kind of day again?”

The commentary struck Xena as funny, and she chortled softly to herself as she found a decent path downward, keeping her senses honed for any sounds out of the ordinary. She could hear heavily running water below them, and she angled her steps away from it, moving along a backbone of granite that carved a step along the curve of the slope.

It felt good to be moving. She rocked her head from side to side to loosen up her neck muscles and loosened the belt around her cloak, letting it free around her to dry in the brisk wind. It let the chill hit her skin, but now that she was in motion she considered the prospect of dry leathers a decent tradeoff.

Right now, hers were wet through. The damp hide was rubbing her skin raw, reminding her of just how long it had been since she’d worn the damn things for more than a few candlemarks, aside from her little jaunt the previous fall.

Nothing would have made her happier than a good fire, and a dry set of socks. But everything around them was dripping wet, so instead she settled for thinking about killing people instead to maintain her good humor.

The weather had dealt them a bad hand. Xena could only take solace in the fact that the bad hand had been equally dealt to both her and Sholeh, and as she evaded a yawning gully opened by the storm she looked for any signs of her adversaries.

Difficult task. It was dark, and with all the furor of the rain movement in the rocks and scuffs on the trunks of the trees she was passing could have been caused by the weather as well as by passing soldiers. She paused, examining a broken branch, but the angle it was hanging made her shake her head, and she kept going.

“Hey Xena?”

“I don’t know where we’re going yet, I don’t know when we’ll get there, and no, I won’t kiss your pony.” Xena tossed over her shoulder. “Did I come close?”

“Um.. I was actually going to ask you what that light was.”

Xena looked where her companion was pointing. “Water.” She said, after a moment. “Moon must be coming through there.” She couldn’t see the sky from where they were, under the trees, but the flash Gabrielle had seen was distinctive and after a moment, she decided to angle towards it.

They were deep in the trees now, and a sense of oppressive silence descended around them, as the forest pressed in on all sides, and the moving shadows from the moving clouds overhead were starting to make Xena’s nerves twitch.

A flicker of motion, and her body reacted, snapping the staff up and getting it into position as something approached her and she struck out with a short, sharp jab that impacted the shadow in the shadows and sent it flying against the nearest tree trunk with a crunching smack.

Gabrielle inhaled sharply. "What was that?"

"Well, unless the Persian poofball enlisted dwarves, it wasn't a soldier." Xena edged forward, even her eyes barely able to sort through the darkness. She poked ahead of her with the staff, and felt it hit something soft that moved a little. "Uh."

She opened her mouth a little and sucked in a lungful of air, catching an odd musky scent from whatever it was. Aware of all the waiting men and muskrat behind her, she gathered her guts up and knelt, feeling the light grating rasp as her knee armor hit mud covered rock.

"Was it an animal?" Gabrielle knelt next to her, peering uselessly into the shadows. "I don't see anything."

Suppressing the desire to say she couldn't either, Xena bravely extended her hand into the gloom, feeling the faint tingle in her fingertips as she detected a living creature and biting her lip to keep from yelping as she touched something warm and furry.

It hissed.

"Oh!" Gabrielle gasped.

"What is it, your Majesty?" One of her men asked, carefully pronouncing her title as though it tasted good to him.

Oh sure. Xena could feel the thing, whatever it was, squirming under her touch. She could feel fur, and what seemed like leather, and the pressure to perform was whacking her squarely in the back of her head.

It hissed again and she took the plunge, grabbing it with both hands to bring it closer so she could see. After a second, something started smacking her in the arms, and she felt claws digging into her skin. She barely kept herself from tossing it away in fear as it neared her face and her eyes managed to make out an ugly pushed in face and the flash of white fangs.

OH, horsecrap. "Stand back." She warned. "It's dangerous."

She felt everyone move back a pace and that gave her enough room to stand up and drop kick the animal as far away from her as she possibly could. It squealed like a pig being gutted, then there was the sound of wings flapping and Xena picked up her staff hastily and got it in front of her in a defensive stance as the animal came back at her in furious anger.

"Yahh!" Gabrielle ducked behind her, as she swung wildly at it, feeling the end of the staff connect with it's body again. It squeaked, and then there was silence. Xena stood very still, her nostrils flaring, listening as hard as she could.

She heard a soft squeak.

Then another.

Then another. Slowly, she turned her head and searched the forest as she saw Gabrielle's chin tip back and a gasp emerge from her. "Okay, boys." Xena was surprised at how calm she sounded. "See that opening over there?" She pointed with the staff. "Between those rocks?"

"Aye.' The soldier behind her said.

"Run there."

"Majesty?"

“Run.” Xena turned and gave him a shove, grabbing hold of Gabrielle as she sensed motion in the trees above them and the wind changed direction, fairly swamping her with the scent of many animals very close by. “Now.”

“Xena, what a..”

“RUN!” Xena bolted, leading the way through the forest at top speed as the cloud of bats descended over them, eyes glittering in the dim light. “Don’t let them catch ya!” She warned. “They’re bats!”

“Bats!” Gabrielle yanked her cloak hood up and needed no further urging as she bolted headlong over the rocks and rough ground. “Why are they attacking us!?”

“They heard how good you were in bed and wanted some.”

“XENA!”

“Well, stop asking stupid questions!”

**

Xena slowly raised her head over the edge of a fallen log, peering into the darkness of the surrounding forest with deeply suspicious eyes. She detected no motion, even after watching for several minutes and finally she eased herself up to her knees and placed her hands on the damp bark.

“Are they gone?” Gabrielle’s head popped up next to her.

“Yeah.” The queen didn’t sound entirely sure, and the blond locks disappeared again. Xena grimaced, and flexed her hands, feeling the ache of scrapes and cuts all along her skin. She looked around again, at the tall rock walls surrounding them, and knew a bit of unease from the sense of being closed in.

Their backs were to the sheer cliff wall that bordered the seacoast, and to the right there was nothing but thick, brooding forest possibly filled with evilly watching bats.

“That was the damndest thing I ever seen.” One of her enemy hangers on bravely got up next to her. “What were those things?”

“Bats.” The queen said. “Like foxes.”

“Them was flying.”

“Foxes with wings, that bite like crazy.” Xena clarified. “You can get real sick from them.” She shook her head. “Had a guy get bit once in the field. He turned into a lunatic and ended up dying in a seizure trying to rip a man to pieces.”

Slowly, the rest of the men appeared, looking nervously at each other. “Anybody get bit?” Xena’s senior man asked, looking around at all the shaking heads.

Gabrielle eased up near Xena and took one of the queen’s hands in her own, turning it up and into the moonlight. Dark, jagged marks were clear against the paler skin and she touched one with her fingertips. “Did you?”

“No.” Xena said, evenly. “Woudln’t matter if I was though.” She met Gabrielle’s eyes. “YOU’d never tell if I went nuts.”

“Xena.”

The queen bared her teeth and lunged at her companion, snapping them, making Gabrielle yelp. Then she chuckled and patted her bedmate on the back. "Relax." She looked around again. "Okay, let's get moving. I think we lost them."

She stood up and brushed herself off, giving her now dry leathers a tug as she stepped in front of the fallen tree. She wanted to get out of the cul de sac quickly, and she started for the small gap between the forest and the rock wall to her left.

Then she stopped, and turned. She waited until all the men had gathered around her before she put her hands on her hips and addressed them. "Listen." She said. "We're going hunting. We're probably going to meet up with some of your trenchmates and kill them. If you're not up for that, take off."

The twenty enemy soldiers looked at each other.

"I mean it." Xena said. "I get a whiff of one of you running or sending a blade towards my back I'll slaughter the lot of you where you stand."

Gabrielle watched the soldiers in fascination. She knew Xena meant exactly what she said, and she knew Xena would do exactly what she'd said she'd do, but these men who had only just met her earlier that day had to figure it all out.

Would they? There were twice as many of them at least, and they were soldiers. She'd been with Xena's soldiers long enough to understand that the men really thought they were the best and the toughest, no matter if they were or not and it did not come easy to them to submit to anyone.

Even Xena, whose personal charm could peel the skin off an apple and leave it naked and not minding. Gabrielle put her hands on her staff and cleared her throat. "It's true." She told the men. "If you think you're going to want to do that, just go back to your camp now."

Xena made a little snoring noise, but maintained her aggressive stance in silence.

The soldiers looked at the oldest of them, who had a rank knot on his shoulder though it wasn't much of one. "We go back, we're dead." The man said, with a half shrug. "We go with you, we're probably dead. Seems like a little better."

"Why will you be dead if you go back?" Gabrielle asked, before Xena could say anything. "Because you didn't try to kill us?"

The man studied her for a moment. "She don't care about us." He said. "We had to join up."

Xena's eyebrows lifted. "You're conscripts?"

The man nodded. "Aye, most of us are." He said. "Conquests, along the way here."

"Ah." The queen said. "I thought you didn't look Persian." She paused. "But she has Persian soldiers with her. The horsemen are."

"They are." He nodded again. "The captains are, the seniors. Her assassins, too."

"With the black knot necklaces?"

The men exchanged glances, then their leader nodded a third time. "She took all the men from my village. Most of them died the other day in the pass."

"Sorry about that." Xena remarked.

“Was looking to kill all of you.” The man replied. “That’s what war is, we know it.” He gestured to the group around him. “We made up to try and run during the storm, see if we could get past the hills. Then we met up with you.”

“Uh huh.” Xena mulled that over. “I could be just as much of a bitch y’know.” She suggested. “Maybe I think you’re just fodder too.”

“Maybe.” The man agreed “But you was in the front there, right with the fodder.”

“Yeah well.” The queen turned and started off again, motioning them all to follow, her decision apparently made and theirs accepted. “I’ve been known to be an idiot as well as a bitch so just hope you get lucky when the arrows start coming.”

Gabrielle gave Xena’s new recruits a friendly smile, before she turned and followed her queen. She felt better about their odd tagalongs now, since at least she could understand why they weren’t trying to attack them.

She caught up to Xena as the queen reached the tree line, and managed to squeeze onto the path next to her, the narrow opening just wide enough for them both. “Is that normal?”

Xena looked around, as though some animal with two heads had appeared in the moonlight. “What?”

“For armies to make people join them?”

Xena stifled a sneeze, cursing a little under her breath. “Sometimes.” She said. “I don’t believe in it though.”

“You don’t?”

“Nah. More trouble than it’s worth, having farmboys with sharp sticks all poking each other in the ass and wanting to be somewhere else.” Xena said. “Unless it’s like they said, Sholeh wanted them to waste on our front lines.”

“Ew.”

Xena shrugged. “Explains some things though.” She admitted. “I didn’t get why their attacks were so damn lame most of the time, then I’d run into some bastards who really knew what they were doing and were close to kicking my ass.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle carefully evaded an evil looking branch of thorns. “So having them with us doesn’t really help, does it?”

“Nope.”

The queen eased through the overgrown foliage sideways, forcing her companion to fall a step behind. The path she’d chosen was roughly a continuation of the one they’d found from the other valley, and it mostly consisted of thick brush, a rock wall, and a lot of cursing to get between one and the other.

She had a pretty good idea of where the path would take her, along the coastline and down towards the river and the port city she’d intended on taking over in some other lifetime a hundred leagues ago. If Sholeh had truly taken over the city, it meant a huge portion of trade goods normally bound for her realm would be halted, leaving the overland route through the mountains on the far side as the only option.

That was the route Bregos had taken, and where the last wars had been fought, and where the feelings ran the hardest. Yes, she’d gotten booty back from his conquests but they’d also made enemies that route and she’d half expected a retaliatory raid over the long winter.

Most of their trade, in the last two seasons, had come the river route. So. Xena readily admitted to herself that she'd allowed many things to slide the last couple of seasons, and aside from stewarding the use of land which she'd turned out pretty good at, she'd been doing a truly crappy job as a tyrant.

Not good. If she'd waited another moon this spring they'd have been trapped in the inner valley and she'd be looking at a long siege when stores were at their lowest and crops had yet to be planted. She'd have died behind the gates, likely, or in some idiotic charge into Sholeh's army.

Pissed her off just thinking about it.

"Xena?"

"What?" Xena pulled out her biggest dagger and started cutting her way through the branches, glad of her gauntlets and wishing she'd had them on before when running from the bats. The cuts and scrapes were making her hands ache and she'd somehow landed on her shoulder and that was throbbing also.

"Funny stuff on the side, why did those bats come after us?" Gabrielle was right behind her, staff making little punking noises in the dirt. "We had bats in our stable. They never hurt anyone."

"They were Bacchae bats." The queen informed her, glad of the distraction as she wrestled the thorns out of the way. "Most bats eat bugs."

"Or little mice." Gabrielle agreed. "But not these? They can't eat people, Xena. They're too small even I know that much."

"They suck blood."

"What?"

Xena turned and bared her teeth. "They bite animals and suck their blood. That's what they eat."

Gabrielle stared at her in horrified fascination. "Really?"

"Really."

"You mean they would have.. If they caught us.. They'd have..."

"Yep."

Gabrielle made a gurgling noise deep in her throat, and tugged her cloak closer to her neck. "Oh Hades. That's almost as gross as those people getting eaten." She shuddered. "Gross."

"Mm." Xena got past a thick bush and saw some easier going ahead. She exhaled in silent relief and put her knife away. "But you know..." She turned and paused, as the line of soldiers came into the clearing. "You." She pointed at the leader of Sholeh's exiles. "Why did they let that merchant train through? Was it a trap?"

After a moment of confusion, the man shook his head. "If you mean that bunch of wagons.. I think the one's that made a deal with her begged for food, yeah? She sent em." He glanced back at his group. "We didn't hear much, but there was a feller who came into the camp, said people were starving."

Xena's brow creased. Yes, there had been no supplies, no wagons during the cold seasons, but there was always the land to forage off of, wasn't there? "Bregos men, were starving?"

The man shrugged. "Said they'd been living off the land during the cold."

"They were living off all those little villages." Gabrielle spoke up suddenly. "The ones we saw destroyed, Xena. They were living off those people."

Xena remained silent for a long moment, her eyes flicking back and forth among the shadows around them. Another piece in the puzzle fit grimly in place, as she thought of all those meagre homeseteads, barely able to support themselves, being raped by Bregos and his men who she now realized would have never lived merely off the land.

Without a doubt, this was her fault. She'd let him go. Let them go. 'Yeah.' She tasted the bitterness of the word on her tongue. "I guess they did." She turned and squared her shoulders. "C'mon. Let's go." She started down the path again, then she stopped and turned, looking at Sholeh's soldiers. "What is it you all want?"

"Ma'am?" The man asked, hesitantly.

"YOU want to be soldiers?" The queen asked, bluntly. "You want to be shepherds, you want to be sold down the river as slaves, what?"

One of the younger men ducked his head with a touch of diffidence. "We'd just want to go home, ma'am." He said. "I got family there. A little girl was just born the night they took me."

Xena's men had circled around them, to wait by their queen's side, and they studied the enemy men with somber, watchful eyes.

"That what you all want?" Xena asked, quietly.

The soldiers nodded. "We got nothing against you." The older man said. "We don't want to be here. Half of them.." He jerked his head towards the general direction of the army. "Don't want to be here."

"Xena will make it right." Gabrielle told them in an utterly confident tone. "Just stay with us, and she'll get you through and home okay."

Xena turned and looked at her, putting her hands on her hips.

"She can do anything." The blond woman assured them. "You wouldn't believe the stories I could tell you, so just stick with us, and you'll be fine."

Xena's men smiled, as they watched their leader's face, outlined clearly in the moonlight Her expression was caught between exasperated and outraged and her body posture matched it. "Aye, the little one's right." Dev said. "Our queen's the best."

Xena's head swiveled and she glared at him. "Just for that I'm gonna kick all of your asses when we get out of this damned forest." She growled. "Let's move it!" She reached out and spanked Gabrielle across the butt. "And you, muskrat, you'll get yours later."

"Oo. Cool." Gabrielle felt a lightening of her spirit, as she picked up her staff and started after the queen's tall, stalking form. "Does that mean you'll find us a hot spring again?"

Xena looked up at the sky. "Gatreilleeee..."

The soldiers chuckled and fell into line, mixing with Xena's men now in a silent, accepted alliance.

Xena strode on, aware of the shorter, slighter shadow at her heels. "You're a little pissant, you know that?"

Gabrielle smiled. "It's going to make a great story, Xena, I just know it."

"It's probably going to be a very short story." The queen remarked. "And you probably won't be around to tell it."

“Maybe.” Gabrielle’s expression turned pensive. “But if I die, I want to die doing the right thing, and helping people. Don’t you?”

Xena shook her head and led the way down the path towards their tomorrow. “I think I’d rather go back and find the damn bats.”

“Xena.”

“Half assed hero horsecrap.”

**

Part 17

Dawn found them near the edge of the river plateau, sheltered in a dry, white limestone cave as they settled down to get some rest.

At least some of them were. Xena had climbed up the side of the cliff face, and was peering across the open spaces ahead of them, clinging to the stone like a large, be-cloaked spider.

Gabrielle was splitting the difference. She had taken a seat on a bit of ledge near the opening of the cave, where she could keep an eye on her acrobatic bedmate and the early morning sun was nicely warming a body still chilled from the long wet walk the previous night.

She didn’t know what Xena was doing. Based on the muttering she’d heard from Xena before she’d started climbing she wasn’t convinced Xena knew what Xena was doing, though so she didn’t really think asking her about it was going to get either of them anywhere.

She was bone tired. Every inch of her wanted to curl up in the sun and sleep despite the emptiness in her stomach and her desire to keep by Xena’s side. Though her body seemed to be getting used to very little sleep and less food she felt she was reaching a limit and hoped Xena would decide to stay put even for a short while.

Moments later, she heard a light rasp of leather against stone, and as she looked up, Xena scaled down the cliff, releasing her hold and dropping the last bodylength to land near where Gabrielle was sitting. “Urf.”

“Urf?” Gabrielle willingly turned her attention to her companion. “What did you see up there?”

“A mess.” Xena took a seat on the rock next to her and leaned back, resting her head against the wall with a sigh. “I’ve got a problem.”

“What kind of problem? Can I help?”

Xena rolled her head to the side and regarded Gabrielle. “I dunno.” She said. “How are you at mass murder? Got any good poison on ya?”

Gabrielle’s adorable, mop head tilted to one side, and she frowned. “Xena, I don’t think I’d be very good at mass murdering ants even by mistake.”

Xena chuckled. “Probably not.” She let her hands rest on her knees, the raw scrapes visible in the sunlight. “You’re too damn cute to be a ruthless killer anyway. No one’d believe it.” She sighed. ‘Now me on the other hand... I could be an innocent wool comber and everyone’d run from me.’”

Gabrielle studied the woman seated next to her. Xena was in her armor, her skin stained from their travels, and weapons were hanging literally all over her. Sitting in there in the sun, weariness plain on her face, she looked like anything but a queen. “I wouldn’t.”

Xena's lips quirked. "You're a smitted nitwit. You don't count."

"One, two three.. Sure I do." Gabrielle reached over and covered one of Xena's hands with her own. "Are we going to stay here for a while?"

"Do you want to?" The queen asked. "You look like you could use a nap." She lifted her free hand and reached across her body to push Gabrielle's hair back off her face. "Still glad you're here?"

Gabrielle looked around them, down at herself, then at Xena. "Well." She managed a half grin. "I sorta wish we were both somewhere else."

"Me too." Xena admitted. "Yeah, we're going to stay here for now. I want to make for the town, and trying it in daylight with twenty armored jerks behind me ain't gonna cut it." She idly picked at a bit of her knee armor, it's edge cut through and twisted into a jagged point.

She knew it must have gotten that way in one of her fights, but she had no memory of it. What was it they called it, the fog of war? She flicked a bit of dried mud off her leg. Churning cesspit of war, more like it.

"I thought we were going to try and make Sholeh follow us." Gabrielle said. "Wasn't that the plan?"

"Plans change." The queen extended her legs gingerly. "There's too many of her troops between us and the river. If I make her chase us, we'll just run into them and dying is so damn boring." She sensed Gabrielle moving, and she turned her head to see her companion edging up behind her, hands already reaching for her shoulders.

She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, accepting the touch gratefully as Gabrielle started to massage what parts of her shoulders she could reach with gentle fingers. It was embarrassingly personal but she was past caring.

"Well, then I'm sure you'll come up with a better plan." Gabrielle said, confidently. "It's amazing how you knew those soldiers would join up with us."

"Ungh."

"They think you're really sexy."

Xena's head turned and she looked over at Gabrielle, her eyes half obscured by mud stiffened hair. "You've got to be kidding me."

"*I* think you're really sexy."

The queen snorted. "Well *I* think you've all got rat eaten eyeballs and need white canes to find your way around with. She faced forward again. "I sure as hell don't feel sexy right now."

Gabrielle eased closer, forgetting about her own weariness as she responded to the unexpected note of discouragement in her friend's voice. Like most of the men Xena was battered by their travels, her skin stained with mud and scraped half raw.

She pressed her belly against Xena's back as she worked her hands under the hard armor, to the warm skin underneath, the solid bones evident under her fingertips. She watched the queen's head drop forward a little further and seeing a bare bit of neck, she leaned forward and kissed it.

Xena grunted softly, and she took that as an invitation and went back for another kiss, nibbling the small bump that was part of the queen's spine after that. She could feel the tension under her hands slowly relaxing as she worked her way up the powerful neck.

Xena let her head rest on her hands, her elbows propped on her knees. She let the thoughts of Sholeh's army loose for a few minutes. The warmth of the contact behind her made her feel like she was briefly caught in a cocoon someplace else, where a bath was waiting, and a cup of mead and the softest of soft beds.

There was none of that here, but Gabrielle's presence brought her a sense of the comforts of that life being almost close enough to touch. She drew in a long breath and released it, as her neck muscles relaxed under the powerful kneading.

Another nibble, along the edge of her ear and despite the utterly grungy state she was in, damned if it didn't make her feel sexy. "You're gonna get sick if you keep eating all that dirt." She commented.

"It's clean there." Gabrielle disagreed, reaching around and putting her arms around Xena to hug her. "If we're going to stay here for a little while, I found a pond just down that little slope there that didn't look too muddy." She said. "Maybe I could make more clean spots."

Xena rubbed her temples with her thumbs. "Are you propositioning me, muskrat?"

"Well." Gabrielle exhaled, right against the skin of Xena's neck. "I could be, but I really think you probably want to just be more comfortable right now." She got up and came around in front of the queen, holding her hands out. "Don't you?"

Xena rested her chin on her fists, mourning the loss of her masseuse. "If I go with you and let you have your way with me, will you finish the backrub?"

"Sure." Gabrielle grinned. The expression grew as Xena stood and took her hand, and they turned and walked down the short slope and into the heavy brush surrounding the cave, that Xena had selected for exactly that reason.

It was invisible unless you came right up on it, and the way down into the valley was blocked by thick stands of heavy underbrush, and a gloomy looking pine forest that ran closely along the rock wall that separated the valley from the sea.

It wasn't safe, of course, but it was as safe a place as she could find to give her little group some much needed rest and Xena felt a weariness settling in her own bones as she followed Gabrielle between two fragrant shrubs and around a corner and she could already smell the rich scent of water on the air.

They had to make their way through a pile of fallen boulders, green with moss, detached from the wall nearby long ago. Tucked under the branches and edged around by thick growth the pond appeared dark and murky, but Xena's nose detected fresh water and just that made her skin itch all over from its cover of mud.

She found a bit of ledge above the waterline and they sat down on it together. Xena unlaced her boots and tugged them off first, lowering her feet into the cool water with a sigh before she started working on her knee armor. "Damn."

Gabrielle was following her lead, and she wiggled her toes in the dark water for a minute before she looked down to unbuckle the belt around her waist. "It's nice here."

Xena eased the armor off her legs and set it to one side, gazing thoughtfully at the battered limbs beneath, the joints aching as she ran her hands over her knees. With a soft grunt, she braced her hands on either side of her and eased into the water, feeling cautiously for the bottom as it came up over her thighs.

It was cool, but not cold and it stopped at her waist. "Got any soap?" The queen eyed her friend, who was lifting her armor over her head, revealing a mud and blood stained shirt underneath.

“Um..” Gabrielle set the armor down and reached for the pouch hanging off the belt she’d dropped near it. “Matter of fact...” She fished something out. “I sure do.”

Xena leaned against the rocks and folded her arms over the cool, damp surface. “What would I do without you?”

Gabrielle looked up, hearing the quiet sincerity in Xena’s voice. She met the somber blue eyes uncertainly, the bit of soap curled within her fingers. “Stay dirty?”

Xena merely gazed at her, then she extended her hand. “Gimme that, and get your ass in here.” She took the soap and waited as Gabrielle squirmed out of her leggings, then boldly jumped off the rock into the water in just her shirt, the sleeves billowing out around her.

She promptly disappeared as the water closed over her head, with a cloud of surprised bubbles and a muffled squawk.

Her companion lunged over and stuck her hand, then arm into the water, grabbing hold of a piece of cloth and yanking upward, pulling a wet, spluttering, wide eyed woman to the surface in one good healthy pull.

“Oof.” Gabrielle gasped. “I didn’t expect that!”

“You’re such a nut.” Xena hauled her over to the shallows and steadied her until she found her footing. “At least you washed all the crud off.. Hey, you’re a blond.”

Gabrielle ducked into the water and knelt, taking off her shirt and rubbing it briskly. “Yeah, I felt pretty grungy.” She admitted. “I hate that.”

“You do?” Xena set the soap down and unlaced her leathers, pulling them over her head and letting them down into the water to soak. “I never figured you for that, muskrat, living with sheep and chickens in your bedroom and all.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle looked up, then stopped speaking as she merely sat there in the water, admiring her now naked companion. Xena was backlit by the dim green light, her hair wafting in the breeze as she worked on cleaning her armor.

She’d seen Xena naked many times before, of course. But after being out in the wilds for the time they’d been, the queen’s body had altered into something more primal, the muscles standing out clearly under her skin and the bones showing along the tops of her shoulders and along her ribs.

With her hair a bit overgrown, and the marks of battle on her, she was so removed from the women in silk gowns Gabrielle had first known, it was hard to absorb. But she felt in her heart, as she had from the first, that this Xena, this dark warrior figure, was the real one. “Wow.”

“What?” Xena looked up from washing the blood out of her leathers.

“You’re gorgeous.”

Xena looked around, then down at herself, then back at Gabrielle. “You hit your head on that rock or something?” She asked, in a puzzled tone. “I look half dead.” She draped her armor over the stone and started scrubbing her arms with the soap. “C’mere.”

Gabrielle waded over to her, and put her shirt down next to Xena’s leathers. She took the soap from the queen’s hands and started cleaning her with it. She scrubbed her powerful back, as Xena turned and leaned against the shore, releasing a small, tired sigh.

"You have kind of a lump here." Gabrielle said, after a few minutes. She gently felt along Xena's spine, to it's base and touched the tight ball she could feel under the skin.

"Yeah." Xena leaned further forward, and rested her head on her arm. "I twisted the wrong way when I was fighting that jerk back there."

"Does it hurt?" Gabrielle tried to carefully knead the spot, feeling the shift as the queen moved under her touch.

Xena remained silent for a moment. "Well." She sighed. "Every gods be damned thing hurts so it's hard to tell. I feel like total horsecrap on a cracker."

The hands on her back continued their patient massage and she let her body relax, the gently moving water and the cool stone with it's mossy scent slowing her thoughts.

She needed a time out from the chaos. There was too much happening all at once, and her next step was either going to lead them off the edge of a cliff, or do something useful and she was so, just so damned tired of scrambling and trying to pull a cooked rabbit out of her ass.

"I love you." Gabrielle's voice floated over her right shoulder, as the scent of soap reached her nose and she felt fingers kneading her shoulders. "And you know what? I fixed up something over between those trees I think you could sit on and maybe rest."

"You did, huh?"

"Yeah, I figured maybe you'd like to sit on something other than a rock."

Xena straightened up and turned, putting her arms around Gabrielle and bending her head down to kiss her with simple, sincere passion. She felt Gabrielle's hand drop and she caught the soap before it dropped into the water as she pulled her companion against her and the water evaporated between them.

Time out.

Gabrielle's hands slid down to rest on her hips as they moved together and she pressed her belly against Xena's, a pleasant warmth that traveled up her body and pushed back the exhaustion and banished the hideous insanity of what they were doing.

Time out.

"Got something soft for us to sit on over there, huh?" Xena backed her lips off just enough to speak. "You little scoundrel." She returned for another kiss, tasting the faintest touch of berries as her tongue teased gently against her bedmates.

"Ungh."

"You know you could even make Tartarus sweet?"

**

"How in the Hades did you come up with THIS?" Xena stopped, right in the middle of a pleasant though damp seduction as she and Gabrielle managed to sidle together into the tiny clearing the blond woman had prepared.

"What?" Gabrielle was totally focused on the bare breast at nose level to her.

“That.” Xena unceremoniously put her hand on her bedmate’s head and turned it so that it was facing the trees instead of her chest. “That over there. You did that?”

Gabrielle tried to catch her breath, as her heartbeat slowed a little, and she blinked at the clearing. “Oh.” She took a deep lungful of air and expelled it. “That. Ah, yeah, that was me.” She admitted. “Do you like it?”

Xena released her hold on her companion and eased around her, ducking past a branch to arrive in the open space between a group of trees. Strung between them was a hide, a cowhide by the look, tied to three of the trunks and suspended above the ground.

It was rough, and a bit crude, but there was room on it for one person sprawled out or two people cuddled together and Xena put her hands on her hips and laughed in genuine amazement. “I’ll be a son of a bacchae.”

Gabrielle put her annoyed libido on hold, trading off for these words of skewed approval from her lover. She joined Xena near the contraption, more than a little pleased with herself. “I used to make these when I had to stay out watching the sheep.” She said. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Where did you get the hide?” Xena asked. “You weren’t carrying it.”

“No.” The blond woman touched it. “It was in the cave. I found it before the rest of those guys did.”

Xena looked around. The clearing was surrounded completely by trees and thick brush. She tried to see through it to the rock wall, and failed, and then tried to see through it to the valley, and had equally horrible success.

That meant, in this most unlikely place, she actually could just sit down and relax for a little while. With an approving grunt, she turned and sat down on the stretched hide, feeling it move under her as she cautiously tested the strength of the ropes.

It seemed nice and secure. Xena laid down on her back on it, gazing up through the leaves at the placid sky before she lifted her hand and curled her finger in a come hither gesture. “Get over here.”

Gabrielle didn’t hesitate. She’d created the hammock in some vague hope that maybe she’d get to take a nap in it, but having Xena gleefully sprawling over her roughly put together swing, the queen’s face lit with a happy grin made her own soul just about sing.

She eased onto the hide next to Xena, eyeing the ropes nervously for a moment as she hoped they would hold both their weights, and that she’d tied the darn knots right. After an unsure, creaking moment, she relaxed and stretched out, her left side firmly in contact with the queen’s right.

The hammock swung a little, a soothing motion as they both adjusted to the bizarrely unexpected comfort. “Wow.” Gabrielle sighed. “It feels really good not to be sitting on a rock.”

“Or a tree.” Xena agreed. “Or even a horse.” She flexed her body, the aches slowly relaxing as her muscles unclenched. Her last night spent in her camp cot seemed very far away, and she faced the fact that in truth, she was no longer the rough and tumble youngster she’d once been.

She’d grown up, and grown old, and she suspected her earlier self would be horrified at what she’d become.

Ah well.

“Boy, I’m tired.” Gabrielle sighed. “I don’t know how you did this for all that time.”

"I was an idiot." Xena promptly answered. "Not to mention, I was too young and stupid to know what it was like to have something so simple as a gods be damned pillow."

"Oh."

Xena glanced sideways at her. "So." She ignored the insanity of them swinging there with enemy soldiers possibly all around them. "Where'd you learn to make one of these? I didn't figure they were big down on the farm."

Gabrielle half turned, and snuggled closer, sliding her arm over Xena's stomach. "It started with the sheep."

"Uh oh." Xena's nostrils flared. "I knew there was a sleeping with sheep story in your past somewhere."

Gabrielle started laughing, shaking her head as the giggles worked down her body. "Oh, for the love of the gods, Xena."

Xena chuckled.

"I've never slept with a sheep." The blond woman's chuckles finally faded. "Not even accidentally. But I used to have to go out and watch the flocks when they grazed, in the summertime."

"Watch them do what? Chew grass and fart?"

Well. Gabrielle thought back to those long days of summer she'd spent, alone with the animals far off in the fields. The memories seemed slightly out of focus, and she almost felt she couldn't reach back and touch the girl she'd been then.

Had it been so very long? Just three or four seasons, but that seemed a lifetime. She could just barely remember the scent of clover, and the sound of birds overhead, and the soft maaing of the ewes nearby. "Watch them to make sure they didn't run off, or that a wolf didn't get them." She explained.

"Gabrielle."

"Yes?"

"You were going to throw yourself in front of a pack of wolves to keep them from getting their lambchops?" Xena's voice lifted incredulously. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Well." It did sound a little crazy. "I don't know.. I never had to do that. The worst that ever happened was one of the lambs fell in a little pit of quicksand and I had to jump in after it." She sighed. "Stupid jerky thing."

Xena listened with half an ear, her attention focused on the cramps slowly working their way out of her back. "Did you get it out?"

"After it bit me, yeah." Gabrielle said. "Anyway, after I brought the herd to the pasture, I'd look for a nice spot to sit down and watch them, but there was always something that made it uncomfortable. Either it was ants, or mud, or rocks or briars.. So finally I stole an old hide cloak from the barn and made myself a little swing seat to sit in."

"Makes sense." Xena watched a bird flit over head, reassured a trifle by it's unconcerned presence. "Bet that made it nicer."

"It did." Gabrielle could feel Xena relaxing against her, and she stroked the queen's side gently with her thumb. "I used to just lay there for hours, watching the clouds float past, and making up stories."

Xena couldn't imagine that. Her early life had been so full of pain and terror sitting and thinking about anything would have been courting death. She couldn't think of herself doing it, but after a moment, she could imagine Gabrielle back then, probably a mop headed little punk who talked to rabbits.

"It was so different than it was at home." Gabrielle added. "It was lonely, but it was wonderful, because I could just be there and imagine all sorts of things, like what were the sheep thinking, and did fish hold their breaths, and what my life was going to be like, someday."

Xena rolled her head to one side, and peered down at her lover's profile. "Bet this never crossed your mind." She indicated both them, and their surroundings with one lazy swipe of her hand.

Gabrielle had to smile. "Um.. No." She admitted. "I think the craziest thing I ever imagined for myself was running away to join the traveling circus."

"I could be considered a traveling circus." Xena mused. "Let's see.. I've been called a viper, a horses ass, a raging bitch.. All I'd need is a midget and you in a clown suit and we could open up shop. You think?"

The blond woman buried her head into Xena's shoulder and started laughing again helplessly.

Xena chuckled, then let out a long sigh. "Oh, Gabrielle." She wrapped her arms around her companion. "Let's enjoy this while we can. Tonight we're going to sneak into the city there, and you're gonna have to lead the way."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you." Xena gave the top of her head a kiss. "I'm not going to be the only one stuck doing half assed hero crap in this gods be damned story."

"Um."

"If you can drag a sheep out of quicksand, you can lead my army."

"Uhhhm."

"It's only an army of twenty six, don't get your tail all wiggling."

**

Xena hitched her knee up, resting her rough wooden bowl on it as she watched the sun start to slip down behind the treeline. Saving the fact that she didn't have a mug of cold ale in her other hand, she was feeling damn wonderful at the moment, and the thought of traveling the night through didn't even faze her.

Being clean, sleeping for hours, and getting a square meal just did wonders for ya, didn't it? She licked her lips. Especially when you were getting ancient.

"Hey, Xena?"

"Yees?"

Gabrielle joined her, the blond woman's body draped only in her shirt and leggings, her armor packed safely with her borrowed hide on the back of one of the soldiers. The late afternoon breeze fluttered the fabric against her body, and ruffled her newly dried hair, and she exhaled in some satisfaction as she watched the gilded sky along with her queen. "That's so pretty."

Was it? Xena picked up a rabbit leg from her bowl and bit a chunk out of it. "You cooked this."

“Uh huh.”

“I can tell from the taste.” The queen said. “As in, it has one.”

“Thanks.” Gabrielle took a seat on a nearby rock and sat back. “I’m really glad those guys cut up that stuff they found first though, because if I’d had to look at those bunnies alive we’d have ended up with herb soup for dinner.”

She kicked her feet out, tasting the rabbit on the back of her tongue with a sense of guilty enjoyment. Despite her ambivalence about consuming adorable animals, she’d been really hungry, and the meal had felt darn good filling her belly.

To have enough to eat, and time to eat it in, was a luxury they hadn’t known much of since they’d started the fight and it made her appreciate all over again the plenty she’d known in the castle over the winter. Funny how that was, since what she’d known before had been far worse than they’d experienced out here.

“What did you say?”

Gabrielle pulled her knees up and circled them with her arms as she turned her head towards the queen. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Yes you did.”

“No, I didn’t.” The blond woman said. “Really.”

“Are you arguing with me?” Xena asked. “Did we forget that whole I’m the queen thing already?”

It was getting harder for her to remember what it had felt like to be afraid of Xena, Gabrielle realized, as she responded to the teasing with a rakish grin. “I never forget your the queen.” She reassured her companion. “But honest, I didn’t say anything.”

Xena offered her a bite of rabbit and she accepted it, nibbling the fingers holding it after she transferred the morsel back to her teeth to be chewed. “I’m glad we had a chance to rest today.”

“Rest?” Xena snickered.

“Well.” Gabrielle swallowed her bit of rabbit. “Lay down, anyway.”

“Me too.” The taller woman licked her fingertips. “So. You ready to go?”

Gabrielle’s expression sobered. “I guess.”

Xena stood up and whistled, glancing behind her as she saw the men start to form up and get ready to move out. “You remember what you’re supposed to do?” She asked Gabrielle. “You’re not going to screw it up, are ya?”

Good question. “I hope not..” Gabrielle busied herself snugging tight the laces on her boots. “But you know, I sure wish Patches were here to go with me.”

Xena glanced at her, then she half turned and let out another whistle, this one lower, and yet more strident. After a moment’s silence, the brush was violently agitated, and as Gabrielle bolted to her feet in surprise, the branches parted to reveal a shaggy head followed by an equally shaggy body.

“Patches!” Gabrielle ran forward to greet her pony, who seemed a bit bemused to see her. “Where have you been? How did you find us?” She turned and looked back at Xena, who had folded her arms over her chest and was smirking. “Wow!”

“Anything else you want?” Xena allowed herself a moment to enjoy the look of delight on her lover’s face. “Golden cup, or a carpet to sit on or something?”

Gabrielle gave the pony a hug around his neck, then she ran back over to where Xena was, and threw her arms around the queen to give her a big hug too. “Thanks. I was really worried about him.”

Xena returned the hug, with a bittersweet feeling. “Yeah, well... they got the rest of them.” She told Gabrielle. “This little punk was the only one that got away.”

Gabrielle went still in her arms, then she slowly looked up at the queen. “They got Tiger?”

Her lover nodded briefly. “This morning. I could see them from up there.” She indicated the wall she’d climbed.

“Wow. I’m sorry.” The blond woman said, softly, her happiness fading.

“Me too.” Xena said. “I’m sure they shot him by now.” She added, with an attempt at offhandedness. “He won’t let anyone handle him.” A pang shot through her chest again, seeing again the picture of men surrounding her beloved stallion and his wild eyes rolling. “Poor bastard.”

“Oh, Xena.. Do you want to..”

“No.” The finality in the queen’s tone was surprising. “It’s just a horse, Gabrielle.”

Just a horse. Gabrielle gave her another hug. “Well” She said, after a pause. “Thanks anyway.. I’m glad to see Patches in any case.”

“I know.” Xena gave her a kiss on the head. “Go play with him so he doesn’t regret following us. Give him a fig or something.”

“Okay.” Her lover released her, and returned to the pony’s side, stroking his neck and scratching his ears. “Hey there, Patches.” She managed a smile. “So you got away, huh? You’re such a smartie.”

Patches shoved her in the chest with his nose, apparently glad to see her in return. He still had his tack on his back, including his saddle and bags, and she rummaged in one to find a somewhat withered apple. “Here you go.” She offered it to him. “It’s not much, but we’ll find you something better once we get going.”

The pony accepted the treat genially, munching on it and bobbing his head a few times while Gabrielle checked his bridle and straightened the straps out. Leaves had gotten trapped in the leather, and she pulled them out, the scent of bruised greenery coming to her nose.

She thought about Tiger, her eyes lifting to watch Xena as she formed up the men to move out. How badly must her friend feel? She never said much about it, but Gabrielle could tell she loved the horses, and the big black one in particular. She knew how she’d have felt if it had been Patches who’d been captured.

Wow. She gave the pony another hug, then she took hold of his reins and waited, as the men gathered around and darkness started to fall around them. Was there anything she could say to Xena about it? Or would the queen just want to pretend it didn’t matter?

“All right, let’s go.” Xena ordered, in a businesslike tone. “Keep alert, keep moving.” She started forward, motioning for Gabrielle to join her. “C’mon, muskrat. Grab the runt and get over here.”

Gabrielle led Patches over to the queen’s side, and they walked together at the head of their little force. She tried to think of something she could say to Xena, to comfort her but in the end, she merely

reached over and took her friend's hand, and clasped it, feeling the powerful fingers tighten around hers in a heartfelt squeeze.

Things felt all upside down again. They were headed towards the city, she was committed to something she wasn't sure she could do, and their future seemed more in doubt now than it had even a day ago. As the path unwound in front of them, a barely seen opening in the brush, she hoped things would work out all right.

She hoped she didn't screw things up too badly.

Xena released her hand, and settled her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders instead, pulling her closer, and shortening her stride so they matched. They walked along in silence as the twilight faded and stars began to show overhead, bathing them in faintest silver.

An owl hooted. Then far off, there was a scream, a hoarse voice raised in agony, but the small band walked on without pause, leaving whatever that trouble was behind them.

**

"Okay." Gabrielle peered through the pre dawn gloom at the walls of the riverside city. She could see guards all around, and there seemed to be soldiers everywhere. "You want me to just walk up there and ask to go in?"

"Yes."

"I thought you liked me."

Xena gave her companion a slap on the butt. "You're not a threat. They won't kill you." She said. "I hope." She added, after a moment. "I need you to get inside, and get us some allies."

Gabrielle mostly felt just scared. "I don't know how to do that."

"Sure you do."

"No, I really don't."

Xena slapped her again. "Listen, muskrat. You charmed me. How hard could it be to charm a bunch of lusty farmboys who were left behind to guard the gates?"

Gabrielle edged to one side to avoid being hit again. "Well.. But I don't know how I charmed you." She answered, unhappily. "I don't know what to do, Xena. I'm going to get up there and just sound crazy."

Xena took her by the shoulders and they faced each other. She studied Gabrielle's face in the dim light, seeing true fear there, and her own expression gentled a little. "Listen. You can handle this." She said. "They don't know who you are, Gabrielle. You're just a kid from the countryside, coming to the big city to tell stories and make a few dinars. No big deal."

Gabrielle felt like crying. "Xena, I can't do this. I'm scared." She whispered, glancing past the queen to where the men were waiting patiently hidden in the brush. "I can't just walk right up there!"

"Shh." The queen cupped her cheek with a surprisingly gentle hand. "You're not going to be walking right up there."

The blond woman's shoulders relaxed. "Oh. Well, I thought you said.."

"You're riding." Xena patted her cheek. "Listen." Her voice dropped to a bare whisper. "I'll be right behind ya. Don't worry about it. Just get in there, get to that back gate, and get it open for us. That's all ya gotta do!"

That's all. Just the thought of leaving Xena, and going alone down that long road was scaring Gabrielle close to speechless, now that they were here, at the edge of the scrub, with nothing but that empty space before them. "You'll be right behind me?" She asked. "I thought you didn't want them to see you."

"They won't."

Gabrielle exhaled.

"Gabrielle, listen to me." Xena said. "Only you can do this. None of us can." She indicated herself, then the other soldiers. "We have to get into the city, we need allies."

"Why do you think we'll find them there?" Gabrielle asked, searching her face intently. "Because Sholeh beat them?"

The queen nodded.

"Xena, you were going to beat them."

Xena grinned briefly, half shrugging her shoulders. "Fortunes of war, my friend. That's just how it goes sometimes. One day you're a bitch, the next, a savior."

Gabrielle exhaled again, then she finally nodded. "Okay. I'll do my best, that's all." She said. "Just please be careful, okay? I don't want anything to happen to you while I'm in there." She put her arms around the queen and gave her a hug.

Xena returned the hug. "You be careful too." She whispered into Gabrielle's ear. "I don't want to lose you." She released Gabrielle and gave her a nudge towards where Patches was calmly standing, chewing a bit of plateau grass. "G'wan."

Feeling a little better, but not much, Gabrielle went over to her pony and turned to face the slope leading down to the road. Squaring her shoulders, she started forward, holding Patches reins as the pony followed her through the thick, high grass.

Almost at once, she felt astonishingly alone. It was hard to leave the others, hard to turn her back on their little cadre of men, and Xena's tall, watching form.

It would have been unbearable, she thought, if she hadn't had Patches with her. Though he couldn't speak, his warm, furry presence gave her a measure of comfort, and she fell back to walk alongside him, her arm laying over his neck as they emerged into the dim light of the setting moon, the sky in the east beginning to pale with the coming dawn.

Ahead of her, she could see the ribbon of the road, and even at this early hour there were dark figures moving on it, horses with men on their backs thick with the distinctive outline of weapons. Soon, she'd intersect the path, and then...

And then.

You're the only one who can do this. Gabrielle let the queen's words echo in her mind, caught between being flattered that there was this something she alone could do and shame at her wanting to run away and not do it.

Scary. She took a deep breath and settled her thoughts, thinking about what she would say to the soldiers when she met up with them. Would they question her? Xena had said for her to say she was just a wandering shepherd, escaping from the strife in the valley, looking to make her fortune.

Would they believe it?

She straightened her sleeve, the thick, now clean linen feeling warm and good against her skin and felt a little light with out the armor she'd come to accept and gotten used to wearing. Now she just had the thick undergarment, and her leggings and boots, with a leather belt tied around her waist holding everything together.

It looked plain enough, but Gabrielle knew no daughter of shepherding family would have dressed the way she was, and no girl would have been traveling along the road towards the port city without an escort.

Would Sholeh's men know that, though? After all, they were lead by a woman, weren't they?

Gabrielle led Patches down a tricky, rock littered slope. "Careful, boy." She murmured, sliding sideways and sending a scattering of rock chips down through the grass.

After a quarter candlemark, she'd reached level ground, and now the road itself was hidden from her, the grass waist high and tickling her arms as they pushed their way through it. She unlooped her waterskin from it's ring on the pony's back and took a drink from it, pausing when she caught Xena's scent on the leather.

That soothed her, strangely. She put the skin back on it's ring and shook her body out, loosening her muscles as she walked, wishing she'd brought her stick along with her. She'd gotten used to using it to feel her way along, and she was a little surprised at how much she missed it already.

Abruptly, they reached the road, one moment walking through the thick grass, the next piercing the wall of foliage and stepping into an open space, with the packed, dirt path down the center of it. Gabrielle paused and turned to look behind her, seeing the patch of scrub she'd left her friends in far up the slope and very remote.

No sign of Xena.

"I thought she said she'd be right behind me, Patches." Gabrielle sighed. "Oh well." She turned and led the pony to the road, then stopped again just before it and scrambled onto his back. Her thighs settled into place, and she felt better for it, as Patches ambled onto the port road and they started towards the city.

It was only a half candlemark before she spotted mounted figures coming towards them, lit by the growing dawn and recognizable by their profile as soldiers. She could see the cone shaped helmets, and as they closed in on her, the curved swords and her throat went a little dry

Closer, and she could see the soldiers were looking at her. She cleared her throat and tried to compose herself to appear as inoffensive and harmless as she could, patting her pony on the neck and talking to him with forced casualness.

"You there." The larger of the two men came right at her, while the second fell back and drew his horse sideways, to block the road. "Stop."

Gabrielle's heart was thumping hard in her chest, but she complied, gently tugging Patches to a halt. "Hello." She greeted the man. "Is there something wrong?"

He was tall, and had a bearded face, reminding her a little of the blacksmith in her former home that now seemed an entire lifetime away. "Where did you come from?"

Stay with the truth, Xena had told her. "Potadeia." Gabrielle answered promptly.

"Where's that?"

Gabrielle looked behind her. "In one of the valleys, back there." She indicated the mountain range behind them.

The man studied her. "Where do you think you're going?"

"The city there." She pointed behind him. "I'm a storyteller. I figure maybe there's some inns there that could use one."

"You think so, huh?"

Gabrielle shrugged, lifting both her hands. "Well, there's not much left where I came from so I figured it was worth a try."

The man circled her, moving his horse around Patches. It made her neck hair prickle, and she was suddenly reminded of that morning in Xena's chambers, when she'd first met the queen and had been judged.

She refused to look behind her, watching the other soldier instead. She kept her hands resting on her saddlehorn and tried to relax, her ears cocked to listen to the pocking of the horses hooves as the man paused.

"Okay. Keep going." The man said. "You're harmless, anyhow." He added. "C'mon, Gerard. S'get to the army.. Messages waiting."

The man in front of her pulled his mount out of the way and clucked at it, moving past her heading in the other direction, without a second glance in her direction.

Gabrielle let out the breath she'd been holding. "Okay. Bye!" She lifted her hand and waved, as she nudged Patches forward, glad enough to leave the grumpy soldiers behind her.

Well. First hurdle down. She was glad and at the same time sorry to see the sun coming up and bathing the road in pink light, as she could now see lines of soldiers heading in her general direction, a stretch of gauntlets she had to pass.

At least, she reasoned, she'd have her story down pat before she reached the city gates.

If she reached them.

**

Xena was pretty well convinced she was going insane. Surely, that had to be the reason she was standing where she was, hugging a tree, locking her arms around it's trunk to prevent the rest of her from running full speed down the road after that slight, disappearing figure.

It was insane. It was totally out of control and it was taking almost all the energy she had just to stay still, much less intelligently plan an invasion.

"Um.. Xena?"

"Yes?" The queen didn't dare turn her head to look at the soldier behind her.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m great.” Xena pressed her cheek against the bark. “I’m just stretching my arms out. Problem with that?”

“Uh. No, ma’am.”

Xena squeezed one eye open and peeked past the tree, relieved to see Gabrielle ambling along on her scruffy runt pony, with no immediately dangerous idiots with weapons near her. “Okay.” She gingerly released the tree and stepped back. “Let’s move out.”

“I thought we were going to wait for dark?” The soldier seemed confused. “Won’t they see us, there’s no cover there.”

“Changed my mind.” Xena fluffed her cloak out, then she started tucking the folds of it around her. “Hope you boys enjoy a good crawl.” She’d really never intended them to stay behind, after all, this was Gabrielle she was sending into the maw of the enemy.

Her brain had told her it was a good idea. It made sense, and she’d always known how to use all her resources effectively.

Pity all that didn’t make it easier for her not to scream out loud. “Let’s go.” She flicked her hair loose from her collar and started along the forest line, staying just inside the trees. Unfortunately they curved away from the road towards the seawall, and as she moved along, she kept one eye on the retreating figure getting further and further from her.

It was making her teeth itch.

Xena sighed, and cursed at herself for the nth time. She swept her gaze over the plateau, and tried to focus on her plan instead.

The high grass at least would give them some cover, and as they reached the end of the forest, she eased out into it, the tops of the stalks just reaching her waist. A quick look to her right showed no travelers on the road, and she took the chance of remaining upright for the moment.

Their small force started out across the long, sloping plain that bordered the road on both sides, ending at the sturdy walls of the port city. As she settled into a quiet, rhythmic stride, trying not to crane her neck to watch Gabrielle, she was glad at least that they were doing something, going on the offensive rather than just running.

Running bothered her. It wasn’t that she was embarrassed by it, or thought it was cowardly but..

Oh, who was she kidding? Xena had to chuckle wryly. Her ego was freaking out at all this hiding and skulking. “I wanna go kill something.”

“Majesty?”

“Nothing.” Xena judged her bedmate was getting a little too far away for her comfort, and decided to fix that. “Everyone get ready to hump.”

“Majesty??!!?”

The queen shook her head and broke into a lope, hearing only her own footsteps for a long moment, then slowly the herd rumbled into motion behind her in a jangle of clinking armor and squeaking leather. With the vague though of knowing now what it was like to be chased by an ox drawn wagon, she powered on, staying as close to the clustered trees as she could.

It took a little while, but since no other soldiers had approached her, Gabrielle found herself relaxing a little bit, enough for her to stretch out her legs in her stirrups and look around at the lands she was riding through.

It was pretty, really. The long stretch of river grass was ruffling in the breeze, and it brought a smell of rich green to her nose. It was quiet, though the same breeze brought the sound of gulls to her ears, and she remembered again how close to the ocean they were though it was totally hidden behind the low cliffs.

Her fear was easing, though the city walls were still far away and there was plenty of time for her to panic again before she reached them. Until she did, though, she figured she might as well enjoy the quiet ride as much as she could and not wonder too much about where Xena was.

Or what she was up to. With a sigh, she wriggled a little in her saddle and reached for her saddlebag, fishing a bit of hastily cooked root from it and nibbling on the edge. A sound made her look up, to find a single cart moving slowly towards her, drawn by a tired looking donkey with wide, wiggling ears.

It didn't seem very threatening, so she relaxed her hold on the reins that she'd instinctively taken, and allowed Patches to continue his ambling way down the road towards the cart. As they came closer, she could see a figure sitting on the front of the cart, hunched over, resting their elbows on their knees as they loosely held on to a set of slack guides laying along the donkey's back.

The figure casually looked her way, and Gabrielle was mildly surprised to see it was another woman. She promptly smiled at her. "Good morning."

With a surprised start, the woman straightened up, as they drew even with each other. "Morning." She replied. "Headed the wrong way, aintcha?"

Gabrielle pulled Patches to a halt. She turned and looked behind her, then back at the woman. "No, I don't think so." She politely disagreed. "I've been there, it's not much fun. Where are you going?"

The woman seemed a little amused. "I'm following the army, of course." She sat up a little straighter, and pushed her hood back, exposing blond hair a bit more yellow and a bit longer than Gabrielle's. "You won't find much action back there." She indicated the port city. "Stodgy lot."

Action? It took Gabrielle a second, but she bravely surmounted her parochial beginnings and realized the woman was talking about something other than a dice game. "Ah." She summoned up another, brief smile. "Well, I'm not really looking for action. I'm a storyteller."

"A storyteller??" The other woman laughed out loud. "Good line." She clucked to her donkey. "I'll have to remember that one. Yah!"

The donkey shook his head and started forward, his worn, ill cared for harness squeaking sadly

"No, really. I am." Gabrielle found herself speaking to a small cloud of dust raised by the wagons passing, its lengthened bed and empty interior making clear its purpose. "Good luck." She added, shaking her head as she guided Patches past.

There hadn't been women like that in her hometown, at least... Gabrielle nibbled on her root again. At least not those who advertised the fact. But on market days, when they'd gone to the larger villages down the valley road she'd seen women in the crowd, who wore their clothes a little too open, and rubbed up against the men a little too much.

Harlots, her mother had called them. Gabrielle gazed through Patches ears at the road, her face thoughtful. Was she so different from that now? She wasn't for hire, of course, and it wasn't like she was looking for 'action' with anyone but Xena but still..

It was an unsettling thought. She knew Xena seemed to be working hard to try and make her a place at her side, but she'd always been told that lovemaking was for those who married, and formed a family and she wasn't at all sure what she had with Xena really was anything like that.

Of course, now with the war, and all, it was sort of pointless for her to worry about it, yet.. Gabrielle looked down at the one piece of livery she'd kept on, the belt with it's hawk's head buckle that held her shirt around her.

Yet. Her brow creased, then she half shook her head, and looked around her again, pushing the thoughts off. What they were didn't matter as much as how they felt, and she had really no doubt how Xena felt about her.

Did she? Certainly, she had no doubt about how she felt about Xena. But now Xena had sent her away, into this great unknown task and a little part of her was wondering just a bit if the queen was just getting tired of her and wanted a break.

It hurt to wonder about that. Gabrielle sighed. She didn't want to, and there was nothing in Xena's recent words or actions that made her think so, except for her sudden decision to throw Gabrielle at the port city.

Or, was that just a good plan? It certainly made a little more sense than them running through the forest trying to keep from being shot by Sholeh's creepy assassins or stumbling over more former farmboys wanting to go back home.

Patches snorted. Gabrielle reached up and scratched her ear. "Am I being silly, Patches?" She asked the pony. "Xena loves me, doesn't she?"

The pony snorted and waggled his head, extending his nose over to the side of the road where the grass grew temptingly close.

"I think she does." Gabrielle decided. "I know she loved Tiger. Do you think he's really gone?"

Patches snagged a mouthful of tall grass and kept walking, chewing the grass.

Hoofbeats other than his made Gabrielle look up again, this time to see a squadron of soldiers trotting towards her in a businesslike way, taking up all the road from one side to the other. "Uh oh." She looked to either side of the road, and saw only thick grass. "Guess we better get in there, Patches."

She urged the pony off the road and felt the rasp of the grass against her as the soldiers closed in, their helmets turning to study her as they got closer. The two nearer to her drew their weapons and swerved towards where she and Patches were standing, brandishing their swords and letting out lusty yells.

This was not looking good. Gabrielle's eyes widened, and as the horses thundered down on top of her, she did the only thing she could think of. "Yah!" She kicked Patches in the side with her heels and clamped her knees down tight as the pony bolted, the grass lashing them both painfully as he picked up speed.

She could smell the horses, and the leather, and the steel and her shoulder slammed hard into something before she ducked her head and they squirted through the charge as the men rushed past with yells and laughter.

But there was no time to listen, as she concentrated on staying aboard her racing pony, the wind blowing her hair straight back as she squinted into it, hoping the soldiers would just ride on past and not chase her.

She really really hoped they wouldn't.

**

"Ah bu..bu.. Bu.." Xena clamped her jaw down hard on a yell of outrage, one hand clenched around a hapless stalk of river grass, the other holding her chakram all ready to decapitate. She was alone, having outdistanced her men in a mad speed crawl through the grass that had left her skin half cut to ribbons by the sharp edges and her heart pretty much flopping around in her throat. "Stupid son of a..."

The soldiers kept laughing and rode on, hardly looking back at the bolting pony putting distance between them, and unaware of the fuming woman a bodylength off the road almost close enough to grab their horses tails.

Xena half wanted to kill them anyway. Only the fact that it would blow her plan kept her from losing her weapon as she felt her heartbeat start to slow and the tension of near battle ease from her body.

Stupid jerks. She realized the men were just playing with Gabrielle, acting out to scare the lone peasant, and they'd been young themselves to boot. Sholeh's regulars though, now that she knew what the rank markings meant she could tell at a glance.

That's what had made her run. The conscripts she figured Gabrielle would have no problem with, after all, they all probably knew someone just like her back home.

Xena pondered that. Well, maybe not JUST like her. She put her weapon away and started back towards where she'd left her ragtag little force, crouching low and moving along in a crablike fashion that was actually far more uncomfortable than it looked.

Good for the thighs, but lousy for the back. Xena could feel the strain already, and by the time she met up with her rapidly crawling companions she felt like laying down and taking a nap. Unfortunately, it wasn't one of her options so she merely changed her direction and started towards the port city again. "C'mon."

"M.. M.. Xena." One of the men panted. "Is the little one all right?"

"Yeah, she's fine." The queen replied shortly, motioning Jens forward. "Speed that runt was going, she's gonna be at the gates in a candlemark."

"Aye." Her captain agreed. "Won't be able to catch her. Not now." He said. "Specially not like we're moving."

"Right." Xena stopped and turned, and the men hastily hauled up not to crash into her. "Let's make for the forest. We'll take the edge there, and run for it." She decided, getting up and cautiously lifting her head over the edge of the grass.

There were a few lone figures on the road, but they were moving steadily, and her sharp eyes detected no motion towards her as she stood to her full height. "Move it." She turned and led the way back towards the tree line, it's far off darkness offering safety, but no view of the road.

Well, not like she could see anything anyway. The queen glumly admitted, glad at least to be upright. She forged ahead, impatiently shoving the grass aside, daring anything to pop up in her way.

“Wh.. Wh..whoa!” Gabrielle finally got herself upright in the saddle, and pulled back on the reins, feeling Patches buck a little under her as the pony slowed down. “Easy! Easy Patches!”

Her throat hurt, and she had dust in her eyes, making her blink furiously as she finally got her mount to stop. She turned and looked behind her, but the road was empty as far as she could see, and she stuck her tongue out and panted as she waited for her heart to stop racing.

Patches pulled at his reins and walked over to the side of the road, nibbling on the river grass, oblivious to his rider’s distress.

“Boy.” Gabrielle wiped her brow with a shaking hand. “That was sure scary.” She looked around, feeling very much alone there on the road. ‘I guess Xena’s really gone, huh?’ She said. “For sure she’d have gone after those guys, wouldn’t she?”

Of course, Patches didn’t answer. With a heavy heart, Gabrielle gathered herself up and nudged the pony to keep going down the road. They moved at a slow walk for a few minutes, then she decided she was over being out in the open waiting for things to happen to her, and wondering what the city was going to bring. “Heck with it, let’s go.”

She pressed her knees against the shaggy sides and held on as Patches pace increased, until they were at a rolling canter, the breeze fresh against them. Gabrielle fixed her eyes on the walls now looming on the horizon, getting over her fear, and starting to view the closed gates with something of a sense of adventure.

Why not? It wasn’t like she could do anything else anyway. If she went the other way, for sure Sholeh would catch her, and she had a feeling the Persian didn’t much care for the likes of a smart mouthed peasant.

So if Xena wanted to send her on an adventure alone, well, then she’d make the most of it. She straightened her back, and tried to imagine herself the wandering storyteller Xena had made her out to be, out to make her fortune in the wild unknown ahead of her.

As the road began to slant down towards the city, she spotted a wagon train moving towards her. It looked like supplies, and she wondered if it was for Sholeh’s army. There were mounted guards with it, and the wagons were being pulled by big draft horses.

They didn’t take up the whole road, she noticed, keeping to one side, and their progress looked orderly and reasonably sedate. The lead guard, though, lifted his hand as she approached and rode a little in the center, not quite blocking her way.

But not quite not. Gabrielle again slowed her mount down, but this time, she felt more sure in her story. “Hello.” She greeted the man, managing a friendly smile to go with it.

The man lowered his hand. “Greetings.” He responded courteously. “Have you come from the pass?”

Dicey question. “From around there, yes.” Gabrielle temporized. “It’s kind of a scramble right now.” She explained, giving a little shrug of her shoulders as she watched the man’s face closely.

“The fight’s still on then?” The man seemed surprised. “The army hasn’t moved through? We had orders to start after them this morning.”

Gabrielle thought fast. “Well, I don’t know much about that.” She admitted. “But I passed a lot of soldiers on this side of the mountain, if that’s any help to you.”

The guard turned to his companion, who had ridden up. "Strange, Ellis. We thought they'd be through and rolling through t'old bitches front door b'now.

"Aye." The man agreed. "Better get moving if they're to make the schedule. Maybe that' rag tag lot gave em a heartburn after all."

"Doubt that, from all I hear." The first guard said. "Well, any way, a good day to you, girl. Headed for the city? Can't blame you. Nothing going to be left the way you came from."

Gabrielle felt a chill go down her back. "What do you mean?" She paused, when the man cocked his head at her, in some suspicion. "I mean.. My family's back there." She added. "Back in the valley."

The man relaxed. "Well, lass, hope you weren't too fond of em." He said. "Army's gonna sweep through, take everything, and everyone they can. Men for the troops, women.. " He chuckled. "Hope you hadn't a sister, eh?"

"Um.."

"Stocks for food. This army's on the move, will be, up the river and taking no prisoners." The man said, briskly. "So were I you, young lass, I'd get me back behind them walls, and get yourself a place, eh? Find some old woman needs a pair of hands, fore you end up in the service of the service, if you catch me."

Gabrielle suddenly remembered the rape in the barracks, the fellow slave she'd seen misused so cruelly she'd never truly recovered from it. "I catch you." SHE answered, faintly. "Yeah, that's a really good idea."

She thought of all the men in the army, dispersed at Xena's orders, who she knew in her heart were probably still on the other side of that pass waiting for their queen.

She thought of all those poor villagers, already in a sense raped by Bregos and his men, sitting targets for Sholeh to use.

She understood, finally, the look in Xena's eyes when she'd come back from Sholeh's tent.

"Go on with you then." The man said, in a surprisingly kind voice. "Got a little one looks like you back home myself." He pulled his horses head around, and motioned with his fist for the wagons to roll forward. "No one said stop, so on we go. Maybe we can chivvy em."

Gabrielle waited for them to pass, then she started on again, her guts churning with a myriad of emotions and just as many doubts as the big gates started stretching up over her head, and the sound of the city came to her.

Bustling and busy, and utterly alien.

"Boy." SHE finally muttered, as Patches cocked an ear back towards her. "I sure hope Xena knows what she's doing."

The pony snorted.

"Yeah, thanks. Glad you're so confident."

**

The ground dipped significantly before the gates of the port city, and Gabrielle found herself leaning back a little in Patches saddle as they made their way down the last bit of the road towards the half open gates.

One side of the portal was barred tight. The other side was propped open, giving just enough space for a wagon to pass yet not enough room for people to make too much trouble.

That seemed smart to Gabrielle. She recognized the idea, because in Xena's stronghold, the big gates were never wide open. There was a smaller door to one side, but you had to approach it single file, and there were soldiers inside watching you the whole time.

Xena had told her it was the easiest way to make sure no one got any cute ideas about launching an attack disguised as a party of merchants, and besides, it kept the cold winds from blowing across the inner courtyard most of the time.

So Gabrielle obligingly slowed down as she reached the entrance finally, getting in line behind a few men riding on horses, and a covered wagon being drawn by two cows. She licked her lips, finding her mouth a little dry and took the opportunity to get a sip of water from her waterskin while she waited.

Sholeh's soldiers were everywhere. They were perched on the walls, and visible through the open gate, and she wondered just before she got to the front of the line if Sholeh had maybe sent word here to the city to be on the lookout for them.

"What d'you want, girl." The guard asked her, making the point moot. "Hurry up, got people behind you."

Gabrielle found she had no time even really to be nervous. She guided Patches up to the guard, and gave him her best attempt at an innocent grin. "Hello."

The man merely raised his eyebrow, and she figured maybe the innocent wasn't as good as it used to be. "I'm uh..." She was aware suddenly of all the eyes on her and it almost made her stutter. "I was just..um.. Looking for a place to tell some stories."

The guard studied her, and she thought maybe her many times rehearsed explanation wasn't nearly as good as Xena seemed to think it would be. After all, did people really just walk up to city gates and say they were going inside to tell people stories?

What if he thought she was lying?

"Stories?" The man sounded doubtful. "What kind of stories? You ain't old enough to have no good stories, girl."

"Oh, well, you'd be surprised." Gabrielle assured him. "I've traveled a little. I'm not as young as I look." She added. "And.. And... I've been collecting stories, you know? From people I meet."

A hoarse yell made the guard turn to look inside the gates and Gabrielle craned her neck to see what was going on. Inside there was a press of people, and a little above them a platform with a man atop it, lashed to an upright and in the middle of a beating.

As she watched, he was struck, and fine spray of blood caught the sunlight, sparkling in vivid brilliance before the man slumped forward, and let out a guttural groan.

The soldiers around her laughed, and the guard turned back around to face her. "Idjuts. Too long living soft out here, tell you that." He walked to the edge of his guard platform and leaned on it, studying Gabrielle closely. "Storyteller. Eh?"

Gabrielle slowly turned her head from the scene and tipped it up to look at him.

“Got stories like that, girl?”

Recent memories flashed before her eyes. “Well.” She managed a wry half smile. “Mine are more about pigs that get loose and dump the milkmaid in the mud.. You know?”

“G’wan.” The guard said, with a shrug, waving her past with the flat of his sword. “G’luck to ya. Remember the gate closes at dark, if you’re wanting out.”

Now what did he mean by that? “Thank you.” Gabrielle responded meekly, urging Patches past the threatening figure. “Have a great day.” She eased past the open gate, past the soldiers standing idly by, who looked her up and down as she passed. “Hello.”

One of them smirked. “WHere ya goin, sweet thing?”

Far away from you. Gabrielle steered Patches down a side walkway, clearing out of the way of the line of people coming in behind her and then she turned around and surveyed the open space inside the gates, where the platform was.

They had untied the man being beaten and tossed him to one side, and another man was being led in to take his place. He was wearing clothing like most of the merchants did in Xena’s realm, and he glared at the soldiers holding him with visible defiance.

The man seemed vaguely familiar, and Gabrielle wondered if she hadn’t seen him in the stronghold, maybe over the winter.

Two men, in the garb of craftsmen, eased out of the side alley and stood near the wall not far from her, watching the scene unfold on the platform, their faces carefully expressionless. Gabrielle watched them from the corner of her eye for a moment, then she casually backed Patches up until she was more or less even with the men. “Excuse me.” She lowered her voice, but it got their attention.

The older of the two, a man in a leather apron with thick, calloused hands and watchful eyes studied her a moment, then he eased upright and sauntered over to her, letting his hand rest on Patches shoulder. “Just come, did you?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle murmured. “I don’t understand, what’s that man done?” She asked, as the merchant on the platform was fastened to the pole. “He doesn’t look like a soldier.”

The man stroked Patches shoulder. “What’s it to you, girl?” He asked. “Don’t mix in this business if you know what’s good for ya.”

Gabrielle hesitated, then she glanced quickly at the man, before she looked back at the platform. “I don’t want to mix in it.” She said. “I was just wondering what he did.” She went on. “So I don’t do it and get into the same mess.”

“Don’t be such a bastard, Balos.” The aproned man’s companion came up on the other side of Patches, as a small crowd gathered in front of them, to watch the beating. “He wanted payment, is all. For his goods.’

“He’s being beaten for that?”

Balos turned his head and carefully spat on the ground. “Why pay for what them can take?” He asked, with a faint snort.

‘Because if all you do is take, there’s nothing left the second time.’ Gabrielle said, echoing Xena’s teaching automatically. “It’s stupid.”

A small silence lengthened, and Gabrielle turned to look at the older man, finding him looking back at her with a watchful expression. "But then again.. I'm just a kid from the sticks. What do I know?" Her lips quirked a little bit. "Anyway, could you tell me where the inn is? "

"Which one?" The younger man half turned his body, so he was facing Gabrielle. "There's more than a handful, girl, but most are filled to the brim with the likes of them. You want their company?"

A loud cracking sound made them all turn and look. The merchant's arm was hanging at an odd, awkward angle, horribly mishaped, and his body was rigid with agony, but his jaw was clamped so tightly the muscles nearly deformed his face and a thin thread of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth in his efforts not to cry out.

Stupidly courageous, Xena would have called it. "No." Gabrielle said, softly. "I don't want to mix with them, that's for sure. I'm just looking for a place to stay, tell a few stories, maybe make a dinar. That's it."

"You're in the wrong place then." Balos pushed away from the pony and strode off, shaking his head in disgust.

Gabrielle watched him go, then she turned to look at his younger companion. "Am I?"

"Maybe." The man said. "What's your name, storyteller?"

Could she trust this man? Gabrielle studied him. He wasn't old, but he wasn't really that young either, maybe the same as Xena was. He had shrewd eyes, and suddenly, he reminded her of Jellaus, Xena's minstrel. "Gabrielle." She told him. "What's yours?"

"Lennat." He answered, after a long pause. "I know where there's an inn. Not the best, but you'll get a decent bowl of soup of it."

Trust him? "Lead on." She turned Patches and followed the man as he casually walked away from the square, down the narrow street bordered on either side by two story buildings. She couldn't really not trust him, because truthfully, she was lost here.

She'd made it inside. She'd found a contact from the city. Hopefully he would take her to someplace safe, and if so, then Xena's plan was working out pretty good after all.

If not, well...

The city's walls loomed up over them and she tipped her head back, seeing the guards on the top of it as they wound their way through the streets, moving away from the loudness of the square and the crowds, and away from the tall, rich buildings.

Further down, where the dwellings were single story, and made of rough construct, and the wind carried a hint of salt on it, until finally Lennat led the way through a rough stone archway covered in vines.

So low, Gabrielle had to duck her head to enter, even with Patches small stature. As she straightened up, she looked around to find a small, overgrown stone courtyard with a few, sad, wooden tables scattered around, and a single story thatched roof building ahead of her.

It looked very unkempt, and dilapidated. Gabrielle pondered if she should dismount, or turn and let Patches amble right on back out of there.

"Don't look much." Lennat said. "But the ale's good." He indicated ramshackle wooden construct just to the left. "You can leave your friend in there. Got some straw, not much. They took the goats." He left

her in the courtyard, walking up the creaking wooden steps and pushing the door open, letting it fall closed behind him.

“Well.” Gabrielle dismounted, glad enough to stretch her legs after the long day’s ride. She took hold of Patches bridle and walked him over to the shack, putting her hand out to touch a wooden spot so worn from years of pushing layers had been peeled off it’s surface.

It opened at her shove though, and she paused to look around, before she entered with Patches following her. Inside there were two wider areas, divided by a roughly nailed together pair of tree limbs, and a very worn wooden trough against the back wall.

As her new friend had said, there was some straw hanging in a net, but the building was empty otherwise though her nose told her it hadn’t been so for very long. “Well, it’s not great, but it’s not a rainy forest, either, huh Patches?”

Patches made for the hanging straw and started pulling at it, chewing as she removed his tack and put it tidily in a corner. Then she took a handful of the straw and started rubbing his coat with it, removing the mud from their day’s travel.

When she finished, she picked up her saddlebags and put them over her shoulder, checking inside her pouch to make sure she had the couple of coins Xena had given her there safe before she walked out the door, and started towards the front of the inn.

I know you can do this. She could hear Xena’s voice, calm and certain. *Muskrat, I’m counting on you.*

Her back straightened as she walked up the steps, and she took a breath before she gently pushed the door open, allowing her eyes to adjust as she walked inside.

The door closed behind her.

**

Xena was really hating open space. She found that a little unusual, because in general she loved open space, and one of the things she secretly been delighted about her new rooms in the castle was the huge expanse of window that allowed her to see right down across the gardens and past the wall to the mountains beyond.

But right now, she was hating open space. It was all that was between her and the walls of the damn city, and there was absolutely no way for her to get any closer without exposing herself to the lines of patrolling guards.

No way. The grasses had been burned back, which as a tyrant she fully appreciated, and Sholeh had left a healthy size contingent to guard her new acquisition who were perched on the wall’s apex and riding in groups between the city entrance and the small creek that wound down through the field and continued on towards the sea.

That meant Xena was stuck where she was, until nightfall and she hated being stuck anywhere for any reason whatsoever.

Jens came up next to her and leaned against the rock, studying the walls pensively. “Think the little one made it inside all right?”

Like she needed to be reminded of *that*. “Hope so.” Xena leaned on her elbows. “It’s going to be a very exciting night otherwise.”

Her captain settled down in a crouch nearby, picking up a branch and stripping off a few pieces of bark. He set the branch down and started to weave the bark together, keeping the tall figure in his peripheral vision as he worked. "She's brave."

"She is." Xena didn't look around at him. "She just has no clue how brave she is yet."

He spent a moment weaving. "Got a good heart." He commented. "Speaking of, some of the men were talking before, as to why we saw no sign of Brendan and his lot."

Ah. "Good question."

"Men with us, didn't see no sign of them, and we didn't hear nothing in the camp." Jens went on. "Seems strange, is all."

Xena turned and slid down the back side of the rock she'd been leaning against, taking a seat on the ground. She extended her legs and crossed them, feeling the cool surface of the boulder against her shoulderblades. "If they weren't talking about them." She said, after a long pause. "They probably never made it out of the valley."

Jens was quiet for a while. Then he sighed. "That'd be a damn shame."

"Yeah." The queen agreed quietly. "He had a lot of good men with him." She looked down at her hands, feeling more than a little sad. "We lost a few good horses, too."

"Aye." Jen's voice had a distinct sympathetic tone. "I know you liked the big boy."

Xena let her head rest against the rock, the stillness around her allowing the realities of her recent past to hit home. The losses were painful, and she propped her elbows up on her knees and folded her hands in front of her face as she reviewed them.

Her realm was likely lost. Even if by some miracle she managed to turn Sholeh, she'd have to lead her off for so long, would there be anything left for her to go back to?

Would she even want to?

Her army was likely lost as well. If they'd dispersed as she'd told them, they were long gone, and scattered, living off the land or, perhaps a few, gone back to the stronghold alone. Without the army, despite her own personal martial expertise, she hadn't a chance in hell of holding the throne.

Xena studied the scuffed and calloused skin on the edges of her thumbs, pressed together before her eyes. Neither of those two things bothered her nearly as much as the memory of Tiger's desperate rearing, though. The poor bastard had depended on her to keep him safe, and like everything else, she'd failed at it.

Damn it she hated personal failure. She hated being wrong, and having to take it on the chin when her choices went bad on her.

Which led her to her latest choice, to send Gabrielle into the city, alone. "You're not winning too many rolls of the dice this time, Xena." She muttered under her breath. "Hope you didn't screw that one up."

Gabrielle. The queen felt a constriction in her chest. What if she had done the wrong thing? What if something happened to her? What if that kid she'd gone and fell in love with ended up gutted and tossed off the wall, all because she screwed up again?

Xena swallowed slowly, and closed her eyes.

Gabrielle looked around the inn with a look of mild surprise. Though the outside had been unkempt and deserted, the inside was clean, if roughly made, and orderly. There were tables with unhandsome benches along the walls, and in the back was a cookpit, that was well used but tidy.

It smelled of old wood and old ale, but not unpleasantly, and it reminded her suddenly of the inn back home in Potadeia, before the raiders burned it to the ground. Just a place to come, and get a bit of bread and a cup, in the winter to sit near the fireplace, and listen to the small world of the village ramble by.

In the cookpit, she spotted a big pot, with steam lifting lazily over it, and her nose caught the scent of barley and sage, and fresh baked bread; a mixture of homey familiarity that made her heart briefly ache.

Lennat entered from a door in the back, and spotted her. "Ah, there you are."

"Here I am." Gabrielle glanced at the two or three people inside the inn, men sitting hunched over bowls with their backs to her. She walked over to the last table near the cookpit and set her bags down, as Lennat joined her. "Is this your inn?"

"My mothers." He perched on a corner of the table. "Hope you don't think I tricked you into coming here just to get her a few coins."

Gabrielle smiled, as she looked briefly around. "Well, I've got to give the dinars to someone. Might as well be your mother." She said. "Besides, it's nice."

Lennat gave her a wry grin. "No it's not." He disagreed. "But it's seedy enough to keep the Persians away, so I'll not scoff it too much." He looked up as an older woman in a thick leather apron entered. "Ah, mother."

The woman paused on her way to the cookpit, regarding Lennat, then switching her attention to Gabrielle. "That your new friend?" She asked, in a skeptical tone. "Lovely."

Gabrielle saw the look of half embarrassed chagrin cross Lennat's face. She circled the table and approached the cooking area, studying the woman as she approached. She had iron gray hair that might have once been black, and pale, piercing eyes. "Hello." She greeted her politely. "It smells great in here."

The woman looked her up and down. "Where you from?"

"Potadeia." Gabrielle answered. "It's.."

"I know where it is." The woman interrupted her rudely. "Or where it was, more like." She leaned forward and glared at Gabrielle. "Who were your family?"

"Mother." Lennat broke in, coming over to them. "Leave it!"

"Hush, you useless nitterling." The woman brushed him off. "Let her answer, or take herself out of here. I'll not have any Persian scats under my roof." She turned back to Gabrielle and gave her a little push. "Well? Talk fast, girl."

Gabrielle's heartbeat picked up, as her body reacted to the unspoken threat. "My parents were Herotydu and Hecuba." She replied quietly. "We were sheep farmers."

"Were?"

It was strange, in a way, how far off the reality of her loss seemed. "Raiders came, and burned us out."

The woman studied her for a long moment, then she grunted and jerked her head to one side. "Had two folk from here end up begging like scum in the streets here." She allowed. "I don't take to beggars."

People from her hometown. She'd never even considered that some of them might have escaped. If she was honest with herself, she hadn't even thought about any of them for a long time. Not her parents, not even Lila, save on what would have been her birthday.

It was cold, and dark, midmorning even before the sun crept unwillingly over the walls edge and let some bit of light through the clouds.

Gabrielle put her hands on the wall and looked outward, bundled in a thick coat against the chill. It was a special morning, for her at least, and she wanted to take this time out to just stand and look out over the training yard and remember.

Below her, the training pell, as she knew it was now, stood mutely in the shadows, but in her mind's eye she could still see Lila's body tied to it, and hear her screams, and feel the terror in her own heart as a soldier raised a crossbow casually and aimed it.

She remembered the grief, and the loss. She remembered the helpless anger, and the pain as she struggled against the men holding her to get free, and some how, some how..

But it was too late, and the man shot, and the arrow sped, and with only a shocked gasp Lila was gone.

Gabrielle bowed her head and rested it against her folded hands, as tears rolled down her face. It wasn't often she let herself feel that emptiness, to know that certainty that she, alone, survived.

No matter her relationship with Xena, no matter her friendships in the stronghold, there was a sorrow none of that touched, not in this way.

To be alone in the world, was a hard thing.

The silence of the morning lengthened around her, as she stood lost in dark memory. Then the sun poked wanly through the clouds, and warmed her, and she let the moment pass back into the corners of the life she had now, to settle in dimness until it was time to remember again.

Gabrielle sniffled, and straightened up, wiping her eyes as she caught the sound of horses moving, and saw the grooms taking four or five young ones across to the yard. Their beauty struck her, and she smiled a little, blinking her eyes to rid her lashes of the last of her tears.

As they moved past her view, she gave the wall a pat, before she turned and went back inside the tower, entering the space she'd once known as a slave, and where she'd met Xena.

It was no longer the queen's tower, of course. Not where she lived anyway, though her solitary, spare fighting chamber was still in regular use. On a whim, Gabrielle detoured past the stairs down to the main part of the stronghold and ducked inside the tiny, irregular chamber that had been her first home here.

Inside, just some folded clothes, and a pallet, but her eyes fastened on the surface of the latter and she walked forward, kneeling beside the bed and putting her hands on it.

Squarely in the center, neatly placed, was a single rose, creamy white petals tinged with crimson giving off a gentle, delicately spicy smell.

She reached out and touched it, lifting it and gazing at it in amazement, to find something so brilliantly alive here in this place, with winter raging in full outside. Where had it come from?

Gabrielle turned her head, and went still, as she found Xena standing in the doorway, just watching her. She looked at the flower, then at her lover, and watched as those beautiful lips smiled, one eye brow lifting in acknowledgement. "I.. Um.."

"Were thinking about your sister." Xena said.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"It's her birthday." Xena held her hand out. "Don't ask me how I know that. I know everything. I'm the queen."

Gabrielle got up and went right past Xena's outstretched hand, wrapping her arms around the taller woman instead, understanding that in the loneliness of the world, she had this touchstone to anchor her no matter the paradox that the hands now holding her were the ones that had taken Lila's life.

Life was just like that sometimes.

"Here, girl!"

Gabrielle started, and smiled apologetically. "Sorry." She said. "I was just thinking of my family."

The old woman's expression softened. "Shame what happened." She said, gruffly. "So, now what is it you're wanting? A bed, was it?"

"She tells stories, mother." Lennat broke in. "Sure that's worth something, yeah?"

Gabrielle forestalled the old woman's indignant response by holding up a coin. "No no.. I can pay. " She said. "I'd just like some dinner, and a place to lay down." She offered the woman the coin. "And.. I'll tell stories for free. How's that?"

The woman took the coin, muffling a smirk. "Well then I.." Her eyes fell on the coin and she stopped speaking, her attention slowly going from the round object to Gabrielle. Then she closed her fingers around the coin and tucked it away. "You'll get a place, girl. Tell what tales you like, if you get coin from it, it's yours."

Gabrielle shifted her gaze from the woman to Lennat, who was watching her sharply, catching so much unsaid going on between them. "Great." She answered, wondering if she'd just made a big mistake, or done something right. It was hard to tell from the reaction. "Can I put my stuff up?"

"Lennat'll show ye." The woman turned and went to the big pot, giving it a stir and turning her back on Gabrielle as though she didn't exist. Lennat motioned her to follow him, and with a moment of uneasy doubt, she did, aware now that the three men in the room had turned and were watching her with a great deal of interest.

"I can't wait to hear what stories you have to tell." Lennat said. "I bet they're interesting. I love a good story."

Gabrielle followed him down a side passage, glad to be away from all the curious eyes. "Well, I haven't been doing this very long." She demurred. "But I'll do my best."

Whatever that ended up being.

**

The room she'd been given was very small. Gabrielle set her saddlebag down and edged around the narrow bed, finding barely enough room for even her relatively slight stature to move around in. There

was a small window in the back, and she went over and opened it, relieved at the light spilling in and the fresh breeze that followed it.

The back of the inn faced a long, crooked path, and at the end of the path she could see the waterfront. That explained the salt on the air, and she was glad to simply stand there for a moment and let events catch up with her.

Just to the left, she could see the curving wall of the city and thanked the gods that somehow, she'd ended up pretty much where she needed to be in order to try and let Xena and the rest of the men in. Seeing how many people were in the streets, though, made her wonder if that was going to be as easy as the queen had made it out to be.

After a moment more of quiet, she turned and leaned against the window, surveying the inside of her little palace. The bed was a simple stuffed bit of sacking, and the only other furniture in the room was a crooked table with a basin on it. Next to the basin was a cracked edged jug, and she walked over to it and peered inside.

To her surprise, there was water already in there. She tipped the jug into the basin and filled it, then she gratefully dipped her hands into the cool liquid and splashed a good amount of it onto her face. She scrubbed her skin, then she reached over and tugged a bit of cloth from her bag and dried herself off.

Then she sat down on the bed, and tried to figure out what to do next. She had time to wait for dinner, so she figured she could rest a while if she wanted to.

But though she was tired, she didn't feel like sitting still, there in the tiny space, so she decided to relax for a half candlemark or so, and then go explore the city. With a grunt of satisfaction, she pulled her saddlebag over and opened it, hitching her legs up to sit with them crossed under her as she sorted through her supplies.

It had been hard to know what to bring, though the gods knew they didn't have much with them. Gabrielle pulled out a spare shirt and let her hand rest on it, unable to repress a tiny grin knowing it was Xena's. It was a rich blue color, and she thought maybe she'd wear it to tell her stories tonight, as sort of a good luck charm.

Setting that aside, she pulled out what little she had in the way of provisions, two somewhat crinkly apples, a pear, and a handful of nuts. Since she had dinner coming to her, she put those away for later, and took out the small sack that had her dinars in it.

Tipping it out, she spilled the coins on the bed, starting in surprise as a small bit of parchment fell out with them. "What's that?" She picked up the parchment and unfolded it, turning it right way up as she spotted writing inside.

The letters were an odd, dark color but the strokes were firm and decisive and familiar to her eyes. She bit her lip and ducked her head a little to see better, half turning her body to the window to catch the light.

Muskrat - don't screw this up. You're all I have left.

Gabrielle stared at the paper, reading the words over and over and over again as a little chill ran down her back and raised goosebumps along her arms. It made her want to cry, but the relief the words brought her was a perfect counterpoint, so all she ended up doing in the end was closing her eyes with a sigh.

It was such a strange journey they were on, wasn't it? Gabrielle folded the parchment and tucked it into her underwraps, near her heart. It prickled a little, but that was a good thing since she knew it was there, and she leaned her elbows on her knees and rested her chin in her hand as she simply sat, and thought about Xena.

Then she gathered up her coins and put them back in her pouch, before she got up off the bed and started for the door. "I won't screw it up, Xena." She paused, before she opened the latch. "I'll do good. I'll make you proud of me. I promise."

She slipped through the door, and hesitated, then she turned to the left instead of towards the right, where the main inn was. She spotted a door leading out and went to it, opening it and finding as she'd hoped a back way out towards that river path.

Xena was depending on her. She was darn well going to do this right.

**

For once, Xena was glad of the clouds that had come up and covered the sky near dusk. It made the land pitch dark and she led her troops across the empty grasslands unseen. "Keep your boots quiet." She uttered back to the men. "Don't walk together."

"Aye." Jens whispered. "Don't make the ground shake, boys."

"Yeah, you never know how hungry those Persians are. If they hear a herd of beef coming, they might stampede." Xena tossed back, then she returned her attention to the flat, black plains ahead of her.

She could see. Gray shadows, of course, but the outline of the grass was clear to her eyes, as were the scattered boulders, and smaller hillocks between them and the city walls. There was a ring of light around those, though, and she realized that was going to pose a problem when they got up that far.

But that would wait for then. She was pathetically glad to be moving, the long day's wait for night fall having worn hard on her nerves. While here little band of troops had gotten some rest, she'd spent the time stressing out over every little thing until she was so twitchy she felt like she was sitting in ants.

Not that she really knew what sitting in ants felt like, of course, though she remembered having to eat ants at one stage in her life merely to survive. Xena licked her lips, remembering that odd, acid taste all too clearly.

Grubs had been better. She'd learned to toast them, and a meal of those with some tubers had sustained her newly formed army on more than one night or two in a moon way back then. They'd lived, but she'd never gotten high marks for cooking that was for damn sure.

That was all right. She'd had other skills, and she'd picked up some who could forage, and gather, and keep the army in meals; she remembered one night coming back from a bit of fishing and rounding the bend to see an entire slope covered with her troops gathered in neat camps, with tidy cookfires going, and thinking..

This is mine.

Xena glanced behind her at her little rag taggle and had to smile, shaking her head as she once again found herself in the lead, heading towards inconceivable trouble. She listened to the rumble of thunder overhead, tugging her cloak a bit closer around her as she started to smell rain in the air.

She lengthened her strides, figuring the faster they went, the faster she could get to the walls, and see what she'd have to fact there to get inside.

Would Gabrielle be there waiting for her?

Yes. Xena told herself firmly. Gabrielle would be there. She knew her little bedmate had been upset about being tossed over the wall in her underwear, so to speak, but she was sure she understood how important it was that they get inside the city.

She was sure, wasn't she? Xena frowned, then her attention was distracted by a flicker of shadowy motion ahead of her. She let out a low whistle and halted, hoping the men wouldn't pile into her. Her eyes swept the area, then swept it again, looking for the movement that had caught her attention.

Behind her, the men stopped in time, and waited in silence, the newer recruits firmly held in place by Xena's soldiers.

Far off, she could hear rain sweeping across the grass, but her ears ignored that, focusing instead on the area right around her, listening hard for sounds that weren't rain, and weren't wind, and then her other senses took over as her body reacted to something so fast she didn't even have time to warn the men before she found herself drawing her sword and defending herself.

They were nothing but shadows, but shadows with steel and she stopped trying to watch them and let her battle instincts take over instead. Her blade met the one sweeping towards her and she let out a wild yell, as she twisted her wrists and swept her arms downward, deflecting the attack before she kept moving around and lashed out as her back turned to her adversary with a roundhouse kick.

They never expected that, and this was no exception. She felt her boot hit flesh then she continued on around and brought her sword up in front of her, its surface flickering as she wove a figure eight in the air before her eyes.

Motion to her left. She swiveled and felt something hit her blade and the shadow behind that resolved in her eyesight to a tall figure with a sword in each hand, and her heartbeat picked up. She squared up her body to face him and opened her eyes up wide, sucking in all the light she could and keeping as much of him in her vision as possible as he launched an attack directly at her.

Fighting two swords was tough. She knew it, and she kept her attention on the flickering steel as she swept left, then right to counter both his strikes. "Back!" She let out a yell, hearing Jens' whistle of acknowledgment before she took a few digging steps forward and forced him to one side.

She could hear battle all around her now. Grunts, and the rasp of steel against steel, and the thump and shuffle of boots on the grassy ground.

The smell of blood on the wind. It made her nape hairs prickle and she caught the first blade, ducking as the second slashed over her head. She released one hand off her sword and caught her adversary's arm as it came back, turning her body square to him again and kicking him in the gut as hard as she could.

He coughed, but wrenched his arm free from her grasp and swung his pommel around, catching her on the side of the head as she moved to get her sword back up into position.

She saw stars, and for a moment her vision blurred, long enough for him to slam his crossed blades against hers and throw her backwards.

Anyone else would have fallen on their ass. Xena thanked the long nights in her training chamber as her body reacted automatically and instead of hitting the dirt she wrenched herself into a backflip that got her out of the man's reach as she landed and then powered forward again, catching him trying to recover from her motion as she slashed her sword sideways and caught him right on the wrist.

He moved quickly, and that was all that saved his hand as the sword in it went flying off behind him. He cursed, and hesitated, and that made the hand moot as Xena set herself, and whipped her sword at neck level edge on right into his jugular.

“Now! Attack them, or be traitors!” A male voice yelled, in the darkness.

Xena whirled as she sensed mass movement around her, spotting a figure on horseback charging towards them repeating the order and pointing with his sword to her little rag tag tagalongs.

Her men were scattered among them. Easy targets, their backs exposed to the newcomers as they fought the attackers in front.

Xena held her breath, tossing her mental dice and waiting to see how they'd fall.

“Hades with ya!” One of her farmboys yelled back, with surprising bravado, and Xena felt a moment of ghoulish pleasure at having guessed right for a change once again.

“As you will!” The horseman said. “Kill them first! Advance!”

The Persians broke off from fighting with Xena's men, and whirled to attack their ex comrades, led by the man on the horse, who charged at them with his sword raised.

Xena found herself moving, bolting through her men who were turning to react and reaching her top speed as she raced across the grass, slashing at the enemy soldiers more to get them out of her way than anything else.

She reached a hillock just as the rider came up on it, and with a little crouch, and a little laugh, she sprang off it and intercepted him just as he reached his target, her sword and his sword tangling together as she hit his body with hers and they both went flying off to the side.

His leg tangled in his stirrup and his hands hooked around her elbow and they were falling together sideways, pulling the horse up and over as the darkness blotted out even the clouds and they landed with the big animal right on top of them.

It was surprising. It hurt. Xena could feel the breath being squeezed out of her, and her legs quickly went numb as the horse struggled wildly. She wrenched her arm free and smashed her elbow back into the soldier's face, but as she felt the impact, and the reaction, she knew it was pointless and he was no longer a threat.

The horse on the other hand, was suffocating her. Xena shoved at whatever she could get her hands on and felt a sudden increase in the pressure as the animal rolled, flattening her for a long, searing, excruciatingly painful moment before his weight came off her and she felt rain instead.

Screaming. The smell of blood. Fighting all around her. The queen tried to catch her breath as she flexed her body with a touch of fear, hoping she hadn't broken anything critical.

Like her back, for instance. But aside from racking pain, her limbs moved when she told them to and she rolled into a ball then onto her knees, grabbing for her sword as she looked for the next attack.

Backs faced her, and she quickly swiveled, to find a tight ring of men surrounding her battling ferociously with the enemy, as fitful bursts of lightning flickered over head.

Her men. The newcomers. Impossible to tell the difference as they stood shoulder to shoulder against the Persians.

But she could hear horses coming, and knew they couldn't stand for long. With an unsteady exhale, she got to her feet and limped towards the line of men, sorting through her few options as she went to take a stand with them.

**

Gabrielle found her way down to the waterside, drawn by the salt smell and the sound of gulls overhead. It wasn't a far walk from the inn, and the streets at this end of town seemed to be very quiet. She turned the last corner and found herself near the docks, her eyes widening a little as she saw the big ships tied in place there.

Warships? Gabrielle peered at the men standing guard around them, and the exotic sigils on the mostly furled sails, and figured they were Sholeh's. At the very end of the dock, one other ship was tied and this one had a lot of activity around it, wagons and men moving to and fro as they took things off the deck.

That ship seemed to be more ordinary, at least to her eyes. The sails were a different shape, and the outside looked very beaten up. There were also no soldiers guarding it, though the men taking away things were in Sholeh's livery.

On her side of the docks, she spotted a little set of stalls, and she strolled towards them, as some of the soliders seemed to be watching her. Behind the stalls were a few glum looking merchants, and a very sparse collection of sad looking wares.

Gabrielle went to the first of them, apparently a baker. "Hello."

The man behind the counter peered at her. "Hello, girl. What's your pleasure? I'm sure we ain't got it here. " He indicated his tray, which had a couple of dark, hard rolls on it. "Only thing here is what ain't what's wanted."

The dark bread brought back an unexpected memory, and Gabrielle picked one up and sniffed it. "Oh, that's good enough." She smiled at the man. "I'll take one. They're like the ones my gram used to make. She fished a small coin from her pouch and handed it over.

The man glanced at it, then at her, one eyebrow raising. "Not from these parts eh?"

"I'm from the other side of the pass.. In the valley." Gabrielle replied, seeing the baker's stall mate cocking his head to listen. "Not that far away."

"Little further than that, I'm thinking."

A prickle went up Gabrielle's spine. "What do you mean?" She asked. "I know where I'm from."

The man reached out and passed the coin over to his neighbor. "Well girl." He lowered his voice. "If'n I were you, I wouldn't be flashing around pieces anyone knows were struck on Xena's hearth, eh?" He looked around carefully.

Xena's hearth? Gabrielle pulled a coin out and looked at it. It seemed pretty ordinary to her, one side stamped with a leaf, the other a circle. "How do you know where this came from?" She asked, curiously.

The man reached over and ran his finger over the edge of the coin, which was slightly raised, and bore tiny ridges. "That marks it." He said. "Some kind of press, yeah? She made it up." He handed her another coin. "See here? This'uns local."

Gabrielle took the coin and examined it. The edges were smooth and tapered, and very irregular. "Wow." She murmured. "Look at that." She handed the coin back to him. "Well, sorry about that.. It's all I have." She handed him back the roll. "If it's a problem, I guess.."

"No, no lass." The man pushed the roll back towards her. "Her mark's good here." He kept his voice low. "Better than most, understand?"

Gabrielle glanced behind them, where Sholeh's men were carting away all the supplies. From this distance, she could see the anger and frustration on the sailor's faces, as they turned over the boxes, one of the soldiers standing casually on the deck, with his crossbow cocked.

They were taking everything. Would Xena have done that too? "I see." She turned around and found the man's stall neighbor approaching, with a small wooden tray in his hands. "Oh, thanks." She took a piece of the cheese he was offering, her nose twitching as she caught the distinctive smell of sheep's milk coming from its moist surface.

"Not to their liking." The man explained with a rakish grin. "So's at least we have a little to sell."

Gabrielle ripped her roll in half and added the cheese to it, nibbling this unexpected taste of her original home with something of a melancholy pleasure.

"You came through the pass then?" The cheesemerchant asked, casually.

Gabrielle nodded. "Before the army got there." She thought fast. "I was coming here.. Ah.. Wanted to see if I could make a few dinars. Not much chance of that back on the farm."

A pair of soldiers strolled by, and the two merchants stiffened, falling silent. Gabrielle half turned and leaned her shoulder against the stand's support, chewing her snack. She met the soldiers gaze with as much composure as she could, keeping her expression what she hoped was politely interested.

The men studied her, slowing down as they passed the meagre little market. Then they stopped, and one man headed her way.

Oh boy. Gabrielle realized she had about a heartbeat to decide what to do, and in that heartbeat she realized there wasn't anything she could do that wouldn't result in her being chased down, or hurt. So she stayed where she was and tried hard not to panic.

After all, what would Xena do?

"You. Girl."

Xena would just kill them. Not very helpful. "Yes?" Gabrielle responded.

"Why are you dressed like a boy?" The man demanded. "Do you seek to mock us?"

It was the very very last thing Gabrielle thought was going to be thrown her way. She glanced down at herself in pure reflex, at the leggings covering her limbs to where the sturdy, well made leather boots started. "Uh.."

"We should cut them off you." The man drew a dagger. He was big, and had a full beard. His armor was stamped with Sholeh's mark and he bore the curved sword of her personal troops. "Insolence."

"Wh.. Wait." Gabrielle held both hands up and took a step backwards. "I wasn't trying to insult anyone.. I just.. " She took another step back as the man reached for her. "I just rode here on a horse! I had to wear them!"

“Llar.” The man lunged for her, but just as he did, a horn blew from down the docks, and he halted in mid-motion, his body jerking back as he turned his head towards the sound.

“Come.” His companion motioned to him, with an odd, crablike signal of his hand. “Another time.” He started off, and the man accosting Gabrielle followed him, pausing only to give her a dirty look before he jogged after his friend and they headed down the docks.

“Gods.” Gabrielle muttered.

“Girl, you got very lucky there.” The baker said, seriously. “Very lucky.”

Several other of the merchants gathered around, now that the sun was setting, and they had packed up their few wares. They were all more or less the same type, selling to the workers of the city, the poorer men and women who lived down near the docks and provided the labor for it.

“I sure was.” Gabrielle agreed. “I don’t get it. Why would wearing these insult them?” She looked down again in puzzlement at herself. “What’s the big deal?”

“Did you really come in on horseback?” The cheesemaker asked, before the baker could answer. “Or were you lying to him as he said?”

“Why would I lie?” Gabrielle shrugged, aware of the circle of people closing around her. “I did ride here... but what difference does it make? Why does that bother them?”

A big, heavysset man with a thick beard eased through the others and settled in front of her. “Before we tell you anything.” He said, in a voice with firm authority in it. “Tell me this.” He held up the coin.

“Where did you get it?”

Gabrielle could now sense danger around her, and she wondered of the soldiers would have been a safer route for her to take. “Why are you asking?” She countered, putting the stall support at her back.

“Because this comes from inside Xena the Merciless’s stronghold, that’s why.” He answered straightforwardly. “We just don’t see this here unless the person giving it has been there, and with things as they are, that’s a doubtful thing.”

Gabrielle could hear her heart pounding, but she summoned up what courage she could, and straightened up. “I’ve been there.” She added a half shrug. “I told some stories, I got some coin. Now, can I ask what the Hades is wrong with you people?”

“Stories?” The man asked. “You’re a storyteller?”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle sensed the shadows growing deeper. “That’s what I’m here for.. Just trying to make a dinar, that’s all.” She started to edge away. “Matter of fact, I’m due at the inn, so excuse me.”

The big man looked at her, then slowly he backed away, and stuck his hands in the pockets of his apron. “Good luck to you, then, storyteller.”

Gabrielle slipped past him, and gave them all a little wave of her hand, as she ducked back into the narrow street that would take her back to the inn. “Bye.” She turned the corner as fast as she could, and looked around, the sun almost gone and the shadows deepening.

A man was coming towards her, a dog at his heels. He watched her as she approached, and she sped up and more more energy in her strides when she thought he was going to stop her. After what she’d just gone through, another interaction didn’t seem like a good idea.

But the man just walked by her, and the dog did too, and Gabrielle broke into a jog, a sense of relief splashing over her. As if in counterpoint, she heard thunder over head, and she tipped her head back to find clouds rolling in, covering what was left of the sunset with a dim, gray blanket.

She thought, suddenly, of Xena out there in the rain. Would the storm keep her from getting to the gates? Or would it help cover her? Would it let Gabrielle have an easier time getting the door open? Did she even know where the door was?

The door to the inn loomed ahead of her, and she got to it and ducked inside just as the rain started falling. She quickly made her way to her little space, and closed herself inside, hurrying over to the window to shut it as the weather blew in.

Then she went to the bed and sat down, her entire body shivering. 'Xena, I don't know if I can do this.' She muttered. "I think I'm just going to get us both in trouble."

She sat quietly for a few minutes, listening to the rain as it got darker and darker inside the room. Then, with a sigh, she leaned forward and sorted through her bag that she'd left on the bed, taking out her flint and striker and the stub of a candle.

The tools felt a little strange in her hands, and she realized it had been a long time since she'd had to use them. In the stronghold, there were candles certainly but she usually lit them from the fire in the fireplace or one of the torches kept burning by the servants.

After a few awkward strikes, though, she got sparks enough to light the candle, and it lit the inside of the room with a gentle, warm glow. She set the candle down on the small table, then she spotted a larger taper already in a holder there.

Gratefully, she lit the new candle from her stub, and was rewarded with a brighter light as she blew out her candle and set it aside. There was a little, cracked mirror on the table and she set the candle by it and stood up, pulling her spare shirt over and unbuckling her belt to remove the one she had on.

After a brief glance at her reflection, she pulled a bit of cloth from her bag and dipped it in the water left in the basin, rubbing the damp rag over her skin and removing the signs of travel from it. She splashed some water on her face, and raked her wet hands through her hair to order it, then she pulled on the blue shirt and let its folds settle over her.

For a moment, she went very still as the shirt gave up Xena's scent, and it surrounded her with a sweet pungency that made her heart clench. She touched the fabric, then she ducked her head to one side and breathed the scent in deeply, wrapping her arms around herself as if she could hug her lover's essence to her.

Then she sighed, and looked in the mirror, making a face at the draping of the fabric. It was a mid sleeve shirt for Xena, so it went to her wrists, but the body far too big for her, and the length nearly went to her knees.

She picked up her belt and buckled it around her waist, gathering the fabric and making the fit a bit more reasonable and pulling her comb from her bag to sort through her pale hair so she didn't look quite so much like a wild creature.

Still, looking at her own reflection in that dim candlelight, she found it hard to relate the figure looking back at her with the one she remembered from her tiny room at home. Her face had lengthened and acquired a slimmer profile but the biggest change she could see was in the eyes looking back at her.

No longer a child's eyes.

After a moment, she took out the bit of parchment tucked against her heart and read the words there a few times before she put the scrap away, and gave herself one last look. "Okay, Gabrielle. You've told everyone here you're a storyteller. So get your butt out there, and tell some damn stories."

She blew the candle out, and walked to the door, opening it and slipping out into the hallway, already hearing the clatter of plates and the sound of voices as she headed towards the hall.

**

Xena leaped off the rock and grabbed the rider around the shoulders, the dagger in her right hand plunging into his throat as she yanked her arm across the front of his neck. She clamped her knees around the horse's flanks as it bucked in alarm, while she shoved the man she'd just killed out of his saddle.

A hop, and she had taken his place, grabbing for the reins as she brought the horse under control and drove the animal towards its former comrades, sheathing her dagger and drawing her sword as she relentlessly went on the attack, hacking and slashing her way through the fighting soldiers surrounding her men.

The rain was making the ground a slippery marl and her horse slid a little, but the motion was to her advantage as she lunged past another horseman and back swung at him, her sword catching him by surprise as it cut deeply into his shoulder.

She jerked her blade out of the bone and twirled it in her hand in time to meet the attack of a foot man, which she slammed to one side, then took advantage of her being on horseback by removing her boot from its stirrup and kicking him in the face.

It felt like the fight had been going on forever. Every inch of her throbbed and she was having to shove aside the pain shooting daggers through her body but there was enough anger, and enough frustration in her to drive her on into the battle.

She hooked another man's arm with a mace in it with her foot and yanked it back just as it was about to descend on one of her men. The soldier gutted the mace wielder, and she grabbed the weapon before it dropped and transferred it to her left hand while she continued to fight off another horseman with the sword in her right.

Xena smashed the mace down on the head of a man trying to cut her leg off, and deflected the sword of her mounted adversary, bumping shoulders with the man as his horse plunged past and ducking as he tried to grab hold of her.

"Demon!" The man hissed, hauling his horse's head around, only to find Xena whirling her own mount in its place and slamming its neck against his animals as she drove her sword in a powerful overhand motion into his leg. "Augh!"

"Bet your ass, loser!" Xena jerked her blade back then socked him in the face with its pommel as their horses stumbled against each other and brought them shoulder again. He fell backwards out of his saddle and tumbled to the ground, where one of Xena's men promptly pounced on him and drove a dagger into his heart. "Kill em all!"

Next. Xena turned her mount, the third she'd taken so far, and paused, when she found no other attackers coming after her.

Lightning struck and lit the sky, and she looked around again, seeing figures heading outward, away from the battle and many still forms lying in the shortened grass.

Was it over? Xena heard a low horn sound, then sound again, and when she turned in her saddle, the only living people around her were hers.

A dark figure limped over to her horse and laid a hand on its shoulder, looking up at her. She peered at the blood covered figure, and realized it was Jens. "Glad you made it."

"As am I, my liege." Jens rasped. "Think they realized the longer they stayed, the more you'd kill of em."

Xena let her sword rest against her thigh, dropping the mace on the ground behind her. In the rain lashed shadows, figures started moving towards her, and she forced herself to focus as the battle rage all too slowly drained out of her body.

Men closed in around her, more than she'd dared hope would survive the fight and she waited for them to press close, picking out their faces in the shadows. Some were farmboys, some were her men but they all had that same look of passion and she drank that up like sweet wine. "Good job." She said, after a quiet pause. "They sent the best they had after us."

"Lots of em." Jens agreed, giving his queen a rakish grin.

Xena nodded. "Lots of em." She repeated. "They ended up running from us."

Us. She could see backs straightening and she allowed herself a moment of pride, for them, and for herself. "All right. Take a break, then we've got a date with a door." She picked up a fold of the horse's saddle blanket and wiped her sword off carefully. "Take what swag off em you like."

The men nodded, and moved off a little, some sitting down on the ground, a few hunting among the bodies on the battle field. Xena watched them, then she looked down at Jens, who was still standing at her horse's shoulder. "Hope we don't have to do that again."

Jens leaned against the horse. "Aye." He agreed wearily. "You keeping this one?" He indicated the horse with a jerk of his head.

"No." Xena leaned on the saddlehorn. "I'm just too beat up and exhausted to climb off it and I'm afraid I'll fall down if I do." She managed a wry grin. "That's the other reason I hope we don't have to do that again."

"Want a waterskin?"

Xena eased upright. "If you've got one handy, yeah." She sheathed her sword, then unlatched the pouch at her belt and removed her carefully folded packets of herbs and the small, collapsible, wooden cup she kept next to them.

She had a couple of choices, and after a long moment's mental wrestling, she chose the least dangerous of them, mixing two of the herbs together in the cup before she uncapped the skin Jens handed up to her and poured water over them. "Thanks."

Jens took the skin back, and drank from it.

Xena swirled the cup a few times, then she drank it in a single fast gulp, making a face as the herbs clung to the back of her tongue. She got them down though, and then she spent a few minutes cautiously stretching her body out, trying to determine how much damage she'd taken.

"M'lady?"

Only the fact that the voice was at her knee, and she was the only non male in the vicinity made Xena look down at the hail. "What'd you call me?"

The farmboy turned soldier reddened, visible even in the shadows. "Begging your pardon."

Xena recognized the soldier who'd defied the Persians first. He was a man of medium height, and medium build, with straight hair and an honest face. "Yeah?" She hoped the herbs would kick in fast, as now that the fight was over the pain was beginning to be a bit overwhelming. "Glad you made that choice?"

The soldier looked up at her, rain hitting his face unheeded. "You... " He cleared his throat. "You put your life up for ours, there."

The queen sighed. "Yeah, I do stupid things sometimes." She agreed. "I try not to make a habit of it."

"Thank you." The man said, with simple sincerity.

It made Xena smile. "You're welcome." She answered quietly. "Now go do something useful, willya?"

The man ducked his head, and moved away, leaving his queen to face the need to get off her comfortable horse and get ready to move.

She eased her leg up and over the animal's haunches and let herself down, pausing with her hands clasping the saddle as she tested to see if her legs would bear her weight.

It was a close thing. Pain shot up her spine as she released her hold on the saddle and she immediately grabbed back on as her knees threatened to buckle. The horse landing on her had twisted her torso and she could feel the strain up and down her back, as her muscles cramped. "Gods be damned to Hades." She muttered under her breath. "This half assed heroic crap is gonna kill me."

She wished Gabrielle were there. Not that her cute bedmate could have done much to help her, but unlike anyone else she'd known, even her brother, she found Gabrielle's presence soothing when she wasn't feeling her best.

Right now, she definitely wasn't feeling her best. Cautiously, she released the saddle and eased herself upright, forcing herself into motion and walking around in a small circle.

Ow.

The rain beat down on her, and she tilted her face up into it, holding her hands a little away from her body to let the water rinse the blood off. Even that small range of motion hurt, though, and she let her hands drop again, though she felt a slight easing of the aches as the herbs finally decided to kick in.

There was no end to this night. Xena went back over to her borrowed mount, who was cropping the grass, seemingly content to stay nearby. She checked the contents of the animal's saddlebags, the inside rich with the heady spices she'd smelled in Sholeh's camp.

They irritated her. She disregarded the rolled bits of food, but found a useful set of beautifully carved daggers, which she tucked into her belt and a pouch full of coins, which she likewise took. Then she slipped the horse's bridle off, and loosened its cinch strap, dragging the saddle off as the animal sidestepped in surprise. "G'wan girl."

The horse snorted at her.

"G'wan." Xena patted her on the neck. "Go find yourself a nice pasture, and some horny stallion to make your life right. War's no place for ya." She watched the horse move off, not quite leaving, but not quite staying either, then she turned and headed through the battlefield towards the front of the line.

It was hard not to limp, but she managed, walking through her troops, giving one a slap on the arm, smiling at another, until she stood on a clean patch of ground, and turned her eyes once again towards the city.

She had an appointment to keep. There'd be time enough to whine later, when the possibility of warm baths, and soft sheets, and adorable muskrats could be had, but right now it was time to be the queen.

Crazy old bitch that she was.

**

Part 19

Gabrielle found herself a seat in the room, near the back in one corner that seemed relatively quiet and out of the way. There was a scrubby little table there, and she squeezed in behind it, her back to the inn wall as she studied the crowd in the room with slightly widened eyes.

There were a lot of people there, more than she'd thought the inn could hold, and the noise reminded her strongly of the castle dining chamber, where the servants and slaves all ate together in a cacophony of voices in loud discourse.

It didn't look like they wanted to be entertained. Faces were angry, and in some cases intense, and the discussion she heard around her all centered on the Persian invaders and the outrages they'd brought.

It was interesting. She fell back on a role she'd practiced during her early life with Xena, listening without seeming to listen as she accepted a bowl of soup and piece of bread from a tired looking server. "Thanks." She gave the girl a smile. "Long day, huh?"

"They all are." The girl paused, glad of a chance to stand still. "You want ale or cider?"

Gabrielle thought a moment. "Cider." She decided.

The girl nodded. "There's a stew coming." She said. "Ends and odds, all we could get."

Ah, well she remembered those odds and ends dinners. "That's fine." Gabrielle watched the girl move off, getting stopped every few steps by customers demands. It was a hard job, one her parents had suggested for her in fact, and she suddenly had a moment of gratitude that her lifes path had turned out far differently though equally far more dangerous in nature.

She dunked her bread in her soup and took a bite. It was a split pea and vegetable concoction and she found the taste to her liking, glad to be filling her belly after her long ride, and longer day. She'd been so distracted she hardly realized how hungry she was until she had the bowl in front of her and now she fairly inhaled it.

Xena's stronghold had been the first place she'd ever consistently had enough to eat, even from the start, even when she was nothing but a newly bought slave down in the worker's quarters. It had astonished her that with all her often random cruelty, the queen had understood at a base level that this was one of the fundamental needs of anyone and no matter how hard the work, and how dangerous the circumstances the people Xena had charge of were taken care of in that way.

Being a slave was a tough thing, though she'd only spent a short time at it. But she'd talked with enough of the servants and enough of the slaves in the stronghold to understand that if you were a slave, being a well fed, well housed one did make all the difference.

It was a matter of personal dignity, and Gabrielle had realized when Xena had made her a space in the hall, and then a space in her own rooms as their relationship rolled along it's unusual path that her new and scary friend understood that need very well.

"Here you go." The girl came back and set a mug of cider down. She glanced at Gabrielle's mostly empty bowl, and looked around, then she slid another bowl on the table and gave her a wink before she continued on her path around the tables.

Mm. Gabrielle didn't hesitate to claim the gift, enjoying the rough, slightly nutty taste of the brown bread as she soaked it in the soup. She'd asked Xena once, why she'd decided to run her realm the way she did, treat her slaves the way she did, and her answer had been both pragmatic and simple, and very much Xena.

"Because I've been hungry." The queen had told her. "And I've slept in a dungeon." She'd added. "Neither made me a happier person."

Gabrielle took a sip of her cider, finding it cold and fragrant. She liked cider better than ale, though she'd become fond of the rich wines Xena tended to favor also but she figured with everything going on, keeping her head clear was probably a very good idea and the place didn't much look like they had fine wines anyway.

Just then the door to the outside opened, and conversation fell off abruptly when four Persian soldiers entered, looking around arrogantly with their hands on their sword hilts.

Gabrielle was now very glad she'd chosen the table she had, tucked in the back, in the shadows, behind everyone else. While she was dressed not unlike the rest of the inngoers, she still felt conspicuous and she kept her head down, and her attention on her soup.

The soldiers pushed their way through the crowd, making a show of examining all those seated at the tables, before they confronted the innkeeper where she was standing near the cookfire. "You."

The woman remained silent, but glowered at them.

"Holding back were ya?" The soldier said.

"I wasn't holding back on anyone." The innkeeper shot back. "All we've got here is scraps. Look for yourself." She reached into the pot and scooped up a ladle of it's contents, dumping it in a bowl and shoving it at the man.

He drew a dagger and poked in the broth. "Doesn't smell like scraps."

"Not my fault if your lot can't cook. I can." The woman was unrepentant.

"Maybe we should take you with us then." The soldier reversed his dagger and struck out, catching the woman across the face. "With a cut out tongue to rid you of your insolence." He reseated his knife and dismissed her, turning to regard the room again.

Gabrielle's mind flashed back to the short time before they'd left the stronghold, when Xena had reacted in such an unexpected way when she'd found things being held back from her. Not nearly as angry as Gabrielle had expected, more like..

"Keep anything back, and you'll all end up in the garbage pit with the last lot who did. Understand?" The soldier barked. "You belong to us! Learn!" He made his way out, with his companions following. As they left, the last one picked up a loaf of bread from one of the tables and took it with him, laughing as the door closed behind them.

More like she'd expected the subterfuge, and not approved of it, but understood. Gabrielle saw the anger around her and she went quietly back to her soup, glad at least to have escaped the Persians attention.

"Bastards."

Gabrielle cocked her ears.

"Can you believe it?" A man at the next table slapped it's surface with his hand. "I told you the prefect sold us out. Shoulda taken Bengen's advice and gone to beg for help before the winter."

His companion snorted. "Woulda done any good? I hear that Persian is going after her next, wants to ram 'er army right up Xena's ass."

"Woulda been better than rolling over like a whipped bitch and letting her take us, yeah?"

"Mm."

"From what I hear." A woman seated nearby commented. "Prefect was promised his own palace in Persia, but ended up tied in the middens for 'is pains." She said. "We all lost. Persia got just what she she was looking for, and aint' leaving no time soon."

The men looked glum. "No way to help it." The one nearest Gabrielle said. "Now. If he'd gone t'other route though.."

"He'd never have." The woman said. "Go to her for help? Not with his pride."

"You'd think she'd have done it?" The man asked.

"If he'd asked Xena for help, you mean?" Gabrielle spoke up, in a casual tone. She wiped her bowl out with her bread and chewed it before she looked up into the odd little silence she'd kicked off. She found the men at the next table looking at her and the voices nearby had dropped off considerably. "She probably would have come here and kept them away."

The man nearest her half turned in his seat, the legs scraping against the floor. "And who might you be, girl?" He said. "To be commenting? Never seen you here before."

Gabrielle picked up her mug and sipped her cider. "No, probably not. I just got here today." She said. "But I come from Xena's lands." She explained. "Seems like my timing was really bad though, huh?"

The man closest to her now turned all the way around, so his chair was facing her, and he looked over his shoulder at the rest of the room before he turned and leaned towards her. "You came through the pass?" He asked. "Through the Persian army?"

It seemed a very common question. "Yes." Gabrielle agreed, holding her hands out and looking down at herself self deprecatingly. "I guess I wasn't much of a threat to them."

The server came back, glancing at the altered tableau as she set down a bowl of the stew for Gabrielle, then moved on to serve the men next to her.

"What made you come here?" The other man asked, by his dress a merchant. "Is it true, what we heard then? That her lands are in revolt?"

Well... "No." Gabrielle shook her head. "There was some trouble before the cold season, but Xena settled that pretty fast." She became aware of heads cocking in her direction as her queen's name was heard, and repeated softly.

"We heard from merchants this past few moons there were lawless types in the valley." The man said. "Most didn't want to go through there, no matter the profit."

How much should she say? Gabrielle pondered a moment, realizing more and more people were turning to listen to the conversation. "There were some exiled soldiers." She said. "But Xena took care of them. The way is clear now."

The woman at the next table got up and sat down across from Gabrielle, her face intent and interested. "Except for the Persians." She said, with a brief smile. "We heard they wanted Xena to join them."

Sensing a line she probably shouldn't cross, Gabrielle shrugged both shoulders instead. "I'm just a wandering storyteller." She said. "I wouldn't know about that.. I just know what I heard when I was traveling along the road, you know?"

"Storyteller, eh?" The man turned, as another figure entered and squeezed in next to where Gabrielle was sitting. "Lennat, did you hear that? A storyteller."

"I heard." Lennat pulled a small stool over and settled on it. "So, Gabrielle, will you tell us some stories this night? After your dinner is over, I mean."

Gabrielle looked around the room. Their little group was in something of a corner, and the rest of the patrons seemed to be involved in their own talk, the mood depressed after the exit of the soldiers. "You think people want to hear any?" She asked. "Sounds like everyone's in a pretty bad mood to me."

Lennat smiled grimly. "Maybe you can change that." He said. "There's not much to spike the mood in these parts these days, now is there?"

No, she supposed not. "Okay." The blond woman agreed softly. "Sure, I'll tell a story or two."

"Good." He patted the table. "Maybe you can cheer my mother up. She's ready to take her kettle there, jump in and float to sea in it." He got up and headed back towards the kitchen, leaving Gabrielle to her small ring of attendants.

"Gabrielle." The merchant mused. "Unusual name. Where have I heard that of late I wonder?"

Gabrielle took out her little dagger and started spearing things from her stew. There was so much odd tension in the room, she was starting to wonder if telling stories, especially stories about Xena, was going to be such a good idea after all.

What if the Persians heard about it?

**

Xena slowly lifted herself up off the ground, her eyes peeking over the edge of the grass as she watched the guard walk along the wall, passing the small postern gate far more frequently than was convenient for her.

She settled back down after a moment, the soaked ground resuming it's chilly, damp cradling of her aching body as her little force rested around her.

She doubted anyone was really sorry to be laying down, since they'd been crawling along for the past three candlemarks to avoid being seen from the walls. Her knees and shoulders were absolutely killing her, and she had to remind herself several times that this whole thing had been her idea before she tried to kill the person responsible for it.

What an idiotic plan. Xena carefully extended her arms and clasped her hands together, then rested her forehead on them. If the guards didn't peter out before midnight, she'd be faced with finding another way in to the city, unless she wanted to risk getting caught.

Did she want to risk that? At least if she did, the day wouldn't end on a boring note, now would it? Xena spent a few minutes imagining the scene, if she just walked up to the main gates and banged on them, demanding entrance.

It had a certain appeal. Xena felt it matched her image a lot better than skulking in the horse crap, and she could do it right now and save herself the long, boring wait that might end in the same place anyway.

On the other hand, twenty of them could just shoot her full of arrows, and that was a damn rotten way to croak, guaranteed to ruin your day.

She pulled up a stalk of grass, and chewed on it, turning a little onto her side and pulling her knee up slightly to relieve the strain on her back. On a third hand, lying here providing ant fodder wasn't her thing either. "Jens?"

"Majesty?" Her stalwart captain was lying in the grass an arms length from her.

"I want to move in closer. Let's see if we can get near enough to spit on those bastards."

"Thank you, Majesty." Jens said. "Getting ate alive here, I am."

"Me too." Xena decimated a few of the crawling insects, brushing them off her arm before she prepared herself to start crawling forward again, waiting for Jens to squirm back and alert the men before she started off.

Making your way through relatively short grass wasn't easy. Xena preferred a side to side almost snakelike motion, moving one elbow and one knee in unison, then the other. This got her a sinuous motion - and if she timed it with the wind her passage was almost invisible.

The key also, was the move, then wait, then move, keeping the timing irregular so anyone watching a particular spot in the grass wouldn't see this consistent disturbance and wonder what was coming at them.

Of course, it also helped not to have twenty six large men of varying skulking skill following you, but Xena had learned in her life to just take what she could get, so she counted herself lucky to have someone watching her back, and at the very least, she wouldn't die alone out here.

They had snaked across about half of the distance to the wall when a sound suddenly alerted her, and she held her hand up, letting out a brief, low hiss to the men following behind her. They stopped as well, and settled down and she cocked her head to listen.

A soft, rustling crackle came from just to the left of her. Xena went very still, and cursed silently. The grass was tall enough to obscure her form, but she knew if whatever it was got close enough, she'd be plainly visible.

She drew in a deep breath, slowly moving her right arm down and closing her fingers on the dagger tucked into her boot. She drew it out and got herself ready, tensing the muscles along her torso as she readied herself to react.

Another soft crunch. Xena sorted through the sounds, trying to figure out how many of them there were, and if she shouldn't just order her men to attack and get it over with.

Patience had never, truly, been one of her virtues.

The sounds stopped.

Xena listened harder, but the wind was in the wrong direction, and all she could hear was noises from the city. After a few moments of nobody doing anything, she lost her patience. Motioning to Jens to stay behind, she eased off towards the last place she'd heard the noises coming from.

Her body slid through the grass, as the rush of impending battle overcame the pain she'd been nagged with and she almost felt exhilarated. She swiveled the knife in her hand until the blade was facing forward, and gathered herself as she parted the last bit of grass that separated her from the spot she was aiming for.

Eyes met hers.

At her eye level.

But they were the wrong shape, and the wrong color, and Xena felt the hair on the back of her neck stand straight up as a rush of fangs and claws and angry animal rushed right at her.

"Blf." Xena stifled a yelp as she ducked her head and swung her knife hand, as the huge cat hit her, its claws sinking into the back of her scalp. She rolled over instinctively, her arms coming up to protect her face as she felt the animal's teeth graze her wrists.

"Bigods!" Jens' voice cut the stillness. "Get it, boys!"

Xena didn't have time to argue. She got her knee up and felt the claws slide off her armor as her hands reached through the mess of sharpness and felt soft fur under her fingers. She grabbed for the animal, smelling the hot scent of blood and suspecting it was her own.

It was huge, and powerful. It had midnight black fur and a bad attitude, and the heavy musk scent of a male. A hind leg raked back and narrowly missed her face and she reacted instinctively, turning her head and biting the cat's foot.

It yanked away, nearly pulling the teeth from her mouth and then she saw claws heading right for her as the animal turned and attacked, its teeth bared.

"Now!"

The cat yowled in surprise and turned its attention from Xena as two of the soldiers jumped bravely on it, stabbing with their short swords in a desperate silence, the grasses around them wavering violently.

The queen took the opportunity to collect herself and get to her knees, wrapping both hands around her knife and driving it into the cat's back, just barely missing Jens' arm. "Bastard!"

The cat twitched, then twitched again, then slumped, a snarl freezing on its face as it went still under them.

For a moment, all they could hear was their own heavy breathing. Then they heard a shout, and a horn sounding, and hoofbeats and Xena exhaled, letting her head rock forward to rest on the cat's pelt. "It's just not going to be my day today, is it?"

"Mistress, you're bleeding." Jens said, softly.

"Jens, it ain't gonna matter much if I am." Xena sighed, pushing herself up and facing the music, lifting her head over the edge of the grass to see what was coming at them.

A squad of horsemen had burst from the gates, and as the queen watched in bemusement, it thundered by them at top speed, chasing the dark shadows down the road towards the pass. Horns were now blowing like crazy at the wall, and soldiers were racing for the city main gates from both sides.

Leaving the postern gate unguarded.

The queen blinked, then blinked again at the chaos.

“Then again.” Xena touched the back of her head, wincing as she pulled her hand away covered in blood. “Maybe I better stop this now, so I don’t drip all over the marble in there.” She pulled a bit of cloth from her belt and pressed it against the wound, sparing the animal a brief glance. “Nice, huh?”

“Mistress, what’s going on there?” One of her other men asked, in a timid voice. “What’s stirred them?”

Xena shrugged. “Maybe Gabrielle took her clothes off and she’s running around singing.”

The men all looked at her in silence. Then Jens cleared his throat. “Didn’t know she sang, Mistress.”

Xena managed a wry chuckle, her entire body shaking a little from the close encounter. “All right.” She craned her neck, and saw the way was still clear. “Let’s go and get in there before I bleed to death and ruin the fun.”

Gathering herself up, she scrambled through the grass, moving in a half crouch, half run as she skirted the edge of the open space, her eyes glued on the soldiers on the wall.

With any luck, she’d make it. If the Fates were in the mood, Gabrielle would even be there to open the door.

Might even be her day after all.

**

Lennat appeared from the shadows, settling down at Gabrielle’s side just as she was finishing up her meal. She continued wiping out her bowl with bread and waited for him to speak, noting that he was carefully looking around to see who was listening.

It almost felt like the court intrigue she’d slowly began to get used to around Xena’s castle. Everyone always thought they had a plan, or a secret, and everyone thought she was the best way to get that sort of information to the queen.

Which, not unreasonably, she indeed was. More approachable by far than her irascible mistress, she had become a gentle conduit for the populace that was far too lowly to attend her courts, and too wary to brave her temper.

Xena had found it funny. Gabrielle on the other hand found it trying at times, since she was uncomfortably aware of both her own lowly origins, and the dependence the people had on her.

“Gabrielle.”

“Hi.” Gabrielle put her spoon down and folded her hands. “Please tell your mother I think she’s a great cook. Thank you.” She told him sincerely. “Dinner was great.”

Caught a little offguard, as he was about to launch into whatever pitch he’d worked up to, Lennat sat back, his body shifting. “Um.. thanks.” He said. “I know she’ll like to hear that. She doesn’t hear it too much. This lot likes their dinner, but begrudges a penny for it.” His eyes shifted quickly to the tables around him, then back to her.

“So they think if they say how good it is, you’ll raise your prices?” Gabrielle grinned a little, remembering people in her home village who’d thought just that. Her father had been one of them.

“Eh.” He lifted his shoulders in a half shrug. “I’m glad you found it to your liking. I had thought we’d frightened you off.”

“Me?” Gabrielle’s brows lifted. “Do I look that easily scared off?”

“Well, yes.” Lennat gave her an apologetic look. “No offense.”

They’ll never believe you’re a soldier, Gabrielle. It’s gotta be you. “None taken.” The blond woman replied. “But what made you think I was?” She glanced casually around, but their table mates were busy at their plates and ignoring the two of them.

At least she thought they were. With a brief frown, she turned her attention back to her companion. “Sorry, I missed that.. What did you say?”

“I went by your room earlier, and found you gone.” Lennat repeated. “I thought maybe you’d gone to find better lodgings.” He motioned to one of the servers, and she came over. “A mug, Else. And one for my friend here, as well.”

“Aye.” The girl answered briefly, turning and giving Gabrielle a wink before she left, ducking between the other patrons with a twitch of her hips. “Be right back.”

“Wench.” Lennat snorted a little. “Anyway.”

“Anyway.” Gabrielle repeated. “I was just taking a walk before.” She said. “Just seeing the place since I’ve never been here.” She paused, gathering her thoughts. “I saw some of the soldiers.. they seem really harsh.”

Lennat held up a hand, and looked around again, with a somewhat anxious expression on his face. “Have a care, Gabrielle. They have ears everywhere.”

Gabrielle swung her head around and studied her table’s neighbors. Most of them were roughly dressed, and seemed to be merchants, or maybe men from the docks. None of them particularly looked like Persian soldiers, but she acknowledged that spies could in deed be bought.

However.

“They already wanted to hurt me just for wearing these.” Gabrielle plucked the fabric of her leggings. “How much worse could it be if they heard me saying they were mean? Aren’t soldiers supposed to be mean? It’s not like I’m saying they keep pet mice.”

“Gabrielle!”

“Well, it’s not.” Gabrielle found herself enjoying the danger of it all. She was aware of the heads half turning her way at other tables. “They were harsh. They were kicking around all those little vendors down by the dock yard and..”

Lennat grabbed her wrist. “You went to the waterside?” He hissed, under his breath.

“Sure.” Gabrielle answered. “It’s just down the path there.” She pointed in the general direction of the water. “They had some really great sheep’s milk cheese and rolls.”

The server girl returned, saving them both from further histrionics. She plunked down a mug by Lennat’s hand, then turned and offered Gabrielle one, with a much more polite bow.

"Thanks." Gabrielle accepted it, and the smile that went with it, before she turned back to her agitated tablemate. "They're taking everything you have, Lennat. What more can you fear from them? You'll starve, if they block the port, and block the valley." She kept her voice low, but didn't try to whisper.

"Shh. Yes." Lennat shushed her. "Only a fool doesn't know that, but dooming the city and dooming my own skin are two different things, you understand?" He muttered. "I have no wish to have my body split in two before the gates."

Gabrielle propped her chin up on her fist. She thought about what Xena would do if she caught someone speaking out against her rule inside her gates, and she nodded a few times, understanding far more than he probably imagined. 'Sorry.'

He raked his blond hair, a lighter shade even than her own back out of his eyes, and took a sip from his mug. He was young, Gabrielle realized, they were much of an age and she found him rakishly attractive, someone she might even have been interested in way back when.

Back when she and Lila would sit near the edge of the pasturage watching the passers by on the road and talk about this one and that one, and who'd they thought was cute, and who they might one day get married to.

Before her life changed. Before the raiders.

Before Xena.

"It's all right." Lennat shrugged. "I'm probably just being a chickenshit. My mother speaks out against them often enough, after all." He took another sip. "Anyway... "

"Anyway." Gabrielle repeated. "So is it time for me to get up there and see if I'm any good at this story thing?"

One pale brow cocked at her. "You're really here to try storytelling?"

"I really am." She responded with complete sincerity. "Hope this crowd likes what I have to tell."

Lennat gave her a dubious look. "Are you going to cause trouble?"

"Probably." Gabrielle resolutely drained her mug and set it down, licking her lips before standing up and gathering her wits together. "You might want to go sit at another table." She riffled her fingers through her hair and eased out from around the table, looking around the room to find a likely spot to stand in.

Near the old, smoke stained fireplace there was a little clear area, directly in front of where the flames would be the hottest, and she aimed for it, moving slowly enough to attract a little bit of attention as she crossed the room.

Over the long winter, she'd gotten a chance on a number of occasions to get up in front of people, sometimes Xena's court, sometimes her immediate servants, sometimes just in the back of the stable with the grooms as witness and practice this budding skill of hers.

She thought it was a skill, anyway.

Jellaus had worked with her and tried to teach her some of his tricks but strangely enough, she'd found she liked her own way of doing things better, and discovered her best and most insightful audience, surprisingly enough, was her daunting lover

Xena absolutely loved listening to stories. What a surprise that had been. At first she'd just thought the queen had been humoring her, but after the tenth request, she'd realized Xena never humored anyone but herself, and if she was asking it was because she wanted it.

That of course went for a lot of other things, too.

Shaking her head a bit, Gabrielle claimed her spot and turned, facing the room and letting her body relax. She scanned the crowd with her eyes, taking the little time she had to study her prospective audience before eyes started to lift from plates, and the sound of voices began to stifle.

She hooked her thumbs into her belt and waited, feeling a nervous flutter in her belly as the attention of the room started to focus on her, frowns and curious eyes, and one dark haired man who looked at her belt buckle, looked at her face, and unaccountably, smiled.

Now, it begins. Gabrielle took a deep breath. "A good evening to all of you." She said. "My name is Gabrielle, and I've just come here to your city."

The last voices died out as everyone turned to look at her. From the corner of her eye, she saw Lennat skulk behind the cooking table, and his mother move to the front of it, one hand with a mixing spoon in it resting on top.

"I'm a storyteller." She went on. "So the kind innkeeper here said I could tell a few here, if that's all right with everyone." Her eyes roamed casually around, not focusing on any one in particular, but reading the faces turned her way. She didn't see any outright hostility, but the expressions were wary. "Is that all right?"

There was a brief moment of silence. Then one of the older men in the back leaned forward. "Depends." He said. "You going to tell stories about them?" He thrust his thumb over his shoulder at the door. "Little girl?"

Gabrielle smiled. "No." She shook her head. "I don't know any stories about them." She said. "I come from the other side of the hills." She imitated the man's gesture, pointing back past the inn, past the walls, back to the valley beyond the horizon.

"Now do you?"

"I do." Gabrielle felt it, a certain tension that made her own skin prickle. There was danger here, she realized, the danger that Lennat had been trying to warn her of. "So you want to hear my stories?"

The man tipped his mug to her. "Go on then." He replied. "Let's see what you have to tell us."

Gabrielle relaxed, just a little bit. This was what she'd been sent for, and now she'd see if she could really live up to Xena's expectations or not.

And if not, there was always that back door.

**

The line of river grass ended a long field's length away from the city walls, providing an open space for the careful watchmen to stand guard over. In times of peace, which had been for a good while now, the watchmen merely looked out for wild beasts hunting, and the odd traveler in the road gotten in trouble on the way in.

Raiders, occasionally, but not many since the city walls were sturdy, and the free populace long used to standing by their outpost on the edge of the land and defending their rights. They'd been sure to

put up their walls, and make their watchtowers, and now Sholeh's troops were taking full advantage of it.

But the lonely stretch of grass, which had spawned nothing more alarming than a few startled rabbits over the long half moon they'd been there was now left unwatched, a martial excitement stirring the city that had remained uneasily compliant since their defeat.

And so, secure in that abandonment at the edge of the stubble, a lone figure rose and stood, outlined against the grass before it moved forward, gliding across the earth with supply assuredness. Behind it, a small force emerged and followed, dark shadows against a darker background.

Xena pressed her back against the wall, her chest moving in short, quick breaths as she took advantage of the scant profile of the door to hide herself from sight.

The front of the gates was nothing if not a maelstrom of activity, torches ringing the opening as soldiers began to mass around it. Above her head, the guards on the top of the wall had long left their posts, racing down towards where the action was and leaving her little stretch of battlement pretty much bare.

From a human perspective, understandable. There was some obvious alert going on and as soldiers, she understood the herd mentality drawing the guards towards it.

However.

"You know, Jens?" Xena took a moment to collect herself, now that they'd reached the safety of the shadows. "I'd be gutting people by now for letting us do what we just did."

"Aye." Her captain agreed.

"I'm damn glad I'm not in charge here."

"Surely as we are, too." Jens nodded again. "Nicer to get here w'out an arrow in my guts." He turned his attention to the gates, where a mounted force had appeared, and were waving their arms. "Wonder what's up w'im?"

"We'll probably find out." The queen remarked, easing forward to peer around the archway. The moon was behind the city now, and there was a nice, thick, black shadow coming off the wall, and with all the torches gone she and her small force were almost invisible.

Almost. Xena caught movement coming towards them, and she held a hand up, then pressed herself back against the wall. She knew their timing was off. She'd made up with Gabrielle to open the gates on the last watch, late after the moon set but the chance disruption had been too good an opportunity for them to get close.

So that meant she had to change her plan, since the odds of them remaining unseen for two candlemarks were too much for even her gamblers heart to handle. She watched as a lone figure appeared from the dark, moving away from all the activity.

Her ears caught the sound of armor, and silently, she drew her dagger out and held it lightly in her right hand, her left curled around the jutting rock edge of the arch. The spasms in her back had been getting worse as the night wore on, and she could feel jolts of pain going down her legs in a most unpleasant way.

She'd tried stretching to shake it off, but that had proved to be an even worse idea than getting squashed by a horse in the first place. Xena was fully capable of soldiering her way through just about anything, but she was starting to worry that her damn legs were going to buckle under her regardless of how much self discipline she had.

Killing someone would at least distract her from that. “C’mere, little boy.” She uttered, under her breath as the figure obediently ambled right at her. She could see the outline of a sword across his back and he was wearing a cloak, common to Sholeh’s men, belted at the waist for fighting.

Her eyes narrowed, as she studied the man, marking him for one of the conscripts instead of a regular by his awkward gait, and she reluctantly decided on a different mode of contact other than a throat cut. “Hey.” She called out instead, in an almost friendly tone.

She felt Jens stiffen behind her, and she grinned wanly to herself, enjoying the outrageousness of it.

The man stopped, and looked around. “Who’s there?” He asked, but in a low voice, not a warning. “Who is it?”

Xena eased out from behind the arch and leaned against it. “C’mere and find out.” She purred. “What’s a nice looking guy like you doing out here in the cold on a night like this?”

He hesitated, caught between curiosity and duty, but the sexy voice won him over and he sidled closer, ducking his head to one side to try and get a better look at her. “Who are you?”

“Depends who you ask.” Xena allowed him to get within a bodylength, close enough for her to see his face and for him to see hers. “What’s your name?”

“Perdicus.” He let one hand rest on the dagger at his belt. “What’s yours?”

“Xena.” The queen replied, watching him intently to see what his reaction was going to be. It was a fifty fifty bet either way, but this close, if he picked the wrong fifty, she could gut him faster than he could yell about it. “As in the Merciless.” She added. “In case you know more than one.”

He stared at her, and she could see his breathing quicken. Subtly, she shifted her grip on her dagger, moving it from a stabbing hold to a throwing one, the hilt balanced in the curl of her fingers. Then she saw his posture change and she relaxed, as he took a step closer and looked around him before he turned back to her.

She was not entirely surprised. Given that the natural thing for a soldier would be to be heading in the opposite direction. Xena rewarded him with a smile, and waited as he studied her in fascination. “Well?” She asked, after a few moments, aware of the passing time.

“What are you doing here?” He asked. “I don’t understand.”

“What are you doing here?” She countered. “You volunteer or someone she just picked up in a pasture somewhere?”

Perdicus looked past her, and now saw the force against the wall. “Uh..” His eyes widened a little as two of the men separated away from the rest, weapons drawn and evident.

“What’s the big noise about?” The queen changed her tack, her voice gaining a crispness. “At the gates.”

He tore his eyes from the soldiers and looked back at her. “I don’t know.” He answered. “I heard the horns blow.. Something about an attack.” He looked at the men again. “Is this the attack?”

Xena chuckled, then she moved suddenly, grabbing the man’s cloak and swinging around to shove his body against the wall and holding it in place with a powerful pressure. “Answer my question, little man.” SHE rasped softly. “Are you in by choice, or not?”

Slowly, his eyes tracked down to where his boots were dangling a foot off the ground, then he swiveled his attention back to her. "Ah.. Uh.. " He blinked. "My home.. My town was destroyed before last winter. I.. " He stammered. "I went out to sea to find.." He stopped, and his eyes averted. "My ship was taken."

Ah. A lie somewhere. Xena felt her instincts prickle and her icy blue eyes drilled into his. "What town?"

"W..what?"

Xena shook him. "I don't have time to play games with you boy. You're from these parts. What town is it you supposedly lost?"

He stared at her, then licked his lips nervously. "P..Potadeia." He gargled out. "I.. I'm sure you never heard of it."

Life was just full of delicious ironies sometimes, now wasn't it? Xena released him and let him fall with a thump to the ground as she relieved her battered bodies screaming outrage without so much as a flinch. "I have." She said, briefly. "So where were you going?"

Perdicus wiped his hands nervously on his cloak. "I had to do something today and I.. " He rubbed his hands again. "I was trying to get away from them. Thought it would be a good chance, with all the noise." He glanced at the other men. "So.. Um.."

"We're going to take over the city." Xena told him. "Wanna come help?"

Perdicus looked at her, then at the men, then back to her. Then he looked back at the men, then at the small gate door, then at her.

"C'mon. If Sholeh catches you deserting you'll be dead anyway." The queen told him cheerfully. "Come die with us. It'll be more fun. I promise."

The man exhaled, then he half shrugged his shoulders. "Makes no difference, I guess." He leaned against the wall. "After what I saw.. What I did today."

Xena accepted this for now, and she turned back to see the group of soldiers now moving away from the gates down the road, torches held high as they started back down towards the pass. Her eyes flicked to the walls, and sure enough she could see figures starting to wander back down them in her direction.

Cursing under her breath, she glanced past her men, to see figures approaching on the walls from that direction too. Realizing she had only moments to decide what to do, and wishing she had better options, she sheathed her dagger, and drew her sword instead. "All right, boys, let's go inside."

She swung around the sill of the gate and went to the thickly barred and iron strapped door set inside it, the space almost too small to fit her shoulders. She felt her troops at her back, and as her free hand searched the surface for anything helpful, she imagined she heard a yell of alarm in the distance.

Uh oh.

"Dont' have much time, Majesty." Jens commented, from behind her.

"Thanks for the bulletin." Xena muttered. "What would I do without you?"

She heard another yell, and just as she was about to command her force to turn and be spitted like dogs, she realized it was coming from inside the walls, not outside.

She also realized it was coming closer, and she could hear a lot of people running inside.

Commotion? Panic? Trouble? Could only mean one thing. “Hang on” Xena reversed her sword and tucked it alongside her thigh. “We’ll be set in a minute.”

“Majesty?”

“Just get ready.”

**

Gabrielle ducked past a pair of outstretched arms and dodged around a table, trying to stay one step ahead of the soldiers chasing her. The inn was in pandemonium, and her breath came short as she scrambled past two of the bolting patrons and found a chair smack in her way.

Without much thought, she grabbed the arm of chair and vaulted over it, hoisting her body up and clearing the other arm with a hard earned strength gained over the winter. She heard the soldier behind her curse and the sound of wood scuffing but by then she was past the next table and heading for the door.

“Get her!” A man lunged for her, grabbing her arm.

Gabrielle twisted out of his grasp, and yanked herself free, looking desperately around for support. But her audience, only minutes before rapt in attention at her story, now turned their backs and huddled against the walls, giving the soldiers fair access to her.

Ugh. So okay, telling that last story about Xena defeating Bregos was a little obvious but she hadn’t expected to be lynched for it.

Hadn’t expected the soldiers, apparently tipped off, to be listening outside. Waiting, apparently, for her to relate her lover’s clever triumph before they burst inside.

The door opened, and more soldiers entered. Gabrielle turned and evaded them by a hair, then she gave up the door and scrambled onto one of the tables, sending dishes and crocks scattering everywhere as she slipped and skidded across the surface, hopping to the next one as a soldier leaped for her and fell just a tiny bit short.

She ran across the next table, then swerved toward the window as the of Sholeh’s men closed in on her from the kitchen side. “Yahh!”

“Don’t let her escape! The Holy one wants her!” One of the soldier’s leaders bellowed. “Kill the rest of the trash in here, but get her! Get her! A reward pouch to whoever brings her to me!”

Gabrielle caught sight of six men closing in on her, spurred by the offer and she jumped to the last table, then having little other option, she leaped out the window into the darkness beyond.

The ground came up very fast, and she barely had time to get her hands up before she was hitting the dirt with them, the shock jarring up her shoulders as she fell hard and rolled to one side, in a space filled with rushing shadows and the flicker of torches.

It was some kind of gift from the gods she hadn’t hit anyone. With a gasp, she got to her feet and caught her breath, then spotted the men pouring from the door and coming after her and she turned and ran, balling her hands into fists and finding herself very glad she’d eaten a good dinner at least, needing the energy from it now.

The soldiers raced after her, but the narrow lanes worked to her advantage and she bolted over the stone lined path with all the speed she could muster.

Running had never really been a skill of hers, and she hadn't gotten any practice at it since meeting up with Xena. The queen preferred riding for her exercise and oddly enough, climbing in trees, so most of her experience in footracing had been with her sister in her much younger years.

However, it was basic, and she knew how to do it a lot better than turning and trying to fight with the soldiers so she put all her energy into getting as far away from them as she could. She could hear a lot of noise behind her, and then the sound of hoofbeats.

Not good. She spotted a very narrow alley and ducked into it, reasoning unless Sholeh's forces were mounted on Patches cousins they weren't going to follow her mounted through there.

A curse and a yell behind her validated her choice, but she felt something graze her back, then something else hit her hard, and she stumbled forward, losing her balance and crashing into the stone wall of the building on her right hand side, knocking the breath of her her for a long, spinning moment.

Someone grabbed her. She felt fingers tangle in her hair, and instinctively she let out a loud yell, reaching back to grab the hand and half turning to see who had hold of her. She could see a male figure, and the outlines of weapons, and she kicked at him, the sudden and unexpected violence startling him into letting go of her. "Leave me alone!"

The man stared at her angry face for an instant, then reached for his knife just as Gabrielle backpeddled frantically then turned and bolted, spotting an uneven spot in the wall and quickly climbing up it. She got to the top just as the soldier's hand grabbed for her ankle, and for a second, she was hanging there and he was hanging onto her before his fingers slipped on her skin and he slid back.

She pulled herself up onto the top of the wall and scrambled along it, hearing the soldier heaving himself up after her. A horn blew somewhere nearby, and she spotted a line of soldiers heading for where she was, torches held high, and hands pointing.

Well, poo. Gabrielle tried to get her bearings, feeling a chill as a damp wind ruffled her hair and brought goosebumps over her skin. She could smell the sea on it, though, and took that as a sign, climbing up across the roof of the hut away from the direction of the wind.

The soldiers scrambled after her, but their heavier frames quickly started breaking down the thatch and they had to slow down or risk pitching right through the room into it's occupants.

The noise was getting louder, though, and Gabrielle knew she was running out of time. She threw herself over the pitch of the roof and tumbled down the other side, half falling, half skidding down the slope, grabbing hold of anything she could to slow down but finding little more than easily ripped thatch that came away in her fingers as she spun off the edge of the roof and found herself falling towards the hard ground.

She hit hard, falling to her knees and then flat with the impact, knocking her chin on the stone road and nearly passing out as the darkness closed in very tightly. She thought at first her ears were ringing from it, then she opened her eyes and saw a squadron of soldiers running towards her, filling the road she was on.

She quickly looked in the other direction, only to see another troop coming up from the river and she froze, for a moment, realizing she was in deep trouble now. Frantically, she looked around, but she was surrounded by tall stone walls and it wasn't until she tipped her head back that she realized one of them was the city border.

She scrambled to her feet and bolted for it, and as she came even with the surface she spotted the postern gate, down a side path she was about to be cut off from by the soldiers.

“Like sheep poo I am.” Gabrielle threw herself into motion and raced for the pathway, as the soldiers swerved to cut her off, weapons drawn.

It occurred to her that she should be afraid, and that death was very close, breathing down her neck as she hurtled towards the torchlit sword blades coming fast at her.

She wasn't. She thought maybe Xena was rubbing off on her a little, and then thinking that, she thought of Xena in her entirety and the space between her and the doorway seemed uncalculably vast. She sped up, and her eyes widened as she saw two men loom into her path, holding their arms out to catch her.

She tried to pull up short but they caught her, and swung her around into the wall, throwing their bodies against hers and trapping her against the cold stone surface.

“Get her? Good!” A man yelled. “Drag er back here! Hurry!”

“Fighting us.. Get over and help!” The soldier yelled, as Gabrielle twisted and tried to free herself. “Cut that out, you little bitch!” He slammed his body against hers against the wall and smacked the back of Gabrielle's head.

Gabrielle felt her skin scraped against the rock, and the scent of moss came pungently into her lungs as she was roughly handled by the two soldiers. She hesitated, then she relaxed and went still, letting her body go completely limp.

“W.. Hades!” The other soldier hollared. “You kilt her, Sholeh'll have your nuts, you moron!”

“All I did..”

Gabrielle felt the weight come off her as she sagged towards the ground, her knees hitting the rocks as she slumped against the wall and her attacker let go of her instinctively. She heard the soft crunch of leather on stone as he took a step back, and with a deep breath, she twisted her body and leaped past their two sets of legs into a clear space beyond.

“Hey!”

Her hands hit the stone and she shoved upward, enough to get her feet under her and then she was off, past the gathering troops who made belated grabs for her before they turned to give chase.

She picked up her speed and got between the last building and the wall, and then she aimed for the gateway and just ran as hard as she could for it. Behind her, she could hear scuffling and chaos as the men tried to sort themselves out to follow her into the narrow space.

Taking advantage of that, she raced along the wall and got to the stone arch of the gate, grabbing hold of it and pulling herself around and to a halt as she faced the iron strapped portal. A quick look behind her showed the entire troop of soldiers headed in her direction fast, and she studied the back of the door in a panic, not sure how it was supposed to open.

“Get her!”

“She's trying to escape the city! Hurry! If she gets out..”

Gabrielle fitted her hands around the heavy bar across the inside of the door, feeling the ends of it as the shadows kept her from seeing any details. She could make out huge iron boxes around them, fixed to the door, and holding it firmly in place.

That would keep the door from opening outward, she went to one side of the bar and started to push, but it didn't so much as budge an inch.

Footsteps, much louder. Frantically, she shoved against the bar, but her boots just slid out from under her, giving her little purchase on the stone floor and she started to panic, as she saw the lurid shadows from the torches coming closer and closer.

“Get her! This time, Hades with it! Kill her!” The man in the lead yelled, as he came into sight and started for her, his sword out and ready. “Kill her! We’ll bring her parts back!”

Gabrielle shoved with all her might, feeling the pressure as she held her breath and her ears popped a little. As the soldier reached her, and the blade skimmed towards her face, she dug in and gave it everything she had, knowing at the least, that she’d tried.

She’d tried, damn it. Xena’d been almost right.

She smelt burning pitch, and hot steel, and then her body jerked as something slammed against the door from the other side, and the bar loosened so quickly she pitched forward helplessly with it, her weight and momentum shoving it clear as she fell on top of it and against the arch wall, knocking herself completely out as her head slammed against the ground.

**

“Ow.” Xena caught her balance, and glared at the door she’d just thrown her body at. “Son of a bacchae...” She faced off against it again, then she saw the surface shift and she grabbed the strapping, scant handhold enough, and tensed her fingers, pulling with all her strength.

To her surprise, and likely to her men’s as well, the door opened rapidly, nearly smacking the queen in the face as she bounced backwards. “Whoa.”

She looked inside the walls. What appeared to be an army looked back at her, over the body of her lover, slumped on the ground between them. The men inside stared at her in shock, and for a long moment, everyone just froze in place.

Xena felt a blanket of what seemed like total silence fall over her, in which she could only hear her own heartbeat.

Her eyes fastened on Gabrielle’s body, focusing on the shoulderblades she could see beneath the soft fabric of her shirt. Her lover’s head was at an odd angle to her body and as the seconds lengthened, and she saw no movement, a growing horror in her guts came viciously home.

No.

No. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way, this time.

Xena drew in a slow breath, then became conscious of where she was and with a shudder, she blocked off the part of her she could feel unraveling into pieces so she could deal with the here and now.

That pain would come later, with all the rest of it. “Boys, let’s go.”

Then she walked forward through the door, stepping carefully over Gabrielle’s still form. “I’m going to kill all of you.” She said, moving from a walk to a fluid run in the blink of an eye as her sword came up and she gutted the first man closest to her, yanking the blade back out and kicking the body to one side.

Her men came pouring in behind her, and in a moment, Sholeh’s men broke out of their stupor and there was full scale battle going on.

Xena didn't much care. She fell into a place where all that mattered to her was killing these people, these damned soldiers.

She felt empty, aware vaguely of a deep pain in her chest, but she set that aside and just kept moving, kept stabbing kept slashing, wanting the smell of blood to fill her lungs as she batted aside enemy swords as though they were straws.

She heard yelling. She spun completely around with her sword held out straight and hoped none of her own men were in its path. She saw a man drop to his knees before her and she lifted her blade straight up and brought it down, splitting his skull, not even really caring if he were friend or foe.

Her arms ached, after a while. She wondered how long they'd been fighting, when suddenly she found herself against the opposite wall and she turned, the fog lifting as she took in the sight of a carpet of bodies laid out between herself and the doorway.

There was no more yelling. The sound of steel clashing had faded. Some soldiers were writhing on the ground, one not an arms length from her. He turned and thrust an arm up, his eyes rolling in agony and she took a step forward, reaching down to yank his head back with one hand.

She cut his throat with the sword in her other, observing the spurt of blood that nearly reached her waist before she dropped him and turned away.

Her men gathered quickly, reduced in number by three, and several more injured. As her eyes swept over them, the wounded men straightened and tried to hide their injuries, and she wondered dispassionately if they were just trying to act tough or if they were afraid she'd kill them for getting hurt.

Not unreasonable. She'd done it before.

Only Jens had the guts to move in her direction, her captain watching her with a mixture of apprehension and something else. "We're in, Mistress."

"Yeah." Xena agreed.

Jens waited, but after a few seconds it was plain Xena was done talking. "You want me to scout a place for us to tuck up?"

Why? Xena looked around. It seemed as good a place to die as any, and she really felt like just standing around until more of Sholeh's soldiers showed up. Her plans had dissipated like just so much fog and she found herself losing interest in the city, or Sholeh, or her army, or much of anything else.

Maybe more soldiers would show up soon, and she'd have to deal with that instead of having to deal with the walk across the narrow space back to the door way.

Back to the huddled figure near it.

If enough soldiers showed up, maybe she'd never have to deal with that at all.

"Mistress?"

Instead of answering, Xena gathered up her tattered courage and walked away from him, away from the far wall and back towards the gate. She was vaguely aware of her new recruit Perdicus struggling to his feet, holding a cut across one arm but she brushed past him without acknowledgement and found herself facing the door, still open to the outside.

With a bone deep sigh, she reached out and pulled it shut. Then she set the point of her sword into the stone and leaned the hilts against the wall before lowered herself wearily to her one knee next to Gabrielle's body.

“All right, all of you.” Jens voice floated past her. “Get yerself what weapons you like, and move this trash to the side here. We’ll find a place to hide up once her Majesty’s finished.”

Her Majesty was finished. Xena rested both her battered hands on her knee and reflected on how meaningless it all was.

She’d disperse the men in the city, she decided. Then she’d just go and give herself up to Sholeh. It would keep the stupid bitch from heading for the stronghold, and she was pretty sure the Persian would think of some clever, painful way to kill her.

Surely, it would hurt less than it did right now. Xena bowed her head a little, and bit the inside of her lip, taking a moment to regain control before she reached down and touched Gabrielle’s face, moving the pale hair back a little to expose the rounded cheekbone beneath.

A few memories floated into her mind’s eye. Her first meeting with Gabrielle. Their first kiss. That first picnic out in the stupid garden.

A brief image of the fireplace in her chambers, Gabrielle kneeling before it, looking back over her shoulder at Xena and smiling.

Xena closed her eyes, and exhaled. Then she opened them up again and let her thumb brush lightly over Gabrielle’s lips in a silent farewell.

And then she froze in place, going so still she might have been a statue kneeling there in the doorway put in place by a demented sculptor who had no understanding of the use of an entrance.

Her world narrowed down to her fingertips, and the impossible sensation of warmth across the skin on her thumb and she watched in dazed disbelief as the surface under her hand twitched and moved a little, and the warmth increased.

She lowered her other hand, shaking, to Gabrielle’s neck, her fingers touching the side of it and feeling the flutter against them. “By the gods.” She whispered. “Gabrielle.”

As if in answer, the pale lashes stirred, then they lifted halfway.

They looked at each other. Gabrielle’s mouth twitched a bit. “G.. Got the door pen.” She rasped. “Huh?”

“Knew you could.” Xena whispered back, her entire mind doing somersaults. The suddenly conflicting emotions were just too much for her to deal with and she had to push them aside, her body caught between wanting to cry and wanting to scream with joy and neither reaction really possible at the moment.

“Inn. Down the road.” Gabrielle’s eyes closed again. “Ow.”

Inn. “Jens.” Xena cleared her throat of the abrupt hoarseness. “Find an inn nearby. We can hole up there until we figure out what to take next.”

“Aye.” Jens sounded profoundly relieved. “Leave the dead ones here?”

“Yea.” Xena was carefully sorting her lover out, feeling along her back and neck for any obvious injuries. She could see her ribcage expanding strongly now, and she wondered how in the Hades she’d missed it before.

Stupid, really, to jump to conclusions like that.

Stupid.

Stupid, Xena, to make yourself crazy like that for no reason.

Satisfied, she gently gathered Gabrielle up in her arms, then stood, cradling her. She turned to look out at the crooked, narrow lane as if seeing it for the first time, the memories of the battle fading abruptly as she focused on what they'd do next.

Now that there was a next she had to care about again. Xena mustered a little smile, as she carried Gabrielle out into the street, stepping over the dead bodies as her men gathered around her. Pity for them, she mused. They'd probably have ended up living longer if her partner hadn't.

Too bad. "Let's go." Xena said. "Down that back way. Stay out of sight if you can and keep your eyes peeled." She eased past Perdicus, whose eyes, suddenly, focused on her burden as he started in surprise. "Move it."

She was past him, before he could answer, and the men clustered in behind her, blocking his path as they moved off into the shadows, leaving death behind them.

**

Part 20

Xena poked her head around the edge of a wall, peering cautiously down a long, narrow alleyway filled mostly with garbage and shadows. "This way?" She muttered into Gabrielle's ear. "You sure?"

Gabrielle lifted her cheek up off Xena's shoulder and squinted down the alley. "Yes.. there's a bigger street on the other side and that goes down to the docks or up to the inn." She put her head back down. "Boy, I feel crummy."

"Me too." Xena sighed.

"I could try walking."

"Shut up." The queen turned her head. "Jens, take a walk through there. Make sure half a damned legion isn't waiting on the other side."

"Aye." Her captain slipped past her and ducked into the alley, drawing a long dagger from his belt.

The rest of the men were strung out behind her, plastered flat against the wall and in a bit of shelter due to the angle of the buildings. From time to time, she could hear shouts and bugles from the direction of the main gates, but so far they'd remained undetected.

Incredible. Xena shook her head again, convinced she could hear something shaking inside her skull when she did so. She hoped she could keep it all together long enough for them to get under some kind of cover and having to carry Gabrielle wasn't making her life any more enjoyable.

She could of course have ordered one of the men to carry her but she'd just as likely cut her own hand off voluntarily so she simply sucked it up and leaned against the wall, waiting to see if they could proceed or not.

She hoped it would not be not. She had no real backup plan and only a marginal regular plan and the edge of her hearing was detecting a rumble of thunder that meant sooner rather than later they'd be skulking around in the rain on top of it all.

A low whistle caught her attention, and she peered around the corner again, seeing Jens outlined in the dim light, making a come ahead gesture.

“Yay.” Xena uttered almost sub vocally. “Let’s go.” She tossed the order over her shoulder and rounded the corner, carefully stepping over a fallen piece of timber before she continued down the alleyway towards where Jens was waiting.

Thunder rolled overhead again, and she could smell rain on the air, which was a relief after all the smells of the city bombarding her sensitive nose. She came up even with her captain and they both warily peered into the open space beyond the narrow space.

In the darkness, it was hard to say what they were looking at. There were walls on all sides of them, looming over their heads and paths angling off in several directions. Xena cocked her head and sniffed the air, catching a bare hint of the sea but it was far too faint for her to figure out where it was coming from.

“There.” Gabrielle nudged her, releasing one arm from around Xena’s neck, and pointing. “That’s the back wall of the inn.”

Xena studied the wall, spotting the small doorway set into it. “That the way in?”

“Uh huh.”

The rain started, spattering on top of her head unexpectedly. “What’s inside the door?”

“Bunch of little rooms, and then the big one.” Gabrielle murmured.

Xena considered again. “You leave the runt in your room?”

Gabrielle managed a tiny snicker. “He’s in the stable.” She said. “Probably more space in there.”

The queen nodded decisively. “All right, let’s move. We go around the wall end there, and get into the stable.” She ordered, in a low tone. “If we can get out of sight, we can regroup, and start the next leg of the plan.”

The soldier next to her nodded seriously and turned to whisper her order to the man behind him, and it passed down the line in the darkness. The queen waited for the hushed sounds to end, before she nudged Jens. “Move.”

Her captain walked slowly out into the path, looking both directions as they crossed into the open, with no place to readily hide. They were halfway down the lane to where the next cross opening was, when voices abruptly sounded coming towards them, loud and angry and numerous.

For a second, they all froze. Then Xena lived up to her reputation and led from the front, turning and bolting back along the path towards the small door in the inn’s wall. She reached it as the flicker of torches lit the curve of the wall and got the door open, somehow fitting herself and Gabrielle through it without gravely injuring either of them.

With both her hands occupied with holding her lover, Xena realized as she cleared the door that she was in an awkward, if not stupendously stupidly deadly position to meet any threat that she might come up against. But the hall was horrifically narrow, and she barged forward anyway, clearing space for her men to enter behind her.

A door to her right presented itself as she heard voices coming towards them from the hall, and she shouldered it open, ducking inside and finding herself in a very small room that was very dark, and oddly smelt faintly like peaches. “Ah.”

“There’s space around the back of the bed.” Gabrielle told her quickly. “But I don’t think..”

Xena moved around the barely seen furniture. “All of you in here. Fast. Shut the door.”

“Uh.. Xena?”

The sound of twenty some men crowding into a space perhaps large enough for three followed, soft clashes of weapons mixed with grunts and cursing, and the sound of creaking floorboards. There was a scrape of wood against the floor and then a light crunch as a soldier landed on a chair, then somehow, somehow, the door was closed behind them and everyone managed to stop making noise as footsteps rang outside.

“Stupid wench!” One of the voices said, in disgust. “Hope they got holt of her, yeah, and whipped her good!”

“Broke the place up, bastards.” Another voice answered. “Wasn’t right.”

“Shut up, or you’ll be whipped next!”

Xena got into the far corner and put her back to the wall, taking solace only in the fact that in all the absolute crap her world was in right now, the one thing good that was happening was Gabrielle’s breath warming the side of her neck.

Absolute crap, otherwise.

“Hey, Xena?”

“Shh.” The queen murmured. “Lemme rest for a quarter candlemark before I’ve gotta kill someone or croak myself, okay?”

“Um..” Gabrielle lowered her voice. “You can put me down. I think I can stand up now. Maybe. I feel better.”

Xena slowly released her, feeling the blond woman’s feet touch the floor pretty much as her arms were about to give out anyway. She circled Gabrielle with them instead, as her companion gratefully leaned against her, and they stood that way in silence, listening to the angry voices fade away.

It was dark, and Xena allowed herself a very brief moment of peace, resting her cheek against her lover’s hair as she tried to figure out what the Hades she was going to do next.

Screaming in frustration occurred to her, and seemed like an attractive notion but she fought to order her thoughts instead, and prepared herself to speak to the men tightly surrounding them.

After all, they were here, and alive, right? Even Gabrielle was alive. Xena stroked the back of her companion’s head, feeling gently around her skull until she detected a lump over one ear.

“Ow.” Gabrielle murmured softly. “That hurts.”

“Bet it does.” Xena was glad enough to postpone her speech, reasoning it gave the inn’s other inhabitants a chance to clear out anyway. “So tell me, muskrat.”

Gabrielle’s arms tightened around her in a damp, but delightful way. “Tell you?”

“Were the stories so bad they were chasing your ass out of town?” The queen asked, in a conversational tone. She heard shifting around her, as the men relaxed, at least as much as they could given the circumstances. “They must have lousier taste than I’d thought.”

“No.” Her lover murmured. “Well..” She backtracked. “They were fine until I told a story about you.”

“Ahhhh.”

"I guess some of the soldiers were listening.. they came running in and tried to catch me." Gabrielle went on, after a pause. "And then everything went sort of crazy."

"Mm." The queen rested her chin on the top of Gabrielle's head.

"And then it got really dark."

Xena went still, her eyes flicking back and forth scanning the shadows in the room. "Dark?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle was silent for a bit. "I heard you calling me." She went on suddenly. "And then I woke up in the middle of the fight. It was really strange."

"I was calling you?" Xena's brow creased as she tried to remember the battle, or yelling in the middle of it.

"Yeah." Her lover seemed positive. "Far away, then a lot louder. You sounded pretty pissed off. So I guess I thought it would be a good idea to go find you." She paused again. "Or something. Anyway, then I heard a lot of noise and I opened my eyes and there you were fighting."

"Ah huh."

"Boy, I was glad to see you."

Xena looked down at her. "I was glad to see you too, muskrat." She replied. "Ya done good."

"I did? I thought I messed everything up with my story."

It was too dark to see, but she knew Gabrielle was smiling, since it changed her voice a little. "Ya did, but in a good way." She gave her lover a hug. "Look, we're here, inside the city, and we're not dead."

"That's true."

Xena cocked her ears, but heard little past the door other than some far off bugles. "Okay." She said, in a louder voice she meant the soldiers to hear. "So."

Several of them cleared their throats.

Xena had to take a moment to stifle her sense of the ridiculous, before she could apply herself seriously to the task at hand. "All right." She said. "First thing we need to do is take over this joint, and get rid of any Persian garbage still lying around."

"Locals might not like it." Jens commented.

"I think they will." Gabrielle interrupted him unexpectedly. "I don't think they like the Persians being here one bit. They're taking all their stuff, and beating all of them up."

Unseen in the darkness, Xena bestowed a kiss on her lover's head. "Yeah?"

"I saw it." Gabrielle said. "And they really liked the story about you."

Xena grinned. "Even though you got chased?"

"I got chased when I told them how smart you were and how you tricked Bregos." Gabrielle said. "That was when the soldiers came in and everything went nuts."

"Ahhhhh." Xena nodded to herself. "Jens, take the men, and clean this place out. If you find someone who likes Persians, kill them."

“Aye.” Her captain seemed glad to have something to do other than stand in the dark. “You heard Her Majesty. Get that door open, let’s move out.’

A square of very dim light appeared accompanied by the squeak of leather hinges, bringing a very welcome gust of fresher air, tinged with woodsmoke. The soldiers slowly filed out, drawing their weapons as they moved down the hallway and gods be blessedly emptying the tiny room.

At last, the space was empty of everything but Xena and Gabrielle, and both exhaled in relief at exactly the same moment.

“Wow.” Gabrielle found herself being bumped backwards, and she sat down abruptly on the bed. “Aren’t we going with them?”

Xena slowly let herself sink to her knees. She rested her elbows on the bed and rested her head in her hands. “Not right now.”

“Xena?”

“Got any really good drink in here?”

Hesitantly, Gabrielle reached out to touch Xena’s head, the dark hair still damp from the rain. “I have a little of that.. red stuff.”

“Gimme.”

“Are you okay?”

“Gimme.”

“Oh boy.”

**

One cup of liquor and a handful of herbs later, Xena gathered the strength to stand up and let herself down onto the bed, stretching out carefully in the warm candlelight as she listened to her troops progress. “Damn.”

Gabrielle sat down next to her. “How did a horse fall on you?” She asked. “Did Tiger come back?” She ran her fingers over the queen’s belly, rubbing lightly in gentle circles.

“No.” Xena stared at the soot covered ceiling. “I just did something stupid and paid for it.” She blinked a few times, as the herbs hit her empty stomach and the room retreated a little. “You know how that goes.”

“Um..”

“Okay, maybe you don’t.” Xena managed a half grin, then she patted the bed. “Lay down.”

Lying down seemed like a good idea. Gabrielle stretched out on her back next to her lover and folded her hands over her stomach. “So what happens next?”

“Beats me.”

Gabrielle looked over at the queen. “Is it one of those days again?”

Another smile briefly crossed Xena’s face.

Her companion exhaled, and shifted, grimacing as she moved her shoulders. “Ow.””

“What?” Xena turned her head.

The blond woman rubbed her neck. “I think I twisted something.”

A flash of memory brought Xena a cold, stark image of Gabrielle lying on the ground, her head at that odd, unnatural angle.

An angle she knew, really, having broken men’s necks before on more than one occasion. Was that why she’d been so damn sure Gabrielle had... She paused the thought, hearing an echo of the stark loneliness of that moment far too loudly.

“Xena?”

The queen rolled onto her side and then hitched herself up on her elbow, extending one hand out to gently feel the younger woman’s neck. She watched the blond lashes fluttered a little at her touch. “Here?”

“Yeah.”

Awkwardly, Xena squirmed closer, then she laid down flat on the bed and got both hands on either side of Gabrielle’s head. “Hold still.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle was perfectly content to do just that. She felt very tired, and a lot of things hurt and though it seemed very strange to be laying down in the middle of an inn with fighting going on all around her she knew that if Xena said it was all right, it just was.

And even if it wasn’t, it was anyway because it was how Xena wanted it. “Ow.” Gabrielle murmured, as she felt a pressure against the side of her neck, where it had been hurting, an odd, pinched feeling that made uncomfortable darts of pain down her arm.

“You’re going to think I’m ripping your head off. Don’t move.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle grimaced as the grip tightened and she felt sudden pressure pushing down on her shoulders at the same time. “Oo.”

It felt very strange. Not really like Xena was trying to rip her head off, but like things were moving around that weren’t supposed to. She stifled a gasp as the queen’s hands tightened and twisted and before she could so much as squeak she felt a pop and a clicking and then a warm flush that extended across her shoulders. “Oh, that was weird!”

Xena was quiet, her fingers just probing gently along Gabrielle’s neck. “Better?” She finally asked.

Gabrielle wiggled her shoulders, then turned her head right and left, surprised when the motion didn’t bother her. “Oh.. yeah.” She relaxed a little more on the bed’s surface. “That’s a lot better.. I think I twisted it when I hit that door. I remember my head hitting my shoulder, and then..”

She paused, as Xena’s hand touched her face. “It hurt a lot, and then it stopped. Just like that. I thought it was strange.” She let the words trail off as she heard the queen draw breath, with a catch that was almost like a gasp.

A gentle, warm stream of air brushed her scalp, as the queen’s thumb gently caressed her cheek. “Xena?”

“Mm?”

“Are you okay?”

“No.” Xena replied. “I’m not okay at all.”

Gabrielle carefully turned herself over, but she found she felt much better already and she was able to settle on her belly, folding her hands and letting her chin rest of them as she studied her friend in the dim light of the candle. “You don’t look so good.” She admitted, watching the bloodshot eyes watch her filled with a roiling emotion she hadn’t seen since the early days of their relationship.

“Well.” Xena mimicked her posture. “I’ve been crawling on the ground half the night, had a half dozen brutes hack parts of me off, had a horse fall on my ass, and then had to think you croaked all in one night.” She paused. “I’ve had better times being whipped in a dungeon.”

The words were typical Xena dark humor, but Gabrielle could see the pained, deep furrows across the queen’s forehead, and the shadows of an unexpected grief in her eyes. After a brief, silent pause, she reached out and covered Xena’s hand with her own. “But you didn’t really think I..”

The queen’s eyes closed at the touch, and she turned her face away a little, swallowing audibly.

Gabrielle felt an uncomfortable twisting in her guts, and she thought again about that quiet darkness she’d fallen into and the smell of flowers she’d thought she imagined. Of course, she had imagined it, because she was here.

Right? Of course. She flexed her hand around Xena’s, reassured by the warmth. The queen had just saw her lying there, so naturally she’d assumed the worst because that’s just how Xena was.

As if to confirm that, her companion opened her eyes and straightened back up, watching her with a normal, skeptical expression. “You do crazy things sometimes.” She shrugged one shoulder. “Who knew?”

Offhand words, but Gabrielle could see the strain on her friend’s face and she eased her other hand out from under her head and sorted Xena’s bangs out, stiffened from dried sweat or worse. She smoothed them back out of the queen’s eyes and found herself drawn into them, unable to look away from the silent weariness there.

“C’mon, Xena.” Gabrielle had to pause to clear her voice of it’s huskiness. “I wouldn’t just go and die on you.. and miss all the fun, would I?” She felt Xena’s hand turn upwards, and clasp hers in a reassuringly strong grip. “We’re just getting started.”

Xena studied her, then she kissed the back of Gabrielle’s hand and laid her cheek against their joined fingers. “That’s good.” She said quietly. “Cause if you did croak, I’d never see you again and damned if that wasn’t kicking my ass.”

Unsure of what she meant, Gabrielle just remained silent, absorbing the unusual look of melancholy on her companions face.

“I never cared about spending eternity in Tartarus alone before.” Xena went on, in a quiet tone. “It really... just hit me.”

Gabrielle tried to imagine what that would be like, and found she couldn’t. She’d never really thought about dying or what would happen afterward, though she knew about Tartarus of course, and the Elysian Fields, and Hades.

Would she go to Elysia?

Would she want to, knowing Xena felt she wouldn’t?

Would she want to be alone, even in the Fields?

It was a strange feeling to be thinking about it, and she didn't feel comfortable considering death, and dying even though she'd been closer to both since she'd met Xena than ever before in her life.

She'd barely had a life yet, after all. "Do you think Lila's in Elysia?" She asked suddenly.

Xena stared past her, at the far wall. Outside, the sound of clashing swords echoed in the room suddenly lending the moment a touch of the surreal. "I'm sure she is." She whispered, a hoarse yell floated through the open door. "Why, you worried about having someone to talk to?"

"No." Gabrielle squirmed forward and touched her forehead to the queen's. She felt a little shift as Xena responded to the touch, and the queen's fingers tightened on hers. "I'd rather talk to you for eternity."

Somewhere, Xena found a smile. "You don't get to pick."

Gabrielle met her eyes squarely. "Probably not but I bet you do."

Xena's breath caught and her eyes widened a little as they stared at each other across the distance of inches.

"I mean, c'mon Xena." Gabrielle's voice gentled instinctively. "I can't imagine anyone making you stay anywhere you didn't want to." A warm flood of affection came over her, and she kissed the top of Xena's head, the ache in her chest almost overcoming her. "I'm glad we're together again. I really missed you."

The queen shifted and rolled over, grabbing hold of Gabrielle and pulling her into an awkward, tangled hug, squeezing her with powerful arms in a mash of silent, unspoken relief.

"Urf." Gabrielle felt the knots her own guts unraveling. "That felt great."

"Yeah well." Xena said, in an almost ordinary voice. "If you're done making me feel like crap, mind giving my back a rub?" She released Gabrielle and rolled onto her stomach again.

"Sure." Gabrielle gently disengaged her hand, then she clambered across the bed, settling on her knees over her lover's body. She moved aside Xena's damp hair, then paused. "Oh."

"I don't like the sound of that."

Gingerly, Gabrielle unlaced the back of Xena's leathers, where even in the dim light she could see dark, bruised skin. "Boy that must hurt."

Xena crossed her ankles and rested her cheek on her folded hands. "Don't feel a damn thing."

"Really?"

"Not a damn thing."

**

Jens leaned against the doorsill, his sword held loosely in one hand. "Places is clear, Mistress." He waited for the queen to turn, then he backed out of the opening to clear room for her. "Not much fuss put up."

"Good." Xena wiped her hands on the bit of linen left by the basin and shifted her newly eased shoulders. Gabrielle's industrious massage hadn't done a damn thing for the bruises, but just those few minutes of that gentle touch had done much to restore her seriously rattled composure.

Not that she'd admit anything of that, of course. "Let's see what we got. C'mon, muskrat." She dropped the linen and headed for the door, patting her armor to make sure it was all back in place as she exited their scrubby little nest into the hall.

Gabrielle uncurled herself from her appealingly touselled sprawl on the bed and got to her feet, wishing mournfully that the fight had lasted just a little bit longer. "Okay."

She did feel better for the short rest, though her head was still aching like crazy. At least Xena had sorted her neck out, and she'd had a chance to catch her breath, and after all they'd gotten some time to talk and snuggle.

She followed Xena out of the room, resisting the urge to latch on to the back of her armor. The inn was dark and mostly quiet now, and she could hear things being dragged behind her, and the swing of the back door opening and shutting.

In the distance, she could still hear horns blowing, but there were no more running feet, or shouting people nearby, and she followed Xena into the big room with more curiosity than fear. "Did you find the innkeeper, Jens?"

The soldier turned, startled at being addressed by her. "Ah... whats 'e look like?" He stuttered a little. "Not so many of em was left in here."

"It's a her." Gabrielle eased past Xena and looked around, the inside of the inn she'd last seen earlier now broken and shattered almost beyond recognition. "Oh.. Wow."

"Yeah, what a dump." Xena looked around disinterestedly. "But at least there's room to move around. Get all the men gathered up in here" She instructed, as she went to the front door and looked out. "Ah."

Gabrielle ducked her head under Xena's arm and peered out. "It's dark."

"Night does that." The queen replied dryly. "It's funny that way." She leaned out a little. "Is that the stable, there?"

"Yes." Gabrielle pulled back and turned as she heard people entering behind them. Three of the soldiers entered, then a fourth, and she found her eyes focusing on the last man's face with a sense of complete and utter surprise. "Perdicus?"

It was like the world turned upside down for a moment, finding her childhood friend here, of all places, and of all times, a sudden flash of a life she'd left behind and a person she'd been then but certainly wasn't now.

The man stopped in his tracks and stared back at her for a long moment. Then he moved forward again. "Gabrielle.. It is you!" His eyes widened.

Xena turned and shut the door, leaning against it and watching with mild interest as her newest acquisition approached. A quick glance at her lovers face confirmed the former Persian soldier had told the truth and she caught a flash of startled embarrassment there that intrigued her.

"It is you." Perdicus repeated. "I can't believe it. What are you doing here?"

It was shocking, and for a few seconds Gabrielle found herself speechless. "What are you doing here?" She countered, taking the hands he'd extended after a pause. "Were you in their army?"

Perdicus looked away, then back at her. "I was... I didn't know you were here... did you get away during the attack?"

“N.. No.” Gabrielle took a step back, then stopped as she hit something big and warm behind her, feeling a weight on her shoulders as Xena draped her arms over them. “I.. Um..”

“She’s with me.” Xena supplied helpfully. “Now go siddown. You can catch up on old burned out home week later.” She stared Perdicus down until he let go of Gabrielle’s hands and backed off, joining the rest of her men as they filed into the room.

Then she cocked her head and looked down at Gabrielle, who had one of those scrunched looks on her face. “Friend of yours?”

Gabrielle leaned back against her. “Yeah.” She murmured. “Boy, that was a shock.”

“Mm.” Xena felt her own expression scrunch up, and she felt an unpleasant tickling in her guts she didn’t like at all. “Good or bad shock?”

“Just weird.” Gabrielle said. “I didn’t think I’d ever see him again.”

“Mm.” The queen watched as the last of the solders entered, and Jens closed the door behind them. They were settling on the remains of what were once tables and chairs, most broken, all collapsed in the midst of a tumble of dishes and cups laying everywhere.

Perdicus had taken a seat in one corner, and he was staring at Gabrielle with an unfathomable expression. “Was he a good friend?”

Gabrielle considered the question. “We were betrothed to be married.” She said, after a brief pause. “So yeah, I guess.”

The unpleasant prickling got stronger. Xena decided she didn’t like the feeling at all. “Ah.”

“I used to think I was in love with him.” Gabrielle went on, oblivious to her friends discomfort. “Until I met you.”

“Ah.” Xena repeated the grunt with an entirely different inflection. “Well, your taste has gotten a lot better, that’s for damn sure.” She gave her companion a kiss on the top of her head, before she untangled herself from her and gathered up her wits to address the men.

It took some gathering. She was exhausted, and now part of her brain was annoyingly off somewhere wrestling over this new development that made her want to simply spit sheep boy on her sword to rid herself of him.

Bloody idiotic distraction. “All right.” Xena booted a fallen stool and caught it as it flew up into the air. She set it upright and perched on it, biting the inside of her lip as her back nearly seized up again. “First thing we need to do is find out what’s outside the door.” She looked at one of her own men. “Take a couple of these grunts who can keep quiet and go see what’s around.”

“Aye, Mistress.” The man nodded quietly.

“Second...” Xena stopped speaking, as they all heard voices approaching. “Get down.” She was off the stool and by the door in a heartbeat, her sword in her hand as she pressed her back against the wall. “Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle limped over to the opening, cocking her head to listen. The voices got louder as they approached, words still indistinct, but the tone forceful and angry. She leaned against the door and half closed her eyes, trying to remember... “I think..”

“Think fast.” Xena had her hand on the door latch. “Then duck, unless you want a warm red bath.”

“Wait..” Gabrielle held her hand up. “Let me talk to them.”

The crunching sound of boots approaching the door was now very loud. The voices had ceased, and Gabrielle felt her heartbeat increasing as the latch worked and the wood of the door started to move.

A quick glance at Xena showed her the queen’s profile in deep shadow, eyes intent on her, watching.

Waiting.

Trusting her.

Gabrielle felt the weight of that on her shoulders as she caught the door, stopping it from opening.

“Lennat? Is that you?”

Shock, and a quickly indrawn breath. “Gabrielle? What are you doing here? How did you get away?” Lennat spoke quickly, glancing over his shoulder. “See, Beren? I told you they didn’t get her.”

He put his hand against the door and Gabrielle gave back a step, but she kept it from opening fully. “I hid.” She said, truthfully. “They must have gotten distracted by all the stuff going on out there..what is going on? Do you know?”

To one side, she heard a barely audible chuckle, but she kept her attention focused on Lennat, leaning forward towards him as he and his companion bent their heads towards her.

“They’ve all gone..well, most of em.” Lennat said, in a low tone. “Something scared em.. They were yelling about an attack, and Xena... they went crazy when you told that story!”

“Ah huh.” Gabrielle murmured. “I saw them all.. Uh.. When I was hiding.”

“Anyway.. Listen.” Lennat looked around, then back at her. “I know you’re here.. For her.” He said. “I know who you are.”

Gabrielle watched his face intently, very aware of the tall figure right at her elbow, unseen to the two men. “You do?” She jumped a little, as a loud bang was heard in the distance. “I mean, I told you who I was.”

“No.” Lennat leaned against the door, moving it not an inch since Xena was now leaning on the other side of it. “I know **who** you are.” He gazed at her. “But it’s okay. We won’t tell them. We want to help you.”

“That’s right.” Beren agreed, glancing behind him. “Let us in.. They’ll come in a minute, and we’ll be spliced.”

“Help me?” Gabrielle could feel the cool chill of Xena’s blade resting against her upper arm, and it raised goosebumps across her neck. “What do you mean? What do you want to do?”

Lennat looked at her like she was looney. “What do you think Gabrielle? We want our city back. We want the bloody Persians out of here before there’s nothing left. You said it.. Why are you pretending not to understand what I mean?”

Gabrielle could feel the blade gently patting the back of her neck. “You want to help Xena, you mean.” She said, quietly.

Lennat rolled his eyes. “Yes.”

“Hurry!” Beren hissed. “They’re gonna come back here!”

“Yeah, c’mon. Let’s get moving... open the door, Gabrielle! Let us in!” Lennat urged. “We do want to help.. What ever is going on, we want to be part of it.”

Gabrielle took a step back, and let the door swing open, revealing the room behind her full of men with long swords, and dour faces, and the tall, backlit figure outlined in dim torchlight who cradled a blade still stained in her arms. “Okay. C’mon in.”

Lennat stumbled forward as the door moved, then he pulled up short, staring at the ring of soldiers as Gabrielle slipped behind him and closed the door again, giving Beren a tiny smile as he jumped at the sound.

Xena took a step forward, and the light from the torch near the door suddenly revealed her angular features, and the pale, glinting eyes. “Be careful what you ask for, boys.” The queen drawled. ‘And you better have meant it, or your heads’ll be decorating the poles out there when the sun comes up. Got me?’

Lennat stared at her, then turned his head to look at Gabrielle, who gave him another small smile, and a shrug of her shoulders. “Oh.”

“Got any friends?” Xena asked.

“Uh..”

“You’re gonna need em.”

**

It was candlemarks later when Gabrielle slipped out of the door and let it shut behind her. The courtyard was pitch dark and silent around her, and she stepped carefully across the broken flagstones as she made her way towards the stable.

She was so tired, her body was aching with the need to sleep and she knew if she was in the big room with all the soldiers and Xena’s restive energy getting any rest would be darn near to impossible.

So she’d told Xena she was going to visit Patches, and now she eased carefully through the rickety door and into the stable lit only by the single candle lantern hung just inside. “Hey Patches.”

The pony was in his stall where she’d left him, and now he poked his head over the divider and extended his nose towards her in greeting, seemingly glad to see her.

“Hey boy.” Gabrielle found herself glad, in any case, and she scratched his forehead and hugged him with a sense of simple pleasure. “I’m glad you’re okay, and those guys didn’t bother you.” She felt the prickly hairs on the pony’s nose tickle her arm. “I had to run when they were chasing me, Patches, but dont’ you worry. I was never going to leave you here.”

She released the pony and went over to the broken down hay crib, where a few lonely bales were left stuck in the rear. “Let me get you some breakfast.” Leaning over the edge of the crib, she grabbed at a bale, then yelped as she overbalanced and tumbled into the straw head over heels.

Patches snorted.

“Pah.” Gabrielle spit a bit of hay out of her mouth. “Boy, this sure hasn’t been my day, Patches.” She sighed and hauled herself to her feet. “First I get chased, then I get..” She paused for a long moment, her hands plucking at the hay. “Then I get knocked silly, then my old boyfriend shows up.”

Patches rested his chin on the stall divider, his ears flicking towards her.

Gabrielle sighed, and hauled the bale up and over the edge of the stall, letting it fall down into the rough trough on the other side. She climbed over the divider and checked the water trough, finding a small, but fresh supply still running there.

She sat down on the edge of the trough and rested her elbows on her knees, then she let her head rest on her hands as exhaustion overcame her. "Oh boy."

Patches came over and nudged her. She straightened up and let her hands fall to her thighs, glancing around the stable for a place she could just sit down and rest in a while. There was a pile of old sacking in the corner that looked like a good candidate and she hauled herself up and went over to it, prodding it with her boot before she sat down.

You never knew if rats were under there, for one thing, or spiders. Gabrielle leaned back against the stable wall, letting her body relax as she idly watched her pony nibble the fresh hay she'd provided him.

She wished Xena was with her, but she knew the queen was very busy directing the soldiers here and there, and sending them out to get things and find out other things.

It sounded really exhausting, and she was happy that Xena had given her the okay to come out here, though she sort of suspected by the little scowl on her lover's face that the queen wasn't entirely happy about it.

Was she worried Gabrielle would get hurt? She extended her legs and crossed her boots at the ankles, letting the normal, ordinary sound of Patches chewing ease the tension from her. Or did she really want to come out here with her, and take a rest too?

"What do you think, Patches?" Gabrielle addressed her shaggy friend. "You think Xena wants to come here and snuggle with me?"

Patches looked up from his hay, a bit of it sticking out of his mouth as he peered at her from between his shaggy bangs.

It made Gabrielle laugh. "You're so cute." She told the pony, smiling as he ambled over and presented his nose for a scratch. "I'm so glad nothing happened to you Patches.. I wish you'd brought your buddy Tiger with you though."

Patches snorted.

"I know, but I think Xena really misses him, even if she's pretending she doesn't." Gabrielle rubbed the pony's ears. "She does that, y'know. She pretends a lot." She fell silent, thinking about their conversation earlier. "She thought I was dead, Patches. Wasn't that silly of her?"

Patches nibbled her hair, his warm breath tickling her scalp. Gabrielle stroked his cheek as she pictured Xena's face, her expressions far more eloquent than her brusque speech as she felt all over again the ache that had shown so clearly in her lover's eyes.

It was humbling, a little, seeing that pain. She felt a little strange, and more than a little unsettled and she nearly jumped and smacked her head on Patches jaw when the door to the stable abruptly opened and closed.

"Gabrielle?"

Speaking of unsettling. "Over here." Gabrielle watched warily as Perdicus peered around the pony's sturdy form and spotted her. She picked up a bit of hay and offered it to Patches as Perdicus ducked under the rail and approached her, as her tired mind tried to sort out her feelings at seeing him again. "Hi."

“Are you all right?” He sat down on the edge of the trough and studied her.

“Yeah.” Gabrielle answered briefly. “Just getting some rest.”

He folded his hands together. “Sorry.” He murmured. “I guess we’re all supposed to be doing that - at least that’s what she said.” He glanced towards the door. “So I thought I’d come see if I could talk to you for a minute.”

Gabrielle was too tired to either protest, or contribute to the conversation. She merely watched him, noting in the dim light that he’d changed in the year since she’d seen him. His hair was longer, and pulled back into a tiny tail in the back and he wore the armor of a soldier easily, very much at odds with the farmer’s son she’d known.

“I didn’t know what happened to you.” Perdicus was saying. “I got back home... and there was nothing left.”

“I know.” Gabrielle murmured. “It was horrible.” Even as she said it, she realized the memory had faded to the point where she almost felt like it was someone else’s. Her life had changed so much, so fast. “I wondered what happened to you.”

He stared at the floor. “I wondered what happened to you.” He said. “I found the baker, Johan.. You remember him?”

“Yes.”

“He said they took you.”

“Yes.” Gabrielle repeated. “All of us, the kids. Slavers took us.” She gazed at Patches knee, it’s front covered with one of his rusty namesakes. “Lila didn’t make it.”

“Oh.” Perdicus said, in a small voice. “I’m sorry.”

Yeah. Gabrielle said. “So how did you end up in the Persian army?” She asked, wishing wistfully that Xena would appear, since there were so many questions she knew he’d ask she had no interest in answering.

As the thought echoed in her mind, as if by magic the outer door to the barn opened and a gust of cool, water scented air entered along with a tall dark haired figure that seemed to fill the space with a edgy, restive energy.

“Did I tell you to come out here?” Xena asked, sharply. “Beat it.”

Perdicus got up and edged away from the queen. “I was just talking to my... we came from the same town. I wanted to see if she was okay.” He explained.

“She’s fine. Move it.” Xena drew her sword and took a step towards him. “Go do something useful.”

Perdicus looked back at Gabrielle, who was merely sitting there, watching them. After a moment, his shoulders dropped and he meekly walked past the glowering queen, slipping out of the door and closing it without any further comment.

Xena walked over to the stall divider and leaned against it, studying her lover with narrowed eyes.

“Thanks.” Gabrielle said, simply.

The queen’s demeanor shifted, and she put her sword away, stepping over the divider and joining Gabrielle on her throne of sacks. “I wasn’t interrupting a romantic moment?”

“Um.. No.” Gabrielle waited for Xena to settle herself, then she snuggled up and put her arms around her and hugged her as hard as her tired arms would allow. “I was just wishing for you.” She told her lover. “Are you done planning?”

“For now.” Xena gave Patches a scratch on the nose. “Hey runt... you keeping an eye on my muskrat here?” She asked the pony. “You should have bitten that little punk in the ass. What’s wrong with you, huh?”

“He’s not really a punk.” Gabrielle said. “I was just really tired and I didn’t want to talk to him.” She felt Xena’s chest heave as she took, and then slowly expelled a deep breath, and she could sense the queen was upset, restless motion twitching across her arms and shoulders. “Hey, Xena?”

“Hey what?” The queen muttered.

“When we take over the city, can you find us a bathtub?”

For a long moment, Xena was completely silent. Then she started laughing, an odd sound in the darkness of the stable that made Patches bob his head and snort. “Bwhahahaha.”

Gabrielle smiled, just to hear the laughter. She didn’t think she’d really meant to be funny, but sometimes you had to take what you could get especially when Xena was involved.

“Gods.” The queen finally wound down to chuckles. “Muskrat, you are something else.” She ruffled Gabrielle’s hair affectionately. “Damn, I needed that.”

Gabrielle felt the sense of anxiety that had been wearing on her ease and she was glad simply to be in Xena’s presence. The city had been and was a scary place. She put her head down on Xena’s shoulder and sighed.

“When we take over this city.” Xena told her, the queen arms wrapping around her with comforting security. “When we kick those bastard Perisans out, and rob them blind, I’ll get you a lot more than a bathtub.”

“Are we going to do that?”

“Well.” Xena sighed. “We’re gonna try. What the Hades, right? Might as well go for Zeus’s brass balls.”

Gabrielle closed her eyes, unable to keep them open a moment longer. Whatever Xena had in mind was fine with her, so long as whatever she had in mind could wait just a little...

Xena felt, at last, a fragile moment of peace, one she knew would be fleeting and of a very short duration. But she accepted it, and savored it’s sweetness.

For this moment, life was all right.

**

Gabrielle leaned against the wall of the barn, letting the morning sunlight soak into her skin with a sense of quiet pleasure. She ran her fingers through her wet hair and drew in a breath of woodsmoke tinged air, and looked around to see what was going on.

Not much, if the empty, somewhat desolate looking courtyard was any evidence. She could see the gates at the front had been tied shut, and piles of broken furniture had been dumped apparently randomly behind them.

She peeked cautiously past the corner of the barn, and looked down the city street, seeing a few people off in the distance starting their day but no mass of soldiers, and the sounds of chaos from the gates were now completely absent.

Something was burning, though, she could smell the strong scent of smoke on the wind and there were ships bells ringing from the direction of the harbor. Now that the sun was up though, somehow it all seemed less scary, and she pushed away from the barn and headed for the inn with a lighter heart because of it.

She also felt better physically. Her headache had finally faded, the lump on the side of her head had gone down and her neck felt fine. The rest had restored some of her energy too and she found herself almost looking forward to whatever plan it was that Xena had come up with.

It was bound to be interesting, if nothing else. She climbed up the rickety stairs and paused, as a soldier appeared from the shadows. "Oh. Hello."

"Your grace." The man faded back against the wall, his mottled armor and leathers blending in with the shadows so perfectly he was almost invisible. "Glad it came good for ye."

Gabrielle wasn't sure what he meant, but she smiled at him because it sounded friendly and positive. "Thanks." She indicated the door. "Okay to go inside?"

"Aye, of course." The man worked the latch and pushed the portal open. "Pardon."

Gabrielle gave him another smile, before she ducked inside the inn and let her eyes adjust to the lower light inside.

"Ah. There you are."

Xena's voice drew her attention, and she blinked a few times before the shadows dissolved and revealed her lover near the back wall, where she'd assembled some broken wood into a long table and spread some parchments out over it.

The soldiers, some of them, were scattered around the room working on fixing other tables with pegs and rope. Lennat and his friend were no where to be seen, and a quick look around told her neither was Perdicus.

With a sense of relief, she crossed the room and went to Xena's side. "Here I am." She acknowledged. "Can I do something?"

Xena leaned on the table with her knuckles. Her armor had been scrubbed clean, and the battle stains removed from her skin and in the morning light peeking through the windows she seemed to be in a much better mood as well. "Yeah." She looked at her lover, then at the kitchen. "Cook something. We're all starving to death and not one of us can boil damn water."

Ah. Gabrielle caught the grateful peeks from the soldiers as she trotted obediently over to where the kitchen was, hoping she could find enough unbroken stuff to do something useful there. The destruction had littered the space with pots and jars, and she started picking them up and setting them on the counter as she moved further inside.

The cookfire was still warm, and she laid some wood on it before she retrieved a round, iron pot that had rolled into a corner and set it on the hooks over the hearth. There were a lot of odds and ends around, roots and bits of dried this and that, so she decided a big stew would probably be her best choice.

“All right.” Xena’s voice floated over to her. “When those damn scouts get back, I want two squads to fan out near the waterfront. Strip off the livery.” She instructed. “There has to be at least three men of war in the harbor. I want them.”

That caught Gabrielle’s attention, and she looked up from where she’d been neatly cutting a root to peer over at Xena in puzzlement. Men of war? Wasn’t that what was in the room with them? Why did Xena want three more?

The men seemed puzzled too. Xena’s sharp eyes caught the expressions and she leaned forward on her knuckles again. “She’s out for plunder.” The queen said. “That’s what’s in those ships.. That’s the prize.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle blurted. “Wow.. That’s true. They were taking all the stuff from the other ships, from the merchants.” She said. “But how did you know?”

Xena’s lips twitched. “It’s what I’d do.” She went back to studying her parchment.

“Oh.” Gabrielle went back to cutting her vegetables. She dumped them into the pot, already full of warming water, and then she continued scrounging around in the messy disarray. She found some dried meat, a large packet of tucked back in a cupboard and with a grunt of approval she started adding it to the stew.

Halfway through her chopping she paused. Wait. Her brow creased. Wasn’t she doing exactly what she’d seen Sholeh’s men doing? Taking whatever she wanted from the inn, and not thinking twice about the people who lived here?

“Problem?”

Xena’s voice right behind her nearly made her cut her own thumb off. “Yow!”

The queen leaned against the counter, picking up a piece of the dried meat and nibbling on it. “You look like you think this is a chunk of the runt. What’s the problem?”

“Oh.” Gabrielle forced herself to continue cutting. Then she stopped again. “Is it?”

“What?”

“Um.. Horse?”

Xena stopped chewing, her eyes widening a little as her words came back to bite her hard in the ass. “Uh... “ She licked her lips. “No. Deer.”

“Phew.”

“I think.” Xena examined the dried steak. ‘Yeah, tastes like it.” She decided, in silent relief.

“I was just thinking..”

“Oh no.”

Gabrielle relaxed a little at the familiar banter. “We shouldn’t take from these people. They lost so much already.” She finished cutting the meat and deposited it in the now bubbling water. It didn’t smell like much yet, but she found what was left of some dried herbs and added them. “Should we?”

Xena finished her bit of meat. “We’re probably going to die trying to get the damn Persians out of this damn city.” She told her lover. “I don’t feel bad about taking a pot of soup before I spill my own blood on the flagstones.”

Well, that certainly put it in perspective. “Oh.” Gabrielle felt silly. “Yeah, sorry. I wasn’t thinking about that. I just..” She looked around the small space. “The innkeeper here.. She was nice to me.”

“Everyone’s nice to you.” The queen remarked. “Some of them not just because they know I’d gouge their eyeballs out even.”

Gabrielle stirred her bubbling concoction. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Don’t guess.” Xena gave her a pat on the side, then she moved out of the kitchen area and went back to her table, just as low hoot came from the back hallway.

Xena was there, with her blade drawn, before the rest of the men could even react. She let a low whistle out, making a sign with her free hand as the soldiers dropped what they were doing and armed themselves.

Gabrielle was unsure of what to do, so she grabbed a broomstick and crouched behind the counter, watching her lover intently as loud sounds came from the back hallway. Yells and thumps, and as they came rapidly towards the closed door to the inn’s big room, Xena lifted her sword and put a hand on the doorlatch, tensing her body and preparing to yank it open.

A heavy body slammed against it, and popped the door open, surprising the queen who slammed her body right back against it instinctively and sent whatever had hit the wood surface tumbling back wards.

Clearly caught between wanting to yell and not wanting to announce her presence, Xena bounded forward and pounced on the doorlatch again, hauling the door open and twirling her sword as she lunged forward into the open space.

A loud squall sounded, and then Xena jumped backwards, hauling a body after her and swinging it around to throw it into the center of the room.

“Bloody Hades!” The innkeeper bowled over a table and landed on her butt. “What’s going on here? Who in the Hades are you?? Get out of my inn!!”

Two soldiers poured into the room after her, breathing hard. “Majesty, there weren’t no stopping that one.”

Xena sheathed her sword. “Figures.”

Gabrielle eased up from her crouch. “Oh! Hello!” She was surprised, but glad to see the innkeeper. “I’m glad you’re okay!”

The woman on the floor turned and spotted her. “You!!” She scrambled to her feet and lunged toward Gabrielle. “You little troublemaker! When I get my hands on you I’ll.. Law!!! Awk!!!”

Xena caught her around the waist and threw her backwards, sending her back to the ground. “Hold it, old woman!” She drew her sword again as the innkeeper made to get up, the blade’s point sweeping in her direction in a very no nonsense manner.

“Hold it yer ass!” The woman scrambled to her feet and grabbed a chair, swinging it at Xena fearlessly. “Bloody vagabonds! Thieves all of you!”

Xena, not surprisingly, stood her ground and as the chair came at her, she got both hands on her sword hilt and moved the blade in an impossibly small pattern. Wood chips flew in every direction, and just as the blade would have hit the innkeeper’s hand the queen lifted her boot lazily and kicked her backwards.

The woman landed on her butt again and glared up at Xena. “Why you..”

“Stay.” Xena pointed her blade at her. “I have no soft spot, especially for bitchy old women who try to hit my adorable partner.”

Gabrielle’s ears pricked at this new name for her, but she eased out from behind the counter and edged around Xena’s tall form. “She’s right.. Please don’t.” She told the innkeeper. “I didn’t mean to cause so much trouble.”

Xena snickered. “Yes you did.” She sheathed her blade again, but pointed her finger at the woman instead. “Be nice.” She warned. “Touch a hair on her head and you’ll lose yours.” Her hand fell on Gabrielle’s shoulder and she locked eyes with the innkeeper.

In the middle of starting another outburst, the woman stopped, perhaps seeing something in Xena’s face that was worth more as a warning than her words, or the bright blade. She shifted her gaze to the rest of the room. “Look at this place.” She muttered instead. “Disaster. Just a disaster.”

“Xena.” Jens appeared at the back door. “Scouts are comin.”

Satisfied that Gabrielle was safe from the crazed elder for the moment, Xena released her and joined her captain at the door. “About damn time.” They disappeared into the darkness of the hall, and around the room, the soldiers went back to their tasks.

Gabrielle walked over and extended a hand down to the innkeeper. “Sorry about that.”

Ignoring the offer, the woman got to her feet, and dusted herself off. She glanced furtively back towards the hallway, then looked at Gabrielle. “That’s Xena?”

“That’s Xena.”

The innkeeper sniffed. “Scrappy thing, isn’t she?” She slowly turned in a circle, watching the soldiers busy fixing tables, then she looked back at Gabrielle again. “Cut me head off, will she?”

Gabrielle tucked her hands behind her back and half shrugged, half nodded. “I think she really would.”

“That you messing with my kitchen?”

“Um.. Yes.”

“Doesn’t that just figure.” The woman sighed. “By the gods, the worlds upturning all over us. I swear it.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle couldn’t deny it. “That happens a lot with Xena around.” She turned and headed back towards the soup, “You sort of get used to it.”

Far off, horns started blowing again, and they all paused to listen. Xena reappeared in the doorway and also listened, a faint smile appearing on her face. She rested her hands on the sill and studied the room. “Eat fast, boys.” She said. “We’re gonna be busy real soon.”

The horns blew again, now with a frantic note, before they faded out, and the sound of shouts and running feet took their place, but moving away from the inn. For now.

**

‘Let’s go.’ Xena pulled her cloak around her and slipped around the corner of the building, emerging onto the dockyard frontage full of boats, and people gathered around gangways. Behind her, six men dressed in nondescript workman’s clothing followed and they started to walk casually down the street, blending with the rest of the crowd.

Well, trying to. Xena was aware she stood out a little, and she pulled her cloak hood up to frame her face as she strolled along. Beside her, Gabrielle was looking curiously around, her pale hair gilded in the morning light. "Thought you came down here."

"No..well.." Gabrielle stared in fascination at the huge ships. "I went down the other way, where the little ones are, and that market."

Here in the mid harbor, Shohleh's troop ships were tied up, wagons rolling up around them and men busy moving stores from the land to the ships holds. As they watched, a cart rumbled towards one of them, full of struggling women on the back.

It pulled to a halt and the men started unloading the women like so many sacks, tossing them from one to the other and laughing as they struggled and tried to cry out through gags tied tightly over their mouths.

Xena motioned the group to pause, and the men separated and found walls to lean against, just watching the scene casually.

"Good thing you went the other way." Xena remarked in a conversational tone. "Sinking all these damn boats looking for you woulda taken a while."

Gabrielle was staring at the cart in horror, memories of her own taking popping up sharp and clear in her mind's eye. "Xena, we have to stop them!" She started towards the wagon only to be hauled down like a sheep by one powerful hand clenched in the back of her clothing. "Xena!"

"Shh!" The queen hissed. "You want us killed before all the fun starts?" She gave her lover a shake. "What in Hades you think is going to happen if I just start kicking those guys asses?"

Gabrielle grabbed her arm. "If someone had been there when those guys were taking me..."

"Then you and I would never have met." Xena finished her statement. "That what you wanted?"

The blond woman went silent, her expressive face twitching through several emotions before she looked back up at the queen. "No way."

"Okay." With truly remarkable patience for her, Xena patted her friend on the back. "Don't do that again."

There was steel in that tone, and she knew it. Gabrielle realized they were in a place where the queen wasn't going to tolerate being questioned and she nodded in agreement. "I won't. I'm sorry."

Xena put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and they started walking along the docks again, taking a detour around the wagon and blending with a crowd of local townsfolk who were gathered near a platform.

"Here then, I've told you you've got it all." A man was on the platform, on his knees. Facing him were two of Shohleh's soldiers, the real ones marked with her mark, and carrying the same air of deadly assurance as Xena did.

To one side a woman was standing, clutching anxiously at the edge of the platform, and watching the man kneeling. "Please.. He's told you!" She called out.

One of the soldiers swung to look dispassionately at her. He was holding a scroll, and he carried it with him as he walked over to where she was standing, kicking her in the face with no warning. She fell back with a cry and hit the floor.

“Shah!” The soldier barked, before he went back to the man. “You bring ten boxes, ship master says he gave you twelve.”

“B.. I had to feed my family!” The man protested.

The second soldier backhanded him. “Two boxes or two lives. You choose.”

Xena sighed.

“I don’t have em!” The man spit out a mouthful of blood. “Traded em for food for my kids!”

“Fine then.” The soldier drew his sword out and grabbed the man by his hair, drawing his head back. “No one holds back from us.”

Gabrielle bit the inside of her lip, holding on to Xena’s arm as she fought her instincts to protest. She looked up at the queen’s profile, so still and quiet, and the in that moment, Xena looked back down at her.

The queen sighed again. “You’re gonna kill me.” She released Gabrielle and signalled the soldiers, grabbing hold of a wall sconce over her head and kicking off the wall to sail over the heads of the city dwellers and land on the platform.

Without a sound, she drew her sword and attacked the guard holding the townsman, deflecting his awkward block and knocking his arm out of position as she whirled in place and came back around, the tip of her sword penetrating his armor and bisecting his ribcage with a startlingly loud pop.

Without waiting for a reaction she yanked her blade free and dropped to one knee, arching her body around as the second soldier attacked her. He was skilled, and she only just blocked his swing before she could get back to her feet and deflect the blade away from her.

He didn’t speak, neither did she. They circled each other as the townsman scrambled out of the way, his clothing drenched with the blood of the first soldier, now lying sprawled on the edge of the platform.

Xena glanced toward the ships, where as yet no one had noticed the battle. She knew she only had seconds before they did though, and the knowledge spurred her reactions as she evaded the skillful blade of her opponent and ducked past him, hopping lightly over the fallen body then crouching, and leaping into the air.

The man jerked back, startled, and started to raise his blade to protect his head but found Xena’s boots coming at him instead of her sword. He tried to dodge, but Xena twisted in mid air and lashed out in a powerful kick, catching him in the side of the skull and sending him spinning right off the platform.

Her men pounced on him, shoving aside townsfolk as they cut off his yell and then cut off his life, before the wide staring eyes.

Xena landed and wiped her blade on the dead man’s leggings before she sheathed it, standing to face the crowd for a single, heart pounding moment.

They stared at the tall, cloaked figure. She swept her hood back and turned her head to look at the crowd, bestowing a dazzling grin on them before she turned and leaped off the platform, getting out of the line of sight from the ship as she landed fairly close to where she’d taken off from.

Gabrielle was watching her in mute awe, her eyes wide, and she went immediately to Xena’s side and threw her arms around her lover.

The crowd broke from its stunned shock and started moving, circling Xena and her men and muskrat and obscuring them from view. Two of the townsmen grabbed the dead soldier of the platform and dragged him off and to the ground, a buzz of excited voices rising.

“By the gods.” The woman had grabbed onto the man who had escaped death by Xena’s graces. “By the gods, they’ve finally listened and sent help to us.”

Xena put her back to the wall, and her men gathered around her as the townsfolk pressed in, some reaching out to touch her cloak. “Find a path out of here.” She instructed the men. “We got lucky so far, but they’re not that stupid.”

“By the gods is right.” The man she’d saved pushed his way through to her. “It’s Xena! Xena the Merciless!”

The volume increased as Xena heard her name repeated over and over again. “Shh.” She held up her hands. “Keep it down. Those bastards’ll be over here in a minute.” She waited for quiet to fall again, trying to ignore the big hug she was getting from Gabrielle.

It was such a ding to her merciless image, after all. She looked over at the ships, but a cart of overturned ale barrels was attracting all the attention at the moment, and she spotted a cotillion of Sholeh’s guards headed that way. “We’re gonna take this city back.”

Just as she thought they were clear, one of the captains looked their way, and then pulled a few of his men to a stop.

“Ah huh.” Xena pulled her hood back up. “Gotta go.”

“Wait!” The man begged her. “How can we stop them? Will you help us?”

Xena saw the soldiers starting their way. “Sure I’ll help you.” She said. “If we don’t all die here. Scatter, all of you!” She ordered. “I’ll be around.”

The crowd started to disperse in some confusion, and Xena ducked down a side alley as her soldiers cleared the way for them.

“Wow.” Gabrielle was clutching the edge of her cloak.

“Save the wow.” The queen led them down the alley, then she took an abrupt right turn and went down a narrower one, barely wide enough for her to pass through. “Suck it in, boys.”

A horn blew behind them, but Xena never wavered. She kept plowing through the gap in the building until she reached the end, sticking her head out to check before she paused and turned. “Follow me. Stay close.”

She eased out and started forward, staying between odorous stacks of fishing traps and the rest of the pier, looking for a spot they could hole up in until the alert was over.

“Xena, over there.” Gabrielle pointed to the tiny market. “Those people want Sholeh gone too - they were really pissed at them.”

“Great.” Xena wasn’t about to kick that gift horse in the ass either. She angled towards the market and hoped she wasn’t leading them into even more trouble.

They dashed across the open dock and ended up on the far side of the market, out of sight of Sholeh’s men and far from the ships of war. Xena paused as they got to the first stall, as Perdicus appeared and ran over to them.

“Urgh.”

“What was that?” Xena looked down at Gabrielle.

“Nothing.”

“There’s some kind of alarm going on.” Perdicus joined them. “No one knows what’s happening.” He glanced at Gabrielle. “Are you okay?”

Gabrielle nodded, but then she had to duck as Xena pushed them all against the wall. “Wh..”

“Sh.” The queen ordered, watching the edge of the dock intently. A boat was drawn up there, its gangplank down, but no activity going on around it. She could hear horns blowing down pier and as she caught the looks of the merchants now staring at them, she decided staying where they were wasn’t such a good idea. “Move.”

She headed across the pier with her little cadre following her, and as she reached the boat’s gangway, she drew her sword, whipping it in a circle as she crossed the wooden plank and jumped onto the deck. “Yah!”

She waited, but there were no answering calls, and no response from anyone aboard. “Hurry.” Xena waved them on. “Get behind the wheel there, and duck down.” She directed. “Jens, pull that gangway on after you.”

She waited for the plank to be stowed, then she joined the men and muskrat behind the cabin, where they were out of sight of anyone on the shore.

“Now what?” Perdicus asked, nervously.

“Now we wait.” Xena said.

“What if the guys who own this thing come back?” Gabrielle asked. “Sholeh’s men took all their stuff.” She moved carefully around on the deck, feeling the boat shift under her. “They were pretty mad.”

“Worry about that when it happens.” Xena leaned her elbows on the wood, peering over the top she was just tall enough to see over. “Jens, check belowdecks. Make sure we’re clear.”

“Aye.” Jens pulled his dagger out and started down the rickety stairs. “Belike old times, eh?”

Xena chuckled dryly. “Unlucky for them if it is.”

Jens chuckled also, and disappeared into the shadows below, as the rest of the soldiers took a seat with their backs to the cabin. Xena remained standing, watching the activity ashore, her body remembering again the feeling of a deck moving under her.

The plans she’d been sorting through, worrying over now shifted, and as she watched Sholeh’s men walking down the pier, obviously looking for something new ideas came to mind. “Old times. Heh.”

Heh.

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Part 21

“Xena.” Jens pointed to the shore, where a wagon had pulled up reasonably close to side of the dock. The man driving it hopped down, and glanced at the ship, then casually leaned against the side of the wagon and fiddled with a bit of the strapping on the side of it.

"I see em." Xena leaned one shoulder against the wooden cabin wall, crossing her arms over her chest. "Go over there and see what his game is." She unhooked her chakram from her belt, and fingered it. "I'll back you up."

Jens smiled briefly, his scarred face creasing into a grin before he tugged his workman's apron straight and circled the cabin, heading for the side of the boat closest to the shore.

"Now what?" Perdicus asked, moving to stand next to Gabrielle, who was naturally standing right next to Xena. "How did I get myself into this mess?"

Gabrielle turned her head to look at him. He looked tense, and upset, and he was wearing a rough linen surcoat covering his Persian armor that his fingers were plucking at. He'd cut his hair very short and he'd gotten a little taller than she remembered him as - and she found it very hard to related to him as part of a past she'd thought she'd put far behind her.

She turned back to watch what was going on, not wanting to miss anything. Xena had one arm resting on the cabin and the other hand juggled her round weapon as she followed Jens progress intently. "Xena?" Gabrielle softly called out. "That's one of the men from the inn. I remember him - he was sitting at one of the front tables when I was telling stories."

"Yeah?" Xena shifted the chakram as Jens set the gangway in place, and walked across it, his attitude friendly as he greeted the man. "Question is, was he listening to be inspired, or listening to have something to tell the Persians?"

"He was there the whole time." Gabrielle said. "Even when the soldiers came, I remember he was really surprised, and he hid under the table."

"Nice."

"Well, I would have too." Gabrielle said. "If I wasn't so busy running away from them."

"Wait." Perdicus grabbed her arm. "You were the storyteller?" He sounded excited. "You're the one they were all looking for? The one Sholeh wanted?"

Gabrielle turned again to face him. "What do you mean?"

Xena was caught in a quandary, half of her fixed on what was going on with Jens, the other half of her tuned to the unexpected drama at her side. If her eyes had been able to move independently like an iguanas, they would have.

"Word went out." Perdicus said. "One of her men came in and said there was a woman coming to the city, a storyteller, and that she'd pay a thousand dinars for her."

Xena's ears almost stood away from the side of her head she was listening so intently. Sholeh knew? They were expecting Gabrielle? Her nostrils twitched as she realized that meant someone in her little party had given the information up.

And, well.. Since she'd picked up half of them from the damn Persian's army, that wasn't such a shock now, was it? Xena growled softly under her breath. Not a surprise, no, but it didnt' mean she didn't have to hate it.

"Wow." Gabrielle murmured. "I can't even imagine what a thousand dinars looks like." She stared hard at Perdicus. "They knew I'd be there?"

Perdicus looked around, glancing at Xena's profile. "That's what they said." His eyes searched her face. "I didn't know you told stories anymore. I thought you.."

"I did." Gabrielle cut him off. "Stop. You know that."

"Well, yeah your father.."

"Yeah." The blond woman glanced away. "Well, I don't have to worry about him anymore."

Jens was coming back onboard, with the man from the wagon. He was slapping him on the shoulder in a friendly manner, so Xena was free to put her weapon away and look down at her lover. Gabrielle had both hands on the wood surface, and her expression was a grim as her cuteness would allow.

Xena put her hand on her companions shoulder. "Since you're a wanted woman, stay here." She drawled. "And for the record, you're worth a Hades of a lot more than a piddling thousand dinars." With a pat, she left Gabrielle standing there and circled the edge of the cabin herself, meeting Jens and their new friend as they stepped down off the gangplank and onto the deck. "Well well."

The man took a deep breath, looking excited and nervous. "H... hello." He cleared his throat. "Ah.. T'word came from the market, yeah? That you all were here."

Xena leaned against the tall mast, careful to keep it between her and the view from the dock. "From that little market there?" She pointed to the end of the pier, where the small, sad looking stalls waited. Behind them, she could see a few merchants, though most of the stalls were empty and seemed closed up.

"Aye." The man said. "The old woman sent me down here. Said to tell ye the searchers were gone and they didn't find nothin."

Nothing eh? Xena considered that, sorting through her plans and what few options they really had. She knew there was a core of the city that wanted out from under the Persians, but she also knew these townfolk were long used to peace and their militia had been pounded to nothing by Sholeh. "All right." She said. "What were they looking for?"

The man's eyes shifted right and left. "That little storyteller what was with ye." He said. "Persian wants 'er bad, real bad."

"So they're not looking for me?" Xena felt a sense of surreal amusement.

"No, m..uh.. Q.. Uh.."

"Xena." The queen stated. "I know who I am. I don't need no stinking titles."

"Word spread about the dock down there." The man went on, with a nervous chuckle. "So.. We thought.. I mean, everyone thought maybe you could.. Uh.. Come up to the inn, like, and tell us what t'do. We want to help get rid of these pigs."

Xena studied his face intently. "Sure." She said, after a pause. "After sundown. We'll be there." She added. "Tell everyone who wants in on this."

The man looked relieved. "Great." He indicated the wagon. "T'old woman had me put the storyteller's stuff in there, sos no one saw it. Brought it here, thought she might like it."

Xena motioned to two of the soldiers. "Go get whatever's on the cart." She ordered. "We'll find a spot over near that wall to hole up until dark, then head over to the inn and see if we can't get this party started."

"Aye." Her men crossed the plank and headed for the wagon.

"Thanks." The queen told the man. "Listen this won't be too hard. Most of her troops are out by the pass, looking for me. All we need to do is kick the rest of em out and shut the gates."

"Right." The man nodded. "Uh.. How are we going to do that?"

"You'll see tonight." Xena promised. "Just make sure everyone's there, I don't like to repeat myself."

"Don't you worry." Their new friend backed away, until he was at the gangway. "We'll make sure everyone's there, that's for sure." He turned and left the ship, sidestepping the two soldiers who were coming back with a load of sacks from the wagon.

The cart drove away. Xena turned to Jens. "Go ashore. Listen for what's up."

He nodded. "Think they'd seen us?"

"I don't know but I don't like surprises, and having no one in the damn city realize I'm here killing people is one big damn surprise. Don't cha think?"

Jens shook his head. "Lots of this stuff's not making sense, Mistress." He answered, lowering his voice and coming closer to her. "What's the game here? Tis almost too easy."

"Mmhm." The queen grunted. "Something ain't clicking. So get going and find out what that is."

"Aye."

"And on your way back, swing by the stable and get all our guys. Bring em back with you." Xena added, very softly. "Not the others."

"Aye, understood, Mistress." He tilted his head and looked past Xena. "What about that'un?"

Xena didn't turn, knowing who he meant. "He's all right." She sighed. "Unfortunately."

"On me way." Jens left the ship again, and Xena stepped back to let the other two men bring the sacks forward. "Muskrat, come claim your junk." She said. "Then I want everyone to set up shop belowdecks."

The men stopped in surprise. "We're not hauling off to the shore?" One of them asked. "Thought we'd.."

"No." Xena replied. "We're staying on board.. But not where we're at."

The men looked at her, then shrugged and knelt to unburden themselves, as Gabrielle came over to join them. Xena merely stood and watched her hand on the mast and her face turned into the wind, waiting for her companion to gather her things up. "They all there?"

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder. "Except for Patches." She said, with a mournful expression. "Xena, please don't let anything happen to him."

The utter absurdity of the request touched her in an odd way. "Do my best, muskrat." Xena ruffled her hair. "Right now, y'know he's got a better chance of not croaking than we do."

"I know." Gabrielle looped her carriesack over her head and joined Xena near the mast. "So are we going over to where those merchants are? Maybe we can buy some stuff from them and help them out. They looked like they could really use it."

"We're not going ashore."

"We're not?" The blond woman looked confused. "I thought you said.."

“Sh.” Xena nudged her towards the stairs. “Go down there, and find something cute to do while I figure out how to sail this thing.”

Gabrielle looked at the queen, then she tipped her head back and looked up at the furled sail on the mast. “Where are we going in it?” She asked, more curious than anxious.

“To cause trouble.” Xena ran her hands over the ropes, trying to recall long forgotten skills when she’d captained a ship not too different from this one, give or take a crew of scoundrels and a stack of crossbows or two.

“Ah.”

Xena straightened. “Everyone get below.” She ordered. “Stay out of sight.” She nudged Gabrielle again. “Gwan. If you find a bed down there ,maybe we’ll use it.”

Gabrielle half grinned, then she made her way to the door, reaching it just as Perdicus did coming from behind the cabin wall. He stopped and gestured for her to go first, and she paused to look back at Xena before she ducked her head and went down the stairs.

Oblivious, Perdicus followed her, along with the rest of the men. Xena watched them until they disappeared, then she walked over and pulled the gangplank up before she went to the wheel, and started examining it.

**

Belowdecks, Gabrielle bypassed the soldiers busy searching the hold for anything useful as she wandered through the wooden structure exploring it. She was aware of Perdicus following her, but she shifted her bag on her shoulder and ignored him as her eyes adjusted to the gloom and she could see better around her.

It was cramped below. She didn’t really like the narrow, creaking passageways and the ceiling, though sufficient for her height, would have Xena bent over uncomfortably.

Most of the inside was the big space she figured they put their cargo in - it smelled of old wine, musk, and a little bit of rancid oil in there though the area itself was pretty much empty. She crossed through it from the front, carefully stepping over the raised, curved ribs of wood going from one side to the other.

The boat was moving a little, and she found that disconcerting. The most water she’d ever seen in her life before now was the creek near her village, and the river running past Xena’s stronghold and though she’d ridden the raft with Xena on that wild day last fall she wasn’t sure she liked the idea of being on something that floated.

Once past the hold she found herself in the wider aft portion of the ship, and as she squeezed between two large, square support spars she found herself in a reasonable sized room at the very back.

She paused, and blinked, as light bathed her face from leaded glass squares all along the back wall of the ship and she turned around to view what she realized was probably where the guy who owned the ship hung out.

It wasn’t very spacious, but there was a comfortable looking bed built into the wall on one side, and a worktable built into the other. Three chests were pushed against the forward wall, heavy leather things bound with brass strapping and a shelf on the back wall held odd metal instruments and stacks of rolled up parchment.

The instruments peaked her curiosity. She walked over to the shelf and lifted one of them, a long tube, one end thicker than the other. She puzzled over its use, then she turned it end on and lifted it, putting her eye to the smaller end and peering through.

“Oh.” Immediately, she pulled her head back, blinking at the suddenly oversized view. “Hm.” She put the instrument down and turned, as she heard someone approaching.

“Wow.” Perdicus stepped over the threshold and joined her in the room. “This isn’t so bad.”

“No.” Gabrielle turned in a circle and examined the ceiling, darkened with soot from two wall mounted oil lamps, mounted firmly to the walls on swinging brackets. She pushed one, now unlit, with her finger and watched it move, the oil chamber staying even and upright no matter how the lamp swung.

Neat. She looked over at the back wall, which was, she realized, the back wall of the ship itself with its blocks of glass set right into it, letting in light from the outside and a wavery unclear image of the dock behind where the ship was tied up.

Near the very back corner, she spotted an iron grate, and she walked over to look up at it. A hatch was behind the grate, and she wondered about it. Moving closer, she reached up through the grate and touched the wood, then she spotted a latch on one side.

“What are you doing?” Perdicus asked. “I wouldn’t mess with stuff in here. I’m sure that... the queen is going to want this place.”

Gabrielle worked the latch, and felt the wood move under her fingers. She pushed hard against it, and the hatch creaked open, letting in more light, and a fresh breeze from the outside. A stout rope was tied off to the latch and again to the grating, making it easy to pull the hatch back closed again. “Cool.”

“What?”

Gabrielle turned towards him reluctantly. “I don’t think we’re going to be on here that long.” She said. “But Xena will probably want to be here, that’s true.” She walked over to the worktable and set her bag down on it, sparing a very wistful glance at the bunk. “It’s tall enough for her to stand up in, for one thing.”

“Well, we could go find some other place to be.” Perdicus said. “Don’t you want to?”

Gabrielle looked at him. “No.” She said. “I’m fine here, thanks.” She leaned back against the table, watching as he shifted uncomfortably. “You can go on though.”

Perdicus looked at her. “I thought we could talk, since we’re stuck here for a little while.” He said. “Now that we’re back together I mean.” He moved closer to her. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

Ugh. “Perdicus, we’re in a lot of trouble here, and everything’s different.” Gabrielle said, after an awkward pause. “I never thought I’d seen you again either.” She watched her old beau uneasily, feeling anxious about this sudden, unwelcome complication in her life.

She’d always liked Perdicus, and she’d once told Lila if she had to marry someone, there were a lot worse people certainly, but now..

His face shifted. “What does that mean?” He asked. “Your father betrothed you to me. That hasn’t changed.” He argued. “Gabrielle, we’ve got a chance to get our lives back now. All we have to do is get out of here.”

Voices sounded outside, and they heard footsteps approaching. “My father’s dead.” Gabrielle said, recognizing at least one of the sets. “We’re not in Potadeia anymore, and I’ve...” She looked over at

the doorway as Xena entered, the queen pausing, her pale eyes flicking between the two of them. "My life's changed."

Xena looked at her, then she turned her head and looked at Perdicus. "I thought I said do something useful."

Perdicus looked back at her uncertainly. "Well, I..."

"Scram." Xena said, pinning Perdicus with a dour stare. "Or start screaming. You pick." She advanced towards him, grabbing his arm when he hesitated and tossing him out of the cabin.

"Hey.." He protested. "I was just.."

Xena stuck her head out. "You're just pond scum." She told him. "Leave Gabrielle alone or you'll be dead pond scum."

He stared at her. "She's not a slave. She can do what she wants!"

"She belongs to me." The queen interrupted him. "And she does what I want her to do." She drew her sword and started to emerge from the room, pausing when he turned and moved rapidly away from her, disappearing into the cargo hold where the rest of the men were.

For a long moment, she just watched the shadows, then she turned and leaned against the doorway, studying it's other occupant. Gabrielle's face, always ridiculously expressive, now showed what she thought was relief and a bit of embarrassment. "So."

"Hi." Gabrielle tucked her hands under her arms. "Thanks." She glanced at the cabin. "This place is pretty okay, isn't it?"

The queen entered, looking around. "Not bad." She agreed. "Figured out why it's so damned empty." SHE held up a bit of parchment. "Crew couldn't afford to take on cargo. Persians took everything they had." Her dark head shook back and forth. "So they walked."

"They just left?" Gabrielle found it hard to believe.

Xena walked over to the grating, and looked at it curiously, leaning forward to peer out the open hatchway. "Looks like it." She touched the grating, snorting under her breath. "Why the Hades didn't I think of that?"

Gabrielle came over to her, easing closer and leaning against Xena's body, circling her with both arms and giving her a hug all in pensive silence.

Xena peered down at her, one arm dropping to fall across Gabrielle's shoulders as she studied the unhappy expression on her lovers face. "What's wrong with you?" SHE asked with typical bluntness. "You cycling or something?"

Gabrielle sighed. "No." She released the queen and straightened. "I just feel like we're going nowhere. Things just keep getting weird."

Xena pondered that. "We are going nowhere." She agreed. "And life sucks right now." The queen continued. "Just about anything I'm gonna have us do is probably going to get us killed, and we don't even have the luxury of a gods be damned bathtub in here."

"Ah."

"On the other hand, I do love you more than my horse."

Gabrielle's face creased into a grin, and she hugged Xena with a good deal more enthusiasm this time. "Well, I love you more than anything including horses so there." She assured her companion. "And I know if anyone can get us out of this, it's you."

Xena enjoyed the hug, feeling an odd, almost guilty sense of relief. "Keep that thought." She "Because tonight, we're going to roll the dice and either we'll win it all, or it's going to be a very crappy morning."

"Oh."

"How good are you at tying knots?"

Gabrielle looked up at Xena with a quizzical expression.

**

It was dark, and the docks were deserted when Xena stepped off the gangplank and paused, waiting for Gabrielle to join her. "Jens." The queen turned and addressed her captain. "Listen for my signal."

"Aye, Mistress." Jens said. "But don't you think maybe we should come with ye?"

"No." Xena pulled her hood up. "This is a job for a pair of sneaky women. Ready, muskrat?"

"Um.. Sure." Gabrielle tugged her own hood up and tightened the tie at her throat. The silence of the docks around her made her shiver a little, and she wasn't really sure she was nearly sneaky enough for whatever it was Xena had in mind.

Nevertheless, she was very glad she was leaving the ship and going with her lover, rather than staying onboard alone. Or more precisely, not alone. She followed Xena as they cleared off the gangway, and the soldiers pulled it aboard.

Xena tugged on her gauntlets, and surveyed the empty pier, then she turned and led the way towards the city center. She kept her eyes scanning right and left as she walked along the edge of the waterside buildings, aware of the silence as though it was a physical thing.

It wasn't right. She wasn't sure though, if the unreal peace was due to a lockdown by Sholeh's forces - not unreasonable after the previous night's violence and her afternoon display - or if it was something more sinister.

It was hard to decide. She had no idea really how much Sholeh knew, after all, and because she was so unsure of what the real deal was, she'd brought Gabrielle with her. If something was afoot the last thing she wanted was to have to worry about what was going on back at the boat.

The men could take care of themselves.

Gabrielle, could not. "So." Xena slowed her steps briefly, watching the deck of a large man of war they were approaching. "See anything up there?"

Gabrielle willingly squinted. "I see a boat." She offered. "There are lights on the back of it."

"True." The queen agreed. "But not by the gangway." She pointed. "Not even a guard."

"Wow."

"Mm." Xena angled away from the pier as the wall turned inward, closing in on the square she'd attacked the soldiers in. It was dark and empty now, the platform deserted. She paused at the corner and stood for a moment, letting her senses extend into the space, as Gabrielle tucked in behind her.

The breeze was blowing down the dock and into her face and there was an expected scent of fish, and salt, and human decay on it. The trash of the city was dumped in the waters to be taken out to sea, and the mixture of that with the smell of burning somewhere nearby turned her guts a little.

But it wasn't close by, so she cautiously eased into the open space and went to the platform, circling it warily. She paused and reached up to grab the platform edge, pulling her body up so she could observe the top of it.

Empty. She released her hold and landed, dusting her hands off as she turned to face Gabrielle. "Nothing."

"Um." Gabrielle looked around. "What were you expecting to see?"

Xena put her hand on her companions back and guided her towards the street leading into the square. "If they figured out someone did something here, I'd have expected to see a dead body or two on top." She said. "But it's clean as the tip of your nose up there."

Gabrielle cleared her throat a little. "Maybe they didn't see what happened." She suggested. "I think your guys sort of um.. "

"Hid the bodies?"

"Yeah."

Xena considered that. She found it highly unlikely that they could have killed two of Sholeh's henchmen in broad daylight in the middle of a crowd and have it go completely unnoticed. On the other hand, she also found it highly unlikely that despite her killing probably a score of Sholeh's soldiers and leaving them scattered all over the street the previous night she'd heard no sign of anyone looking for her, just for Gabrielle.

It made no sense at all. Either Sholeh was the only one in her entire damned army with a brain, or she and Gabrielle were going to turn a corner and walk right into a surprise neither of them would enjoy.

She turned the corner and paused, but the stretch of street, broad and double sized to allow wagons to bring cargo down to the docks, was as empty as the square had been. The buildings to either side, during the day full of merchants, were dark and quiet and she felt nothing but conspicuous as she lead Gabrielle up the road.

"Are we going to the inn?" Gabrielle asked, after they'd walked for a few minutes further.

"Yes." Xena said.

"I thought you told the guys.."

"I did." The queen came to a crossroads, and peered in all directions. "I didn't want anyone to know what I was doing except for me."

"Oh."

"And you." Xena asserted. "Remember I told you all that stuff about not trusting anyone?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle found herself much happier to be where she was at the moment than she had even been when she left the ship. "So what are we doing then? Are we going to help the city people?"

"We'll see." Xena turned to her right and started up a narrower street, moving from the dark silence of the docks, to the muted sounds, and shuttered lights of the inhabited part of the city. She could smell vague wisps of cooking from behind the tightly closed doors, and hear voices, low and subdued.

It made her feel better, for some reason. She heard the sounds of hoofbeats in the distance, and then the sounds of boots crunching somewhere nearby. She pulled Gabrielle into a niche in the wall and held her still, as the sounds came closer. "Shh."

Gabrielle found herself wrapped in Xena's cloak, her head poking out under her companion's chin. She could hear the footsteps approaching and then male voices, with the odd timber of Persia in them. She felt Xena release one arm from her, and the motion as her companion reached up over her head, to fasten her hand around the hilt of her sword.

It was nerve-racking, but in all that, she still felt safe.

"Keep your head down." Xena whispered in her ear. "So I don't cut it off."

It made her shiver, but still, in her heart, Gabrielle felt the oddest sense of exultation. She snuggled closer to Xena's body and hunched her neck down, her heartbeat speeding up as the voices got louder and louder.

She didn't understand the language. She thought maybe Xena did, because the queen snorted a little, an exhalation she felt behind her shoulderblades as the soldiers came even with them and stopped.

They were arguing. One of the men, fully outfitted in armor, and wearing Sholeh's crest on his surcoat was poking the other man on the shoulder. His companion had his arms spread wide, and he was protesting in a loud, angry voice.

Gabrielle recognized Xena's name in the yelling and she felt another snort work its way through her companion's chest but she had no time to reflect on that because the first soldier gave the second a huge shove, and he stumbled backward and fell landing right at Xena's boots.

"Ahgh, ya Persian bastard!" The man yelled, kicking out with his boots as the other soldier approached and reached for him. He nailed the man in the groin, and started to get up, but the soldier recovered and pulled his curved sword out, lunging forward in an attack.

Gabrielle felt Xena start to move, and she grabbed hold of the edge of the doorway they were sheltered in and scrambled out of the way as the queen drew her sword and stepped forward, engaging the Persian soldier in a fiercely vicious, silent parry.

Steel rang against steel.

Gabrielle pressed her back against the wall and looked around, hoping to spot a rock or something she could use in case she needed it. She saw a water jug, and figuring it was better than nothing she pounced on it, grabbing it by its wide handles and turning just in time to reel backwards as the second soldier made a clutch at her. "Hey!"

"C'mere c'mere.. " He panted. "You're me ticked out of this you little.. You're what she wants!" He grabbed at her arm, and she shoved him back with the jug. "Stop it.. Git over here!"

"Leave me alone!" Gabrielle hopped out of his path, swinging her pot around with all the speed she could muster. She hit his outstretched fingers with a cracking sound, and he howled in pain, just as the sounds around them started to increase as the noise caused doors to open, and heads to pop out windows.

Holding his fingers, the man came after her, his face now angry. "Why you little..."

Gabrielle swung her pot again, hitting him in the shoulder as he half turned away. She spotted Xena fighting furiously with the other soldier, and behind the queen, there were bodies moving fast towards

them. She ducked under the swinging arm of the man trying to catch her and bolted for the queen, as the first of the soldiers reached them. “Xena!”

“Busy now!”

“But..

“I see em. Bite em in the ankles or something!”

Gabrielle did what she could, which consisted of hauling around and throwing her water pot at the soldier as hard as she could, stumbling backwards when the force of her toss knocked her off balance. She crashed into something hard behind her, then she fell to the ground, with a heavy body on top of her.

“Yow!” She got her feet under her and scrambled away from the flailing arms grasping at her clothing, only to be hauled up short by a hand catching her belt. “Hey!”

“Move!” Xena headed back down the road, half carrying her as they just evaded the outstretched lance tips of six determined Persians. “Never knew you could throw such a good pot, muskrat.”

“Buh!” Gabrielle scrambled to keep her balance and keep moving forward. She could hear the soldiers hot on their heels, and she pointed to a narrow passageway. “That goes to..”

“Great.” Xena shoved her into the small opening and turned, putting her back to it and her sword towards the Persians, who scrambled to stop in time and engage her. “Lemme take out the trash first, watch my back!”

Gabrielle whirled around, able to see little else but. She searched the ground for something to pick up, finding a piece of stone from the roof all she had handy. The moonlight flashed off Xena’s sword, and she heard the queen laugh and she hoped like Hades that meant they were going to be okay.

A spear flew past Xena, making Gabrielle jump in surprise, but the weapon bounced off the wall and fell at her feet with a clatter. She peered at it. “Guess that’s one of those looking horses in the tail things, huh?” She tossed her rock away and picked up the spear, spreading her hands out as Xena had taught her and turning to face the battle. “I’ve got a spear!”

“Great!” Xena gutted an opponent and kicked his body back off her sword. “Don’t stick me in the ass with it!”

“I won’t!” Gabrielle took a better hold of the spear and watched anxiously, glancing behind her when she thought she heard something coming.

Shadows.

She turned to face them, putting her almost back to back with the queen. She lifted the weapon and braced herself for whatever was coming determined to live up to Xena’s trust in her, no matter what she had to do.

No matter what.

**

A dark figure rushed out of the shadows at her, and she thrust the spear in front of her, bending her knees as she prepared to take the shock of a collision. “Yah!”

The figure reeled to a halt. “Gabrielle!” Lennat waved his arms, trying to keep from plowing into her. “Whoa. I found you!”

“Lennat!” Gabrielle hissed back. “YOU should get out of here! Everyone’s after us!”

“I know!” He gingerly edged around her spear point. “Listen, come with me! I know where you can hide.. They’ve already half wrecked the inn looking for you!”

Gabrielle half turned, and hopped back a step as Xena yanked her blade from the last of the soldiers and started in her direction unexpectedly. “Yow!”

“Move.” The queen bumped into her impatiently. “Stick your poker into inn-boy’s nuts if he keeps standing there.”

“B.” Gabrielle looked at the spear, then at Lennat, who backpedaled in a hurry. “Where are we going?”

“Away from those dead soldiers.” Xena wiped her sword off on her cloak and sheathed it. She caught Lennat watching her in some horror, and treated him to a sexy grin. “Bet you’re glad you’re not my washing slave, huh?”

“Uh.” Lennat glanced past her. “No. I mean yes.” He started walking quickly. “There’s a storeroom.. You can hide there.”

“Hide?” Xena chuckled. “Yeah, okay. Lead on.” She tugged her cloak straight. “They take your place apart?”

Gabrielle just concentrated on keeping her spear from tangling with Xena’s long legs, and not trip over herself as she hurried to keep up with the two others. She was aware of Lennat answering the queen, but the words passed over her as she tried to make sense of what was going on.

Far off, a horn blew. The sound seemed like it had a triumphant note in it, and she looked quickly up at her lover, who had cocked her head to listen. “What is it?”

Xena glanced down at her. “A horn.”

Gabrielle sighed.

“I’m not sure.’ The queen relented. “But I don’t like the sound of it.”

They moved down the alley, following Lennat as the walls narrowed in and let them move only in single file. The sound of the horns grew louder and more frequent, and by the time they reached the end of the lane, there was the sense of movement in the streets around them.

Xena stood in the shadows, and watched, seeing dark figures, some wearing armor, all heading inward, to the center of the city. A prickle of foreboding made her shoulder blades twitch, and she pulled her hood up again. “Lets go see what’s happening.”

Lennat looked at her like she was nuts. “They’ll...”

Xena merely walked past him, staying as much in the shadows as she could. She heard some words exchanged behind her, then the light patter of Gabrielle’s boots as her lover followed her down the street. “Stay near the wall.” She cautioned.

“Okay.” Gabrielle whispered, holding her spear like a walking stick, and moving it along with her steps. “Where are we going?”

“Wherever everyone else is.” The queen muttered, watching a squad of soldiers move by at a quick pace, voices raised in excitement.

“They have them!” One of the men said, as he passed right by Xena and Gabrielle, jogging quickly after a squad of his mates. “Knew they’d get em!”

Xena sidestepped a helmet left in the road and drew her hood a little closer, as they moved up the lane that led to the inn and climbed the slope that angled from the docks up to the towering wall and the gates. It was obvious to her that was where the crowd was heading, and her height let her see at the top of the road a cluster of torches ahead.

“If they’re all happy, that’s not a good thing for us, huh?” Gabrielle asked, suddenly.

“Fast learner, aintcha?” Xena exhaled, absently rubbing the dried blood from her hands with the edge of her cloak. She spotted a smaller alleyway to the left, and she tugged Gabrielle towards it, getting them out of the increasing flow of bodies. “Let’s take this route.”

To Gabrielle’s eyes, the other path seemed far steeper, and a little creepy, but she followed Xena and they started to climb up it, bracing their hands on the walls to either side to keep their balances. It was dark, and she could feel the strain in her legs. “Oof.”

Without looking back, the queen reached over and grabbed the back of her collar and started hauling her along, her long legs lifting them both up with seemingly little effort. At the end of the path she could see a wall blocking their way just about her own height, and beyond that the space was lit with flickering torches. “Shh.”

Gabrielle pressed against her as they reached the wall on the far end, putting her back to the wall and watching back down the way they’d come. The slope was steeper than she’d even imagined, and she braced her spear against the rough cobblestones as she caught her breath.

Next to her, she felt Xena shift, and her body stretch higher, and she looked up to see the queen extending herself to peer over the edge of the wall. It occurred to her suddenly that Xena’s choice of paths had be anything but random, and she turned to look up at her friend just as the queen let out a vicious, heartfelt curse.

“What is it?” Gabrielle asked, as Xena turned, sliding down the wall and coming to rest with her boots braced against the slope and her head resting on her hands. When no answer was forthcoming, she looked quickly, around, spotting a wooden crate against the wall and dragging it over so she could stand on it.

Her balance was precarious. She hugged the wall and got up on her tip toes, enough for her to peer over the top and see what was beyond it. At first, her eyes blinked hard, getting used to the bright light of the torches around the big central square she remembered passing on her way in.

As it was then, it was now full of people, soldiers mostly with townfolk on the edges and in the central square, before the wide open gates, was a large bunch of mounted soldiers surrounding a group of captives.

Gabrielle frowned, then she squinted and focused on the first captive in the group, a sense of shock making her skin warm, and then grow cold. “Oh my gosh.” She whispered. “It’s Brendan!” As she watched in horror, the Persian soldiers herded Xena’s men into the center of the square, laughter audible even from where she was standing.

She couldn’t understand what was funny. Brendan and his men were unarmed and weather bedraggled, but their backs were held straight, and their heads high, the force of fifty seemingly intact from when she’d last seen them. “Oh no.”

“Idiots.” Xena muttered, barely audibly.

Gabrielle turned, climbing precariously off the box and sitting on it, letting her hand rest on Xena's shoulder. "Wow, I thought they'd have gotten all the way back to the stronghold by now... I can't believe they got captured!"

Xena straightened and let her head rest against the wall's stone surface. "You can't, huh?" She exhaled. "Stupid piece of dung mindless fools."

"Oh, Xena." Gabrielle rubbed her back. "I'm sure they tried really hard."

Xena rolled her head to the side and stared at her, lips twitching sardonically. "Yeah." She let her hands rest on her knees. "Now what in the Hades am I gonna do?" She asked. "They're probably gonna start cutting pieces off those bastards before morning."

"You can't let them do that."

Xena sighed once more. "No, I can't." She agreed. "If I know that, and you know that, wanna guess who else knows that?"

Gabrielle frowned. Then she stood up and got back on her box, looking over the wall again. The Persians had started tying the prisoners to the stakes in the square, while lines of soldiers stood by with crossbows cocked, alertly watching the crowd, and the area around them. "I don't understand."

Xena leaned on the wall next to her, eyes just visible over the top. "Why take prisoners?"

"What?"

"Why take enemy prisoners?" The queen asked again. "I'd just kill em." She said.

"Oh."

"Unless I wanted to get something for them, or use them as bait." The queen went on. "And since anything Sholeh wants, she can pretty much take I guess those poor bastards are the chum in the water."

Gabrielle looked away as Brendan was hoisted by his tied hands to dangle in a tripod of wood posts. "What does she want with them?"

"Me." Xena shrugged.

"To join her army again?" Gabrielle voice rose.

"No." The queen murmured. "I think she's given up on that. I think she either wants me dead, or discredited, and she figures if she starts killing my men either I'll jump in front of those arrows to help em out or I'll walk away and there goes that idiotic reputation of mine."

"But..." Gabrielle started to protest, then she subsided. "Oh." She said. "You mean if you don't do anything, then..."

"Its damn funny." Xena wiggled her fingers. "I thought I did such a good job being a complete bastard. What the Hades went wrong?"

"You're a hero."

"Shut up."

Gabrielle turned and looked at her, a serious expression on her face. "Xena, you are." She said. "Stop pretending you're not." She watched the pale eyes fasten on her, shadows chasing through

them. "That's what you meant by your reputation, isn't it? Those men are loyal to you because they know you care about them."

"I do not." Xena snapped back at her. "You don't know what your talking about. They're just dumb soldiers, and this is war, Gabrielle. You can't care about people you're going to see killed."

"Then if it doesn't matter, you can just walk away and let them be killed, right?" Gabrielle's voice softened. "If that's all this is - is war, and you don't care. It's just a bunch of guys."

Xena turned and looked out at the square without answering.

"I don't think that's true." Gabrielle said finally.

The queen sighed and let her head rest against the cool stone. "I don't really know what is true and what's not anymore." She said. "I used to think I knew who I was." She straightened. "Damned if I know what I am now." Her eyes flicked to the square. "Let's go." She turned and started back down the alleyway.

Gabrielle looked at the men, and at the suffering Brendan. Then she slowly climbed down off her box and grabbed her spear, following Xena as the queen walked off into the shadows.

**

They were just finishing putting the fires out when Xena and Gabrielle got back to the inn. Instead of walking towards the doorway though, the queen turned and slipped inside the stable, it's badly hung door shuddering under her touch.

Gabrielle hesitated. Xena hadn't asked her to follow, and though she usually would have, something inside her told her that she shouldn't. She waited for a few moments, just to be sure Xena wasn't coming back, then she took a deep breath and walked on towards the inn.

How funny life was, wasn't it? She felt very tired, and really depressed and she had to put a hand out to steady herself as she almost tripped up the uneven steps. She didn't even really have the energy to wonder what Xena was going to do about the mess they were in - she just hoped she'd get a chance to get in a few more hugs before it all was over.

That's all she wanted, really. Gabrielle sighed again. That and maybe a warm bath, and a smile from Xena. That wasn't too much to ask from life, was it?

Maybe it was. Her eyes drifted over the cracked wooden supports and the broken shutters. Maybe it wasn't fair for her to get what she wanted, when everyone else had to suffer.

And people had suffered. The darkness masked the details, but near the outer wall were laid still figures under blankets, and she saw two men kneeling before a young woman who was sobbing, her arm held awkwardly and covered in blood.

The Persians had been brutal, and Gabrielle felt her heart sink as she realized she and Xena were the reason for it. The soldiers had been searching for them, and left in their wake death and pain since their targets had slipped away leaving the people in the inn to suffer.

She felt ashamed, more so when she saw two children creep out from behind the side of the inn, crying and holding on to each other. Two girls, scared and bewildered and giving her a shocking flashback to the moment she'd been taken and all she'd had to hold on to was Lila's shaking hand.

She swallowed hard, as the two passed her, barely giving her a glance as they stared around in horror and she remembered vividly being that terrified child, looking out at a world turned suddenly, viciously mean.

Then she looked at the ground, and exhaled, before she walked on, passing a still, huddled body with a spear sticking up out of it and a man simply sitting beside it, staring past her with unseeing eyes.

At the door she stopped, with her hand resting against the wood surface, then she turned and put her back to the wall and leaned against it, the smell of burning things filling her lungs and putting a sour taste on the back of her tongue.

**

Xena hardly realized what she was doing, as she picked up a handful of straw and started rubbing Patches scruffy coat with it. The pony was eyeing her in mild surprise, evidently wondering what he'd done to rate the attention.

Damned if she knew. Her hands moved automatically, straightening his thick coat as she leaned a little against his short frame, wanting the simple and undemanding contact.

In the silence around her, she heard the echoes of condemnation. Her options seemed to have neatly run out, and as she stood there stroking Patches neck she knew one of the few moments in her life when she really just felt like sitting down and crying.

She didn't. She couldn't. She was too old and too jaded and she knew better than most how badly life sucked sometimes - there were no tears in her.

Were there? She felt a band tighten painfully around her chest, and her throat ached, taunting her.

Gods, she wanted to. Xena stepped back and slid down to sit with her back against the wall and her knees upraised with her arms resting on them. "Know what, runt?"

Patches eased over to where she was sitting, nibbling hay casually as his neat little hooves settled near her boots.

"I screwed up." The queen went on, with a sigh. "I screwed up so many things this time I ain't got no idea where to start to count them, much less fix em."

Patches nudged her leg with his nose.

Xena stroked the side of his cheek with one hand. "What am I gonna do, little one?" She mused. "Know what I should do? I should grab her, and you, and just sneak out of here."

The pony nibbled at her fingers, lipping them hopefully as he shifted his feet, his ears cocked as he listened to her.

"I should do it. Gods only know I'm as useful as teats on a bull in this place." She thought about the words briefly. "Wanna hear something crazy?"

Patches snorted softly, and snuffled, pushing his head into her chest.

Xena leaned forward and put her lips near one ear. "I don't wanna be queen anymore."

The pony's ear twitched violently, and he shook his head.

"I don't want to owe anyone anything, y'know?" She looked up into his round, liquid eye. "I don't want to have to make the damn decisions anymore. Isn't that pathetic?"

Patches seemed to understand, or at least, he managed as much of a sympathetic look as his equine features were capable of. He stepped closer and bumped her roughly with his nose, his warm breath stirring her already disheveled hair.

“Aren’t I pathetic?” Xena exhaled, closing her eyes and giving in to the rolling despair, letting her head come to rest against one hand as she let the echoes of her words fade into the shadows.

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“Gabrielle!” Lennat started in surprise as he came through the door and saw her standing there. “You’re back!” He looked around. “Wheres.. Uh..”

It took a minute before she could pull herself out of the cloud of depression that had settled over her. “Um..” Gabrielle turned to look at him. “She’s planning.” She said, after a pause. “Wow, they really came through here, huh?”

“They did.” Lennat came over and leaned against the wall next to her. “But you know what? No one said anything.” He added. “No one told them about you or her.”

Gabrielle watched some of the men come back across the courtyard. ‘They don’t look mad.” She commented, as one of the men spotted her and straightened up, running his hands through his hair and giving her a shy smile. “Don’t they care about all this mess?”

Lennat scrubbed his face with one hand. “I don’t know.” He confessed. “I guess it’s been so awful being under their boots that it feels good to see them messed up a little.”

“A little.” Gabrielle looked over at him. “But not that much.” She glanced past him and lowered her voice.” They got some of Xena’s men.”

“Yeah, we heard.” The blond man said. “But that’s no problem right? She’ll get em back, and then we’ll be set.”

The confidence in his voice shocked her. Gabrielle felt a little short of breath as she realized that some how, some way, these people they barely knew had fallen for the mystique of her lover’s invincibility at the most inconvenient of times. “Yeah?”

Lennat nodded. “Was she mad?”

Mad? “Oh, about her guys?” Gabrielle managed to answer. “Uh.. Yes, yes she was.” She pushed away from the wall. “I’m.. I’ll go see if she’s done with her.. With planning.” Her heart was beating fast, she could feel it inside her chest, an uncomfortable sensation that made her want to rub the spot above it.

Instead, she started for the steps.

“Gabrielle, wait.” Lennat came after her. “What.. I mean, is there something we can do to help now?” He asked. “Can we.. Uh.. Get some weapons or something? I mean, you’re the expert.”

Gabrielle resisted the urge to look around to see who Lennat was talking to. ‘What?’

“You told us.” He put his hand out to touch her arm. “You told us how Xena went against the odds and won, Gabrielle. Everyone heard it.”

‘Well, she did but..”

“And after what happened on the docks, that did it. We knew she could lead us to get rid of these scumbags.” Lennat said, in a tone of certainty. “She’s everything you said she was.”

Gabrielle gazed at him unhappily. "She's not..um.."

"We just want to be a part of things." Her companion said, earnestly. "I know we're not soldiers, and maybe she doesn't think we can do much, but we can! We know the city, and we'll do whatever it takes.. Whatever she wants us to do."

Whatever she wants them to do. The blond woman felt her guts twist. "Lennat, these guys are really mean. You could get hurt.. Maybe killed."

"No one else is doing anything. We want to make a difference." He walked over to her. "Like in your story."

Her story. Gabrielle suddenly wished she'd been born mute, like the boy who had cared for the oxen back in Potadeia. "Ah huh." She murmured. "Uh.. For now I guess.. If you could um.. Listen? To the soldiers? Maybe you could find out something Xena might like to know."

Lennat visibly perked up. "Really?"

She rummaged through her very tiny store of experience. "Yeah." She said. "Like, uh.. When they change watch shifts.. Something like that?"

The man slapped his head. "Of course.. Sure." He agreed. "That makes a lot of sense. I guess that's why you're her bard, huh?"

Bard? "Um.. Right." Gabrielle patted his arm, then she escaped and half ran, half fell down the steps, her legs shaking as she crossed the burned and broken courtyard, the dampened fires casting long shadows and masking her path as she made her way towards the barn.

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Xena heard the door open. She kept her eyes closed though, since she knew it was Gabrielle entering and she waited in pensive silence as the soft footsteps crossed the floor and neared her. She heard her lover pat Patches, and the soft sound of her voice as she murmured to the pony before she settled to her knees by Xena's side.

After a moment of awkward silence, her cheek was warmed by a gentle touch and with that Xena's mind was made up. She let her eyes flutter open. "Hey."

"Are you okay?" Gabrielle asked, her voice concerned. "Boy you had me scared there."

"Good." Xena answered mildly. "I like scaring people."

Gabrielle took a seat next to her, shoulder to shoulder. "Not that kind of scared." SHE said. "I was worried about you when I saw you just sitting there." She took Xena's hand in both her own, and rubbed it. "You feel so cold."

Xena extended one leg out, her boot ending up between Patches forelegs. "Do I?"

"You do. Can I get you a blanket or something?" Gabrielle edged closer and pressed her body against the queen's, feeling the unusual chill where their skin touched.

"No, I'm all right." Xena said, not really sure if she was or not. "I just feel like killing myself, that's all."

"Bft." Gabrielle half turned and reached out to touch Xena's chest. "That's not funny."

"I'm not laughing." Xena let her head rest against the wall as she studied her companion. "We have to get out of here." She said. "So here's what we're gonna do. You're gonna get your stuff, and I'm gonna tack up this damned annoying runt of yours, and we're gonna go on down to the boat."

"Um."

"And then, we're gonna sail out of the harbor, and hope like Hades I still know how to navigate." Xena finished. "Sound all right with you?"

Gabrielle peered at her in the dimness, her face half hidden itself in the shadows. "We're leaving?"

"Yeah."

"Just like that? What about Brendan?"

"He took his chances." Xena said. "I'm not being the queen today. I just want out." She exhaled after she finished speaking, swallowing as the exhaustion she'd been holding at bay for too long settled back over her. "Maybe I'll teach you how to fish. You like that?"

Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, then she closed it again. She could see Xena's profile, and as she looked closely, she saw the weariness there she'd missed before, masked in the queen's dark energy. The protest she'd started to make died unspoken as she reached out to stroke Xena's cheek instead. "I'd like that."

Xena's eyes were watching her face intently. "You don't think I'm a loser for running away?" She asked. "Am I disappointing you? Lousy end to a story, ain't it?"

Gabrielle thought of the people outside, and of the men in the stocks, and about her own words proudly telling of her friend's heroism and looking into Xena's eyes, she realized something a little shameful about herself that made her guts twist to think of.

"Ain't it?"

"I don't care." Gabrielle said, after a long pause.

Xena waited, but as the silence lengthened, she finally reached over and took the hand Gabrielle had let drop to her thigh and held it. "You don't care?"

The soft green eyes lifted and met hers. "If it means I don't have to lose you I don't care." Gabrielle stopped, and swallowed. "I never really wanted to be a storyteller anyway."

Patches extended his neck and nibbled at Gabrielle's pale hair as the two women sat there together in silence. Xena put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and pulled her into a hug as the sounds outside started to fade and the horns of the watch echoed faintly.

Gabrielle blinked her eyes a few times, not really able to see in the gloom as she sat there listening to Xena's heartbeat just under her right ear. She no longer felt anxious. Her mind was mulling over the thought of going on the boat with Xena and spending some time in the nice room she'd found.

It was completely selfish. Gabrielle understood that. "Thank you for thinking of Patches." She said, after a bit. "I'd miss him."

Xena rested her head against her lover's. She exhaled slowly, then she looked around. "Well, lets get moving." She said. "Before anyone gets any stupid ideas." She gathered her strength and straightened up, biting the inside of her lip as her now stiffened body screamed in protest.

"Xena, are you.."

“Sh.” The queen grunted.

Gabrielle fell silent, but she could feel the tension in the body under her hands and she rubbed Xena’s back gently, feeling a faint shiver under her touch. After a few breaths, the tension relaxed a little, and she released her grip as the queen started to stand up.

Xena was hurting, she could tell. The queen normally moved in a smooth, easy way with little effort and watching her now slowly easing herself upright was painful to see. “Xena..”

“I said shh.” Xena’s armor rustled into place as she got to her feet and reached out to put her hands on Patches back, steadying her balance. “Let me be an old bitch in peace, huh?” She slowly flexed one leg and then the other, sucking in a breath as her back almost seized up on her.

Another damned good reason to slink out of the place, before she had to try and fight and end up falling on her ass. With a sigh, she patted the pony’s back and stiffly circled him, going to the door of the barn and opening it just enough to look out.

The courtyard was busier than she’d expected. Men and women were milling around, some working to remove debris, and others just standing talking to each other. The voices were very low, and even her ears couldn’t distinguish them, but the body language indicated both excitement and anger and made her wonder.

Anger? Sure. The bastards had come through like rutting boars looking for her, and they’d a right to be angry at them and at her too. It was the excitement that seemed strange, and she half turned only to find Gabrielle right at her elbow, peeking under it. “Ah. Muskrat.”

“Are we going out that way?” Gabrielle asked. “Everyone will see us.”

“Mm.” The queen replied. “Probably not a good idea since I’m not real popular out there, eh/”

Gabrielle didn’t answer. She turned and went back over to where Patches was, picking up his bridle and starting to put it on.

Xena watched her, head cocked to one side as she pondered the body language on this side of the barn wall. After a minute she walked across to the back of the barn, where a pile of old, broken farm equipment was stacked. “Let’s see if I can find another way out.”

“That’s probably a good idea.” Gabrielle finished fastening Patches bridle and stood at his head, stroking his cheek as he jangled his bit at her.

Xena lifted a bit of wood and metal and tossed it to one side. “That ticked at me, huh?”

“No.”

The queen stopped and turned. “No?”

Gabrielle shook her head, almost invisible in the gloom. “They’re waiting for you to come out and tell them how we’re going to beat Sholeh.” She said. “So it’s probably better if we go some other way.”

Xena put her hands on her hips, now fully turned around and staring at her consort. “Where in the Hades did they get that idea from?”

“Um.. you.”

“Me??”

The blond woman nodded. "You said you'd come back here, remember? I guess they think that's why." She started leading Patches out of his enclosure. "I guess I thought that too."

"Hey."

"I don't know how to explain to them now." Gabrielle continued, as she came even to where Xena was. "So, can I help? Patches can drag some of that stuff away from the wall, I think." She started to tug at one end of a wooden board.

Xena didn't move. "I thought you said you didn't care."

Gabrielle continued to pull on the board.

"Gabrielle." Xena's voice dropped, and strengthened, taking on an edge. "Put that down and come over here."

Obediently, her consort did, leaving the debris and walking over to stand before the queen, head tilted back to look up at her.

Xena studied the somber eyes facing her with a sense of discomfort. "Well?" She said, more sharply than she'd intended. "Were you just spouting crap before?" She felt a churning in her guts as the unexpected conflict shook her. "I told you not to make me out as some half assed hero."

Gabrielle's eyes dropped, and she looked away. Her shoulders slumped and she merely stood there, head a little down, mutely waiting.

The queen reached out and tangled her fingers in Gabrielle's pale hair, tugging her head up and forcing their eyes to meet again. They stood there watching each other across a sudden, uncomfortable gulf until she finally released her grip and turned away. "C'mon."

She turned back to the pile of junk and started plowing her way through it, pulling pieces off and throwing them with some violence into the dark corner of the barn driven by a sense of dark turmoil. At least the motion was loosening up her body, and she took a small comfort from that as she dug deeper into the rubbish.

Working at her side, Gabrielle picked up the smaller pieces and carried them more carefully to the other side, setting them down near where the water trough was. She moved past Patches as she came back over to where Xena was, giving him a little stroke or pat every time.

The last piece blocking the wall was a huge yoke. Xena grabbed hold of it, then realized she'd made a mistake when the thing overbalanced and started to fall on top of her. She stumbled backwards. "Gabrielle get out of th.."

The yoke came down fast, and she just barely got her hands up on it before it's weight was buckling her knees and she crashed down onto them as the yoke slammed against her shoulders. She was on the verge of collapsing when she felt a warmth against her back and heard Gabrielle grunt as she added her grip to the wood.

The dust settled around them, and Xena reeled for a moment, then got her body back under control and balanced the weight of the yoke. "Okay." She gasped. "I count to three, let go, jump back."

"Okay." Gabrielle rasped immediately. "Oof."

"One, two.." Xena gathered her strength and took a deep breath. "Three.." She flexed her body and pushed off against the yoke, feeling Gabrielle pushing it upward behind her as the weight lifted off her

shoulders and she hurled herself backwards, taking Gabrielle with her as they tumbled across the dirty straw and landed just at Patches' feet.

The yoke crashed to the ground with a splintering crack, scattering dust and clumps of old hay over everything.

Patches snorted, and backed up, shaking his head.

Xena blinked, waving her hand to clear the dust as she found herself laying pretty much in Gabrielle's lap with the blond woman's arms around her. She peered through the gloom, and cursed. "Useless piece of.."

Gabrielle caught her breath. "You okay?" She blurted, wincing as she flexed her hand and found a splinter in it. "What's wrong?"

Xena relaxed abruptly, letting her body go limp across Gabrielle's legs and leaning backwards to look up at her through the gloom. "No door."

"Oh." The blond woman's expression tensed into an adorable scowl as she looked at the wall. "We did all that for nothing?"

"Mm."

Gabrielle exhaled audibly.

The queen's eyes studied Gabrielle's face. "Sorry about that hero thing, muskrat." She said, in a quiet voice. "I'm really a much better jerky jackass of a tyrant."

Gabrielle touched her face with the backs of her knuckles. "Whatever you are, I want to be with you." She said. "So I guess that makes me jerky too."

The pale blue eyes blinked at her. "You weren't supposed to agree with me, Gabrielle." She sighed aggrievedly. "You're supposed to tell me how wonderful I am."

"Oh. Sorry.." A smile briefly creased the blond woman's face, which morphed into a grimace as she flexed her fingers. "Ow."

The queen picked up her consort's hand, spotting the splinter she'd been worrying out and capturing it neatly between her teeth. She pulled it out, feeling Gabrielle flinch as she spit the bit of wood out before she very gently kissed the spot she'd taken it from.

Gabrielle's body relaxed and she leaned over, resting her head against Xena's shoulder.

Xena exhaled, letting her hands fall to rest against the hay cover floor as she looked up at the roof, pondering the possibility of spiders coming down on top of them. "So much for that idea." She started to push herself upright. "Guess we're going out the front door after all. Hope you got your talking game on, Muskrat."

"Uh.."

Xena pulled herself to her feet, acknowledging the new set of aches she'd just acquired, and headed for the door to the barn, grabbing Patches reins as she passed and pulling the pony after her. "Move it."

Gabrielle scrambled up, stretching her arms out with a grimace as she followed Xena to the door and hoping she'd figure out what to say to everyone before it opened.

Boy, life was just getting suckier every minute.

**

Part 22

The barn door was heavy, and Gabrielle had to put a lot of effort into closing it, which gave her a moment to collect herself before she turned and faced the crowd of people standing there before them.

Xena was standing just in front of her, one hand on Patches reins and the other wavering between wanting to grab at her sword, and wanting to cover her eyes – or at least, that’s how Gabrielle interpreted her body language anyway.

The courtyard was full of townsfolk, and torches had been set around to cast light across the ground and the doors to the barn, almost as though they’d expected Xena to make a grand entrance through them. She was surprised at how many eyes were watching them – there seemed hardly room to stand between the ramshackle arbor walls and the doors to the inn.

At their entrance, the crowd started moving toward them, and the sound of voices rose in excitement as the city dwellers approached where they were.

Gabrielle carefully dusted her hands off and walked over to join the queen, stepping just past her and turning so her back was to the crowd. “Want me to tell them we’re taking off?” She asked, looking up at Xena’s face outlined clearly in the torchlight.

Xena looked down at her.

Gabrielle simply waited. What else could she say? Her heart was telling her leaving the city was wrong, but she was honest enough with herself to know that she cared more about being with Xena than helping the people.

So if Xena didn’t want to help them, that’s all there was to it. She’d do her best to explain to them and they’d move on.

“Gabrielle?”

She twitched a little, and riveted her attention back on the queen after it’s momentary drift. “Yes?”

Xena put her hand on her companions shoulder and exhaled, cocking her head to one side as a grim expression appeared on her face. “When this is over, I’m gonna strip you naked and spank you senseless.” She said, with complete seriousness. “I swear it.”

Gabrielle quickly looked behind her at the gathering crowd, then back at the queen. “Promise?” She whispered, trying hard not to smile.

“Promise.” Xena diverted her attention from her cheeky distraction and faced the crowd. She pulled Gabrielle around to her side and draped her arm over her shoulders as the men and women of the city gathered close and the voices died down as they studied her with undisguised fascination.

As she stood there, and they stood there waiting, Xena felt a weird twitch inside her chest and she suspected she either was getting sick, or something even more annoying was happening to her. She looked at the faces opposite her, and she detected fear, interest, and most surprisingly, hope there.

Oh boy.

Lennat stepped forward, twisting his fingers together nervously. “Your majesty.”

Xena wasn't really sure she was that anymore. Her army was dispersed, her men captured and probably tortured by now, some duke had probably taken over the stronghold, and her decisions lately had frankly sucked.

However. "Yes?" The queen answered, since no one else appeared likely to. "This all the people you could find?"

Lennat licked his lips. "Some.." He paused, looking around him for support. "Some of us are down by the square." He said. "There's some bad things going on down there."

Without visibly moving, Xena's body stiffened as a chill went down her back. "To my men?" She asked, in the calmest of voices.

Lennat nodded, after a pause. "Hung two of em on the gate, said it'd bring you in here."

Xena sighed. "Damn."

Gabrielle put her arm around Xena's waist and gave her a squeeze. "I can't believe they don't know you're already here, Xena. What's wrong with them?"

"I can't believe I'm going to do what I'm going to do." Xena replied, with another sigh. "I can't believe I'm buying into that bullshit hero story nonsense of yours, either." She squared her shoulders and faced the crowd again. "All right." She lifted her voice considerably. "First thing I need to do is go teach those stupid bastards why those men were willing to walk right into Sholeh's trap for me."

The crowd whispered and exchanged looks.

"You mean.. I thought they were captured." Lennat said. "That's what the soldiers said."

"Yeah, that's what they think." Xena chewed the inside of her lip. "Who's seen the layout there?" She changed the subject. "You?" She indicated a man's hesitantly raised hand. "All right, you, and you, come over here."

She released Gabrielle and went over to the side of the barn, where a ramshackle table was leaning against the wall. "Bring that torch over here, and someone grab a piece of parchment." She looked up to see everyone goggling at her. "You wanted action? Well move it!"

After a long stunned moment, the men lurched into motion, one of the younger women turning and running back towards the inn calling out for parchment. Lennat hurried over to Xena's side and motioned the other men with him, and slowly the crowd started to follow.

Gabrielle stayed where she was, now grasping Patches bridle as she sorted through what Xena had just said. Had she really meant that Brendan had purposely gotten captured just to be where she was? The more she thought about that, the more she realized Xena had known all along what the truth was.

Of course Brendan had walked into trouble. Of course the men with him had gladly put their lives on the line for their beloved queen. They would die for her. Brendan had once even said that, casually as though he'd been talking about having his dinner.

Of course.

What was inconceivable to her was that Xena had considered, if even so briefly, just walking away from them.

Gods.

She walked Patches back towards barn, feeling a mixture of confusion and dismay that this woman she'd thought she'd known had suddenly become a little strange to her.

How could Xena have thought about leaving them? She opened the door and led Patches back into his little domain, taking him into the enclosure and standing there with her arms around his neck. "Wow, Patches."

The pony seemed a bit disgruntled about being back in his little pen. He tossed his head and jangled his bit, looking towards the still open door. Gabrielle stroked him gently, pulling the thick mane out from under one of the bridle straps. "We sure are in a pickle, huh?"

Patches snorted.

"Not that I really can say anything." Gabrielle admitted, leaning against the pony. "I was ready to walk away from all this too, wasn't I? I could have tried to talk her out of it." She rested her forehead against the pony's neck. "I wish I knew what was right and wrong anymore."

She released the pony and went over to where Xena had been sitting when she'd found her and sat down in the same spot, not really wanting to know what was going on outside, content to sit there and wait to see what Xena wanted her to do.

What if it had been been Brendan who'd been hung on the gate? She knew what that was. She'd seen the victims of Xena's wrath similarly hung on a number of occasions, and she wasn't ready to think about seeing the man she'd come to think of as a friend hanging there like that.

She felt more than a little sick to her stomach. She propped her elbow on her knee and let her chin rest against her fist. Maybe it would be better if she went down to the ship and just waited with the rest of the men there, she thought.

Then she remembered Perdicus was there, and thought better of it. Talking to him was worse than sitting here waiting to know the worst of what was going on, since at least here she didn't have to see him looking at her and wondering who in the Hades she was now.

She sure didn't know.

"Gabrielle."

Gabrielle looked up to find Xena leaning on the enclosure railing, gazing quietly at her. "Oh. Sorry." She scrambled to her feet and ducked past Patches. "I was just.."

"Getting away from my evil self." Xena concluded. "Don't blame you. If I could get away from me right now I would too."

Gabrielle slowed to a halt and they faced each other over the rail. After an awkward moment, she cleared her throat. "I was just bringing Patches back in here."

Xena's lips twisted sardonically but she merely straightened up and tugged a bit of her armor into place. "I'm going down to the docks to get the men. I want you to stay here." She studied the ground, refusing to meet Gabrielle's eyes.

It felt like the bottom part of her stomach had just dropped free, and Gabrielle had to swallow past a sudden lump in her throat. The emotions between them were abruptly changed and uncertain, and she remembered that one moment after she'd defied Xena the first time, when she thought she'd gone past a line and couldn't get back.

Horrible. Terrifying. "Are you coming back here with them?" She managed to ask, in a soft tone.

“Probably not.” Xena replied.

Gabrielle’s heart was racing so fast it was making it hard to breathe. “Are you going to sail away with them in the ship?” Her voice cracked on the last word and she closed her jaw tightly.

Xena went quite still, then she turned her head and looked at Gabrielle. “You think I’d do that?” She asked. “And leave you here?”

“I don’t know.”

Now it was Xena’s turn to swallow. “You want me to? This isn’t a bad place, once the Persians take off.” She said, in a forced, casual tone. “You’d do all right.” She waited for Gabrielle to answer, then she looked back up after a long moment of silence to see her companion standing there, hands gripped tightly around the rail, tears running down her face.

Her body shifted closer. “Okay, maybe not.” The queen muttered. “Stop freaking out. I’m just trying to find a way to keep from seeing you spitted on a lance, not get rid of you.”

Gabrielle turned away and wiped her eyes on her sleeve in an almost angry gesture. “Yeah, thanks.” She went over to Patches and started messing with his mane, her back turned to Xena. “Fine, I’ll stay here. Come back whenever you feel like it.”

The queen leaned on the rail. “Gabrielle don’t make this tougher than it has to be for..”

“Why not?” Gabrielle turned and faced her lover. “Why should it be easy for you? It’s not easy for Brendan, or those people, or me.” Her eyes were dark with anger. “So go ahead! Go leave, or hide or whatever it is you’re going to do and just..” She turned away and put her arms around Patches and buried her face into the side of his neck. “Forget it.”

She let the silence lengthen, until she had to lift her head again and turn, only to find the space Xena had been in empty, and herself and Patches alone in the barn.

The shock left her lightheaded, and she had to grab hold of the pony’s mane to keep from falling down on the ground as she turned fully in a circle to confirm what her eyes were telling her.

Xena was gone.

She was alone.

Gabrielle’s mouth opened, then she shut it again, backing away from the rail until she collided with the wall, and slid down it to sit on the floor, shaking. A soft sound escaped from her and she cradled her head in her hands, giving in to the unexpected grief that racked her with almost noiseless sobs.

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Xena pressed her back against the wall across from the docks, letting the sounds of the city filter through her senses as she waited for the right moment to cross.

Or at least, she pretended that was what she was doing. She pulled up the edge of her cloak and wiped the sweat from her face, rubbing her eyes furtively as she did so. She waited until she was pretty sure no one was watching, then she moved away from the wall and headed for the ship.

She was spotted, and the plank was in place as she reached the edge of the dock and she crossed without incident onto the deck of the ship. “Jens.”

“Here, Mistress.” Her captain met her. “We’re all packed up ready, we tucked things up when we heard about them having Brendan and them.”

Xena stopped walking, resting her hand on the wall of the cabin. "Did you?"

"All ready to move out." Jens said. "You figure we can bust em from there without them folks? Not much fighters there."

Xena could feel the air moving in and out of her lungs as she watched her captain watch her, the absolutely confident look on his face betraying his assumptions about what her plans were. Her jaw clamped shut on what was about to come out of it, and she took a long, steadying moment before she tried to talk again. "Um.." Her throat relaxed a touch. "Get everyone up here and ready. I've got to get something below. Then we'll talk."

"Right." Jens nodded, turning to motion to the men. "Out from back of there, you lot."

Xena slipped past him and through the door to belowdecks. She pushed past the men moving up the steps who hurriedly moved out of her way and escaped through the cargo hold, almost breaking into a run as she found the door of the captain's cabin and got through it, closing it behind her with seriously shaking hands.

Inside it was thankfully silent and she crossed the deck to sit down on the bunk, resting her elbows on her knees and clasping her hands together.

She felt cold. She felt confused.

She felt lost, having turned her back on the one thing she thought she could count on, throwing her intent to the winds and deciding to return to the ship and take off regardless of everything.

Regardless of anything.

If she just got out of here, and left everything behind she could start over again, right? Xena felt like she was breathing too fast, and there didn't seem to be enough air in the room. Just take the ship out, go somewhere, take the few men she had with her and maybe... there were places down the coast, little towns..

No realm, no crown, no..

Xena's eyes fell on the common, dun colored bag resting on the captain's table. She stared at it for a long, frozen moment. "Were you really going to do that, Xena?" She asked herself out loud. "Are you really that much of an idiot or that much of a piece of scum?"

Her voice echoing off the walls was her only answer. She got up and went to the table, sitting down on the rough stool as she picked up the bag and opened it.

The scent rising from it made her close her eyes and she waited for the ache to pass before she opened them again and closed the bag, folding her arms over it and putting her head down on them.

It didn't pass. She just kept hurting inside. She got up and walked over to the grated window and stared out it, seeing a sprinkling of stars overhead and remembering what it was like to be out at sea, with nothing but stars around her.

Quiet. At peace. The waves hitting the hull and lulling her to sleep. Xena turned and leaned against the wall, catching sight of her own reflection peering back at her from the silvered metal mirror against the far partition.

She didn't recognize it. Her hair had grown long since she'd left the stronghold, hanging partly into her eyes and framing her face with a wildness she hadn't seen in a long time, a face that was far gaunter

than she remembered with dark circles under the eyes and lines she didn't recall having marking the angles.

She could barely meet her own eyes in the mirror. It seemed to her every single decision she'd made since leaving the castle had been wrong and now she was on the cusp of making yet another one with no expectation this one would be any better.

She studied her boots for a little while, aware of the creaking overhead as the men assembled and waited for her. Finally, she lifted her head and met her own eyes again, this time more squarely. "What's it gonna be, Xena?"

Those pale eyes studied her as though they were someone else's. "Pleasure or pain? Hard or easy?" She folded her arms across her chest. "Your vision or hers?"

The decision, in the end, was easier than she'd thought it would be. Or maybe, she'd never really had a choice in the first place. She stepped closer to the mirror and straightened up, tugging her armor into place and running her fingers through her hair to push it back.

Then she went over to the basin in the room and scooped a handful of water out of it, washing her face with brisk motions and drying it off on the bit of linen left next to it. She turned and walked out of the room, then she paused and went back, grabbing the bag off the desk and taking it with her as she disappeared again into the darkness.

**

Patches edged over and gave the silent figure against the wall a nudge. Gabrielle lifted her head from her hands and looked up at him, having run out of tears and emotional energy. She had gotten past the shock of Xena's sudden departure, and now she mostly felt just very sad, and tired.

"Hey boy." She reached out and patted his leg. "Looks like it's just you and me now huh?"

Patches nudged her again, and snorted.

"Yeah." Gabrielle sighed. "I shouldn't have said that. She was trying to apologize and I just made her mad. I always do that." She said. "Now she's gone."

The pony shook his head.

"Maybe she will take the ship and go." Gabrielle concluded sadly. "Gods, that hurts, Patches. I love her so much."

Patches nibbled her hair.

"Everything's so messed up." Gabrielle let her head rest against the wall. "I should have gone after her." After a moment's silence, she exhaled, and got up, struggling to her feet as she stretched out her aching legs and wiggled a half-asleep calf.

Patches seemed encouraged by this, and he thumped his head against her chest, knocking the wind out of her.

"Oof. Cut that out." Gabrielle winced, rubbing her breastbone. "I hurt enough." She leaned her arms across the pony's back. "Well, Patches.. you know what? If Xena's not coming back, someone has to do something about those guys."

Patches turned his head around and looked at her from one dark, liquid eye.

"Yeah, I know I'm not worth much." Gabrielle murmured. "But you know, at least I can try. I can't let those guys just die there thinking no one cares about them."

That wasn't fair, and she knew it. Xena did care about her men, she'd seen it so many times in so many ways she had no doubt. That was why the thought of her walking out on them had turned her so up side down, shocked her so badly, that her lover had wanted to leave them to die so she could...

Gabrielle went still, only her lashes blinking as she stared across Patches back. "What would make her do that, Patches?" She whispered. "What was different for her, this time?"

Patches rolled his eyes, and snorted.

"I was different." Gabrielle let her head thump down onto his back. "Oh Patches, what a stupid idiot I am." She turned her head sideways and rested her cheek on the thick, bristly coat. "Or is that just what I want to think?"

The pony sighed.

"I guess it doesn't really matter, does it?" She straightened up. "I'm going to go over there and see what I can do." She started to walk out of the stall, startled when the pony followed her promptly. "Oh.. ah..". She stumbled forward as she was bumped roughly in the back. "Okay, okay.. I'm going."

Patches herded her out of the barn and into the now quiet courtyard, only the fluttering torches showing any signs of life.

**

Gabrielle pushed the inn door open, peering inside at the crowd gathered around one of the hastily fixed tables. Heads turned quickly on hearing the creaks of the hinges, but the men relaxed when they recognized her and turned back to what they were looking at.

She walked over to where they were, feeling a sense of distance from everything that made the floor seem far away, and the voices just a cloud of buzzing. But the men separated when she neared, and she could see what was on the surface.

Parchment, spread out, with dark, bold marks on it and writing in a hand she recognized.

The recognition nearly made her turn away, but she gathered her resolve and moved closer instead, leaning her hands on the table as the men turned to focus on her.

"Gabrielle, did you get any rest?" Lennat asked. "Xena said not to trouble you."

She flinched a little inside at that, but at the same time, it made a tight wound knot inside her relax just a trifle. "Um.. yes I.. what is this?" She changed the subject. "Is that the square?"

Lennat turned back to the map. "Yes.. Xena drew it out, but she said she had something to take care of, and she left before she could tell us what we were to do." He looked at her. "But you probably know."

Oh. Oh. "Um." Gabrielle studied the drawing.

"She said she was going to get some help." One of the other men said. "I guess those other soldiers."

"Right." Gabrielle folded her arms across her chest to hide her crossed fingers. "Well, um.. she's probably going to figure out a way to make a distraction, you know? To make everyone look somewhere else."

“Ah.” The men nodded. “That makes sense.” Lennat agreed. “But where do we fit in?”

Gabrielle studied the map, thinking furiously. What would Xena do? Really make the distraction? Sail away? “Well.” She decided to come down on the side of the positive. “If she makes a scene, then I guess we need to be around here.” She pointed at the roughly drawn city square. “So we can.. uh.. sneak in and cut the guys loose in the mess, right?”

“Of course.” Lennat slapped the table. “That’s what she meant. She said for us to be ready.”

“Yes, yes she did!” The other man said. “We should go now! We don’t want to miss out on helping!”

The men in the room crowded close, except for the careful space around Gabrielle. “There are already many there.” One of the older men said. “We could mix in with them.”

Gabrielle laid her hands on the table. “We will mix in with them.” She said, in a more certain voice. “All we need is that distraction, and it can be anything. Xena’s..very clever. It could be.. uh.. just something you didn’t expect, but we have to be ready to jump in there.”

Lennat reached forward and briefly covered her hand, then withdrew in an almost nervous gesture. “We can do that.” He assured her. “Really.”

“Okay, lets go.” Gabrielle said.

The men started to move around, chattering excitedly. Lennat came over to Gabrielle’s side. “Gabrielle.” He lowered his voice. “Stay here. It’ll be safer.. they won’t recognize you.”

“No.” Gabrielle felt better just thinking about doing something. “Those men are my friends too.” She said. “And they mean a lot to me.”

He pressed her shoulder with one hand. “I understand.”

Do you? Gabrielle asked silently. Wish I did. She pulled her hood up, and tried to remember where she’d left her makeshift staff. Whatever else happened, she knew in her heart this was the right thing.

Whether Xena agreed with her or not.

**

“Mistress?”

Xena put her hand on the mast spar. “I said, pull in the lines and get ready to raise the sails.” She felt a touch breathless as she said the words, a conscience she hadn’t suspected she still had rising unexpectedly. “C’mon, we don’t have all night to get out of here.”

Jens was genuinely taken aback. He hesitated, then saw Xena’s body language shift as she let her hand rest on her dagger and his shoulders dropped. “Yes, Majesty.” He turned to the men. “You heard. Get the lines in and stow the gear there. We’re moving out.”

Xena could sense the shock around her. “Get moving.” She growled. “Or I’ll start cutting heads off.”

“Wait a minute.. where are we going?” Perdicus came up behind her. “We’re leaving?”

Xena half turned and clocked him with a fist to the jaw, hearing the crunch and the thump as he hit the side of the ship and slid down to the ground senseless. She stepped over his body and went to the wheel, wrapping one hand around one of the handles as she watched the men move slowly to the port side, unwrapping the ropes that held the ship tied to the pier.

She could already feel the ship straining to move away, sensing the tide pulling out and drawing the vessel with it. "Raise the sail." She ordered. "Quietly."

Two of her men went to the center spar and started unfurling the thick cloth, releasing the scent of salt and musty fabric into the air as it started to raise up.

The ship loosed from it's ties and floated back into the channel, the shore retreating as the deck tilted under her boots and brought back bittersweet memories to her. Xena let out a breath as she turned back to the wheel, aware of Jens coming over to join her.

He came even, then merely stood, hands braced behind his back, eyes forward as she turned the rudder. "Better have some of them stand with poles, in case we need to push off against those hulks." Xena indicated the men of war clustered at dock ahead of them.

"Aye." Jens turned and motioned.

Xena waited, but he remained silent after that and she pondered briefly if she owed him an explanation or not.

Not.

Her heart was hammering in her chest and she blinked a few times as she looked out past the end of the harbor, to where the sea was waiting for her, glistening in the moonlight. She could already smell the air blowing inland and the sound of the waves lightly brushing the hull were like music to her ears.

"Xena."

She turned to look at her captain. "Yes?" She lowered her tone dangerously. "What?"

Jens looked scared, but he held his ground next to her. "What of the little one?" He asked in a soft voice. "How fares she?"

The queen looked away. "I left her somewhere safe." She waited, but there was no answer, so she looked back over at Jens. His face was blank, but the starlight showed twinkles from wetness under his eyes, and she drew in an uncertain breath, not sure of what that meant.

They were soldiers. She didn't think they had any particular feelings for her consort, above and beyond the fact they knew Xena had valued her.

Had? "She'll be fine." The queen concluded. "She'll do all right not mixed up in all this."

"Wasn't her I was thinking of." Jens turned and walked away, joining two men on the rail and picking up a thick wooden oar in both hands.

Xena felt a little like she'd been gut punched. She leaned against the wheel and focused on the looming Persian warships. The sides towered over her little merchant vessel, and she searched the top decks looking for watchmen.

It seemed quiet. She could see torches onshore in front of the piers, and she studied the shoreline intently, waiting to see if their passage caused any notice.

There had been some small ship traffic during the day. Empty ships moving out, mostly, as all the inbound ships had been corralled by the Persians and stripped bare. Bodies visible on the pier seemed to turn towards them, but as Xena held her breath, no alarm was raised.

Maybe she'd luck out, just this once. She concentrated on keeping the rudder straight and her watching, shoving everything else to the back of her mind for a later time.

The first warship neared, and the bow slipped past it, far out enough in the channel to easily clear the tall aft beam. Her cocked ears caught the sound of laughter, and a brief snatch of music from the vessel and that flash suddenly injected a vivid memory of the winter into her minds eye.

A simple moment, really, just a casual evening in the castle, only a few scattered nobles in attendance, and Jellaus singing a new song to Gabrielle's noisy delight.

Relaxing in her chair, leaning on the arm and watching her lover dance in her seat in an endearingly goofy way. Happy.

At peace.

Xena looked past the bow, blinking the memory away and wishing the insight into what happiness was had passed her by this time as it had so many times before.

It really was easier just to be miserable all the time, she mused, than know what it was to not be.

"Xena."

The low whisper caught her ear, and she turned to see the second warship passing them, but unlike the first, this one had a watch on the back who was looking right down at them with visible interest. "Ah." She straightened up and focused her attention on steering the ship, resisting the urge to pull her cloak up to hide her distinctive profile and long hair.

"Hey there!" The guards yelled down. "Where go ya!"

Jens looked at Xena. The queen wrapped her hands more tightly around the wheel. "Tell em we're heading home." She said, in a low voice. "Tell em we're broke."

He nodded, then he turned to face the guard, holding out both arms with his hands turned upmost, empty. "Where else but back to our mothers?" He yelled. "Not even got the bread to get there with."

The guard laughed, and slapped his companion on the shoulder. "That's what you get for being sheep!" He called down. "Run like dogs! If we find you out there, we'll take you again!"

Jens shrugged both shoulders, then he picked up his oar again and stood ready as the current took them closer to the near shore.

The guard followed them along the rail, though, and Xena felt her shoulderblades twitch as several more guards joined them and a torch was raised, sending flickering reflections across her and her crew. "Steady."

"Watching us." Jens called back in a low voice.

"I see it." Xena wished the current would pull them faster. She could hear the waves getting louder and she had a sense suddenly of time running out. "Wave at em."

Jens looked at his companions, then they all shrugged, and lifted one hand, giving the guard a casual wave. They were answered unexpectedly when an arrow slammed into the mast, and everyone dove for cover as several more followed it. "Bigods! X..M.. Geddown!"

Xena looked quickly up at the guard, seeing the weapons pointed in their direction. She cursed softly under her breath, feeling the resistance in her hands as she held the rudder steady and knowing if she let go they'd likely steer right into the back of the warship.

She felt a sting and just kept from jumping as an arrow buried itself into the wood near her elbow and she clamped her jaw down on a yell of outrage, knowing her voice, and catching any of the arrows would likely betray at least a suspicion of who she was, and end their escape before it really started.

“Hey! What’s that for!” Jens yelled in her stead. “We did nothing to ya!”

“We’re bored! You’re dead!” The watch yelled back. “Worthless sheep!”

Jackasses. Xena ducked as she sensed another arrow nearing her, jerking back as it buried itself into the wheel not a hand span from her fingers.

She willed the tide faster, and moved the wheel to turn the ship’s bow towards the Persian warship, sliding the aft where she was standing towards the far shore. “Stay down.” She warned the men in a low tone. “They’re just playing games.”

“With sharp weapons.” Jens grouched.

“Just my style.” Xena managed a bit of ghoulish humor. She saw the quick glances in her direction, but there was no response to it, and she sighed, edging back behind the mast spar as the guards continued to rain arrows down on top of them.

The channel opened a little, and she gladly steered clear of the warship.

“Ah, ya cowards!” The guards had continued on along the back of their ship, and now they visited the most undignified of attacks, opening their trousers and issuing a steady stream of urine over the side to rain down, driven by the wind to spatter against Xena’s ship.

Before she could really think about what she was doing, her temper got the better of her and she unhooked her chakram, grabbing the wheel with her left hand as she let fly with the weapon in her right. Five screams and four slight splashes later, the chakram was skimming back to her, and yells of outrage were already sounding far above.

She heard a faint snort of laughter from Jens, and she managed one herself as the alarm spread, and lights began to outline the water channel, showing harsh and bright against their sail.

“Get them! Let the boats down!”

Xena steered away from the warships and looked hopefully up at the sail as the wind came from behind and filled it just a little. She ducked an arrow, then sucked in a breath hard as one hit her in the back, the impact driving her forward and throwing her against the wheel.

It was the pain of an impact though, not a penetration and she braced her legs hard as a second arrow whipped past her, this one lit with fire. Her eyes tracked it to the water, and it disappeared with a hiss as another followed it and a third buried itself in the wood of the ship. “Get that!” Xena yelled, no longer trying to disguise her identity.

Jens bolted across the deck and grabbed the arrow, yanking it out and heading to the far rail to throw it over. Another soldier ran over and doused the fire with his cloak, tamping it out as they moved past the range of the guard.

“C’mon, c’mon.” Xena willed the wind to pick up. “Jens, yank the damn sticker out of my back willya?”

Her captain approached, and gingerly put his hand on her shoulder to steady himself before he took hold of the arrow and pulled it out of her armor. “Deep in there.”

“Yeah.” Xena peered up, to see the guard on the next warship bolting for the back, heeding the warning yells from their comrades still squealing on the next deck. “We’re deep in now, that’s for sure.”

“Wind’s coming up.” Jens looked at the sail as it filled and their speed increased. “We could get past em.”

“We could.” Xena threw her cloak back over her shoulders and gripped the wheel, urging the vessel towards the harbor entrance. “If we’re lucky.”

“Aye.”

Xena looked at him, seeing the stark, stony expression.

“Guess we are the lucky ones.” Jens turned and went back to where the men were crouched,, leaving her to soberly regard the wooden backs of the warships now sliding past them at a greater and greater rate.

The Persians weren’t giving up though – she heard the splash as a shore boat hit the water behind them, and the hoarse yells as the rowers dipped rows to water and began the chase.

“Yeah.” Xena murmured to herself. “I’m feeling real lucky.”

**

Gabrielle was tucked between Lennat and a tall, silent friend of his as they walked together in a big group towards the still noisy square. In truth, her heart was aching, but at least with the townsfolk she could keep her mind busy and off the gaping hollow Xena’s absence made in her and she tried to focus on the task at hand.

The men with her were nervous. They were not soldiers, and Gabrielle gathered in the furtive glances in her direction that they put some level of trust into her guidance just from her association with the queen.

The irony of it hurt. She closed her hand more firmly around her borrowed spear, and briefly wished she’d brought Patches with her, his familiar friendliness sorely missed here in the company of mostly strangers.

“Gabrielle.” Lennat leaned closer to her. “What do you think Xena’s going to do?”

Gabrielle took several breaths before she answered. “I don’t know.” She said with total honesty. “She’s not very predicable.”

Lennat nodded. “Of course.” He murmured. “That’s the whole point, I guess, isn’t it?”

Was it? Gabrielle had to agree that in a war being predictable probably wasn’t a good thing. However, in her personal life that much excitement was neither welcome nor wanted at least by her. “Right.” She could hear the sounds of the square now and she looked between the shoulders of the men ahead of her and saw the bright light of the torches past the bend in the road.

Her nose wrinkled as a bit of wind puffed into their faces, and she realized she could not only smell blood on it, but that she knew instantly what the smell was she’d become so used to it.

War had a different smell than anything else, she’d found, even different than the fall slaughter she remembered from her village. She wasn’t sure why. She shifted her grip on her spear and tried to prepare herself for what was ahead, already feeling sick at her stomach.

There was a line of people surrounding the square, and beyond it the gore stained platform with its forest of posts now fully populated with bound figures. Gabrielle found her eyes straining to distinguish the faces, but she was too far back, and the torchlight was too uncertain for her to see much detail.

“Ugh.” Lennat grunted softly. “Those damn bastards.”

There were too many people she could describe that way just now. “Yeah.” Gabrielle saw the men ahead of her were pausing, looking for a way to get closer to the square to see better what was going on. “There’s a gap there.” She pointed with her spear, and stepped between the front line to lead the way towards it.

There were some shuffling steps behind her, then she felt the men at her back and she pulled her hood up a little bit more as they closed in on the line of watchers and the light grew strong enough for her to really see.

Her breath caught. The torches flickered off a sheen of visible blood on the skin of the captives closest to her and across the platform the sound of striking whips could clearly be heard.

But her attention focused on the faces of the prisoners, the profiles nearest to her striking chords of familiarity and it hammered home the knowledge that she did truly know these men. She’d talked and joked with them on the journey out from the stronghold and the man very closest to where she was standing had just been a father, before they’d left.

Grim faces. Eyes looking straight ahead as the whips feel, no reaction evident save the jerks of motion from the force of the strikes.

“Oh my gods.” Gabrielle whispered, as she stopped with her shoulders against a low wall, with her little force surrounding her.

“Do you know them?” Lennat asked softly.

“Yes.” Gabrielle felt her eyes fill with tears, both from the misery and the steadfast courage she was witnessing. “I do know them.” She glanced around at the people near the platform, seeing a mix of disgust and fascination there as they watched the torture.

Lennat was also watching. “How long do you think it’ll take Xena to do whatever she’s going to do?” He whispered into her ear. “Those poor men won’t last long, I don’t think.”

Gabrielle wrapped both hands around her spear. “Tell everyone to just be ready.” She whispered back. “The first sign of any distraction, we’ll do it.”

“Do what?”

Gabrielle was aware of the other townsfolk near her listening. “Well.” She realized she had no idea truly what was going to happen. “It.. uh, depends on what direction the, uh, distraction comes from.” She whispered, pausing as a story beginning erupted into her mind unexpectedly.

She tried to shove it aside, but then, it occurred to her that she was going to be telling a story, in a way, at least she’d tell them how she wanted things to turn out.

So? “So, if the distraction comes from that side..” She pointed to the far side of the square. “Then we can go up those scaffolds there, and start cutting those poor guys lose.” She pointed at the ladderlike structure. “See?”

The men around her nodded, after a pause.

“And if it comes from back there..” Gabrielle pointed towards the harbor. “Then everyone will run that way, and we can climb up that front part there, where those lower steps are.”

“Right.” Lennat agreed. “What if it comes from behind us?”

Gabrielle turned her head and looked down the way they’d come. “Then we get out of the way.” She said. “So just be ready, okay?”

A whip cracked, and they all turned to look, as the leather drew back over the striker’s head and a spray of blood followed it. “Hope it’s soon.” Lennat murmured. “What’s going to happen after we let them go?”

Gabrielle found her story without an ending. “That.. um., that’s going to be up to Xena.” She admitted. “I don’t know what happens next.”

She edged to one side, as the crowd parted a little and she got a better view of the platform. She could see across to the center now, and she felt suddenly both relieved, and heartstricken as she spotted two sets of poles with a figure stretched between them and recognized Brendan in the stocks.

Her body jerked, and she just kept herself from surging forward and running to his aid. The Persians were stretching him out, and as she watched in horror, one of the soldiers pulled a red hot iron from a floor brazier and inspected it.

Blood surged through her, and Gabrielle was abruptly reminded of something Xena had said to her, what seemed like a lifetime ago – about how people were fighters, or runners.

Right now, she didn’t feel at all like running, and that made Xena’s recent decision all the more strange and puzzling to her because she never ever figured Xena for a runner either.

“Was I that wrong?”

“Gabrielle, did you say something?” Lennat leaned closer.

“No, I don’t believe it.” Gabrielle stared past him at the platform. “She’ll be here.”

**

“Xena, look out.” Jens was at her side, pointing up. “What’s that mischief?”

The queen looked up to see a phalanx of bowmen, and several others struggling to bring a long, open mouthed caldron to the edge of the rail facing them. She let out a curse and leaned hard on the wheel, shoving the rudder to the right as the ship started an all too leisurely drift to the left. “Get your shields up!” She yelled. “Get back from the side!”

The archers rained arrows down on them, pinning the men where they were as the rest got their caldron in place and started pouring down hot oil on them. It struck the water and splashed up, striking the sides of the ship as they drifted closer, drawn by the tide and the wind in the wrong direction.

“Gods be damned.” Xena wished fervently for a pile of long oars and two dozen slaves to wield them. She had rarely felt so helpless, as she ducked behind the mast to gain as much protection from the bowmen as possible.

The boat drifted further, and the oil started to pour down inside the deck. One of the men was hit and he recoiled, half standing to get away from it then jerking and falling as an arrow thunked right through his armor.

A sound to her right made her turn swiftly, to see Perdicus struggling to his feet and gazing around in bewilderment. With another soft curse, Xena ducked out from behind the spar and lashed out with a kick that knocked him back against the wall just as she sensed trouble coming at her from the other direction.

Instinctively she dropped to the deck, flat on her belly and heard the whine of arrows in flight a moment before she heard Perdicus scream.

She turned her head, to see him slumping against the wooden wall, hands clutching at two shafts buried in his gut. She had no time to absorb this though, because as she turned her head the other way, she spotted ropes being tossed over the railing of the warship and armored figures spiraling their way down.

“Suck suck suck.” Xena scrambled to her feet and drew her sword, caught between wanting to defend the deck and the need to get back to steering the ship. “Jens, get over here!”

Her captain left the side and bolted for the wheel deck, lunging back and forth to make himself a lesser target as he came up even with Xena just as the queen reached past him with her sword, grazing his head as she knocked away a speeding shaft.

He stumbled past her and grabbed the wheel as she released it, getting her other hand on her sword as a hail of arrows reached her and she had a moment of losing her mind as her body managed to get itself together to deflect them.

There was no time for thought. No time to do anything other than react, and reach out, and let her years of experience and complete lack of sense take over. She bounded across the deck, whacking arrows out of the way as she reached the far wall where the rest of the men were huddled. “Head behind the forecastle! I’ll hold em!”

The oil stopped falling as the men spiraled down and she took a step back as the archers paused as well, to keep from hitting their own men.

She glanced behind her, and found the rest of the men rising and stepping up to wait with her, drawing weapons as the first of the Persians approached the water and leaped to the deck, drawing their curved scimitars and attacking as soon as they had their footing.

Xena felt the wind pick up behind her, and she met the first Persian with a sense of desperation as he engaged her with fast, skilled strikes. If she could keep the bastards tied up until the boat went past, they’d be home free.

Home free. She twisted her wrists as the heavy scimitar drove against her and stepped sideways, deflecting the strike to her left and turning as the man fighting her recovered and swung back around with his arms locked, the blade sweeping towards her ribs.

“Xena!”

She jumped to the side, and felt an arrow skim the back of her neck, leaving a burn behind it and a brief pain, as hair was ripped from her head. She sensed the Persian coming at her and she dropped to one knee, as another arrow buried itself in the deck just past her boot.

The scimitar slammed into her shoulder and its edge caught on her armor, throwing her over and onto her side. She went with the motion and rolled onto her back, kicking up as the Persian came around and slashed down ward at her.

The sword hit her boot and she kicked it outward, then she half rolled onto her side and kicked with her other foot catching him in the hip and shoving him sideways right into an arrow from one of his own men.

It pierced his throat and showered her with blood, the harsh copper scent making her blink as she rolled again and got to her feet, sweeping her sword around as she spotted another Persian about to spit Jens.

She had a heartbeat to think about what threw her across the deck, sword sweeping back into a running position as she bolted towards the fighting men and interrupted the Persians stroke by throwing herself into him bodily, knocking him off his feet as she jumped over Jen's rolling form to grab the wheel, spinning free.

She cranked it back the other direction, jamming it in place with her boot as the Persian recovered and came at her, his sword in one hand and a dagger in the other, his face fierce and set as the boat swung under him.

The wind finally came her way, filling the sail fully and pushing the boat past the warship, skimming over the water as it straightened in the channel and moved past the last of the men of war before the edge of the harbor and safety.

Three longboats were rowing after them, but as they picked up speed and she parried her opponent, she could sense the turning of fortunes. "Yah!" She reversed her body and slashed downward, catching the man's sword against her own and sending it flying over board.

He reeled backward, but she grinned fiercely at him and released one hand off her blade, backhanding him in the neck with the edge and cutting his throat with a single pass.

Jens jumped up over the edge of the deck and grabbed the wheel again. "Got er."

"Hold it steady!" Xena looked around and saw no standing enemy. She sheathed her sword and grabbed a dropped crossbow, moving to the back rail, dropping to one knee and setting a shaft in place.. Protected by the wood, she took aim and fired, and a rower keeled over in the lead chasing boat.

She set another shaft in place, and glanced aside as one and then two more of her men joined her. "Cmon, c'mon." She shot another rower, watching as the furious guard fell behind, then turned and raced towards the warships gangway.

The third ship, as yet, seemed unalarmed. Xena felt the boats speed pick up, and she started to exhale as they came even with the last man of war, which was moored a little apart from the others. She looked to her left, at the shore, searching for guards but seeing instead a crowd of Persians around a cart, and a lot of arguing going on.

Her eyes fastened on the cart, and the pottery jars fastened to it.

"We're out." Jens called back. "They won't catch us!"

Xena bowed her head and rested it against the wood. Then she looked up, a darkly wry look on her face as she got to her feet and headed for the wheel.

Irony, thy name really is Xena.

**

Gabrielle had been edging closer and closer to the scaffolding, slowly sliding between the watchers until she was right up next to the edge.

The torture seemed random. The Persians were walking around on the platform, looking all around as though expecting something as they made strutting passes past the bound me, turning to lash the bound men.

She noticed the big man who had come to see Sholeh in the camp standing to one side, his eyes slowly scanning the crowd with hawklike caution.

Luckily for her, her eyes were barely at the level with the platform, and her body was hidden behind it. She reversed her spear so the blunt end was upmost, and she could sense a growing feeling of impatience around her.

The men in front were yelling at the crowd, but she couldn't make out the words from her spot near the back, though she thought she heard Xena's name at least once.

At least.

Gabrielle saw the big man bend down to listen to another soldier standing on the ground near the front of the platform. He straightened up after a moment, then he took a horn from his belt and blew it, making a sound surprisingly like a farting ewe.

She forgot about that a second after, because everyone turned and he started to bellow.

"Kill them!" He said. "It is done! – we have heard the great, cowardly Xena has run, taken to the sea like a dog! She values you not at all!"

Gabrielle felt like an ice bath had been dumped over her head. She felt Lennat's hand on her shoulder, but she didn't dare turn her head or look at him.

"She ran! She left you to die like pigs!" The man bellowed. "Do you hear me? "

What did it mean? Was Xena really running away? Gabrielle exhaled slowly. More to her point, was Xena really running away and leaving her?

Really? The raw truth hit her in the gut and she closed her eyes against the pain of it.

"You think it's true?"

What did she think? Did it even matter anymore? "No." Gabrielle said the only thing she really could. "Xena would never run like a dog." She put one hand on the scaffold rail and got herself ready to climb up it. "She's smart." Her eyes filled with tears. "And very very brave."

If she was running, she'd run in her own way, not like a dog since the Persians had seen her, but like a wolf, snapping and snarling all the way.

That she was sure of. She bit the inside of her lip, anyway, knowing a moment of loss that hurt her inside, wishing at last that her final words to Xena had been less angry.

More loving. "I do love you." She whispered, her face pressed against the scaffold. "I'm sorry." She straightened up and stared across the platform, her eyes following the men with the whips as they separated and headed towards Xena's men with a look of cruel anticipation.

Well. Gabrielle felt the weight of decision settling on her shoulders and she had a sense of control over herself and her life that she'd never had before. She could wait and watch her friends be killed, or she could do something about it.

The crowd was buzzing though, looking around and at each other, and she knew if she acted, chances were she'd act on her own – and watching the soldiers advance on her friends she decided that was okay.

She'd do what she could, and if she died there, trying to help them then she did. Everyone had to die sometime, and without Xena around..

Who cared anyway?

The man with the brand circled it over his head and headed for Brendan and as he did, Gabrielle found herself moving, shoving past the man next to her to get to the cross braced piece of scaffold, clambering up on it and hauling herself onto the top of the platform, just enough out of the torchlight to get to her feet before the soldiers saw her.

“Don't even think about what you're doing, Gabrielle. Just do it.” She fixed her attention on Brendan and the man approaching him and she started running, letting out as loud a yell as she could.

**

Xena jumped to the pier as the front of the boat crashed into the dock, sending most of her men tumbling to the deck. “Follow me.” She turned and dropped a rope loop over the stout pole, pulling her sword out of it's sheath as she started to head for the third ship's gangway without waiting to see if they were coming.

Behind them, she heard the men in the longboats start to yell as they came round the corner of the third man of war and spotted them grounded. She glanced back to see her men clambering off the boat and chasing after her, and she pulled her dagger out and clenched it in her free hand as she saw a squad of Persians heading right at her.

Life really did suck sometimes. She ducked the first man's sword and gutted him with the dagger, stepping out of the way as Jens engaged the second. “Get the gangway!” She ordered.

“We stealing the bigger one?” Jens yelled, incredulously. “Bigods, Xena!”

“I hate being seasick.” His queen yelled back. “Just get over there!” She stabbed a second man and got to the edge of the gangway and faced off against the oncoming Persians. “Move move move!”

Her men obeyed, pelting up the gangway as she joined them moving backwards up the slanted platform as she fought off the soldiers chasing her, giving up ground bit by bit as she moved higher and higher away from the ground.

Below her was chaos. There were men arguing around the cart at the front of the ship seemingly oblivious to the fighting nearby, and past them, the men from the 2nd warship were pelting down the docks, yelling themselves at the men with the cart and the men with the longboat.

She appreciated the chaos. It meant the Persians were offbalance and she intended on keeping them that way. With a yell, she kicked the last man chasing them off the gangway and pulled out her chakram, letting it fly towards the men in the boat as they came piling up onto the shore.

It was like day and night. She felt like she'd turned completely around. “Just goes to show you what a little killing'll do for ya.” She watched the chakram skim through the sailors, and they went diving out of the way right back into the water. She laughed, catching it as it returned to her hand and turning to bolt the rest of the way up the gangplank and onto the ship.

Once there, she turned and saw men starting to climb back up it, so she chopped the ropes holding it to the side of the ship and as she saw their eyes widen, she dropped her sword on the ground and grabbed the edges of the gangway. “Jens!”

“Right here. Mistress.” Her captain grabbed hold of the wooden surface and two other men with him, and they wrestled it off the side of the ship and sent it tumbling down to the ground. “There, ya bastards!”

The Persians scrambled for it, some shooting arrows up at the top of the man of war, but the high sides protected Xena and her crew and she turned and let them to their own devices. “That’ll be up again but we’ve got time to do what we need to.”

“We do?” Jens panted.

“We do.” Xena sheathed her sword and settled her dagger. “Let’s go.”

She led the way down into the hold, and they followed, one reaching to grab a torch from the upper wall as they went.

“No.” Xena turned suddenly and stopped him. “Put that back.”

“Majesty? It’s dark down there.”

Xena took the torch and stuck it back in the holder. “Fraid I’m gonna grope you?” She asked. “Cmon, We don’t have much time.” She continued down the steps and led the way into a very gloomy space, full of tall, clay pots much like the ones she’d seen in the cart outside.

She paused and looked at them, giving her head a little shake. “Start breaking those open.” She directed the men. “Spread the stuff inside all over everything.” She cocked her head, hearing scrapes and thumps above. “Hurry.”

Uncertain but willing, the men followed her lead as she grabbed the first of the urns and spun it away from her, smashing it against the wooden wall and breaking it open. The smell it gave off was pungent, thick and oily and it made her nose wrinkle hard.

“Ugh.” Jens covered his mouth with his sleeve briefly. “Whatin hades is that?”

“Nothing you want to get on you.” Xena reached for the second urn, dragging it across the hold to where more carefully stacked bundles were huddling in the shadows. Her boot caught on one and she almost tripped over it, then she knelt and yanked the covering back to see what it was.

Spears. She looked around, her experienced eyes taking in the shapes of the packages. “Get all this covered in it.” She picked up the urn, grunting a little under its liquid weight, and tossed it against the far wall of the cargo hold, watching it shatter and soak the boxes below it.

Two more urns followed, and now the hold was so full of fumes from the liquid it was making even Xena gag. “Bring six more up with you.” She indicated the stairs. “One jug, two lugs. Fast.”

The men didn’t hesitate. They grabbed the urns and started for the stairs, pausing to let Xena slide in ahead of them as they left the stinking pit behind them and struggled towards the night sky visible above.

Xena drew her sword before she emerged, her eyes sweeping to where the gangplank was now just settling into place against the rail. “Spread it across the deck!” She hollered, as she moved to where the torch was still fluttering where she left it.

The men did as they were told, glad enough to get rid of the heavy urns as the substance soaked into the planking of the deck.

She took it from its holder, walked to the cargo hold opening, and waited. "Get over to the far rail." She ordered, watching the Persians flow up the gangway. "Let those ropes down. When I tell you jump, JUMP."

"Mistress?" Jens started to draw his sword. "Shouldn't we.."

A line of Persians jumped onto the ship's deck and headed her way. Xena dropped the torch down into the hold with an offhanded gesture, starting for the rail as it left her fingers. "JUMP."

The deck rumbled under their feet and the men got the message, turning and grabbing the ropes as Jens released his sword and bolted after them. Xena waited just long enough to see the horrified looks of understanding on the Persian's faces before she went to the side, ducking under the mainsail spar as a huge, rushing column of flame erupted from the hold.

It caught the first row of Persians flatfooted and they roared where they stood as the second row frantically stumbled and backpedaled, their hands touching the drenched deck as a shimmering flutter of heat erupted off it.

Xena grabbed one of the long lines and untwisted the loop at its end, tossing it over one of the men on fire as he staggered towards her. "Die." She advised him. "It'll hurt less."

Then she released the catch on the spar and watched it start to swing heavily around, dragging the man with it as she took hold of the rope over the side and dove off, feeling the rush of heat as the burning man spun out over her head and across the open space, carried by the spars momentum until he smacked into the sail on the next ship in port.

It burst into flames.

Xena saw the ground coming up fast and she released the rope, tumbling in mid air into a somersault before she landed on the dock where her men were assembling, almost forgotten as the Persians onshore bolted in utter panic at the sudden, unexpected fiery destruction all around them.

The ship she'd just left went up in a roar, and started to lean over. Xena grabbed Jen's shirt and started running, shoving the men ahead of her as fast as she, and they were able.

**

Gabrielle took advantage of her size, or lack of it, to twist between three men trying to grab her as she determinedly strove to reach the rack where Brendan was strung up.

Men were yelling all around her, some incredulous, some laughing, some trying to twine their whips around her feet, most reacting only slowly to this unlikely threat in their midst.

She was alone. She'd expected that. Not even Lennat had followed her up onto the platform and as she ducked a man's outstretched arm she had to admit she'd done something pretty stupid.

"Girl!" Brendan had spotted her, and twisted against his ropes, half turning to watch her approach. "Git outta here!"

Gabrielle skidded to a halt, hopping to one side as a Persian plowed past her, arms thrust forward, colliding with the post her friend was tied to. It shivered, and as he stumbled and smashed against it again, cracked with a solid, splintering sound and started to fall.

"Thanks!" Gabrielle hastily pulled out her knife and started to saw at the rope holding Brendans leg to the still standing post. She could feel the platform shaking as soldiers ran to stop her, but a sense of manic determination took hold and she sawed with all the strength she had, to at least do this one little thing, this one scrap of something before she was grabbed and taken and...

The rope parted in her hand and she scrambled on her hands and knees towards the broken post as the man who'd cracked it came to his senses and reached out for her. She kicked his hands away and hopped over the post just as another Persian leaped on top of her and she dropped to the ground as he fell on the post instead.

She rolled out of the way and got to the rope tying Brendan's hand, attacking the rope with her knife as the Persian grabbed her leg and tried to drag her away. She kicked out, her body lifted into mid air as she clung to the post with one arm and sawed with the other.

"Girl!" Brendan was twisting and yanking like a madman. "Go!"

"Argh!" Gabrielle felt frustration overtake her. She released the pole and turned, kicking hard at the man who had hold of her and punching him in the face with her heel. Another set of hands clutched at her, and she struggled furiously, as she was pinned to the ground and a tight grip fastened on the wrist of the hand she was holding the knife with.

She felt something falling over her, and she gritted her teeth, then twisted in surprise as the grip on her loosened and she was able to roll over, keeping her head down as the broken pole swung wildly over her.

Men were yelling all around her. She snuck a look and saw the soldiers busy now trying to protect their heads with both hands and blinking, she realized the crowd was throwing rocks at them.

There was no time to enjoy the revelation though. The big, bearded man lifted his sword and pointed at her. "Kill her!" He turned and looked at the crowd. "All those caught throwing anything else will die as well!"

Gabrielle got to her hands and knees and started to scramble to her feet, but she was suddenly tackled and driven to the ground with shocking force, an elbow across the back of her neck driving her face into the wooden surface.

"There, you little bitch." A man's voice was near her ear.

Gabrielle could hear screams now and the sound of arrows firing, and she could taste blood in her mouth. The Persian crouched over her smacked her on the back of her head, and she saw stars, hearing cursing nearby in a voice she recognized as Brendans.

Well. She tried to stay still, so the man wouldn't hit her again. She'd given it a try.

At least she'd done something.

Anything.

"Kill them! Kill them!" The big man bellowed. "Don't just stand there, you idiot! Fire!"

Gabrielle felt herself being picked up and her view changed from the wood platform to a dizzying view of the crowd as she was swung off her feet, the neck of her cloak tightened so that it choked her. She struggled and gasped, reaching behind her to grab the hands holding her and nearly blacking out when she was shaken hard.

Horns.

Gabrielle blinked and reeled as she was dropped abruptly to the ground, barely getting her hands down to keep from smashing her face on the floor again. She rolled over and grabbed for her knife as the soldier holding her raced towards the end of the platform, “W..”

She looked quickly around and found the rest of the Persians running the same direction, despite the yelling of the big bearded man for them to stop.

Not time to worry about that. She scuttled over to where Brendan was fighting to finish freeing himself and started to cut the ropes again.

“Gabrielle.” He hissed under his breath. “What the Hades are ya doing here!”

Gabrielle concentrated on cutting the rope, unable to look him in the eye. “Long story.” She finally said, as the rope parted under her knife. “I’m not really sure wh..”

“What?” The big bearded man bellowed. “What’s that you said? Get over here!”

Gabrielle turned as the man jumped up onto the platform. He grabbed a soldier whose chest was heaving so badly he appeared convulsing and shook him till his teeth rattled.

“F.. fire!” The man managed to stammer. “Your grace, it’s fire! The ships are on fire! We need help!”

Fire. “Wow, that was..” Gabrielle ducked behind the post and flattened herself as the big man turned and scanned the platform.

“Kill them.” He repeated. “I don’t care a damn of the fire.”

“But..”

“KILL THEM.” He picked up a fallen spear and turned, ramming it through one of Xena’s men still tied to the posts. “Kill her!” He yanked the spear out and pointed it at Gabrielle, its tip reddened with blood and covered in shreds of gore. “Little raga...”

His eyes widened and he moved closer. “That’s no.. get her!” He rushed forward. “It’s the storyteller! Get her! Grab her!!”

Uh oh. Gabrielle knew she was out of options.

“Run.” Brendan said, staying very still as though he were mortally injured. “Get away with yourself, Gabrielle. Hurry.”

Gabrielle saw the man rushing towards her. Her hands slid across the deck and found the round, slightly irregular shape of her spear and she wrapped her hands around it and picked it up as she stood, moving as if in a dream.

A half memory, instinct ruling her body as she felt her balance set and she twisted her torso to bring the spear tip across just as he reached her.

It ripped through his surcoat, and she felt resistance, but her momentum carried it through and she recovered to see him gripping his gut and staring at her in utter shock.

She brought the spear back around and smashed the other end into his head, seeing blood and sweat go flying as he spun around and fell to the ground.

For a moment, everything stopped.

Then she heard a low, rumbling roar, far off, and a closer roar in a higher pitch and then the crowd was swarming up onto the platform and everything became chaos.

She could hear many people rushing towards the square and the Persians started to react, dropping their whips as they turned to defend themselves from the city people while others were at the edge of the platform as the first wave of soldiers reached the edge of the square.

“Get the horses!” She heard one yell. “We must move!”

Screaming, far off. A breeze blew up from the waterfront and suddenly everyone was in a panic, as smoke came pungent on it.

“Fire!”

Gabrielle looked down the road to the pier and saw a solid wave of bodies moving toward them. “Get the guys loose and let’s get out of the way!” She yelled to a suddenly present Lennat. “They’re all coming here!”

“You should have waited!” Lennat was untying one of Xena’s men. “Gabrielle you’re crazy!”

She felt more confused than crazy, but since the Persians were no longer interested in killing her or Xena’s men, she’d take it. She freed the last tie holding Brendan down and helped him to stand up as the rest of the men started to gather around.

“Where’s she?” Brendan asked. “What’s the deal?”

“I don’t know.” Gabrielle had to admit.

“What?” The old soldier took her by the shoulders. “What do you mean? She’s not here?”

The sound of the oncoming rush of Persians overwhelmed the conversation, and Gabrielle found herself being pulled along with Xena’s men, off the platform down the side path she’d originally come up what seemed like a lifetime ago.

The city folk drew back in a mass of confusion.

“Get back!” Gabrielle called out. “Get out of the way!”

They didn’t seem to hear her, then she was being pressed hard against the wall as everyone obeyed in a torrent of bodies and she just had room to look down the square to see a wagon, lit up with green fire, being pulled by terrified horses. “Oh! Gods!”

“That damn fire!” Brendan coughed. “Be damned.”

The Persians started to run towards the gates, away from the wagon, turning and dropping their weapons and running as hard as they could.

From her right Gabrielle heard another loud noise, and she looked over to see a long, low warehouse, pressed into apparent service as a stable, open its doors wide and emit line after line of horses, some with riders, some running free.

One whiff of smoke and the horses went out of control, and headed for the open gates in an unstoppable wave, uncaring about what was in their path, trampling Persians and city folk with equal abandon.

Gabrielle just stood in shock, watching the wagon careen out of control and slam right into the wooden platform, the horses going down under it in with equine screams as the fiery load smashed into the stanchions and with a thundering roar, the platform burst into fire as well.

She could feel the heat against her face as they all scrambled back away from the square, as the posts and scaffolding went up in flames that hungrily ate everything it touched.

A man ran screaming past, his clothes on fire.

The smell of roasting flesh and the pungent scent of the Greek fire filled her lungs.

“Leave him!” A loud voice nearby caught her attention, drawing it away from the horror. She saw two men at the doors to the makeshift stable, one grabbing the other and pulling him away. “Leave that damn bastard to fry! Deserves it!”

Gabrielle glanced at the burning square, and realized the chance of the stable catching fire was very real. She twisted out of Brendan’s grip and ran towards the doors, not really sure why she was doing it except that it was a stable, and it probably had horses in it, and..

And she was totally freaking out and losing her mind.

Gabrielle skidded to a halt outside the door, feeling the heat of the fire on her back as she ducked her head inside, hearing a rustling motion and an angry snort. “Easy..” She went inside, barely able to see anything in the gloom as she crossed the hay littered floor, tripping over bits of tack and weapons left behind by the troops.

One torch. She grabbed it and looked around, seeing a high walled stall near the back and a pair of white ringed eyes looking out at her.

She took a step closer, blinking hard. Then she stopped moving, as she heard a long, high, piercing whistle outside that made her head ring and turned her around as she ran back towards the door.

Standing there, she saw the last of the Persians run through the gates, leaving utter chaos and death behind them.

But through all that, through the smoke and the screaming, the blood and the panic, a tall figure appeared in front of the burning platform outlined in green flame.

It stopped, and looked around, then turned and faced the crowd.

“Well, close the damned gates!” Xena yelled at the top of her lungs. “I ain’t doing that again!” She put her hands on her hips as her men ran towards the portals, her eyes sweeping slowly across the gruesome scene until they reached the stable, and the door, and the slim, bedraggled figure standing in the opening.

For a long, silent moment, they merely stared at each other. Then Xena lifted one hand, and curled her fingers in a come hither gesture, and as though drawn on a string Gabrielle obeyed, leaving the doorway and crossing the burning square as the gates slammed closed behind them.

In the space of the moon’s crossing, it all had changed.

Again.

**

Part 23

Gabrielle found the walk across the square one of the longest she’d ever taken in her life. The roaring fire on her left hand side, and the looming walls on the right gave her the sensation of walking in a tunnel and at the end of the tunnel was that tall figure standing there waiting.

Waiting for her. Summoning her. Gabrielle felt a weakness in her knees as she walked and her heart was beating so fast she couldn't count the beats. It was making her light headed.

What would Xena do? Scorn her? Spurn her? Kiss her? Gabrielle slowed as she approached the queen and came to a halt just at arms length from her, waiting for Xena to finish surveying the burning platform before those icy eyes turned and fastened on hers.

All her nerves went away, and she felt a clenching in her chest when she saw the look on Xena's face and she stepped closer as the queen's body posture altered and she turned to face Gabrielle. She looked like she was going to say something, then she just reached out and put her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder and squeezed it.

Gabrielle understood the words had to come from her first. "I'm sorry." She almost whispered. "I lied to you. It did matter."

Xena sighed. "I lied to me too." She admitted. "Whippings all around, I guess. That should entertain the troops."

Gabrielle reached up and clasped Xena's hand with her own. It felt so good just to be near her, and to know she was welcome she almost wanted to just lay down and curl up at Xena's feet for a nap.

Xena seemed to sense it. She pulled Gabrielle close and shifted her grip from her shoulder to the back of her neck, giving her a kiss on the top of her head as Gabrielle responded with a timid hug. "Life's dealing us a crappy hand, Gabrielle." She murmured. "At least lets not mess this up."

Gabrielle's arms tightened and she drew in and released a shaky breath.

It was funny, Xena mused, how doing really stupid things could make you feel good. She'd noticed that in her relationship with Gabrielle, but now it had come home to her on a far bigger scale when she'd found she gained a measure of satisfaction in the chaotic destruction she'd caused merely in the looks of relief from the people of the town.

They had no idea she'd just let them in for an utter nightmare of course. The gates were closed behind the Persian soldiers and sure, she'd taken out a part of the fleet, but she wasn't stupid enough to think Sholeh wasn't going to react to this with anything less than the same homicidal fury as she would.

The Persians would sack the city. Xena reviewed the square. Oh well. Burning their ships had been a kick, at any rate. She gave Gabrielle's back a brisk rub. "Let's move. My eyebrows are roasting."

Gabrielle released her, but kept hold of her hand. "I found something." She said. "Over there." She indicated the makeshift barn.

Xena eyed it. "Like what?"

"Come and see." Gabrielle really wanted to just get out of the glare and the heat, and the eyes of the excited townsfolk running around finding excuses to stand near them and oogle Xena.

She felt raw. She felt exhausted. She wanted a few minutes of peace.

"You're not just trying to drag me off into a dark room and ravage me are you?"

The wry humor put a smile on her face. "If I could I would." Gabrielle answered. "But I'm having enough problems just walking right now."

Xena draped one arm over her shoulders and they walked towards the barn, ignoring the townsfolk staring in awe at the still burning square while Xena's men did their best to keep them away from the

flames. As they neared the edge, Brendan moved to intercept them and Xena slowed her pace and waited for him to catch them up.

“Majesty.” The old captain greeted her, his battered face wary.

Xena looked him up and down. “You never do a damn thing I tell you to, do ya?” She sighed. “What in the Hades am I going to do with you?”

Brendan’s shoulders relaxed. “Hades knows.” He agreed. “Been a tough road.”

Xena chuckled humorlessly. “Rapidly going down hill.” She agreed. “Once the bonfire burns itself down start collecting anyone in this place with a clue so I can give them the bad news once.”

“Aye.”

“Let’s get people fed. Get them rest.” The queen tasted the word, strange and exotic, on her tongue. “Put a watch on the walls and kill any Persians you find.”

“Aye.”

They studied each other briefly. “Glad to see your ugly mug, Brendan.” Xena finally said, in a mild tone. “Even if you didn’t listen to me.”

He shifted his boots. “Sorry, Xena.” He tilted his head and met her eyes. “Did what I could to harass em, but when we heard you’d been taken I..”

Xena’s eyebrow cocked. “What?” She looked around. “Do I look taken to you?”

Brendan looked at her, then at Gabrielle, then back at her.

“Shut up.”

“Them said it.” Brendan changed the subject with a cough. “All the men knowd it, back behind the pass.” His eyes crept up to hers daringly. “We’re just the first of em.”

Xena stared at him. “I told them to disperse.” She said between gritted teeth. “Are you all idiots? Did you not see the force out there?”

“Aye.” Brendan managed a rakish smile. “We seen.” He turned to Gabrielle. “Little one, I thank you. Woulda roasted like mam’s pig otherwise. You’re a brave soul.”

Xena had taken a deep breath to start yelling, now she stopped, and her brows twitched. She looked at Gabrielle. “What did you do?” She watched a blush creep up her bedraggled lover’s face. “Never mind. Tell me later.”

“I’m glad it all turned out okay.” Gabrielle said, in a quiet voice. “I’m really glad Xena’s here.” She could feel the motion as the queen exhaled and was glad when Xena nudged her forward, and they continued on towards the barn.

The world around her was starting to fade out. She could hear all the excited voices, and the roar of the flames, and the crack of things collapsing but it was slowly losing its meaning, and she narrowed her attention down to the warm arm around her shoulders, and the light bump of Xena’s hip against her side as they entered the battered building.

“Now, what’s the deal here, Gabrielle?” Xena was asking. “Did you really have something in here to....” There was a long pause. “By the gods.”

Gabrielle released her hold on the queen and stood there watching, as Xena literally scampered across the ground to the back stall, yanking it open and exposing the head of the animal inside it. She smiled again, as she heard honest joy in the queen's voice and allowed herself a long minute just to enjoy the sound.

"Tiger, you little bastard!" Xena touched the stallion's head as he tried to push his way out of the stall. "Why in the Hades are you still alive? I thought they'd cooked you for dinner, damn you."

Gabrielle came forward to join her. She reached a hand out to Tiger's nose, feeling the prickle of the whiskers on the end of it as he snuffled her palm. "Hey buddy." She said. "You know what? I bet Patches will be glad to see you, too."

Xena stroked the stallion's cheek, as she tried to reconcile the desolation of earlier in the day to the unlikely triumph of the moment. "Got you and my horse back." She said. "It's too damn hot to be my birthday. What's up with all that?"

Gabrielle leaned against the stall divider. "I don't know but I like it."

"I bet." Xena turned and sat down on an overturned bucket, resting her elbows on her knees. "Well, my friend. Here we are."

"Yeah." Gabrielle found her own seat on the feed bin edge. "Wow."

Xena pursed her lips, glancing up to study her companion's very tired, bloodied, scraped and dirtied face. "Tell you what." She said. "We've got a day before that Persian bitch gets her act together and comes after us. How about we find a bathtub, and a cot."

She watched a smile appear on Gabrielle's lips, but there was so much between them right now, she wasn't sure exactly what that meant anymore. "Yes? No?"

"Heck yes." Gabrielle said, simply.

Xena reached over and put her hand on Gabrielle's knee. "I know a lot of crap went on." She said. "Let's wait till we feel human to fight about it."

Gabrielle looked down at her hands, studying them as though they were someone else's. Then she looked up. "I'm just glad you came back." She said. "I don't want to fight with you about anything."

Xena saw the haunting in those eyes and the fear behind it, and it made her swallow an uncomfortable lump. "All right." She agreed. "That sounds pretty good to me too." She got up and waited for Gabrielle to join her. "Did you really save Brendan's ass or was he just being smarmy to suck up to me?"

Gabrielle was silent for a moment. "I tried." She admitted finally. "I wasn't really sure what I was doing.. I just wanted to do something."

Xena let both her wrists rest on Gabrielle's shoulders. "I saw you clock the big Persian." She waited for Gabrielle to look up. "If I hadn't already been running across the top of a roof trying not to cut my own arm off chasing that wagon I'd have swooned."

Gabrielle's brow scrunched, then she shifted her glance down and to the left, then she looked back up. "Thanks." She said softly. "I didn't think about what I was doing I just.."

"Did it." The queen agreed. "Made me damn proud." She caught the faint glimmer of tears as Gabrielle somewhat hesitantly let her hands rest on the queen's hips. "Made me realize which one of us is really a hero."

Gabrielle sighed. "I didn't feel like a hero. I felt like an idiot."

“Welcome to my world.” Xena turned and patted her on the back as they walked towards the open doors. “Let’s go find us some wine and a loaf of bread, and some quiet.”

It sounded like Elysia to her. Gabrielle felt her steps getting lighter as they crossed the square. Even in the few minutes they’d been inside the stable it seemed to have gotten more organized. Xena’s men were making a barrier around the still burning remnants and on the wall she could see a watch in familiar colors.

Lennat came running over as they approached, a bandage wrapped around his head but otherwise apparently unharmed. “Gabrielle!” He skidded to a halt. “Wow. When you said Xena was going to make a distraction, you sure weren’t kidding!” He blurted. “Half the waterfront’s on fire.”

Xena’s head slowly swung to the side as she peered down at her companion, both eyebrows hiked as high as they would go on her forehead.

“She sure came though.” Gabrielle resisted the urge to hide from the royal glare to her right. “I knew she would.”

Xena cleared her throat loudly.

“We tried to follow you.. you should have warned us!” Lennat went on, heedless of the glowering queen. “But boy, when that section just broke off under you.. we couldn’t find a way up fast enough.”

Huh? Gabrielle didn’t remember that. “Well, now I’m sure you’ll have a chance to do a lot more stuff, so we’ve got to uh...”

“Leave.” Xena supplied. “So move before I smack you in the head.”

“Uh.. sorry.” Lennat scrambled out of the way and let the two women pass, towards a two story townhouse at the edge of the square already surrounded by soldiers. “Wow.”

“Majesty.” Jens greeted Xena as they arrived where the group was standing. “Yonder’s where the Persian’s were staying. We cleaned up one of the rooms for ye.” His eyes shifted to Gabrielle, and warmed. “Glad you’re all right, your grace.”

Gabrielle had seldom felt less graceful, but she nodded in acknowledgement. “You too.”

“Keep an eye on the docks.” Xena said. “If the whole damn city looks like it’s going to burn down knock and let me know. Otherwise..” She turned and regarded the quieting chaos. “Everyone get as much rest as you can. We’ll have company tomorrow.”

She guided Gabrielle past the soldiers, towards the open door of the townhouse that finally offered them at least a few hours peace.

Maybe.

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The quiet was almost shocking. The heavy walls of the building blocked out most of the noise from outside, and even the windows were covered with thick draperies that muffled what little did get through. Xena pushed the door to the chamber her men had prepared open and stood in the entry, reviewing their choice for a long moment.

It wasn’t a big space, but the floors were covered in thick wool carpet, and there was a big bed on one side that had a freshly stuffed mattress on it, and, most importantly, there was a sunken tub near the fireplace that was already full of steaming water.

Ahhh.

“Wow. Is that a tub?” Gabrielle’s voice sounded exhausted, but grateful.

“Sure is.” The queen moved aside to let her companion pass. “Looks good, huh?”

“Ungh.” Gabrielle made a small, pitiful sound. “I forgot what clean water looked like.”

Xena patted her on the back, as she eased by. “Don’t get used to it.” She warned. “I don’t think we’ll be here long.”

Gabrielle paused. “Long enough to sit down?”

The queen chuckled, but she could sense a certain tension in Gabrielle’s voice and she sauntered over, putting both hands on the blond woman’s shoulders. “With any luck, until tomorrow.”

She felt the shoulders relax. “Maybe a little longer.” She added. “Depends on how fast the Persian bitch comes after me.”

“Great.” Gabrielle sighed. “I hope she falls in a ditch then.”

“Me too.” Xena released her, and turned around again, noting the iron bars protecting the windows, and the shadows of her men guarding outside. “Damn, I might even be able to sleep tonight.”

The room was acceptable. Xena looked around, nodding a little at the well made furniture and weapons stands, reasoning the townhouse had once been the residence of whoever headed up the city guard.

Well, right now apparently she did, so that worked out, didn’t it? She walked over to the press and reached back to unhook her sword, laying it down on the wood in it’s battered sheath along with her chakram.

She heard the sound of liquid pouring, then a soft thunk, before Gabrielle appeared at her side with a wooden cup held out in offering. “What’s that?”

“Grape wine.” Gabrielle answered. “I tasted it. It seemed okay.”

Xena took the cup and took a sip, finding it more than acceptable. “I thought we ‘d worked out that whole you don’t taste my food in case you croak thing.”

“Well.” Gabrielle sighed. “I really wanted to make sure it wasn’t something nasty.” She admitted. “So you wouldn’t get mad.” She added, almost as an afterthought.

Xena ruffled her companions scruffy hair. “Thanks.” She said, too tired to argue further. “Mind getting the laces back there?”

Gabrielle didn’t mind. She waited for the queen to turn, then she untied the leather strips as Xena loosened her armor, lifting it over her head. She could see the bruises and cuts on the queen’s skin and she backed up as Xena eased the armor down on the press and let out a soft sigh. “It’s done.”

“I feel it.” Xena worked the straps on her leathers off her shoulders, examining a long gash on her forearm she didn’t remember getting. She let the garment fall down and stepped out of it, sucking in a breath as her back cramped. “Damn it.” She muttered, glancing behind her to find that Gabrielle had wandered off across the room, a fact that made her frown.

She’d thought she’d said all the right things, hadn’t she? Damn it, she was too tired and too smacked around for this. “Hey.”

Gabrielle turned and came back over to where she was standing. "Did you want something?" She asked, her eyes searching Xena's face intently.

Now Xena felt silly. "Yeah, but I forgot what it was." She scowled a little. "Maybe I'll think of it later. G'wan back to whatever you were doing."

Her companion cocked her head in puzzlement, then she gave Xena a hesitant pat on her hip before she wandered back off towards the bath again, turning her back to the queen's bare body and running her hands over the smooth marble verge.

The queen pondered her friends strange attitude for a moment, then she shook her head and went back to undressing, leaving the questions to rest for a while. "I am too damn tired for this." She muttered under her breath. "Cranky old bitch."

"Did you say something?" Gabrielle asked, looking over her shoulder.

"No. Just talking to myself." Xena sighed. "Too many kicks in the head today."

Gabrielle found herself staring at the tub full of steaming water with something like dumbfounded bliss. She put her hand in it and felt the warmth creep into her fingertips, and breathed in the faintly lavender scented steam with mute pleasure.

Behind her, she could hear Xena muttering again to herself, and she hoped the queen would relax a little, now that they were safe, and alone, and in a nice quiet spot without soldiers and burning buildings and people dying right and left.

She wanted Xena to relax. Then she could relax, instead of be wound up in knots wondering what they were going to end up saying to each other again.

She was mind numbingly glad to be with Xena again, but she was mind numbingly scared at the same time that the anger and the estrangement would continue between them and she'd lose the only thing in her life that really had any meaning at all.

Maybe she was just being silly.

"If you're gonna wash one finger at a time, get the Hades out of the way I'm diving in." Xena voice came from behind her. She edged to one side and let Xena move past and lower herself into the sunken tub with a groan before she sat down on the verge and started taking her boots off.

Maybe.

"Ungh." Xena plopped down in the water and sent a wave of it spilling over the edge to drench Gabrielle's back and side. "Whoops."

"Yikes." Gabrielle got up hastily and hopped to one side, overbalancing and ending up tumbling to the ground with her boot in one hand and her bare leg waving. "Whoa!"

Xena leaned on the side of the tub. "I'd get up and get ya, but honest to damn gods, Gabrielle, I'm too wiped. Sorry."

Gabrielle righted herself and gave the queen a bemused look. "It's okay." She tossed her boot to one side and started unlacing the other one. "It's just as comfortable down here." Maybe she was being silly. Xena was sounding more and more like her old self every moment.

Maybe they could even.. Gabrielle suddenly knew what she wanted. It was nuts. She wasn't silly, she was borderline insane. With a sigh, she shucked her worn, tattered overtunic and got out of her leggings, glad to toss them in a pile for later washing and rid her skin of their touch.

Then she turned and look at the tub, with it's sprawling occupant, before she screwed up her courage and headed there herself.

Xena leaned back in the tub and was grateful to just sit still, every bone in her body aching and even breathing taking an ungodly amount of effort. She lowered her hands into the water and flexed them slowly, watching the bloodstains leech off as her muscles started to unkink.

After a moment she felt the water move, and she opened her eyes to find Gabrielle easing down into the far end of the tub, her battered body almost as banged up as Xena's was. She had bruises all up and down her torso, and long scratches on her arms and as she leaned back and slid down to her neck in the water she let out a groan the queen fully understood.

She wiggled her toes and cautiously leaned back, the marble verge cool on her back as she let the peace of the room soak into her. So very many things had gone on the last couple days that it was hard for her to remember the last time she'd gotten to just sit down.

Oh. Wait, no she did remember. In the barn. On the straw. In a pile of pony crap.

"Life sucks, huh?" Xena picked up a bit of soap and started scrubbing her bloodstained skin after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence.

Gabrielle blinked at her. "Not right now it doesn't." She said, lifting a hand up and letting the warm scented water trickle through her fingers. "This is awesome."

Xena regarded the warm water bemusedly. "You got a point." She flexed her hand, noting the big bruise in the soft spot between her forefinger and thumb. "You got a point, my friend."

The words were encouraging, and Gabrielle started to feel a little better. "So, um.." She moved a bit closer as she rubbed her arms with her own piece of soap. "What's going to happen next?" She grimaced as the soap stung in the raw skin across the back of one hand. "Ow."

"Well." Xena ducked under the water and got her hair wet, then she surfaced. "With any luck, we'll get to eat something, then make love, then go to sleep." She replied. "That sound okay with you?"

Huh? It wasn't at all what Gabrielle had been asking, but the answer suited her perfectly. "Oh, yeah!" She exhaled, feeling more of the tension in her relax. "That sounds great."

Xena chuckled softly under her breath. "Sure does." She replied wistfully.

Gabrielle ducked her head under and shook it, scrubbing her hair with a sense of utter relief. She surfaced, and caught Xena watching her, and the look in those eyes....It was more than she'd hoped for, really. After a moment, she looked up at Xena again. "Hey, Xena?"

"Mm?"

"Can we skip dinner?"

Xena got caught by surprise rinsing her hair. She stopped and looked up from under wet bangs, and started to laugh. She dropped the soap and sat up, her shoulders shaking as she watched Gabrielle turn a delicate shade of bright pink. "You little vixen."

Ah, the ice was broken. Gabrielle smiled, then she started laughing softly too, as she rubbed the soap over her shoulders and breathed in the light, herbal scent. "Would you really want me to say I wanted soup over you?"

Xena laughed harder.

"I mean, c'mon, Xena." Gabrielle noticed her hands were shaking, a little. "Give me a break, huh?"

Then she felt a touch on her leg, and looked up. "What?" She found gently twinkling blue eyes watching her, with a warmth behind them that chased away the clinging web of fear.

"C'mere." Xena tugged on her calf. "You randy little muskrat, you."

Gabrielle let the soap loose and slid over towards Xena's end of the tub, willingly fitting herself in the queen's waiting arms at last.

Ahh. Gabrielle smiled As their bodies touched, her world finally regained some of its color. She leaned against the queen and folded her arms over hers, tipping her head back as Xena leaned forward and their lips touched.

It was like...

Gabrielle couldn't even complete the thought. She half turned and let her hands drop below the water, caressing Xena's thigh as her guts started to burn and she let the day's events slide away from her.

Let the recent past slide away from her, taking the dark, and the anger, and the fear with it. She didn't want them. She just wanted this heat, and this closeness and to not be alone for one moment longer.

"Screw dinner." Xena shifted her more fully around, their limbs tangling in the warm water as a building passion took both of them by surprise. "Just bring on dessert." Her hand cupped Gabrielle's breast and she felt a touch high up on the inside of her thigh that made her breathing unsteady.

She forgot about being hurt. She forgot about being tired. The rich, sexual energy filled her and she leaned back, pulling Gabrielle against her as their bodies pressed against each other, banishing the water for a far more potent heat.

Her hands dropped down Gabrielle's sides as they kissed, feeling the sharp motion of her companion's ribs under her thumbs as she inhaled as hearing the soft subvocal groan as her thigh slipped between Gabrielle's and eased them apart.

Gabrielle was caught between elation and arousal. So much had happened. So much had come between them, that it was almost a shock to find that touch so familiar, and her own so welcome. She hardly knew where to start as she reacquainted herself with the queen's long body, her hands traveling down over a form thinner, and more spare than she remembered.

War was tough, wasn't that what Xena had said? Especially on someone who hardly slept and fought all..

"You're not too much of a swimmer are ya?" Xena broke off and whispered in her ear.

Fought all the good fights. "N..no." Gabrielle uttered, as Xena's hand teased her breast.

"Let's get out of this damn tub then." The queen let her head drop back a little, as the gentle stroking on her thigh went from teasing to sensual. "Before we both drown."

Gabrielle nibbled at the visible flutter along Xena's neck, having Xena at a bit of a disadvantage. She leaned over and their bodies touched and slid against each other again as her stroking now went from sensual to a rhythmic intensity she'd learned over the months would put Xena pretty much at her mercy.

If only for a brief moment.

She felt Xena's hands grip her as her body reacted to the touch, the strength evident in the hold making her catch her breath as always. She gently bit Xena's earlobe, then moved lower, nipping and teasing as those long winter afternoon memories came flooding back and she let herself get lost in it.

A low groan emerged from the queen's throat and it was like music to Gabrielle's ears as she felt the queen's body start to convulse and she went with the motion as the grip on her tightened and they both shifted, sending a splash of water out of the tub and across the floor.

Then Xena's hold on her relaxed, and they were sliding together again, oblivious of the bath, and of the water, and of anything but each other.

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"I think I could learn to like swimming." Gabrielle studiously applied herself to a bunch of grapes. She was seated cross legged on one of the chairs, her body wrapped in linen and was sharing a hastily thrown together tray Xena's men had brought them.

"I think you'd be pretty damn good at it." Xena was in the chair across from her, slumped against one arm with one leg tucked up under her and the other extended across the floor. She had a cup of wine cradled in the long fingers of one hand, and a bit of bread and cheese in the other.

She almost had everything she wanted. She was clean, her libido was sated for the moment, and she had eaten enough to feel almost normal.

However. "Damn, my back hurts." Xena sighed. "Hades, every bone in my body hurts." She let her head rest against the chair. "Gabrielle, let me tell ya one thing. This hero crap's a killer."

Gabrielle set her grapes down and got up, walking around behind Xena and reaching around the back of the chair to gently massage her shoulders. "You don't have your stuff with you, huh?"

"No." Xena replied in a mournful tone. "When I left the boat I just grabbed your bag, that's it."

Gabrielle's hands probed a little deeper, working carefully around the knots Xena could feel on either side of her neck, and though the touch wasn't doing a damn thing for the damage she'd done to herself, the queen wasn't about to put a stop to it.

"Thanks for bringing that." Gabrielle said, after a quiet period. "At least we have some soap and a brush to share, huh?"

Xena smiled, chuckling softly under her breath. "Yeah." She put her cup down and slowly flexed her hands. "Did you hear what Brendan said? He said the damn army's heading this way."

"Uh huh."

"No body listens to me anymore, Gabrielle." Xena sighed. "Nobody does what I tell them to."

"Mm."

"Cat got your tongue?"

Gabrielle remained quiet for a little while, then she gently cleared her throat. "I..um.. "

Xena cocked her ears, listening intently to her companion but keeping her posture the way it was, since she wanted to hear what Gabrielle had to say but not have her freak out again over anything.

The silenced lengthened, though, and the queen found herself in the strange position of having to be the chatty half of their relationship for a change. “Funny how the Fates suddenly screw things around for you, aint’ it?”

“Hm?”

Xena exhaled. “I had this crazy idea.” She said. “I lied to myself, and to you, and to those men on that ship and the truth is, all I was going to lead us into was death.”

She felt the warmth against the back of her head as Gabrielle exhaled, but the gentle hands just kept moving in silence.

“Then I had another crazy idea.” Xena went on, in a quieter tone. “I thought if I led those men to the sea, and we died, since we didn’t have rigging, didn’t have supplies... didn’t even have barrels of water.. then at least you wouldn’t die with me.” She paused, but Gabrielle didn’t say anything and she sighed inwardly, girding herself to get through the rest of it. “The stupid part of that was, naturally, that you’re going to say some halfassed thing like you’d rather die with me than.. ah.. never mind. Whatever.”

“Xena.”

The queen peered back over her shoulder.

“You don’t need to explain anything to me.” Gabrielle had folded her hands over the back of the chair and rested her chin on them. “You’re the queen.”

Xena watched those shadowed, tired eyes carefully, a shock of adrenaline tingling through her as she recognized the moment for what it was. “Is that all I am to you?” She asked, in a quiet, even tone., holding her breath as she waited for the answer. “Now?”

For a long moment, Gabrielle just met her gaze, then she looked away. “Does it really matter?”

I knew. Xena mentally recited. I knew how she felt. I knew how she felt because she gods be damned told me a dozen times and I just totally threw that away like the jackass I am. Audibly, she exhaled in a half sigh, half groan. “Someday I’m gonna grow up and not be such an idiot.”

Gabrielle watched her quietly.

“Of course it matters.” The queen said, after a long pause. Then she felt silent, as the sudden fear that she’d done something irreparable hit her and she wondered if maybe Gabrielle did see her as just that now. Maybe she didn’t have it in her to trust like that again.

Would she? Ironic, Xena. You make everyone else prove their loyalty and you think that means you get a free ride.

Her heart did a few uncomfortable flip flops, but her own internal conscience took hold and she pushed aside the chastisements for something more productive. If it was one thing Xena understood, it was how to clean up her own mess when she made it.

Humbleness sucked. Didn’t mean she didn’t know how to do it if she had to.

“Gabrielle.” She said. “I’m sorry I screwed that up. I shouldn’t have left you in the barn.” She tilted her head back to look up at her lover. “Please forgive me.”

The blond woman slowly circled the chair and came to the front of it, kneeling down in front of Xena and putting her hands on the queen’s knees as Xena turned her head to follow her movements,

sensing her success in Gabrielle's swiftly altering body language and knowing a moment of almost painful relief.

She realized then that her ability to apologize was really dependent on her need to have that apology accepted and her need right now was absolute.

Gabrielle's expression altered, from quiet and closed, to an open and honest sweetness as she leaned forward and squeezed her finger gently. "By the gods, Xena. It's you who should be forgiving me."

It was worth the pain. Xena covered one of Gabrielle's hands with her own, rubbing the edge of her thumb against her lover's knuckles. It was worth the emotional flogging to collect those odd and scattered strings that made up their life together and pull them close again, shoving the world aside to close this very personal gap grown between them.

She mattered to Gabrielle. Gabrielle mattered to her. Their love mattered.

"You're everything to me." Gabrielle said. "I should have followed you. I was just too scared you didn't want me to."

Yeah, it was worth it. Who in the Hades needed dignity anyway? "I wanted you to." The queen admitted. "I kept looking behind me to see if you were there." She paused. "Damned near killed me when you weren't."

Gabrielle leaned forward and kissed Xena's bare kneecap. "I'm sorry." She rested her head against the spot.

Xena gently stroked her hair. "You." She said. "Brendan, the army.. what I did I ever do to deserve all this corny idealism?"

"You're just you."

"Great." The queen sighed again. "I think I'll stop being me then. Maybe I'll be a donkey. Just sit in some field all day chewing grass and passing wind. What do you think?"

Gabrielle looked up at her.

"Don't answer that." Xena stroked her cheek and watched the already warm expression turn into something so gooey she almost melted right along with it. "Let's get some sleep. Damned if I know what's going to happen tomorrow but if I don't get a nap I may end up cutting my fingers off trying to get my sword out of my sheath."

Gabrielle turned her head and kissed Xena's palm. Then she stood and held her hands out to the queen, waiting for her to clasp them before she tugged her to her feet and led her over to the bed. They climbed in as Xena snuffed the candle out nearby, leaving the only light the still flickering torches glowing through the windows and the wall sconce near the door.

Xena stretched her body out carefully, and let her head rest on the pillow. Now that she was here, and it was quiet, it was hard to believe that she was here, and it was quiet, and she could spend a little while being still and just rest.

So much had happened so fast. Hades, so much had happened so fast just since sundown. She felt like the world was turning too swiftly for her, and she was getting her ass run over far too often, and far too consistently.

Stop. She wanted to say. Just stop, and let me get my mind around what's going on.

The day had seemed like it lasted a lifetime. Xena closed her eyes and thought about all the things that had happened, going over the fight, and the finding of the boat, the finding of her men, and her and Gabrielle parting ways in the stable.

Why had she let it all overwhelm her like that? Her heart almost stopped when she felt a warm touch on her belly, then she relaxed as Gabrielle snuggled closer, laying her arm across Xena's stomach and bringing a very welcome heat along her side.

It touched her sore spots. It made her tense muscles relax, and she exhaled a little, putting her arm around Gabrielle and acknowledging just how glad she was they were here together. Not too much earlier, she'd been staring right into the possibility of losing her lover, either through the chance of the tide, or her own recklessness and now that she had a chance to really think about it, she had to wonder what in the Hades she'd been thinking.

Lose this? If motion wouldn't of disturbed her bedmate she'd have slapped herself in the head. She wondered if she was losing her mind after all, if age was withering her ability to think and plan, since all she'd done in the last year was completely screw up absolutely everything she'd gotten her hands on.

Gabrielle gave her a little squeeze, and put a light kiss on Xena's breast.

Well. Almost everything.

So what should she do next? What was the city expecting of her? What was she expecting of her? Was her reluctance to engage Sholeh good sense, or just cowardice?

Xena knew she'd only ever hear that question from herself, but she also knew she was the only one who could look at that face in the mirror and see reality reflected back at her, not some half assed legend. That reality was what was urging her to cut and run, take what she could and get out .

It made sense, didn't it? Why stick around and get killed? Only an idiot would do that, with the force Sholeh had facing them. Sure, she took a score of men away, but what was that against the thousands? What could she really do?

Xena opened her eyes and studied the ceiling, watching for any hint of spiders. Well, okay, so she'd wrecked their docked ships, and incited the city into revolt, and chased the Persians out of the gates, but really...

Hm.

"Gabrielle?"

"Mm?" Gabrielle murmured sleepily back.

"Why did you tell them I was going to create a distraction?"

Gabrielle was silent for a few moments. "I guess because I knew in my heart if you could do something like that, you would."

"Huh." Xena inspected the statement. "You were right." She said, in a surprised tone. "That's exactly how it happened. I saw a chance, and I took it."

Gabrielle gave her another squeeze.

"But how did you know?" Xena persisted. "I sure as Hades didn't know."

"I just knew." Her bedmate said. "You always do that, Xena. You always are in the front of everyone, taking charge, standing up to all the dangerous stuff.. you just do it naturally."

"I do." Xena murmured an agreement. "I just don't know why I do it. I used to think it's because I'm the queen. Queens are supposed to lead."

"I don't think it has anything to do with you being a queen."

"Well, it could be because I'm a homicidal maniac who thinks they're Ares, the God of War."

"Do you really think that?"

Xena sighed. "I used to." She admitted. "But I don't think he'd have run out on the night tide, do you?"

"But you didn't."

"I wanted to."

Gabrielle hesitated for a long moment, then she exhaled, warming the curve of Xena's breast with her breath. "So did I."

Xena felt sleep, held at bay for so long, taking her over. She drifted off with Gabrielle's words in her mind, their color and weight sinking quickly into her dreams.

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Gabrielle stood in the sunlight pouring in the window, working with a rag to clean the surface of Xena's armor. The scent of the metal and leather, mixed with the sun dried clean cloth she was wearing floated around her, and she patiently polished away in the quiet peace of the room.

Outside in the square, men and wagons were pulling away the charred remains of the platform, and in it's place Xena's troops had started to set up camp there, the numbers swelled by city volunteers as they moved piles of supplies into place.

She looked outside as she heard a familiar voice, and spotted Xena dodging an ox wagon as she yelled something loud at two men struggling with a wooden pole.

It was almost funny, to watch everyone else react to Xena's presence. Whatever they were doing, the men either slowed or stopped completely until she passed, their heads swinging around like a wind was blowing them as their eyes stayed glued to her tall form in it's freshly washed leathers.

Gabrielle smiled, just a bit, and went back to her cleaning. She carefully removed the dirt and blood from the heavy metal, shining it with patient fingers.

It was a brand new day, in more ways than one. She finished one of the bracers and set it down, then picked up the other one, turning to look as a soft knock came at the door. "Come in."

Slowly, the door opened, and a tow headed figure appeared. "Good morning."

Gabrielle smiled. "Hi, Lennat. Good morning to you too." She rubbed a stubborn stain from the brassy metal. "A lot's happened, huh?"

"Sure has." Lennat came forward, encouraged by her words. "Um.. they came and got your pony and put him in the stable up here." He said. "I hope that's okay."

"Sure." She replied. "I bet he was glad to see Tiger, Xena's horse."

Lennat looked around, then back at her. "Xena has a horse? I didn't see one." He sidled over, peering at the armor Gabrielle was polishing. "Have you been down to the docks? It's horrible."

“No.” Gabrielle shook her head. “Xena asked me to take care of this while she gets things organized.” She said. “But if it’s anything like what outside was like, I can imagine.”

“Worse.” Lennat said. “There were a lot of people in the ships.” He fell silent. “Some of them tried to jump and swim away, but they stayed on fire.” He added. “It was pretty terrible.”

“Well.” Gabrielle set the bracer down, then she perched on the press and pulled Xena’s chest armor over to rest on her knee as she worked on it. “War is really pretty terrible.” She glanced up at him. “But they attacked you, so I guess you know that.”

“They didn’t, really.” Lennat sat down on the press next to her. “They said they would, and the city council just let them in.”

Gabrielle stopped, and looked at him. “Really?”

“Sure.” He responded. “What else were they supposed to do? Their ships showed up in our port, and the army marched up the road – the council figured they’d just put a few soldiers here and move on.”

“Oh. But they didn’t”

“No.” Lennat sighed. “They just started taking everything, and killing people. I guess they figured out it was a mistake, but I don’t think even if we fought it would have been much good. We’re not much good at war.” He glanced out the window. “But Xena’s amazing at it, isn’t she? The men were saying she pretty much did what happened at the pier by herself.”

“She’s amazing.” Gabrielle agreed readily. “I know she’ll work really hard to save what she can from Sholeh’s army. If they were smart, they’d just run off and not mess with her.”

Lennat nodded. “You’re right.” He said. “Oh, hey, listen... one of Xena’s guys from the ship was hurt, they brought him over to the inn and he was asking for you.”

Uh oh. Gabrielle exhaled. “Really?” She murmured. “For me?”

“Gabrielle!”

They both turned as Xena’s voice penetrated into the room with very little effort. Gabrielle laid the armor down and trotted over to the window, looking out to find her lover standing, arms on hips in that powerfully swaggering attitude watching her.

“I’m here.” Gabrielle replied. “Do you want me for something?”

Xena produced a sexy grin. “ Sure you want the whole damn city knowing the answer to that?”

“Gods.” Gabrielle muttered, half covering her eyes. “No.” She answered. “Not really.”

The queen chuckled, and walked towards the window, spotting Lennat inside as she got closer. Her expression altered, and her head dropped forward a little, tilting as her brows lifted. “What do you want?”

Lennat backed away from the window. “Um...”

“He was just telling me about Patches.” Gabrielle hastily intervened. “That’s all.”

“Mmm.” Xena growled low under her breath. “Okay.” She put her hands on the sill and leaned in towards Gabrielle. “I told all these town idiots to gather in the middle of the road near the gates. We’re going to see what they’re made of.”

Privately, Gabrielle wondered if they were made of something different than she or Xena was. "Okay." She said. "I'm almost done with your stuff. Just these parts left." She touched the rounded breastplate with one hand.

Xena snickered.

"Xena."

"Okay, but hurry up." The queen said. "I'll be back in a quarter candlemark to get em." She reached inside and patted Gabrielle's arm. "Be ready. I'll b back to get you too."

She disappeared from the window, and Gabrielle took a moment to catch her breath before she turned back to where Lennat was nervously waiting. "Sorry about that. She's.."

"Not as mean as she sounds?" Lennat smiled wanly.

"Um... " Gabrielle started back to work on the breastplate. "Well, actually she is." She said, in an apologetic tone. "Probably she's meaner." She added. "But this is a really complicated situation so she's trying to find the best way to fix things."

Lennat backed towards the door. "Well, good to know. Ah, just wanted to let you know that stuff, guess I'll see you around." He added hastily, opening the door and scooting through it then slamming it behind him with a loud bang.

Gabrielle watched him leave, with a bit of quizzical expression, unsure of whether she'd scared him off or not. After a moment, she shook her head and went back to her work.

Behind her, Xena sheathed her dagger and chuckled silently, heading back to the men now gathering in the square.

**

Brendan was scribing onto a piece of parchment as Xena arrived. He paused and looked up at the queen as her shadow darkened his workspace. "Majesty."

"Mm." Xena looked around. "I almost feel like a majesty this morning." She admitted frankly. "Instead of a piece of three season old horse crap on a wagon wheel."

Brendan merely blinked at this pronouncement.

"So." The queen went right on. "How many dead Persians?"

"A score." Brendan said. "Fire did a lot of the work, down yonder."

Xena had heard the screaming as she'd headed from the docks. "Good."

"Scouts just came in." Her captain added. "Said t'army's headed up the road. Figure they'll be here sundown, if they keep the pace." He glanced up towards the gates, firmly shut and barred. "Won't hold long."

Xena faced the gates. They were tall, and sturdily built, rising three or four times again her height and studded with heavy iron strapping. "No." She agreed. "Not if we let them come right at them they won't."

Brendan eyed her.

The queen steepled her fingers and tapped them against her lips, as she turned in a circle and studied the surroundings. Where there once had been the platform with its torture stations now stood a camp full of soldiers, hers, the ones she'd acquired from the Persians, and some volunteers from the city.

Not too many of those. Mostly younger sons, and workers now left with no livelihood after the raping of the city but they were willing, and stupid enough to volunteer and she wasn't turning any live body down in this current insanity of hers.

So, a hundred men. "How's the scavenging doing?"

"Not so bad." Jens had come up on the other side of Brendan. "The men what ran out last night left all but what they had in their hands." He indicated the long, low buildings the soldiers had lived in. "And the armory, plenty of good arrows there."

"Good." Xena "Get those useless newbies over there to start going street by street and bringing every wagon in the city up here to the gates." She said. "Anything salvageable at the pier?"

"No." Both Jens and Brendan shook their heads. "Ah." Jens held a hand up. "The little boat we took, that's left." He said. "Tied up where ye left it. We took the dead off, dumped em, and brought that Persian you took too over to the inn."

Persian she took too? Xena stared at him. "What?"

"The soldier." Jens said. "From outside the gates?"

Oh. Ugh. "Shoulda left him." Xena exhaled in irritation. "He's alive?"

Jens half shrugged. "Was."

The queen frowned. "Damn." She mused, glancing around. People were moving in the streets now, heading towards the central square. "I'll deal with that later." She decided. "Gather all of them in front of the gates, and wait for me to get back."

"Aye." Brendan replied. "We'll do that, Mistress."

Xena took one more look around the space, then she turned and headed decisively back towards her temporary quarters, leaving her captains behind.

"Going to be a Hades of a fight." Jens remarked. "Tell you though, it sure the Hades beats sitting in the barracks and going to rust." He said. "No matter what the end of it."

Brendan snorted, then chuckled. "You've got a mouthful there, lad." He replied. "Think her Maj's finally got herself back on the path with us." He glanced around, lowering his voice. "Here's hoping, anyhow."

Jens let his hands rest on the crate his companion was using as a table. "Never left it." He disagreed. "Just was fighting the slope a bit, is all."

"Mm."

"Little one showed her the way." Jens added, unexpectedly. "Bold heart, that one."

"None bolder." Brendan allowed. "Jell made her out a mouse, but the wee mouse has teeth of a mountain cat, yeah?"

"Maj got bitten, that's for damn sure."

Xena walked over to the raised guard platform on one side of the gates and prepared to climb up onto it. She paused first, straightening her cloak a little and raking her fingers through her hair as she watched the gathering crowd from the corner of her eye. "Hmph."

"Something wrong?" Gabrielle came to a halt next to her.

"No." Xena studied her. "You ready?"

Gabrielle looked around, as if wondering who Xena was talking to. Her hair was a soft, bright golden in the sunlight, and she was dressed in her livery, her hands clasped behind her. "Um.. sure." She responded. "What are we doing?"

"Taking over the city." Xena turned and nudged her towards the ladder, giving her a pat on her butt. "Up you go."

Gabrielle made a face, but she reached up and fitted her hands around the rungs, pulling herself up and starting to climb towards the platform. It was a tall ladder, and she gripped the wood tightly as she felt the wood start to shake under her as Xena followed. "Yikes."

"Keep going." The queen called up to her. "Fall on my head and we're both gonna regret it."

It made Gabrielle smile, and she managed the rest of the climb in short order, getting up to the top and pulling herself onto the platform with the thick wooden posts there apparently for that purpose since they were worn with years of hands before hers.

The platform was big enough for a few soldiers, and on the far side, it had just enough height to allow Gabrielle to peek over the walls and look across the plain towards the mountains while she waited for Xena to join her.

A dry wind was coming across the open space, and she could smell smoke on it, the long road empty almost until the line of the trees where she could see a dark smudge forming, moving in their direction. "Is that them?"

Xena stepped up behind her. "It's them."

"There's a lot of them." Gabrielle commented. "But we have you." She looked up at her lover. "I think we're even."

Xena rubbed her brow and pinched the bridge of her nose, half muffling a chuckle. "Tell the Persians that when they get here, willya?"

"I will." Gabrielle responded. "Besides you're a lot prettier than whatshername out there."

Xena smiled patted her lover on the shoulder. "C'mon."

Gabrielle turned and joined Xena as they faced the crowd, now stretching across the square and down the streets leading away from it. In the late afternoon light, the faces upturned in their direction were clearly defined, eyes watching them intently.

It was intimidating. Gabrielle carefully positioned herself just to the left and a step or two behind Xena and folded her hands in front of her, waiting to see what the queen had to say. The sun spilled down on her companion's armor, and her polishing showed clearly in the warm glow as Xena swept her cloak back off her shoulders and faced the crowd.

Incredible, really, how different Xena looked today. Gabrielle found herself fascinated by the sharp profile, most of the haunted weariness vanished from it and only the faintest hint of dark circles remaining under her eyes.

“All right.” Xena put her hands on the railing. “Listen up!” She let her voice carry over the square, and the buzz of voices settled to silence immediately. Her posture straightened up at that, her shoulders coming back and her head lifting as the breeze brushed her dark hair into a swirl.

Gabrielle was just glad to be there. Even with her back turned to the oncoming army, standing there in the sun next to Xena, before the people of the city, she felt a sense of fulfilled destiny no matter what the outcome of the day was going to be.

“My name is Xena.” The queen’s voice rang out loud and clear. “Just in case anyone missed that part.”

The crowd stirred, but everyone remained silent. In the center of the square, Xena’s men were assembled, standing braced and watching their leader, a little respectful space around them.

“This is my partner, Gabrielle.” Xena went on. “My consort and second in command.”

Gabrielle’s eyeballs nearly came out of her skull and she muffled a squawk.

“The Persian army is heading back this way.” The queen went on, blithely ignoring the woman freaking out at her side. “There’s good news and bad news about that. The good news is, if we stay and fight, they’ll probably sack the city since we’ve only got a hundred men and a muskrat besides me here.”

Gabrielle grabbed the railing to stop from toppling over. Partner? What? Second in command? What?

“Bad news is, if we leave, they’ll sack the city because you hid us.” Xena continued. “So suck it up, and get ready to fight.” She paused, and regarded her audience. “If we all give everything we’ve got, some of you might end up living. That’s the best offer you’ll get.”

She stopped talking, and waited. The crowd stirred, almost visible waves of shock rippling off them to bounce against her armored chest as she watched her platform mate in her peripheral vision.

Gabrielle was watching her with huge, round eyes.

“Well?” Xena addressed the crowd. “What’s it gonna be?”

After a short silence, three or four older men came forward, moving through the crowd to face her, peering up at the platform and shading their eyes from the sun. After an awkward pause, one of them, a tall man with a thick, flowing beard and the clothing of a noble took an additional step.

Xena waited with for her, commendable patience. She was aware of the approaching force at her back, and the slant of the sun, and the muskrat losing her mind right next to her, and the craziness of it all was making her feel wild and almost free.

The Hades with it. She was a warrior. Her life was defined by her sword, and if the Fates had decided this was where that sword got broken then so be it.

“Your majesty.” The elder called up, his voice somewhat hoarse. “Our city was being destroyed slowly. If it’s fate is to now be destroyed quickly, then we accept that.” He cleared his throat, as a buzz went up behind him. “Whatever we can do to help, we will.”

Nice. “Very well.” Xena summoned up her most queenly attitude. “Those of you who have weapons, and want to fight, get them, and come back here.” She surveyed them with a slow turn of her head. “The rest of you.. find a place to hide.”

For a moment after she stopped speaking, everyone just stood there, and stared at her. “Shoo.” Xena raised her hands and made a shoving away gesture, watching as the crowd started to dispel, a loud buzz of conversation rising above the square.

"Your majesty." The old man at the bottom of the platform called up. "May we speak with you?"

Xena gazed down at them. "Sure." She said. "C'mon up." She indicated the ladder, then she turned and went to the wall, leaning her elbows on it as she studied her oncoming enemy. "Gggaaabrielle."

"Yes?" Gabrielle had joined her, but instead of facing out, she was leaning her back against the wall. "Did you really mean that?"

"What, your name?" The queen peeked over at her. "Or the part about you being my main squeeze?"

Gabrielle's face scrunched.

"Aren't ya?"

Suddenly the sound of the wind was very loud in her ears. Gabrielle half turned and faced the queen, seeing the seriousness in her face. "I hope so." She answered softly. "But I don't think I can command an army, Xena."

"Sure you can." Xena kept one ear out for the ladder, hearing the soft cursing as the elders made their way up to see her. "Gabrielle, you led those nitty idiots when you thought I'd bailed out on you."

Gabrielle looked at the top of the guard platform.

"Don't." Suddenly Xena's voice altered, and she reached over to gently tip Gabrielle's chin back. "Look at me."

The soft green eyes met hers, carrying all the weight of their love in them.

Xena momentarily forgot what she was going to say. She blinked a few times, then pulled herself together again. "I've been trying to fight what you've been telling me ever since we left." She said, seriously. "I don't know if I'm what you think I am, but I don't know if I'm what I think I am either."

Gabrielle merely watched her, eyes fastened on her face.

"I'm tired of fighting myself." The queen put her hand on Gabrielle's cheek. "I may be riding right into Hade's arms, and I might be taking you with me, but if we end up in the Styx together I want everyone to know you were a lot more to me than some slave kid I picked up off the road."

She leaned forward and kissed Gabrielle on the lips. "So you're my partner." She looked her companion right in the eye. "And you're my consort. We're in this together."

Xena wasn't sure what was going on behind those eyes, but she could see the smile, and the warmth, and she knew she'd gotten her message across. "Okay?"

Gabrielle slowly exhaled, a look of overwhelmed wonder on her face. She put her hand up and covered Xena's, gently squeezing the fingers. "Will you marry me?"

Xena's nostrils twitched, and her eyes widened. "Uh.."

"If we're going to meet Hades, I'd like to do it married." Gabrielle got the words out in a rush. "My father said I never would be. He said I was too ugly, and.."

"Yes." Xena moved her hand over and covered Gabrielle's lips with her fingers. "Can it wait for the geezers to leave?" She jerked her head sideways, as the first of the elders came up the ladder, panting hard.

Gabrielle nodded.

“Okay.” Xena ignored the city men, pulling Gabrielle into a hug and squeezing her hard.

**

Gabrielle walked through the crowd, following the queen and pretty much completely oblivious to her surroundings. Every inch of her attention was completely focused on the tall figure in front of her, the words the queen had said running over and over in her mind as the noise of the assembling fighters rose around them.

Many of the city people were arriving, some with poles, some with old, or ornate swords obviously not really intended for battle. She smiled at them without really seeing them, until she realized two men in front of her were Jens and Brendan, and they were both saluting.

She looked at Xena, then realized the queen was turned in the complete opposite direction and the two soldiers were actually honoring her. Gabrielle felt herself blushing intensely, and she managed a feeble wave of the hand in their direction, as they grinned at her.

“Your grace.. we cleaned this up for ya.” Brendan handed over her spear, it’s tip now polished and shining.

Gabrielle took it, closing her fingers around the stout wood handle and feeling the solid weight of it as she settled the end near her boot. “Thanks.” She said. “That was really nice of you.”

Xena turned around. “Ah.” She regarded her companion. “Got your pig sticker back, huh?”

“I don’t think I’d stick any pigs.” Gabrielle said, seriously. “Unless they were chasing you, that is.”

The queen put her hands on her hips. “You make me want to go find a pigpen.”

The men chuckled, as Gabrielle blushed again. “All right.” Xena motioned the rest of the soldiers over. “Let’s see what we’ve got here.” She waited for the army, such as it was, to surround her. “They’re moving slower than I thought.”

“Won’t be here by sundown.” Brendan agreed.

“No.” Xena shifted, and a space appeared around her as she started to pace back and forth. “So that can go two ways – either they’ll settle in and hit us in the morning, or they go for a night attack.” She clasped her hands behind her back. “IF it was me, I’d hit us at night.”

“Surprise.” Brendan nodded. “Aye.”

“But she’s not me.” Xena went on.

“Boy, isn’t that the truth.” Gabrielle spoke up unexpectedly

Xena turned to regard her, with a half grin. Then she turned back to the troops. “I think I’ve thrown enough surprises at her that she’s going to be wary of hitting us in the dark.” She went on. “But that doesn’t mean we won’t be ready anyway.”

Brendan shifted, letting his hand rest on his sword hilt. “Wall won’t stand up to them for long.” He said. “Not with the rigs they had in the pass.”

“Mm.” The queen grunted. “Let’s watch out for them.” She indicated the watch. “Get up there on the wall, and just watch. Watch everything they do, everything they set up. Don’t put torches up.” Her voice grew stronger, and more intense. “Get used to the night. Live in it, and they won’t be able to pull anything over on us. Understand?”

The men nodded, their eyes fixed on her.

“All of you.” Xena pointed at a line of the soldiers, with a sweep of her hand. “Get up there.”

The soldiers gathered their gear and started off, easing through the crowd towards the wall.

“The rest of you, gather up every weapon we can fire over the wall you can.” Xena said. “Brendan, get a bunch of people making arrow. When you’re done, come get me and we’ll put something on em.”

“Aye.”

Xena stepped back, and looked around. “We won’t leave the wall once they’re here.” She called out. “Bring everything there. Food, water, every godsbedamned pointed thing you’ve got, and a death wish.” She lifted her hands up, fists clenched. “We’ve only got to take out forty of em for every one of us.”

“Xena! Xena!” The chant went up suddenly, as the queen turned in their midst, soaking it all in. Then she lowered her fists, as the yells still echoed around her. “Nice.” She turned to face Gabrielle. “Let’s go see what trouble we can find for our friend Sholeh.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle amiably followed her, hefting her spear and walking along with it. “You know what I miss?”

“Waking up naked with me in the morning?”

“Hm.”

“Oh that’s right, we did that today.” Xena was in evident good humor. “You know what, Gabrielle? Even if this goes right to Hades on us, no body’s gonna ever forget it.”

“Probably not.” Gabrielle wrenched her mind away from being naked and focused on the building they were walking towards. It was two stories, and large, surrounded by a well made wall that the guard shack they’d slept in butted up against.

Some of Xena’s men were in front of it, and she recognized Jens tall form, as well as her friend Lennat’s. He seemed to have picked up some of the pieces of soldiery, and was now wearing a big knife on a belt, and heavy boots.

He looked a little silly, and she felt a little silly with her spear, but Xena’s men seemed to have accepted him and they all braced to attention as the queen approached. “What do we have here, boys?”

The men looked at Lennat, who blushed and cleared his throat. “It’s the prince’s palace, uh.. ma’am.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Don’t call her that.”

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged glances after the tandem words got out, and Gabrielle scratched her nose in some mild embarrassment.

“Ahem.” Xena turned her icy eyes on the hapless Lennat. “My name is Xena.” She said. “Use it or I’ll cut your tongue out.”

Lennat nodded up and down rapidly, making his soft, straight bangs flop up and down. “Prince Eslan left when the Persians showed up.” He explained. “Uh.. Xena.”

“Ah.” The queen rubbed her jaw. “I remember him.” She said. “He showed up in my court asking me to pay a tax for the ships he let dock to trade here.”

“He took his guard, and they left on a fast ship.” Lennat went on. “But it was small, and they couldn’t take much. They left a lot here, and the Persians didn’t loot the place for some reason.”

Xena viewed the ornate, grand building. “Probably because Princess Pooftah claimed it.” She shoved the gates open with a healthy push. “Let’s see what we got.” She walked inside the gates and up the carefully scrubbed white stone path that led to the doors of the small palace.

Not really a palace, Xena reasoned. Not like hers was, vast wings of stone reaching out in four directions, with long hallways and towers, and the huge, echoing halls she held court in. This was a delicate, dainty space with carefully carved extravagances, all in white stone and pale marble.

It did not smell of cool stone and rich tapestry. Xena found herself suddenly nostalgic for her home, realizing it had indeed been a home for her now for the majority of her life. A glance behind her showed Gabrielle trailing in her wake, her eyes roaming everywhere in that slightly widened amazement she found so endearing.

With a silent sigh, the queen turned and continued exploring. The ground floor of the estate house was full of large, open spaces, and she figured they used them for parties since there were sideboards on every wall and the carpets, though rich, were shorn close and just a touch threadbare.

She stuck her head inside one doorway, and found a reasonable size kitchen. “Ah.” She walked inside and opened a few of the wooden cabinets, finding a few jars but not a whole lot more. “This get looted?”

Lennat, who had followed them inside with Jens, shrugged a trifle. “I think those who had none, snuck in and got what they could.” He said.

“Makes sense.” Xena went through another door and crossed to the wide, beautiful stairway leading to the second level. The steps were marble, and they rasped softly under the leather of her boots as she climbed them. “So this guy just ran out on you huh?”

Lennat was a couple steps behind them. “Wasn’t much more he could do.” He said. “He took the treasury with him.”

Xena stopped walking and turned on the steps. “What?”

Everyone else stopped too. “That’s why they didn’t take anything else.” Lennat seemed a little apologetic. “They took all the coin, the gold, all the jewels.. pretty much anything worth much in that ship with them.”

They all stared at him. “Which way did they go?” Xena asked, resting one hand on the stairwell railing.

“What?”

“Never mind.” The queen muttered. “Save that for later. So they took the swag, huh?” She chuckled and kept walking up. “Smarter than I pegged him for.”

“Yeah.” Lennat said. “I think that’s what the Persians were looking for, mostly. They were pretty mad.”

“I bet.” Xena chuckled again. “No wonder they were raping the place.”

“You mean they’d have left it alone if they’d gotten the money?” Gabrielle asked.

“Sure.” Xena got to the top of the steps and she wandered down the hallway. Rooms on either side proved to be ornate, well decorated bedrooms and parlors and she eyed a particularly soft looking bed with a certain wistfulness.

“Hey Xena, look in here.” Gabrielle was at the next doorway, leaning in as she held on to her spear with a firm grip. “Wow.”

The queen scooted up in back of her lover and peered over her head, blinking as the brilliant light inside the room almost blinded her. “What in the Hades..?” She pulled her head back and rubbed her eyes. “What is all that in there?”

Gabrielle eased around the door and entered, moving to stand in the middle of the room as the sunlight poured into the windows and reflected off what seemed like a thousand different surfaces to light her in golden brilliance. “Wow!”

Xena leaned against the doorsill, her eyes taken with the figure in the center of the room. “Wow.” She repeated, in a much softer voice. “Hey, city boy. C’mere.” She motioned Lennat over. “What’s up with the mirrors?”

Lennat approached timidly, peeking past Xena with a nervous motion. “Oh!” He started back, stunned by the sight. “Wow.” He glanced at the queen. “We heard.. I mean, you hear talk around the city, you know? Especially in an inn.”

“I know.” Xena replied with unusual patience. “And?”

“His wife, Anthea.” Lennat said. “She was really vain.”

Xena walked into the room and joined her lover in the center, turning in a circle and seeing herself reflected back in thousand facets. “Nice.” She walked over to examine the mirrors, average wall plaques roughly the size of a rider’s shield mounted firmly to the wall on all four sides.

“Wow. It’s warm in here.” Gabrielle sidled out of the reflected light and went to the door. “All that sun.”

Xena went still for a moment, then she turned and leaned one shoulder against the wall. “Jens?”

“Here, Mistress?” Her captain poked his head into the room, and blinked. “Bigods.”

“Get some men in here and take these damn things down.” Xena ordered, as she pushed off from the wall and headed for the door. “Put em in a wagon and let me know when you’re done.”

“Aye, Majesty.” Jens answered, in a confused tone. “The mirrors, yeah?”

“Yeah.” The queen said. “Maybe if we show the Persians what they look like they’ll run screaming.” She started down the steps at a brisk trot. “Gabrielle? We’ve got an old salt to find.”

Gabrielle scrambled after her, trying not to trip over her spear. “Old salt, new salt.. I think I’m getting hungry.”

**

Part 24

Xena stood by the window, sorting through the contents of a box, pulling things out and dropping them on the top of the press with idle curiosity.

“What’s that?” Gabrielle closed the door behind her, carrying a flagon with her as she crossed the floor. “I found this cold cider. I thought you’d like some.”

“C’mere.” Xena turned as she approached a lifted something up, settling on her lover’s head, and adjusting it. “There.” She turned Gabrielle towards the mirror, and they both studied the silver filigreed circlet now nestling in her pale hair.

“Um... it’s pretty.” Gabrielle eyed herself. “What is it?”

The queen reached out and fluffed her bangs a little. “It’s a baby crown.” She said. “It’s what royal people wear so people know they’re royal and don’t trip over them.”

“So how come you don’t wear one?”

Xena snickered. “Do you really think anyone’s gonna trip over me?” She asked. “I’ve got one. I just hate it. It’s ugly as a mules behind.”

“Ah.” Gabrielle reached up and touched the circlet, feeling the delicate tracing against her fingertips as she glanced into the mirror..

It was pretty. It contrasted nicely against her hair and it twinkled in the sunlight from the window. “I don’t think it’s really practical though, is it??” She asked wistfully. “I mean, we’re in a war and all that.” She could see Xena’s eyes reflected at her in the mirror, and the gentle, almost sad expression surprised her.

“It’s not.” Xena agreed. “But who cares?”

Gabrielle turned to face her. “If you like it, I’ll wear it.” She said. “It’s so light I barely feel it.”

“I do like it.” Xena smiled at her. “Besides, didn’t you always want to be a princess?”

Gabrielle considered a moment. “No.” She admitted.

“Really?”

“Really.” The blond woman assumed a rueful expression. “I really always wanted to be a acrobat.”

Xena’s jaw dropped a little. “What?”

“We used to have these little traveling shows come through the valley in the summer.” Gabrielle explained. “One of them had these guys who could swing on ropes, and do somersaults.. I always wanted to grow up and be one of them.”

“Really?” The queen mused. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Gabrielle spared a moment for those childhood memories, the long, warm afternoons she’d spent hiding behind the stables, watching the performers practice their tricks and longing to be that strong, and that graceful. “I bet you’d be good at it.” She told Xena. “I’ve seen you do all those somersaults in the air.”

Xena considered the prospect of spending a lifetime doing circus tricks for food and sighed.

“Anyway.” Gabrielle leaned forward, and slipped her arms around the queen. “Thanks.”

Xena returned the hug, reveling guiltily in the simple pleasure of it. “I could teach you how to do somersaults.” She offered. “When we get done with this whole mess.”

Gabrielle went still, then she looked up at Xena. “When we get home?”

“Mm.” Xena nodded.

“I’d like that a lot.” Gabrielle said, softly. “I miss home.”

The queen stared out the window for a long moment. "So do I." She said, in a surprised tone. "I'm tired of all this. Let's kick everyone's ass and get the Hades out of here. Sound good?"

"Oh yeah." Gabrielle nodded.

"Good." Xena nibbled the top of her head, tugging idle strands of hair above the silver circle. She felt Gabrielle's body press against hers and enjoyed the surge of sensuality between them as she ducked her head down to trade the strands for Gabrielle's lips..

Regretfully, though, she limited herself to another few moments of kissing before she released Gabrielle and stepped back, giving her partner a little pat on the side. "First things first."

Gabrielle's nostrils flared, but she stepped back herself, and went to pour the cider she'd brought into the two cups on the press. "There's a lot of wagons near the gate." She said. "And a lot of people walking around with sticks."

Xena went to the window and stuck her head out, peering towards the city entrance. Sure enough, there was a dense crowd of vehicles and horses near the gates, and an equally large crowd of townsfolk milling around with what could best be described as stage weapons.

Not fake, the queen mused, just the ones kept for show in the higher ranking households but still, the turnout was gratifying, as she'd promised little to the city other than a good fight.

Maybe they were just ready for a good fight. People were sometimes, she reasoned. "Remind me to have them gather up a bunch of rocks." She said. "They can toss em, anyway."

Gabrielle came to the window and handed her a cup. "They're all sort of excited." She said. "I think the Persians really pissed them off."

"Me too." Xena said, as she watched the sun slowly sink towards the top of the wall. To one side, near where the platform had been, she spotted a big cook fire with most of her men around it, and the breeze brought the scent of cooking meat to her. "Mm... what's going on there?" She asked. "I thought they were out of food stock."

"Um." Gabrielle cleared her throat a little. "I think they were kind of doing what those people in the castle were doing when we left."

"Ahhhh."

"One of the wagons, the guys that brought it over said it was for us for dinner."

"Mm." Xena turned and headed for the door. "Let's check it out." She ordered crisply. "Move, muskrat."

Gabrielle grabbed her own cup of cider and followed Xena out from their little haven, passing soldiers at guard as they exited the building and walked across the wide, busy square.

"Xena, it's her. There she is!"

Gabrielle could hear the whispers all around her as they passed, and as she saw the sexy swagger appear in Xena's walk, she knew the queen did also. An open path appeared before them and they entered the soldiers encampment, separated from the crowd a little by piles of weapons, gear, and supplies.

Inside that, the soldiers spotted their queen and nearly sprained limbs coming to attention and coming to her attention, the force of Xena's personality rolling over them like an irresistible force.

Amazing. Gabrielle could only wonder at the change in her lover from the previous day's depression. She'd gone from expecting a disaster, to this positive, ferocious attitude that even had her talking about going home when they were done.

Going home? She had to wonder if the queen wasn't just a little loopy. She wanted to go home too, but even she realized there was this whole big army in front of them, coming as fast as it could to try and kill them all between them and the route back to the stronghold and that was even assuming something bad hadn't happened in the meantime there and they had a home to go back to.

So weird. She sighed. But it was better than having to hear Xena so down, and sense the anguish around her. And who knew? Maybe she had a plan in her mind that sorted everything out, and it really was just going to be a matter of her kicking everyone's butt and that would be the end of it.

"What's in the pot?" Xena was asking. "And who gave it to you?"

Two of the men stirring the big pot looked at her in surprise. "It's smoked meats, mostly, your Majesty." The man closest to her said. "Some roots, not a whole lot, but it'll fill us." He added. "Man what brought that wagon, there, gave it to us."

Xena turned her head and regarded the wagon. She stalked purposefully towards it, with Gabrielle wandering in her wake and then she circled it, examining the inside with a curious intensity, her fingers touching the markings on the side, and her eyes raking over the yoke and its strappings.

The horse inside them turned at her approach and regarded her, but remained where he was, apparently not nearly as threatened as the men who edged away from it as she continued her inspection.

Not able to see over the edge of the wagon, Gabrielle went to the horses head instead, and stroked his nose as she watched Xena work. A air of tension was starting to grow around them, as the queen ducked her head and looked at the wheels, then bent over and examined the rim of one, running her fingers over the edge of it.

"M...your uh.. majesty?" The wagon's owner timidly approached. "Are you needing something?"

The queen crooked a finger at him and glared as he approached slowly, eyes blinking in apprehension. She stepped away from the wagon and put her hands on her hips. "What's your name?"

"Allus." The man responded. "I.. I'm just a carter for the dockfronts."

"Where did you get the stock you brought here?" The queen asked, in a sharp tone.

The man looked around, but all his companions had faded back, moving away from the now threatening figure in their midst. The crowd had fallen silent, and they were all watching Xena, as her men, now also alert, gathered at her back.

Gabrielle wasn't sure what was going on, but she'd learned the hard way that Xena did usually know what she was doing and often things that seemed confusing really weren't once she got what she was after.

"Uh.." The man stammered. "Well.. I uh..." He looked around again, almost frantically. "They gave it to me!" He said. "They stopped me when I was coming up here and said to put this in the wagon and bring it to you. I don't know nothing!"

Gabrielle looked around at the crowd and wondered if the queen was on to something. She studied the faces, and though they were wary, she didn't see any with what she'd named pusscat face – that self satisfied little expression she remembered so well from court.

“Gabrielle.”

Uh oh. Gabrielle released the horse and went over to where Xena was standing, her nose twitching when she got close enough and could smell the sweat of fear on the man the queen was questioning. “Yes?”

The man's eyes turned on her, wide and fearful.

“Know this guy?”

Gabrielle studied his face, and thought back to the recent few days. Had he been in the inn? On the streets? He did seem a little familiar.. in the square? Ah. “Yes.” She said. “He was taking some supplies from one of the boats away to the big ships.”

“Working with the Persians?” Xena persisted. “Right?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle now had the picture in her head, and she remembered standing by the small market stalls, sadly empty, as the carts moved in front of them heading towards the conqueror's ships. “I remember the sign on the side.” She touched the cart. “It had sacks in it.”

The man stared at her. “I was doing what they told me!”

Xena took a step forward. “Who is ‘they’?” She asked , lowering her voice to a rasp. “Who gave you what you brought here?”

He shut his jaw, and looked back at her in silence, his eyes nearly popping as she moved with silent speed, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and whirling him around to slam him against the wagon with a rattle that made the horse start.

Xena looked intently at him, but the man's jaw remained shut, and his eyes, thought terrified, met hers unflinchingly. “Start talking, or you'll be flipping a coin to Charon next.” She warned. “Those men mean more to me than this whole godsbedamned city.”

He licked his lips and swallowed, but remained silent, his panicked breathing suddenly very loud in the now quiet square when the queen release one hand on him and with a negligent flick of her wrist, produced a dagger that glittered in the sunlight.

“Were you working with the people at the inn?” Gabrielle asked, suddenly. “With Lennat's mother? Stealing things from the Persians?”

A ripple of shock went out at her words, not the least of which was from Xena herself. The queen glanced sideways at her lover, one eyebrow edging up.

“I know they were getting supplies from somewhere.” Gabrielle persisted. “In the shed behind the barn.”

Xena turned back to her victim, bringing the dagger close to his face, just in his vision. “Answer her.” She ordered. “Or I'm going to carve your lips off.”

A stir of motion went through the crowd, and Xena sensed activity at her back that almost made her drop the man and turn as her hackles raised, and she sensed danger on the air.

A cracking sound on the wind made her shoulders tense, but she bore down with the knife and threw her trust in her soldiers and the stalwart woman next to her as she kept her back to whatever was coming. "Talk."

War could end up being even shorter than she thought.

**

"Hey!"

Xena didn't budge at the voice, but Gabrielle did, moving away from the wagon and putting herself between the queen and whatever was coming in the cutest imaginable way.

"Wait, don't come closer!" Gabrielle held her hands out. "No! No!!!"

"What's she doing to him?" The voice yelled, outraged. "Let him go ya big.."

"Scuse me." Xena whipped her elbow into the man's chin and knocked him out. "Be right back. " She dropped him to the floor, sheathed her dagger, drew her sword, and stepped in front of Gabrielle just as the innkeeper charged up to them ending with her sword point right in the woman's puss. "STOP!"

The woman stopped, but only just. Her face was flushed red with anger, and her hands were curled into fists around two thick rolling pins, her bristling attitude overcoming her short, elderly stature. "Who the Hades you think you are hitting him? What's he done to you, ya.." She lunged at Xena, brandishing her pins.

Xena took one step forward and backhanded her sword against the woman's cheekbone, sending her sprawling from the force of the blow.

The crowd surged forward angrily. "Hey, it's just an old woman! Don't you do that!" One of the men yelled. "She don't do nothing to you! You're as bad as t'ther ones are!"

"Ain't that the truth!" The innkeeper held a hand to her face. "Worse!"

Xena took another step as the woman tried to rise, and put her blade against her head. "I'm about to offer my life for this damn place. Who the Hades are you to interfere with anything I choose to do?" She looked around. "Who are any of you to question me? Bootlickers? You surrendered to Sholeh like a dog in heat."

"Now wait..." The innkeeper protested.

"So you ask me to fight for you?" Xena went on, yelling louder. "Damn you! I'll take what I want for my blood!"

The innkeeper went still, her eyes flicking over Xena's face intently. Then she looked along the blade inches from her face, it's sharp edge rock steady in the queen's extended grip. "Hades of a time to stop trusting us."

"I never trusted you." Xena replied immediately. "I trust me and I trust her." She indicated Gabrielle. "And I trust her because she's earned it. You haven't." From the corner of her eye she saw Gabrielle straighten up, her shoulders drawing back and her head lifting as the innkeeper glanced briefly at her, before returning her eyes to Xena.

"All right you got a point there." The innkeeper said, after a pause. "Want to move that? I'm not for poking an eye out after all of this."

Xena let her wonder for a minute, then she lazily withdrew her sword and sheathed it. "So." She put her hands on her hips. "You the resistance, old woman?"

"Keep calling me that and you'll find out." The innkeeper got warily to her feet, careful to keep clear of Xena's reach. "We took what we could, yeah. It's true. The kid knows what's what. No mindless git like some I could say." She dusted her hands off and picked up her rolling pins, as some of the others started to gather around her, watching Xena closely.

Xena turned and looked at her companion. "I think she said something nice about you."

Gabrielle nodded. "I think so too." She sidestepped over to Xena as the crowd around them started to relax and Xena's men behind them put their weapons away. "Do you want me to try some of the stew first anyway?"

The innkeeper's head snapped up and turned towards her, catching Xena's attention again. She studied the woman's face without actually looking right at her, as she reached over to tweak Gabrielle's nose. "Nah." She said. "I'll do it."

Without further ado, she dodged back around the wagon and headed for the pot, leaving Gabrielle standing with the city dwellers.

Gabrielle looked at the innkeeper, then she turned and raced after the queen, ducking under the horses head and nearly scaring him into bolting. The crowd surged after her, as Xena got to the cook fire and stepped up onto the log next to it, taking the crude ladle from her man's hand and dipping it in.

"Hey..whoa.." Gabrielle scrambled through the crowd and reached Xena's side as the queen selected a bit of meat from the ladle and put it into her mouth. Without much real thought she jumped up onto a log and grabbed Xena's hand, stretching up and grabbing the end of the meat in her own teeth and pulling back.

The meat ripped between them and she almost ended up in the pot, reeling back until the queen dropped the ladle and grabbed her instead. They faced each other, bits of meat extending from their lips for a shocked moment, before they both chewed and swallowed almost at the same time.

"What in the Hades was that?" Xena spluttered.

Gabrielle licked her lips. "Insane devotion?"

The queen felt like she was being sucked down into a vortex of gooey romanticism. She was acutely aware of all the eyes goggling at her and her crazy bedmate and she really wasn't sure if she should shake Gabrielle silly or just stab herself in the leg.

Insane devotion? "You're such an idiot." Xena sighed, stepping away from the cook pot and turning to face the crowd, the innkeeper and the now revived carter right in the front row, staring at them. "You better hope there was nothing in that meat because if there was and something happens to my partner here, before I croak I'll gut the lot of you."

She closed her jaw with a click at the end of that, and stared down the city folk.

"You're so romantic sometimes." Gabrielle squeezed her arm, ignoring the icy blue glare at her words. "I'm sure it will be fine." She looked at the innkeeper. "Right?"

The woman was watching her with a strange expression. Then she exhaled, her pugnacious attitude gone. "There's nothing wrong with it." She said. "Was what we'd collected, kept back from the bastards over the last sevenday. Figured you all were due a good meal before we all go to Hades."

Gabrielle licked her lips again. The meat had a strong, smokey taste, but it was insignificant against the feeling of reckless energy she was feeling, as Xena's arm draped lazily over her shoulders. It was her way, a little, of returning Xena's words of confidence in her no matter how embarrassing her companion thought it was.

I go, where you go.

Really. "Well, thanks." Gabrielle spoke for them both. "I sure appreciate it, and I know the guys do too." She looked up. "Right Xena?"

"Oh." The queen now seemed amused. "You're asking my opinion now instead of biting me in the face?"

"I didn't bite you."

"Only because my reflexes aren't dead yet." The queen replied. "Got more where that came from?" She addressed the innkeeper. "Might as well give everyone a good meal."

The woman nodded quietly. "You." She addressed two of the men standing next to her. "Take the cart and get everything."

"All of it?" The man queried. "But wh..."

"She's right." The innkeeper indicated Xena. "There might not be a tomorrow. We should live tonight." She turned, and the crowd shifted with her, muttering and watching the tall figure at the fringe of their midst.

Xena sniffed. "Do me a favor?" She turned and looked at her companion.

"Sorry." Gabrielle half turned, so her back was to the crowd and lowered her voice. "That was kinda public."

"Mm." The queen agreed. "I might have to kiss you until you squeal because you did that." She said. "But before I do, can you please do something with that pot to make it edible or that one bite's gonna be it for me." She stuck the tip of her tongue out. "Blah."

Gabrielle was moving through a flow of emotions, strong and light at once, aware of the seriousness of the day, and the beauty of the moment all at the same time. It was exhilarating, yet somewhat nauseating. "Okay." She nodded. "It was kinda bland."

"Unlike you." Xena leaned forward and gave her a light, gentle kiss on the lips. Then she nudged her towards the pot and turned to survey the gates, trying to refocus her mind on the battle to come.

"Mistress."

"Yes, Brendan?"

"The gods have blessed you, Mistress."

"The gods are laughing their asses off at me, Brendan." The queen replied. "Along with everyone else in this place but you know what? I don't give a damn."

"No, Mistress." Brendan had removed his gauntlets, and now he stood shoulder to shoulder with Xena, as they both studied the sun disappearing below the wall. "Me either."

The queen chuckled a bit. "Let's go up on the gate, old friend."

They walked across the open space to where the guard tower was, past wagons full of discarded Persian spears, old bows, arrows, rocks, and other unidentifiable items more or less of war. Xena noted the one full of the mirrors taken from the townhouse and nodded. "Glad they got that done."

"What's the idea of that, Xena?" Brendan asked as they started the long climb up the ladder. "Think they'll shatter if we throw em?"

"Probably." The queen grimaced as she got a splinter in the palm of one hand. "But that's not what they're for. I'll tell you later." She gripped the rungs and hauled her body upward, feeling the strain in her back from muscles not quite recovered even with the rest she'd gotten the night before.

The top of the watch tower was full of soldiers, but they scattered back as her head came up over the edge and they recognized her. They cleared space as she stepped off the ladder and moved aside as she went to the edge of the wall and looked over.

The sunset was painting the open flat in a pretty shade of gold, marred mostly by the line of black slowly moving towards them. It had gone from an indistinct smudge to visible motion, horses and banners and the tall engines of war trundling their way forward as slow and relentless as the tide.

Huge force. But Xena didn't even feel intimidated anymore, fed up to her finely arched eyebrows with the Persians and their overwhelming force.

Hades with it. "Okay." She leaned on the wall. "Here's what they're gonna do, and here's what we're gonna do back."

"How do you know, your majesty, what they're going to do?" One of the recruits spoke up suddenly. "They never told us anything. Just do what we were bid."

"Exactly." Xena smiled. "That's how I know what they're going to do." She looked at the man, who looked completely confused. "With that many stupid pieces of walking battle fodder, your choices are limited."

The man frowned.

"But my choices are limitless." She went on. "I can do anything." She rested her elbows on the wall. "And she has no idea what I'm going to do."

**

Gabrielle sat on the upturned crate, her heels kicking idly at its side. She watched Xena cross the square for the nth time, a bundle of spears balanced on one shoulder and was glad enough to just be a spectator for a while.

The wall towered over her, and here as the very last bit of sunlight spilled over the top of it a sense of strange peace settled also. Across from where she was sitting, about half the soldiers were gathered huddled over bowls of her stew while the rest worked with Xena.

She had two bowls of the stuff next to her, in fact, but so far the queen had remained too busy to eat and she decided to wait for her before she had some herself.

No real sensible reason for that, but Gabrielle didn't much care. She was in the odd position of seeing the gathering clouds of danger around the city and yet savoring every moment as though it were precious now that all her uncertainties had been settled.

Ah. Finally. Xena dropped off her last load of weapons and headed in Gabrielle's direction. The queen's walk was a little slow, and she thought maybe her lover was hiding a bit of a limp, but her attitude was it's usual brazen self as she joined Gabrielle on her crate. "Hello."

"Hello." Xena responded. "You waiting for that muck to solidify so I can use it for bricks or what?"

"I was waiting for you." Gabrielle replied. "It's not muck, really."

"Hand it over then." Xena eased herself back on the crate and after a moment, she slowly pulled her boots up and tucked her legs up crossed on her her. "Ah." She sighed, as she took the bowl Gabrielle uncovered from it's cloth and handed to her. "Know what I really want?"

Gabrielle considered all of the possibilities, both flattering and not so. "How about some wine?" She asked. "There's some red grape over there."

"Don't want it." Xena rested her elbows on her knees as she spooned up some of the stew. "Want you."

Gabrielle felt a prickle of sensual reaction sting her skin, the curious sensation of the hair along her arms lifting. "Oh, well."

"Oh, well?" Xena chewed her mouthful. "That's a nice answer to 'I want you.'" She bumped her knee against Gabrielle's hip. "Eat."

With a rakish grin, her companion picked up her bowl and complied. "I heard the soldiers talking about you." She said. "The ones over there, near where the city people are. I think those are the ones from the Persians mostly."

"Uh huh."

"Sholeh said she'd cut the tongue out of anyone she heard talking about you."

Xena snickered, her shoulders shaking as she continued to eat. "What a stupid bitch." She commented. "Took her what.. weeks to figure out what she needed to do was crap on my reputation not goose it?" She picked up the loaf of bread Gabrielle had left nearby and ripped it in half, tossing one part into her companions bowl and taking a bite from the other.

"They were looking for me so she could put me on the gates and torture me to make you show yourself." Gabrielle picked up the bread and bit the end that had fallen into the stew off. "She told them I was your key."

Pale blue eyes shifted to her face, one brow cocking. "Wonder where she got that idea."

"I don't know." Gabrielle looked up, then realized she was being tweaked. "Oh, Xena. I really don't know.. it's not like I go around opening things for you."

The queen snickered. "That's not true."

"Xena." Gabrielle had to laugh, resting her chin on one fist as she felt the blush warm her skin. "That's not what she meant." She peeked at the queen. "Was it?"

Xena chewed and swallowed. "She wanted me to open up something for her, that's for sure." She said. "Maybe she was jealous of you." Her voice grew thoughtful. "Maybe she figured if you were out of the picture I'd just crawl into her camp and be her dog."

"That's silly. You'd never do that."

Xena bit into the bread and watched the twilight gently blanket the square. “No. You’re right.” She said, matter of factly. “I wouldn’t ever do that.” She propped her head up on one fist. “I’d just keep killing people until they killed me.”

Gabrielle paused in mid chew, blinking in startlement at her companion. She could see the queen was looking off into space, her eyes a mirror of something very dark and she became uncomfortably aware that Xena wasn’t speaking hypothetically. “Oh.” She murmured. “Well, I’m sure I’d be pretty pissed off if anything happened to you, too.”

Xena broke out of her funk with a sudden smile, looking sideways at Gabrielle with one of her more charming expressions. “Damn, I love you.” She reached over and took the blond woman’s hand and pulled it close, kissing the knuckles. “Not to mention you make a damn good stew.”

“Thanks.” Gabrielle relaxed, squeezing Xena’s fingers with her own. “I love you too.” She added. “I can’t wait until this is all over, and we can go and have fun somewhere.”

“Me either.” The queen replied promptly. “So listen.” She went back to her stew. “Now that we’re done soaking each other in goo, let’s talk about killing people.”

Ah. The contradictions in her life head butted each other and left Gabrielle somewhat breathless. “Okay.” She agreed. “But can’t we talk about love just until I finish eating?” She indicated the bowl. “There are a lot of bits and parts in this.”

Xena chuckled, wiping her bowl out with her bread. “Sure.”

“Or..” A thought occurred to her. “Lennat said they brought Perdicus to the inn and he was hurt.. what happened to him?”

Xena frowned as she chewed. “Damned if I rememb.. oh yeah.” She nodded. “Stood up when he shouldn’t have. Took an arrow in the gut.”

“Oh.”

The queen kept her eyes on her bowl. “Wanna go see him?” She asked, in a casual voice. “Probably wants to see you.”

Gabrielle thought about that. “Probably.” She agreed. “But you know, there’s so much going on here, I better wait until it’s all over.” She finished up the last of her stew, licking her lips a little at the taste. It hadn’t been her best effort, but not her worst by far and it felt good to be full, and relatively rested.

She wondered if they’d get a chance to take a nap before things started happening. If they did, though, she reasoned, Xena would probably refuse because she was the queen, and all that, and she hated getting caught napping even by Gabrielle.

“Good idea.” Xena had finished also, and set her bowl to one side, returning her elbows to her knees and resting her chin on her folded hands as she regarded the square.

“Okay.” Gabrielle copied her posture, pulling her feet up under her and relaxing. “So now what?” She looked at the queen. “Do you really think they’ll just stop, and not attack us tonight?”

Xena shifted, half turning and letting her legs dangle off the other end of the crate as she settled her head into Gabrielle’s lap. She folded her hands over her stomach and gazed up at the darkening sky as Gabrielle gently combed her fingers through the queen’s dark hair.

It was a blissful moment of peace. Even the sounds of the soldiers had faded, the ones in the square sitting quietly and resting, and the ones on the wall taking their places at watch and settling down as

well. The city folk had either clustered in by the soldiers if they were staying to fight, or gone back to their homes until the battle started.

“Do I really think she’ll stop.” Xena mused thoughtfully. “I think she probably won’t want to.” She admitted. “But in the dark, and given who’s in here... yeah, I think she’ll stop.”

“Because of you?”

“Because of me.” Xena confirmed. “Every time we’ve met so far I’ve surprised her, I think.” She said, in a quiet, thoughtful tone. “I don’t think she likes being surprised. I sure don’t.”

“Ah. Okay. Yeah I don’t think so either.” Gabrielle said.

“You don’t, huh?” Xena tipped her head back and looked at her, with an amused grin.

The blond woman gently pushed her hair to one side and ran a fingertip down the center of Xena’s nose. “I wish she’d just go somewhere else.” She said. “I wish this was all over. I don’t think I really like war, Xena.”

“You mean you don’t find getting hurt and dying fun?” Xena’s eyes widened in mock innocence. “Aw, c’mon, muskrat... we haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.”

The sound of boots scuffing nearby made them both start a little, and Xena turned her head to find Brendan there with an older, grizzled man with a thick white beard. “Yeah?” She narrowed her eyes and growled to offset the preciousness of her current position.

Brendan placed his hands behind his back, and clasped them. “Xena, you asked me t’find a master. I done that.”

Xena studied the grizzled old man next to him. “Ahh.” The man looked back at her with steady, iron gray eyes, and he had an understated competence about him she liked. “Ship captain?”

“Aye.” The man agreed briefly. “Was.” He amended. “Barstard Persians stole my ship.”

“Ah huh.” The queen grunted. “Well, I want you to marry someone.”

The man frowned. “Eh?” He said. “Why’s that? Got me a missus back home, I do.”

Gabrielle started giggling silently, her body shaking Xena’s and making the queen’s eyeballs jiggle.

Xena sighed melodramatically. “Have you ever performed a marriage?” She asked. “Other than your own, I mean?”

“Nah.” The old salt shook his head, giving her a skeptical look. “All men on the ship. Weren’t marrying types.”

“Okay.” The queen held a hand up. “Never mind. Sorry we bothered you. Brendan, toss him back in the water.” She flicked her fingers at both of them, and waited for her captain to retreat with his old salt in tow. “His crew was damn lucky they took his ship.”

She covered her eyes with one hand. “Gods you’d think I’d be able to find a damn magistrate or something in this piece of crap town. What did they all do, swim off after the booty boat?”

Gabrielle stifled the last of her chuckles. “That was so sweet of you.” She stroked Xena’s face tenderly. “But there’s so much going on, you don’t have to do that.. we can wait for this whole thing to be over.”

Xena’s expression became unusually serious. “I don’t want to wait.” She said. “Hades. I’m the queen. I’ll do it myself.” She lifted her body up off Gabrielle’s lap and hopped off the crate. “C’mon, muskrat.”

She offered Gabrielle her hand. "Let's go up on that wall and tie the knot. With any luck, the Persian jackass will be close enough to watch us."

Gabrielle felt a flutter in her chest, and she got carefully off the crate before she took Xena's hand and followed her towards the ladder. "Doesn't that mean she'd also be close enough to shoot at us?"

"Sure does. I hate boring weddings. Don't you?"

"Uh..."

"Grab life and bite it in the ass, Gabrielle, before it runs out on ya."

**

The wind had turned chilly by the time they made it up to the top of the platform. Along the edge of the wall, soldiers were deployed in evenly spaced bunches, and at their feet were piles of arrows and baskets of rocks.

Gabrielle rubbed her hands together as she watched Xena inspect the stations, her heart beating a little fast and her throat a little dry.

It wasn't as if she was afraid of what was going to happen. After all, from the time she was old enough to help in the kitchen all she'd pretty much heard from her mother was who, when, how, and where she was going to get married as soon as they could possibly arrange it.

Then, it had seemed a little scary, at least until she'd started walking out with Perdicus and she at least had hopes of marrying someone she knew. Her father hadn't really liked Perdi, since he was a younger son of one of the merchants in town and had indifferent prospects but he'd gotten together enough money to pay her bride price so in the end he'd just taken it.

This was different. Gabrielle turned and leaned against the edge of the wall, peering out over the plain where she could see the torches of the approaching Persian army very clearly now. It seemed like they were still moving forward, but it was hard to tell in the gloom. She could hear them, though, a low, uneven roar that was part moving and part rough voices.

"All right." Xena appeared next to her. "Ready?"

Was she? Gabrielle never pictured getting married was going to be anything like this, but then, given who she was getting married to, maybe she should have. "Yes."

Xena turned and vaulted up onto the wall, turning and offering Gabrielle a hand up. The wind immediately ruffled her hair and streamed it back, and Gabrielle had to lean forward a little as she climbed up against its force.

Once up, she experienced a moment of complete terror, as she felt the wind almost grab her and send her flying, only Xena's firm hold on her keeping her in place. "Whoa!"

"Easy." Xena gripped her shoulder, and faced into the wind, as they stood on the top of the wall on a narrow walkspace barely the width of the queen's shoulders. "Nice, huh?"

Gabrielle caught her balance, but kept hold of Xena's belt with one hand as the wind buffeted her. "Um..." She felt very exposed up here on the rim, and she looked nervously out over the open space towards the torches and massed bodies. "I don't think I'd call them nice."

"Well." Xena reached up and scratched her nose. "The sky is, I thought."

The last of the light had faded, and as Gabrielle tipped her head back and looked up at the dark canopy, it twinkled at her with an explosion of stars that made thousands of patterns. "Oh." She exhaled, her shoulders relaxing as she let her eyes scan the lights. "Wow they are."

The queen studied the patterns. On the wall, torches fluttered hard in the wind, providing a little light. Across the plain, the torches of the enemy likewise flickered, and as she stood there on the wall it was like she was standing on the knife's edge of her own destiny.

Standing there, doing what she was doing, was craziness. She knew that. She wasn't even entirely sure why she was doing it, except that something inside was telling her she should, that she should get this tiny bit of commitment cemented in time so that she could go into battle tomorrow – or tonight – and know it was there.

Maybe it was the fact she'd almost just abandoned Gabrielle, and there was a part of her wondering why she hadn't, warring with the part of her horrified that she'd even been thinking of it.

Two halves. Her civilized half, and the unruly, arrogant warrior animal part of her that wanted no part of home, and partnership, and devotion.

She'd always relied on the animal part. It had saved her ass on more than one occasion and it was the core of where her value as a warrior came from. But for the first time in her life, she found herself rejecting the cold logic of that part of her.

It was hard. She figured it was probably dangerous. "Okay."

"Okay." Gabrielle turned to face her, turning her shoulders to the wind and looking up at Xena in the low torchlight. Her green eyes were amber colored in the low illumination and her features were just barely outlined in the glow from the stars. "Do you think they can see us?"

Xena glanced out to the left. "They can probably see something is up on the wall." She allowed. "Not enough light for them to see who, until the moon comes up maybe." She indicated a glow behind the trees. "If I bring torches up here, they'll blow out."

"Well." Gabrielle straightened up a little, and tugged her surcoat straight with slightly nervous fingers. "That's okay. I'd rather really pay attention to this than worry about arrows."

"Don't worry about arrows." The queen told her. "I'll handle em."

Gabrielle tilted her head back a little and studied her lover's face. "Okay." She said, moving a little closer as the wind noise faded out a little and she pushed the thought of the enemy army from her mind.

She looked down into the city, and was surprised to see the soldiers lined up watching them, and the city people below looking up. The top level was filled with Xena's men and there was a solemnness about them that made her guts prickle just a little.

She turned back and looked back at Xena. The queen held out her hands, palms up, and without hesitating, she clasped them, the warmth welcome in the cold wind.

She didn't know what Xena was going to say, or how this would work. But looking up into those pale eyes, she didn't really think Xena knew either and she wasn't sure either of them really cared. "What am I supposed to say other than I love you more than anything in the world?"

Xena had taken a breath to speak, now she let it out, and paused, caught a bit offguard.

"Sorry." Gabrielle murmured.

“Don’t be.” Xena replied. “One of us had to start and that wasn’t bad.” She paused again. “I have no idea what the Hades I’m supposed to do next.” She admitted. “For some reason, no one ever asked me to bless their nuptials.”

“Well... I’ve seen a few.” Gabrielle offered. “Not really queen kind, though. More like shepherds and that kind of thing.” She pondered. “Usually the reeve just wrote down the names, asked if anyone had any problems with the two people getting married, and that was that.”

“Ah.”

“Kind of boring, really.”

“They didn’t get to consummate in front of everyone? I bet it was boring.” Xena remarked, smiling as she saw Gabrielle’s eyes widen. “Relax. We’d probably roll off the top of the damn wall and kill ourselves and besides, it’s not like we’ve never had sex.”

“Oh. Phew.” Gabrielle sighed.

“Unless you want to try it.” The queen added. “I’m up for it. That’d really stick in the Persian’s craw. I’d even have a bonfire built up here so she could see all the details.”

Gabrielle felt lightheaded as a blush so intense heated her skin it blocked out the cold around her effortlessly. “Xena, I don’t think I can do that.”

The queen released one of her hands and patted Gabrielle’s cheek. “That’s okay, muskrat.” She said, in a kind voice. “I don’t think I could either.”

“Really?” The blond woman peeked up.

“Really.” Xena smiled at her. “I talk a good battle, but I don’t want my ass out bare in the wind here any more than you do.”

Gabrielle smiled back at her. “Okay, so now what?”

“Now what.” Xena gazed down at the wall for a moment, then she straightened up, and took Gabrielle’s hand again, her expression becoming quietly serious. “Now I guess I tell you how I feel.”

Gabrielle’s eyes went big and round again.

“Don’t pass out on me, muskrat.” The queen chuckled softly. “Let’s start with this.” She paused. “I was born a bastard, Gabrielle. My mother dallied with some traveler and ended up with me, the second mistake of three of them. Then she died, and left us orphans.”

Gabrielle merely squeezed her hands, listening intently.

“I have no family now.” Xena said. “I have nothing but what I’ve taken with my hands, and my sword, and gotten scars that cover me head to foot from it.” She paused again. “Everything I have can be taken in a heartbeat. Her eyes fastened on Gabrielle. “Except for you.”

Gabrielle felt a chill across her skin.

“All I have to offer you is what’s in here.” Xena released one hand and tapped her own chest. “I can’t promise anything else, including you being happy, us living a long life together, or even that we’ll see the sun come up tomorrow.”

“I know that.” Gabrielle answered softly.

“I know you know that.” The queen replied. “Shut up and let me finish grandstanding.”

Gabrielle smiled sheepishly, raising Xena's hand to her lips and kissing it.

"Okay, where was I." Xena muttered, glancing to her left as the wind brought the growing sound of the approaching army to her. The moon was peeking above the trees, and outlining them both in faint silver, and she wondered if they were about to become romantically precious pincushions.

Ah well. Everyone had to die sometime. "Anyway." The queen resumed. "I never thought I'd find someone I wanted to walk the road of life with until whatever it's end was." She said. "Until I met you."

Gabrielle blushed. "Same here." She whispered.

"Damned if I know why." Xena admitted. "We've got nothing in common. We spend our time either near croaking or screwing and you want to sit on a throne about as much as I want to plant flowers."

"Because I love you." Gabrielle said, after they eyed each other in silence for a beat. "Because you're the first person in my life who valued me." She added. "And really, because there is no reason for why I feel the way I do about you."

Xena nodded thoughtfully. "There really is no reason." She agreed. "I like that. I hate when life's predictable." She brought their hands up and took a step forward, as a horn sounded faintly from across the plain. "Let it be known." Her voice lifted, and rang out much louder, echoing off the walls.

"We hear." Brendan answered for the troops.

"I take Gabrielle to be my wife. Everything I got, she's entitled to." Xena continued. "Everyone got that?"

"We hear, Mistress." Brendan answered again. "She will be as you are to us."

Xena turned her attention back to her lover. "That okay with you?"

"Yes." Gabrielle answered, softly.

"Louder."

Gabrielle cleared her throat. "I take Xena to be my wife." She called out loudly. "And since all I have is my heart, and my soul, and my body, I give that willingly to her, forever."

Now it was Xena's turn to blush, though her darker skin didn't show it nearly as vividly. "A simple yes woulda done you, muskrat." She muttered.

"We hear, little one." Brendan hollered over the wind. "And so you are as we are, and we will protect you as we do our mistress, for all our days." He paused. "We hear!"

The rest of the soldiers let out the same yell, echoing the sound over the wall, competing with the sound of horns growing slowly louder.

Xena looked out over the plain, and saw movement much closer than she'd anticipated. A line of horses were thundering towards the gates and as she let her eyes focus she saw the glint of moonlight against arrowtips and realized there were a lot more bows than she had arms. "Gabrielle, I guessed wrong. Let's get outta here." She said. "Boys, get ready to fight! They're coming!"

"Wait." Gabrielle reached up and put her arms around Xena's neck, pulling her head down and kissing her soundly, as the wind whipped at their bodies, and the soldiers behind the wall started to scramble in reaction to the oncoming force.

They broke apart after a long, passionate moment, and looked into each other's eyes.

Then the arrows started coming fast and thick, thwacking against the wall as Xena's body reacted instinctively, grabbing Gabrielle and diving back out of range onto the platform while all Hades broke loose around them.

The night had just gotten very long indeed.

**

"Get to the wall!" Xena raced down the platform. "Get your weapons ready and douse those damn torches!!"

The soldiers scrambled to obey her, crossbows settling on the top of the wall to give a steady aim as the line of horsemen thundered towards them.

Xena found a spot midway on the wall, almost where the two gates met. The platforms to either side had been hastily extended, and she could smell the greenness of the wood and the sharp scent of fresh hemp as she focused her eyes to see through the gloom. "Ready!!!"

"What can I do?" Gabrielle squiggled up next to her.

"Do that again."

"What?"

"Never mind." Xena handed her a woven bucket full of broken bricks from the square. "Throw these."

Gabrielle took the basket and set it on the edge of the wall, craning her neck to see over it. "What's going on? What are they doing?" She felt Xena's hand against her back and she pressed down on the wall, even though the torches were on the far end and she wasn't that visible now.

It was hard to see anything out there. She could hear the drumming of hooves, and she vague shadows as the horses came at them, but it was difficult to say how far they were and what they were going to try and do once they got to the wall.

Did they have that fire, for instance? "Xena, what if they have that stuff?" She asked. "The stuff you used on the boats?"

"Stone wall." The queen said, briefly. "Doesn't burn."

"Oh." Gabrielle felt inside the basket and curled her hand around a moderately large piece of stone pulling it out and rubbing the edge of her thumb against it. "That means it wouldn't have worked back home either, right?"

"Right." Xena said. "You use it against people, not buildings."

Gabrielle grimaced a little, remembering the stench of burning flesh from the previous day. "Like they tried to do to us in the beginning, when they attacked?"

"Right." The queen said again. "Damn you're a fast learner."

Her companion sighed and leaned forward a little, trying to see through the darkness. "I'd rather learn about kissing." She said, as the soldiers around her started cocking their weapons, placing the short crossbow shafts into their holders. "That was a lot more fun."

"It was, wasn't it?" Xena watched the enemy intently, catching the edges of the line curving back as the riders in the middle formed a point. She could see the bulk of the army looming behind them and the blood was starting to beat strongly inside her chest as the time for battle came closer.

“Xena?”

“I’d love to, but we’ll embarrass the boys.” Xena said. “Aim for the ground twenty paces on, boys!” She yelled. “When I say fire, let em loose.” She leaned on her elbows, just her eyes peeking over the top of the wall as she sorted the shadows into a line of horsemen, her eyes seeing details she knew her troops did not.

“No, I was just going to ask..” Gabrielle said. “If they don’t have the fire, and we’re behind the wall..”

“Shh.” Xena cupped her hands to either side of her face, blocking out even the small bit of light from behind the ramparts. Her ears cocked, listening past the drumming of the hooves to the rhythmic clash of armor on moving bodies.

She could almost sense them closing in, hear the hoarse breathing, smell the musky scent of sweat tinged with a little fear.

“But, Xena...”

“Get your aim on!” Xena yelled. “On my mark... ready... ready...”

Gabrielle put her free hand on her lover’s arm. “Why are they running right at the wall?”

“Read...” The queen paused in mid bellow, her head turning slightly as she looked at the dimly seen profile of the woman next to her. Then she looked back over the wall and tapped her thumbs against the top of it, eyes flicking rapidly back and forth.

Why were they running right at the wall?

“Majesty?” Brendan yelled. “Can we have at em?”

Xena cocked her head. “Wait!” She barked. “Hold on. Don’t fire a damn single arrow!”

Up and down the line, the men looked at each other, heads visible in the dim torchlight as they passed the order all the way down, rustlings and the soft sounds of weapons being rested against the wall echoing back. The queen waited until she was sure everyone heard her before she focused her attention once again ahead of her.

With a suddenness that made her jerk, the attacking soldiers began to yell, almost causing her to surge upright to see what was going on.

Something stopped her. Xena really wasn’t sure what, but a prickle of warning chased over her skin and instead, she grabbed the basket of rocks she’d given Gabrielle and tossed it up onto the top of the wall, moving it forward near to the front edge.

Instantly, the sound of arrows sliced through the air and she was turning and grabbing Gabrielle and pulling her down as she swiveled, putting her back to the wall as a hail of missiles came over it, striking the basket and bouncing off the sides, smacking the queen in the back of the head as they tumbled past.

Xena grabbed one of them and inspected it, her nose already twitching as she caught the acrid scent from the tips. “Ware!” She yelled. “Bastards have poison on the tips!”

“Wow.” Gabrielle exhaled.

“Stay down!” Xena turned and ignored her own advice, easing up to peer past the basket, hoping the shadows would hide her. She spotted the line of horses peeling off and thundering down the wall on

either side as her men held their aim and she felt another shiver, much less pleasurable, tickle down her spine. “Hope we remembered to lock that damn door, muskrat.”

“Me too.” Gabrielle examined the arrow Xena had dropped, sniffing the end and wrinkling her nose at the smell. “What is that?”

“Not sure.” Xena watched the horsemen retreat, realizing how close she’d come to losing her most precious resources – her most experienced men here with her on the ramparts. “Venom, maybe. I don’t think it’s herbal.” She nudged the arrow away from her lover. “Don’t poke yourself with it. Huh? I don’t want to find out the hard way if I know how to counter it.”

Gabrielle fingered the shaft. “Xena, if they have so many more soldiers than we do, why can’t they just fight fair?”

The queen laughed shortly. “Keep your heads down!” She yelled. “Look through the keyholes!” She eased over and peered through the short vertical slots herself. “Brendan, have them hoist some of that crap up here so we can put up a shield.”

“Aye.” Her captain scrambled past where they were sitting and ran for the ladder platform, taking care to keep his head below the level of the wall. “Hades of shots they are in this night dark, Xena. All of em have yer eyes, like.”

“Mm.” Xena turned and extended her hand to the nearest soldier. “Gimme.” She took the crossbow he handed over and examined it, then she eased up to the wall again and peered over it.

“Careful.” Gabrielle pressed against her, an unexpected warmth in the newly chilly wind.

She let the darkness close in around her vision again and focused past it. A few blinks, and the shadows sorted themselves out and became the outline of the Persian army against the horizon, halted just out of range in a shifting mass.

She blinked again, detecting outlines higher than she’d expected, and then softly cursed. “How in Hades did they have time to build those damn things?”

“What?”

“Nevermind.” The queen exhaled in irritation. “I’m trying to fight a war with six three legged ponies and a barrel of duck farts.” She returned her focus to the enemy army and looked through the shadows, watching them move and shift and finally resolve in her vision into single figures.

She let her cheek rest against the crossbow stock, knowing she was bucking fro a broken cheekbone but wanting the line to be right as she fastened her eyes on one of the enemy, a tall form walking before the lines, secure in the darkness, confident in their choice of positions.

Her body obediently aligned itself to her chosen target and she released the mechanism, keeping her head still as the weapon stock smacked into her face and watching as the figure she’d selected stopped in mid walk.

Turned towards her. She could almost see the surprise on his face as he reached for the bolt and crumpled before he could touch it, falling to the ground in a heap. A horn rang out, and the shadows burst into motion again, a flurry of alarm that floated to them on the wind with the sound of horses snorting and the rattled and clash of men picking up shed arms.

“Fine shot, Mistress.” Brendan said quietly, from behind her.

“Thanks.” Xena turned and sat down on the platform, putting the crossbow between her boots and resetting it. “Didn’t want em to get too damn comfortable with themselves.” She looked up when she was done. “Get whatever we’ve got up onto the top of the wall to protect the men. They’ll keep coming at us with whatever they’ve got.”

“Aye.” The old captain agreed. “Good thing you figgered them out with this lot.” He touched the poisoned arrow. “Bad way to die,. Remember that fight down past the mountains way back?”

“I remember.” Xena said, resting the crossbow on her knee. “That’s when I decided I’d better learn to be a healer before all of you croaked.”

Brendan merely grunted.

“Xena’s a really good healer.” Gabrielle spoke up, as a little silence fell between them. “That’s one of the first things I learned about her.”

“Yeah.” The queen sighed. “I’m sure me telling you how to cut an arrowhead out of my back was an eye opener.” She watched the soldiers passing crates and baskets past where she was seated. “Brendan, go down there and make sure they all stay clear of the open space. If they start pitching things over the wall I don’t want anyone under them.”

The soldier nodded and started to head off, then paused, when Xena caught his boot with hers. “Mistress?”

“See if you can get anyone stupid enough to volunteer to go out there and stage a raid on their lines.” Xena said. “Four, five complete idiots. Okay?”

“Sure.” Brendan visibly cheered up, and he rambled off with a good deal more enthusiasm.

Gabrielle squiggled over and seated herself right next to Xena. “That sounds dangerous.” She said.

“It is.” Xena answered. “But she wants everything her own way. She wants us off balance. She wants to rule the battlefield and you know what, Gabrielle?” She turned and regarded her lover. “There’s only room in this war for one unreasonable, arrogant bitch with Ares own ego.”

Gabrielle gazed seriously at her. “There’s more than one?”

One of the queens dark brows lifted. “Was that an insult or are you just that clueless?” She watched warily as Gabrielle shifted and leaned across her knees, facing her. “Which is it?”

“There’s one unreasonable arrogant bitch, and one beautiful hero.” Gabrielle stated. “I know what side I’m on, that’s for sure.”

“G…”

“Because you’re **my** beautiful hero.”

Xena looked down at the crossbow in her hands, then she looked back up at Gabrielle, her pale eyes half obscured by dark hair. After a moment, she smiled faintly. “I’m yours.” She agreed finally.

Gabrielle smiled back, a solemn twinkle in her eyes.

The queen cleared her throat, then she set the weapon down and patted her lover’s cheek. “And if you keep asking those damn questions I might even make all of that the truth.”

“Xena.” Brendan called from the platform. “Got them volunteers you asked for.”

“Ah. Into our lives some idiots are falling. C’mon.” Xena eased forward and got to her knees, then to her feet, keeping her head down as she headed towards her captain with Gabrielle in tow. “You really don’t think I’m a bitch?”

“Nope.”

“Boy have I got you fooled.”

**

Xena stood by the small door in the wall, her squad of volunteers clustered around her. She had a hand braced on either side of the opening, and she waited, as the last of the men wrapped themselves up in a dark cloak and turned to face her.

She knelt, and brushed her cloak back off her shoulder, as she plucked a dagger from her boot top and sketched a rough diagram on the ground. The torchlight was enough to show the details, but the men shifted to get a better view anyway, some crouching down level with her as she drew.

She briefly scratched in the wall of the city, then the open space and the road, then the ring of forest that eventually lead back to the pass, memories flooding back of sitting in clearings around campfires long ago doing much the same thing as she’d planned their next conquest.

“Their front lines are here.” Xena marked a long line on the ground. “From here, to here.” She marked an ‘x’ from the end of the forest on one side, where she’d lain in the grass not too many days ago, to the edge of the river.

“Blocking the place.” Brendan grunted.

“Mhm.” The queen agreed. “That’s what I’d have done if I’d wanted this place.” She paused and poked a bit of dust from the ground with the point of the dagger. “But I’ve got a feeling they don’t want this place any more than the time it takes to trash it.”

“Because of what we did to the ships?” Brendan said. “Ego, eh? And chasing them out the gates?”

Xena nodded. “So.” She went back to her drawing. “So they’re gonna hit us with everything, keep us reeling until they can bring up those assault towers and take the walls. We need to stop them.”

The men all looked at each other. “Us?” One of them circled his hand at the small group. “Are you coming with us then, your Majesty?”

Xena chuckled. “Not this time.” She responded in a truly regretful tone. “Take the jars Brendan gave you and go along the wall until you get here.” She touched a spot near the edge of the long grass. “The shadows’ll cover you. Go through the grass until you get here.” She touched the edge of where the Persian lines are. “Then open the jars, light them with your flints, toss em and run your asses back to the door fast as you can.”

The men looked at the jars, tucked in raffia slings under their arms. “Is this the stuff from the ships?”

“No.” Xena said. “It’s... let’s say it’s a calling card from me.” She stood up. “Everyone understand?”

The men nodded, getting up and starting to gather themselves as Xena turned to the door, laying a hand on the latch.

“Sh.” Xena went still, her sensitive fingertips feeling a certain motion against them. She held her free hand up and the noise behind her dropped to nothingness as she focused her senses on the doorway.

There. The motion came again, along with the faintest rasping sound.

Xena turned and made a hand sign at Brendan, then a second. He shoved the nearest man against the wall, then pointed and kept shoving until the way behind the queen was clear and the small group was plastered against the rock surface to either side.

Xena cocked her head. The door was big, and it was solid. Hardened wood with metal strapping, but she could hear sounds outside it now, a soft clinking, and bodies moving.

Amazing. The Persian was trying the same trick she'd done herself, only with out a...

Xena turned and drew her sword, stepping clear of the entry way and letting her eyes rake around the open space beyond it. Her free hand twitched, and she imagined she heard the whisper of an arrow, but the way remained clear and the only eyes looking back at her were her soldiers.

Was Sholeh counting on someone inside? "Brendan." She uttered softly. "Come here."

The soldier immediately came to her side. "What is it, Mistress?"

"Go to my quarters. Make sure Gabrielle's okay." Xena said. "There's something going on here. Men outside the door.. and I don't know if anyone's on this side waiting for them."

"Right." Brendan turned and broke into a flat run, his boots scuffing against the stone path as he headed for the central square.

Xena turned around to face the rest of the soldiers. "Stay where you are." She called out softly. "I'm gonna open this door and let the bastards in."

"Majesty??"

"And then we'll kill em." Xena went to the door and slowly eased her weight against it, pressing the surface away from the sturdy lock bar holding it closed. She pushed the bar open, then she backed away from it as fast as she could, swinging around and clearing the entrance as the men hastily made room for her.

For a long moment, everything was silent. Then the scrape and creak of the door opening was heard, and the soft thud as it pulled back against the rock entranceway wall.

Xena wished she'd thought to ask Brendan to send a couple dozen more men down. She was aware of the earnest, but mostly unskilled soldiers around her, and cognizant of the danger she'd just opened them all up to.

"Typical egotistical me." Xena muttered under her breath, as she caught the sound of bodies moving nearby, then a momentary silence.

"Where's he?" A voice whispered. "Opened the door.. where'd he go?"

"Don't know, just move. Forget 'im. Let's get this done."

Xena shifted her grip on her sword and wiggled her ears in mute delight, her body tensing as she sensed the nearness of battle, her nose picking up the scent of dust and sweaty leather as the scuffling started again and she prepared to attack.

Six men came trotting out of the entrance, getting midway into the passageway before they spotted the waiting soldiers and whirled in surprise.

"Get moving." Xena booted the nearest soldier towards the door. "Remember what I told ya."

"But Majesty.. "

"I'll take care of these guys." Xena took a step forwards and twirled her sword, as the men scrambled to meet her, kicking two of them backwards as she grabbed the one in the lead and slammed her elbow into his jaw. "Move it!"

She sensed the hesitation in her own soldiers, but she was out of time as the rest of the enemy attacked her and she was busy fighting for her life.

Unexpectedly fighting for her life, as two men engaged her with thick, curved swords as she was disentangling herself from the leader's legs and she almost tripped and fell backwards.

Reflexes and the fact she'd actually gotten sleep saved her. She deflected one man's sword and twisted sideways to avoid the second's, putting her hand out to catch the man's arm and pulling it to one side.

He wrenched free, and started a backswing, but stopped in mid motion and stumbled back, turning to engage the soldier who had jumped on his back and was wrestling him to the ground.

Xena found herself free to engage her current adversary, a big man with a nice set of armor who immediately challenged her skills as his blade crashed against her own. She focused hard on him as she saw her soldiers taking after the rest of the intruders, and a twist of her wrist slid his blade enough to one side for her to take a hop backwards and steady her balance.

Regaining her momentum, she dismissed her soldiers rampant disregard for her orders as it was currently saving her ass, and she settled down to the business of fighting.

This man was a real Persian soldier. He topped her by a head, and outweighed her by half again, and he was damn good with his sword. Xena reckoned he'd been the leader of their little attack party, and she met his sword and found herself being shoved to one side as he tried to smash his hilts into her chest.

That didn't happen too often. Xena turned and let the man's forward motion take him past her as she pulled her arms back across her body and ducked instinctively as he slashed backwards, his sword missing her head by hair.

Literally.

She dove for the ground and tumbled, coming up back onto her feet and shoving her sword forward in a short, savage jab that got the man right in the ass as he tried to whirl and catch up to her. She yanked the blade backwards as he yelled in rage.

She didn't give him a chance to argue with her about it. Going on the offensive, she circled him and brought her blade around two handed as he limped in a circle and caught her attack, working to parry it as she bore down and crashed into him, slamming her shoulder against his.

It was like throwing herself against the wall. Xena felt the jolt go through her entire body but even so, she knocked him back and step and he hesitated just for an instant, not expecting that.

But just an instant. The next moment he'd whipped his arm back and smacked her in the side of the head before she could avoid him, sending an explosion of stars into her vision as her body reacted from pure instinct, her hands bringing her sword up just in time to block his return swing headed right for her neck.

She felt the shock as their blades met, and she shook her head to clear her vision, blinking hard as he came back into focus and she parried his swing with a painful wrenching of her forearms. He cursed and she steeled herself to block again as he twisted his body and their blades grated against each other.

She twisted in the opposite direction and they ended up with their hands slamming into each other painfully, the blades whispering by their faces as they came almost nose to nose.

Xena didn't hesitate. She arched her body and smacked her head into his face, forcing a cough from him as he jerked backwards. She repeated the motion and their hands slid past each other as their bodies collided instead, too close for the swords to do any damage.

He growled and she saw a flash of teeth as he aimed for the side of her face, shoving her backwards with sheer weight as Xena fought to stay on her feet. She released one hand off her sword and grabbed her dagger instead, risking his blade as she flipped the dagger in her and jammed it into his ribs, feeling the resistance of his armor push back against her.

He tried to back off, but they slid around in a half circle and Xena lunged forward, the point of her dagger piercing through and finding flesh beneath it.

He staggered back and knocked her hand away, leaving the dagger in place as he brought his sword back up and swung it at her.

Xena ducked the swing, then spun and lashed out with kick, knocking the sword blade away before she continued on around and booted him with the other leg, sending him at last sideways as the fight began to take its toll.

She followed his motion, swinging her blade around in a two handed circle to smack him against the side of the face with the blade with all the strength in her arms. She felt a crunching all the way down her arms and saw blood fly, as he stumbled to the side, slamming against the wall and bouncing off to fall on the ground at her feet.

Xena kicked his blade away and caught her breath, looking around to find the other invaders slumped on the ground and her men standing over them, their eyes wide as they watched her. She looked at them, one boot coming to rest on her opponent's head as she made sure he stayed where he was. "Didja at least close the damn door?"

The nearest man nodded rapidly.

"Good." Xena looked down at her gasping captive. "Now let's find out what they were up to." She dropped to one knee and jabbed him in the throat with her fingers, making his body jerk hard as he struggled suddenly, glaring up at her. "And who they were going to do it with."

**

Part 25

Gabrielle focused on her task, gathering bits of stone and brick into a basket while she worked equally hard to not think about Xena not being next to her.

She knew the queen was not that far away, just down the path really, around the corner against the wall where she'd taken her little group of guys to go do whatever it was they were going to do.

Xena wasn't supposed to go with them, but Gabrielle had a haunting suspicion that given her druthers, Xena would do just that because she loved to be in the middle of whatever was going on and she loved causing as much chaos as she could.

Seemed like a really good opportunity to do both. Gabrielle sighed, and picked up another rock to place it in the basket. Would Xena go? She said she wouldn't, in fact, she'd told Gabrielle specifically that she'd be right back but this was war and it was Xena and...

Well...

She put her basket, now full, down on the rough wooden bench that had been erected on one side of the square, and went to look for another one. The soldiers were busy and excited around her, carrying bundles of arrows from the square out to the wall, and other men were sitting around piles of sticks making more of them.

There was no sense of panic, though. The attitudes around her were confident, and she even heard one of the soldiers whistling as he carefully affixed a bit of feather to the back of a shaft.

On the other side of the wall, there was nothing but silence, and the occasional crack of wood and sound of horses neighing.

It seemed strange, and scary. First the attack, then nothing. What would the Persians do next? What would Xena do?

What would Xena do. Gabrielle picked up a basket and went back to her rock scrounging. What she hoped Xena wouldn't do is give in to her usual instincts and end up going with the soldiers out of the gate and into the dangers in front of it.

She fingered the basket thoughtfully. Xena would do that, wouldn't she? With a frown, she put the basket on the verge and dusted her hands off, stepping over the ledge and starting down the path at a brisk trot.

Soldiers dodged out of her way as she approached, and she gave them a brief, distracted smile as she went past.

"Gabrielle, wait."

Poo. Gabrielle glanced to her right, spotting Lennat headed in her direction. She hesitated just long enough to let him catch up, then she kept walking. "What's up?"

"Wow. That was so strange." Lennat said. "What you and Xena did, up on the wall."

Strange. Hm. "I guess." Gabrielle murmured. "But that's sort of how Xena is. She never does what you expect her to."

"Yeah." Lennat adjusted the belt around his waist, with it's sword. "So, what did it mean? Are you .. uh.. married to her?"

Well now, that was a pretty darn good question wasn't it? Gabrielle had been asking herself the same thing for the past candlemark, puzzling over what her status really was now, and whether anything had really actually changed. "Yes." She finally said. "I am."

"Wow."

Gabrielle stepped over a bundle of spears and kept going, hoping Lennat would find something else to do, but resigned to his presence as he continued to follow her.

"Why did you do that?" Lennat asked after a few steps. "I mean, why like that?"

"Why not like that?" Gabrielle walked down the steps from the square into the narrowing path that led to the street that bordered the wall. "I thought it was great. There we were under the stars, and the wind was great.."

"People were shooting arrows at you."

"That's okay, Xena can catch them." The blond woman shrugged that off. "Anyway, it's really dangerous here, you know? I'm glad Xena wanted to.. " She hesitated. "In case anything happens."

"Oh." Lennat murmured, after a moment. "I didn't think of that." He seemed a touch embarrassed. "So, where are you going? Can I help you do something?"

Gabrielle started to turn the corner, her mind sorting through what she could tell her erstwhile friend to distract him from hanging around. So occupied, she nearly got bowled over on her ass when a dark, cloaked figure rushed at her from the opposite direction and shoved her out of the way. "Hey!"

"Hold on there!" Lennat made a grab for the man, then he spun to one side and gasped as he was struck, and shoved against the wall. "Stop!"

The man hurried past, breaking into an awkward run and disappearing around the edge of the path, as Lennat slowly slid to the ground, his hands clenched around his belly.

Gabrielle pushed off from the wall she'd been thrown into and rushed over to him, her conscience overriding her desire to go find the queen. "Wh.. are you all right?"

"Augh." Lennat removed one hand and stared at it, the glistening of fresh blood darkening his skin. "He stabbed me!" He looked around. "Where'd he go? Ow!" His eyes widened as Gabrielle knelt next to him. "Ow.. what did he do that for?"

There was a lot of blood. Gabrielle forgot her impatience as she gently moved his hands, the sharp copper scent rising sharply in the night air. "Don't' move around." She said. "Stay here, I'll get help." She could hear his breathing growing labored. "Just take it easy." She patted his shoulder, and got to her feet, considering her options.

Wasn't many, really. She turned and bolted down the path, heading for where she hoped the queen was still waiting.

**

Xena crouched over her victim, her weight resting on one knee and her leg straddled over the man's writhing body. He was struggling against the block she'd put on his throat, his chest straining to suck in air his paralyzed neck wouldn't allow to pass. "Moron!" She smacked him in the face. "The more you fight, the more air you use. Wanna die?"

The man stared at her with nothing but hate in his eyes. Xena found that a bit refreshing, and it made her smile as he tried to spit at her, finding himself unable to do more than dribbling on himself. "You can talk." She said, conversationally. "Or I'll sit here and watch you die like a fish flopping around out of the water. Take your pick."

"Pmof." The man tried to spit at her again. "Ratherdie."

"Suit yourself." Xena rocked back onto her heel and picked up a fold of his Persian surcoat, wiping her sword on it and polishing the edge. "All your friends are already dead. Too bad someone sent you in her into a trap, huh?"

The man froze in his struggles and lay there, panting.

"Yeah." Xena spit carefully on her blade and rubbed a bit of dried blood off it. "What a bunch of sitting ducks you were." She glanced casually at him. "On the other hand, I got to use you to train my new guards here. They got a little workout."

The soldier stared at her.

Xena sheathed her sword and leaned on her knee, looking back at him with a faint smile. "Sure you don't want to talk? I could use a good man."

Their eyes met. His were dark and held a faint slant to them. Hers were the palest of ice blue but the spirit that peered out of both had the same energy and Xena could feel the tug as their personalities wrestled with each other.

"C'mon." Xena said. "What's someone like you doing with the likes of those guys?" "She indicated the dead raiders. "You're the real thing. What's that all about?" She was aware of her own men standing by, waiting quietly near the wall in the shadows.

For a long moment, as his lips were turning blue and they studied each other in stubborn silence, it teetered on the balance and Xena thought she'd lost him. Then he moved his head, just a trifle, and his eyes shifted, just a little and she knew victory was in her hands.

She reached over and triggered the hold on his neck, letting him breathe. She kept her fingers ready though, because with someone that dangerous, you just never knew what was going to happen and she'd feel pretty damn stupid if he got her over on her back after that nice pretty speech.

But all he did was breathe, his chest heaving as he blinked at her. "You're a demon."

"Thanks." Xena smiled at him. "Flattery will get you a kick in the ass from me, but you're lying on it so you just wasted your opportunity."

He took another few breaths. "We were supposed to have allies open the door." He said. "We were promised."

"They sold you out." The queen said. "Sucks, huh?"

The soldier looked around at the men in the shadows.

"C'mon. What are the odds we'd be at the door at the exact minute you got there?" The queen chuckled. "You don't think that was a coincidence do ya?"

The Persian frowned. He had a dark, handsome face with a neatly trimmed beard and moustache, and black brows that nearly met over his eyes. "I think.."

"Xena!"

The man stopped speaking and they both looked up as Gabrielle came barreling around the corner, running full tilt towards them.

The queen leaned on her knee as she watched her lover approach, a smile appearing on her face. "Ah." She said. "I'm always in such demand. Yes, muskrat?"

"Xena, you have to come quickly."

"Is that an order?" The queen snickered "Bossy little thing, aren't you? We just got married and you're already making the rules in bed?"

"You of..burf." Gabrielle skidded to a halt and stopped talking, covering her face with one hand. "Xena, for goodness' sake." She sighed. "No, please.. Lennat got hurt.. this guy stabbed him and ran away, and he knocked me down too, and he needs a healer!"

Xena absorbed all the babble with a thoughtful expression.

“Right now!” Gabrielle tugged on her arm, almost stepping over the Persian to do so. “Xena he’s bleeding.”

The queen sighed. “Am I the only healer around here?” She asked, wanting to stay and complete her conversion of her new captive.

“Yes.” Gabrielle answered. “Well, you ‘re the only one I know.” She amended. “Please?”

Xena got up and brushed her hands off. “Take him to the barracks and secure him until we can talk again.” She felt a little vexed at the interruption. “I’ll meet you there after I take care of this.”

“But weren’t we..” One of the soldiers started to ask, then stopped when his companion cuffed him in the shoulder. “Ah, right. Sorry Majesty.”

Xena stepped back and circled the man, who was hauled to his feet by her soldiers. He was taller than most of them, as tall as Xena herself and even in his somber meekness there was a degree of danger she highly appreciated. “Be nice to him.” She added. “I like a man who can almost kick my ass.”

They moved off, and she turned to Gabrielle. “Now. Tell me what happened again? Whose sorry carcass do I need to sew up?” She started to follow the soldiers, laying her arm across Gabrielle’s shoulders. “I thought I told you to stay and collect rocks.”

“It’s Lennat.” Gabrielle ignored the last words. “We were heading this way..”

“Why?”

Gabrielle really had no good answer for that. “I wanted to be with you.” She finally offered up meekly, as they walked along the path. “I thought maybe you’d go out with those guys and I didn’t want to miss out on anything.”

Xena walked along in silence for a few steps. “You know something, Gabrielle?” She sighed. “One of the most charming things about you is that you tell me the truth when I ask you something.”

Gabrielle felt a bit confused about that, since she really thought telling Xena she thought Xena had lied and might run out on her wasn’t nearly as complimentary as the queen seemed to think it was. Or maybe she didn’t think of it that way. “Oh.”

“I wasn’t going to go.”

“Oh.”

“One of the reasons I wasn’t going to go was because I told you to wait back there for me and I knew if I did, you’d be pissed off.”

“Oh!”

“Mm.” Xena flexed a sore hand. “Imagine me getting a conscience in my old age. Freaky.”

They rounded the bend and spotted Lennat still slumped against the wall. He looked up as they approached, his eyes going wide as he recognized Xena. “I thought you were getting help?” He murmured, as they knelt on either side of him. “I think I could have w.. ow!”

Xena slapped his hands away and continued her examination. “Shut up.” She growled, peering at the wound then standing and yanking him to his feet after her. “Walk fast. You might get back to the camp before you bleed to death.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle hastily gave Lennat support on his other side. “He is bleeding.”

“So am I.” The queen replied. “You can fix that while I fix him. C’mon.”

**

The square was once again a hive of activity. The city people, who had drifted off had now gathered back around, some bringing blankets and other things that indicated they were there to stay this time.

The innkeeper had taken over the cooking area and there were boxes and crates around that hadn't been before, and there was an air of nervous expectation as the occasional sound floated over the wall and the guard sounded a series of alarms.

To one side, the two story barracks Xena had taken over was well lit from within and shadows danced in the windows as the soldiers moved to and fro.

“Change of plan.” Xena placed one hand on either side of the doorway, addressing her small troop as Gabrielle stitched up the gash that traveled from just under her arm almost to her hip on one side. She'd taken her leathers off down to her waist, perversely enjoying the number of different places the eyeballs of men could be found moving when trying not to look at a half naked woman. “If they're expecting that bunch of losers to come back out of that door, they'll be watching it too closely.”

“Xena, d'ya think they're fixing to attack?” Brendan asked. “Watch says they don't see much out there.”

The queen paused, as the needle pierced her side for the nth time. The attack through the door, so eerily similar to the one she'd been contemplating herself had shaken her a little. “No.” She finally said. “I think they'll wait for the morning – or –“ A faint smile. “Wait for their goons to come back.”

The men chuckled, but they looked a bit uneasy, and their eyes settled momentarily on her in some doubt before they skittered off again.

Xena noticed. She frowned and sifted through the recent events, trying to force her mind from the harpoon size needle piercing her skin. Having her own plan turned on her wasn't making her look too good in front of the men, and she realized that.

Had to be something else she could do. Some other smart idea she could pull out of her ass. Some other clever plan...

Ah.

Well, it would take their minds off her being outmaneuvered, anyway.

Xena's head cocked to one side for a moment, then she chuckled herself. “So what we're gonna do, is we're gonna make like we **are** her goons, going back.” She said. “She's expecting a bunch of Persians back, and I've got a bunch of dead men in Persian uniforms.”

The soldiers looked at each other. “We're gonna go out there into that army?” One of the men asked. “For real?”

“Yup.” Xena said. “Get moving. Get those uniforms and I'll..” She started to move, then stopped when Gabrielle squeaked loudly. “I'll stay here and finish getting sewn.” She amended as she felt a yank on her skin. “Before Gabrielle spans me.”

Gabrielle squeaked again, more softly.

The men hesitated, then Brendan stood up and motioned them to follow him. “Let's go boys.” He said. “We'll not keep her Maj waiting.” He added in a confident tone. “Be a good one, eh? Put em on their ass from their own, yeah?”

“But..” One of the men said. “Won’t they figgur out who we are?”

Xena eyed them. “Half of you were Persian soldiers. You think they can really tell the difference at this point?”

The man scratched his jaw, then shrugged sheepishly. “Ayeh. Sorry, your Majesty.”

“Let’s go.” Brendan smacked the man on the side of the head. “Fore I find you a Persian woman’s skirt to wear out there.”

Obediently, the soldiers got up and followed him as he headed off to the charnel pit they’d thrown the Persian bodies in. Xena stood casually until they all left, then she grimaced and leaned against one side of the doorway. “Ouch.”

“Sorry.” Gabrielle glanced up apologetically.

“Serves me right.” The queen sighed. “I moved too damn slow.” She peered down her side to where her lover was almost nose to rib with her, blond head tilted to one side and tongue tip stuck out in utter concentration. “Not your fault it feels like your sticking my ribs with a hot poker.”

Gabrielle paused and looked up at her, eyes widening.

Xena smiled. “Just kidding. Keep going.” She observed the long, bloody, but thin line down her side. “Nice job.”

“I’d rather just fix your cloak or something.” The blond woman sighed. “Should you put on some more armor if this sort of thing is going to happen?”

“Trade off.” The queen said. “Less crap, more speed. Though at the rate my old ass is going, I might as well go around with a damn barrel strapped over my head.”

“That’s not true.” Gabrielle bent over her task again. “No one goes as fast as you do.”

Xena snorted. “Yeah.” She fingered the matching slit in her leathers, and sighed again. “Hey, Gabrielle?”

“Yeah?” Gabrielle bit the inside of her lip, and hesitated. “Can you let your breath out for a second?”

Confused, the queen’s brow puckered, but after a second she complied, exhaling and then pausing, as she felt the gentle pinch of Gabrielle’s fingertips against her skin, pressing the cut together and then the pinprick of fire as the needle followed.

It brought back to mind, suddenly, that pivotal moment when she’d trusted Gabrielle because she’d had no option and she remembered all over again how terrifying and inevitable it had all been. Trusting like that hadn’t come easily and now..

Now. Now she was on the brink once again of throwing that into peril. Xena brushed the thought aside, and twitched a little with impatience. “No uneven scars, remember?”

“I remember.” Gabrielle leaned close, her breath warming Xena’s skin and sending goosebumps across her side as she bit the end of the gut off, and then leaned back. “Okay, done.” She studied her handiwork seriously. “I think it’s even.”

“You think?” Xena’s brows lifted.

“Sometimes.” The blond woman agreed, laying a gentle hand on her lover’s thigh. “So, are we going with the guys this time?”

The queen drew in a short breath, almost a gasp, and she turned fully to face Gabrielle. "What in the Hades made you ask that?" She said, in a sharp tone, a little rattled to have the thoughts toying with the tip of her tongue coming out of her companion's mouth.

"I think you want to." Gabrielle answered honestly. "And...um..." She paused for a long moment. "Because I want to." She got the last words out in a rush. "Go do that."

Slowly, Xena dropped down to sit on the long wooden slab next to her, pale blue eyes never moving from her face. "You do? Why?"

That was hard to answer because Gabrielle was not, truly, sure herself why. "I just want to." She answered. "I want to do something. Not just sit here waiting." She looked down at the needle and its bare bit of remaining gut left in her fingers. "Bad things could happen, but I want to be fighting them if they do, not letting them happen to me."

How strange. Xena mused in silence. To find parts of yourself reflected back into your own eyes from such an unexpected mirror. She remembered, hazily, being close with Lyceus, but even that sibling bond was nowhere near what it felt like to be slipping into this partnership of the...

Heart?

Gabrielle looked up at her and their eyes met.

Soul?

Was Gabrielle saying what she was saying just because she knew it was what Xena wanted to hear? What she wanted to believe? A brief memory of seeing her young friend square off against the Persian prince popped into her mind and she saw again those squared shoulders, and the nascent, unsure fire that had stiffened her posture and driven those short, lucky blows.

Or did this most unlikely of vessels hold something inside she knew better than most?

"Yeah, we're going with the men. Hades, I'm.. we're leading the men." Xena felt a rush of prickling energy chill and then warm her skin. "We're gonna take it to them, Gabrielle." Her lips twisted in mild irony. "Fight the good fight."

Gabrielle looked relieved, and she put her cheek against Xena's shoulder, then she lifted her head and kissed the skin there. "I'm glad." She said. "I just had a feeling if we stayed here, something really bad would happen."

"You did? I mean, you do?"

"Yeah."

Xena studied her. "Do you have these insane visions often?" She queried warily. "You never mentioned it before."

Gabrielle carefully tucked her gut and needle away. "Um.. no." She shook her head. "I don't have visions.. or stuff like that. I was just... I just feel weird." She admitted. "I think we should do what they don't expect us to do because if we do what they expect us to do we won't expect what they're doing to do to us."

Xena studied her. "Don't ever say that again." She said, after a brief pause. "Or I'll bite your tongue for you." She flexed her hands and started to gather herself up. "Let's get moving. We need to look like soldiers too."

The blond woman nodded, then she touched Xena's armor. "Do you want me to try and fix your leather thing first?"

"Nah." Xena pulled up her leather thing and settled the straps in place. "As long as we're going to do this the crazy way, let's go see if I can get my new friend to come with us." She raked her fingers through her hair and freed strands of it from the back of her armor. "Let's see if I haven't lost my touch."

She got up and stretched like a cat, wiggling her eyebrows and then heading off towards the block house she'd had the Persian warrior taken to. After a moment, Gabrielle scrambled after her, feeling afraid, and happy, and excited all at the same time.

**

A space had been cleared in the back of the barracks, with a stout door barring what had once been a store room. In front of the door was a bench, and on the bench was seated the Persian. Four soldiers were standing nearby, weapons held casually as they watched a fifth work on the prisoner's wounds with rough, but not unkind skill.

Xena paused in the outer hall for a few minutes to watch, studying her potential victim unseen. Even seated, he was much bigger than the soldiers around him, bigger even than she'd remembered from the fight. His head was down and he was resting his elbows on his knees, his body in a posture of weariness she could fully sympathize with.

She wondered who'd been more surprised that she'd won, herself or him. A moment's more thought. "Him." Xena dusted her hands off and straightened her shoulders, taking a deep breath before she came around the door and entered the room.

Her men stiffened into attention, and after a second, the Persian looked up in startlement, going still as he recognized her.

"Majesty." The healer greeted her politely as she joined him at the man's side. "I am almost finished here." He said. "What I can attend, I have. There is some I cannot mend, though."

The Persian was holding one elbow close to his chest. "Broke a thing or so." He explained, as Xena cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Sorry." The queen smiled.

"Was the hardest I've been hit, by man or woman." The Persian admitted. "You do your reputation justice."

The healer stood. "I will tend to that other one now, from the inn." He said. "Took a bad cut, he did." He picked up his kit and stepped carefully around the queen, ducking his head in respect as he moved through the doorway and headed for the other side of the barracks.

Xena studied the Persian, then she walked over and seated herself on a sealed barrel, hitching one leg up and letting her hands rest on her knee. "Scram." She told her men. "Gabrielle's outside. Go give her a hand."

The men stirred and left, not without a glance at the man before they vanished.

Xena waited for them to disappear, then she turned her attention back to her captive. "So." She said. "What's your name?"

He studied her in return. "We don't give our names to outlanders." He said, but in a moderately respectful tone. "From my people, that is. Others may."

Xena cocked her head to one side, pondering which direction to take with this enigma. "All right." She said. "Tell me what you want me to call you then, or I'll give you a name and I bet you won't like it."

The Persian straightened slowly up, leaning back and letting his hands rest on his thighs. He had massive shoulders and a thick, very heavy chest, and long, powerful legs that were bunched with muscle. His face wasn't either old or young, but there was experience in its lines and the thick, dark beard trimmed close to his face neatly outlined it.

Good looking, in an exotic sort of way. Xena waited for him to answer, her ears pricking as she heard sounds of movement outside in the square. "Well?"

"In the army, they call me the Bull of Persia." He replied.

"You want me to call you Bull?" Xena queried, in an amused tone. "You shoulda let me pick. I'da done better than that." She informed him. "Ask Gabrielle what I call her."

The Persian moved his shoulders in a faint shrug. "I am Heydar." He said. "It is not my true name, but it is well enough and what my friends call me." He studied his hands. "Though there aren't many left I can call that."

"Mm." Xena made a low sound in her throat. "Yeah. It's like that isn't it?"

Heydar's eyes lifted and met hers. "It is."

This was, Xena realized, someone who did indeed know what she knew, lived in the blood filled world she lived in, and had suffered both the joys and the heartaches of war as she had.

This was someone who knew the horrible, savage need.

Pity. "So." The queen crossed her ankles and regarded him. "Heydar."

He watched her, dark eyes close to expressionless, but not quite. "What is it you intend with me, Xena?" He used her name boldly. "Will you kill me? Of all that I have seen here, you would be the one that could."

"I could." The queen agreed. "Or I could hang you upside down from your heels for being an insolent jackass to me." She continued, in a mild tone. "But that'd be a waste of my time and your talent."

His nostrils flared, just a little.

Xena got up off her barrel and strolled across the room, putting her hands on either side of the open door to the storeroom and looking inside. The boxes and crates had been moved out on her order, and on one side, a hard pallet had been set.

Behind her, she heard only silence, save the soft rasp of breathing. She kept her back to the room and studied the inside of her makeshift prison, noting the thick stone walls, and the dusty, but solid floor. "At least you'll be dry in here." She commented. "Be a change from the field."

Still, no sound behind her, but she felt the change in the air as something big moved, and the draft from the outer doorway was blocked so it no longer brushed the back of her neck.

She felt heat approaching her, still in a silence so profound she could hear her own heart beating. She took a breath, and then another, and then smoothly, easily, she turned and looked right into Heydar's eyes, an arms length from her, letting a faint smile cross her face.

He went still, only his fingertips twitching, watching her intently to see what her reaction was going to be, only slightly widened eyes betraying his own surprise at her lack of it.

“Wanna die?” Xena asked him. “Or do you really think you can take me?” She kept her pose in the doorway, leaning against one side of it. Since she hadn’t yet redonned her armor, she had only her leathers and her attitude between herself and the Persian, with the single exception of a dagger in the top of one boot.

He had no weapons, naturally, and she figured if he was going to be stupid it was going to get very, very ugly and there was a definite chance she could get her ass thoroughly kicked if she wasn’t very, very careful.

Heydar exhaled a trifle. “What are my choices?” He asked. “Be kept as a prisoner, or die fighting you? I’ll take the chance of death, and thank you. I have no wish to be kept.” He gathered himself. “I won’t be put in that cage no matter how dry it is.”

He took a step forward, crossing into her reach, his arms spreading out to either side a little.

Xena showed no signs of being alarmed at the threat. “Picky picky.” She forced herself to stay relaxed, keeping her breathing even as she absorbed his body posture and tried to read his dark eyes. She was suddenly aware of how alone she was and mentally cursed herself for the arrogant nitwit she sometimes was. “What if there was a third choice?”

He paused warily, his head tilting a bit to one side. “I won’t betray her.” He said, simply. “I swore it.”

Now, Xena moved. She let her arms drop and took a step towards him, coming close into the space around him as she sensed his whole body twitch in reaction. “I swear a lot to.” She said. “Doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

They were face to face, easily in touching distance, and yet, he remained still.

“C’mon.” Xena rasped softly. “If you think you can take me, give it a try.” She slowly drew a breath in at the gamble. “Or if you think you’re life’s worth more than a promise then cut the horsecrap and join me.” Casually, she reached out and patted his cheek, stilling her nerves as she felt the shiver run through him under the touch of her fingertips. “I don’t ask anyone to swear.”

“Don’t you?” He finally whispered, his eyes glued to her face. “Don’t you ask for loyalty, Xena?”

In a moment of surprising insight, Xena smiled. “No.” She said. “I don’t. I give it.”

His body shifted, and his shoulders dropped and moved backwards, his hands coming to rest near his legs with half curled fingers, their eyes still locked. “Ah.”

“Ah.” Xena echoed.

The Persian chewed the inside of his lip, an oddly adolescent motion. “You have no chance of winning.” He said. “She will take the city, and you, and it will be all for nothing.”

“No.” Xena shook her head. “She’ll never take me.”

He looked at her in silence.

Motion in the doorway. Xena’s hand twitched and made a signal and it stopped. “For one thing, I’m already taken.” A quirky grin appeared on her face. “And no matter what happens, no one’s ever gonna forget this fight.”

Heydar sighed. "You are a demon. What was said, is true." He gazed down at his boots. "Lock me in then." He said, finally. "I will not forswear myself." His eyes lifted briefly. "But I will not put myself against you either."

Honorable choice. Xena had to give that to him, even though in truth his fate was in her hands not his own. "You're not staying here." She motioned towards the door. "You're coming with me, outside the walls."

"But.."

"That wasn't a question." The queen told him. "I'm not going to put up with your dagger at my back. You want out? You want back to your mistress? No problem. I'll take ya."

He blinked at her in complete bewilderment. "W.."

"Sh." Xena gave him a shove down towards the bench again. "Shut up or I'll have my personal assassin here skin you."

Heydar turned in startlement as he reached for the bench, his eyes darting around the room and finally falling on the relatively slight figure entering. "But.. " He seemed at a loss. "Is that not your storyteller?"

"She's got many skills." Xena held her hand out for the folded pile of cloth her lover had. "And count yourself lucky. If looks could kill you'd have had a hole in your back the size of an ox a minute ago."

Heydar stared at Gabrielle, who stared right back, her face tensed into an angry scowl. Finally the Persian sighed again. "So much is not as it seems."

Xena snorted. "You got that right. C'mon muskrat. Let's go chitter." She snapped her fingers, bringing the guards back in the room with their crossbows cocked. "Watch him. Don't get near him.." She herded Gabrielle to the door. "If he gets any more ideas, shoot him with some of those arrows we got off the Persian bodies."

"Mistress." The soldiers braced. "As you will."

"Yeah yeah yeah."

**

"Xena, that's guys a creep."

"You always say that about men who want to take me to bed." Xena sorted through the pile of clothing. "Why is that, I wonder?"

Gabrielle turned her head as though watching her thoughts roll right off their track and across the floor. "Huh?" She said. "I do? No I don't. I never say that."

The queen chuckled.

"Do I?" Her lover wandered over and picked up a thick surcoat that had dropped to the ground. "I can't remember the last time I said that about someone."

"I can." Xena said. "You said it about Alaran." She paused, studying a bit of armor stained deep with blood. "I should have listened to you." She added, in a quiet tone. "Would have saved me a lot of trouble and some men their lives."

Gabrielle eased in next to her. "He was creepy." She admitted, giving Xena's arm a little rub. "Can I wear this?" She held up the surcoat. "I think it will sort of fit me."

“Sure.” Xena replied, absently. “Go out there naked if you want. We’ll put some blue paint on ya and they’ll think you’re a war ghoul.”

Gabrielle was momentarily silent, processing the image. “Do you really think I’d look good in blue?” She asked. “That must be hard to get off.”

Xena paused and looked down at her. “Shut up and put that thing on.” She bumped Gabrielle with her hip, and tossed most of the pile off to one side, saving a long surcoat for herself. “Everyone else getting ready?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle pulled the heavy fabric over her head and then down her body, blinking in bemusement as it came down to her knees. The body wasn’t too huge though, so she figured it had just been on a tall, skinny soldier. Her hands traced the odd and unfamiliar pattern on the front, as she tried not to think about the blood covering the lower half and the fact it had been taken from a dead man.

“How’s your buddy?”

“Huh?” Gabrielle looked up sharply. “My what?”

“Inn boy.” The queen was fitting herself in a similar outfit, with slightly more ornate piping, and golden trim along the edges. It wasn’t quite so long on her, and when she snugged the belt of it tight, the result was dashing sexy. “Eh. Not bad.”

“Oh. Lennat.” Gabrielle walked around her lover and brushed bits of straw off the surcoat. “This looks really good on you.” She advised her. “He’s fine... but you know, I tried to find Perdicus in there, and I couldn’t.”

“Did you really want to find him?” Xena peered over her shoulder at Gabrielle, one brow hiked.

“Well..” Gabrielle had the grace to look embarrassed. “No, well.. I thought I should at least say hello. I mean..” She sighed. “He did get hurt, and all that. But he wasn’t there.” She frowned. “He probably went to go see what was going on.”

“Or look for you?” Xena teased her, watching her companion’s face twist into a grimace of acknowledgement. “No problem, muskrat.” She gently ruffled her lover’s hair. “We’ll be out of here soon, and he won’t be following us.”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle worked the buckle on the belt, snugging it around her body and wriggling her shoulders to adjust the fit. “Hmm.”

Xena pulled the shoulder seams straight on Gabrielle’s outfit, and studied the result. Though the garment was too large, and too long, it didn’t look bad on her, and the dark color outlined her slim body nicely. “Okay. Got your spear?”

Gabrielle nodded. “In the corner there.” She pointed with one hand. “Are we going to take the horses?”

The queen made a last adjustment, then brushed a bit of dust off one of her shoulders. “No.” She said, in a regretful tone. “They didn’t have any. Wish they had, the bastards. Make my life easier. My back’s still killing me.”

“Mm.” Gabrielle wandered over to where her spear was. She put her hand around it, and lifted it, sliding her other hand down the shaft to run over faint stains in the wood. “That’s too bad. I’d like to have Patches around.”

Xena swung her cloak over her shoulders and fastened the catch, then pulled the hood up to hide her head. She turned and peered in a cracked mirror, reluctantly approving her scruffily menacing appearance. "Yeah, well.. maybe next time." She turned and picked up her gauntlets. "Let's go, muskrat. We've got history to make."

Gabrielle hoisted her spear and followed her lover out the door, picking up her own cloak as she passed by the chair it was draped over. Already the cool night air was blowing against her face, and she drew in a lungful of it, hoping they'd find a successful dawn.

**

The door again. Xena turned and surveyed her little force, pressed against the wall's flat surface waiting for her command to move forward. Near the back of the line, Heydar's bulk was distinctive even in the shadows, and she hoped he behaved himself until they could get outside, and she could put her plan into motion.

He was the wildcard, of course. Even Xena had no idea what the big Persian was going to end up doing. "Ready?" She glanced down at the first soldier in line, the shortest of them. "Stay close to me, okay?"

"Like a sock on a foot." Gabrielle assured her, licking the last bit of a last minute bowl of soup from her lips. She pulled her cloak hood up and followed the queen as Xena went to the door and pressed both hands against it, leaning forward and cocking her head in a listening pose.

There were sounds all around them, of course. The men, the city, animals.. but she had no doubt that Xena would hear what she needed to hear in order to keep them all safe. She watched the queen's back, tense under it's covering of wool, then she drew in a breath as Xena straightened up and worked the bar holding the door closed.

She clenched her hand on her spear, taking a step back as Xena slid the bar back and opened the door, the queen's body braced against the iron bound wood as she carefully peered outside, her body barely outlined in the shadows.

Her heart was pounding. She felt a dryness in her throat and she licked her lips again, as Xena slowly backed up and opened the door all of the way.

"All right. Let's go." The low rasp reached her. Gabrielle moved forward, following Xena as she slipped out the door and into the night air beyond. She had a funny sensation as she cleared the doorway – ostensibly going from safety into danger – yet she knew she felt relieved as the dark, cold sky filled her eyes and the smell of churned earth and grass her lungs.

Her only regret was the thought of leaving Patches behind, tucked into his warm stall next to Tiger. She pushed that thought aside and kept in Xena's footsteps as the queen moved down the wall, keeping in it's shadow as she headed away from the gates, towards the edge of the forest in the distance.

The men filed out behind them, and she heard the rasp, then a thunk as the door was closed and they were locked outside. "Hey Xena?" She whispered.

"Mm?" The queen paused, waiting for everyone to catch up.

"This would be a good time for someone to do bad stuff in there, huh?"

"Yeah." Xena agreed. "That's why you're with me. You matter." She patted her companion's shoulder, then she studied the waving grasses they faced. It was dark, the moon had set and left everything in

the barest of shadows. She could see the front lines of Sholeh's forces, and hear the flutter of torches just past arrow's range from the wall.

With them were two score soldiers, plus the Persian. She watched him from the corner of her eye, but he was standing quietly with two of her men bracketing him, showing no signs of making trouble. Was he waiting for the right time? Or waiting to see what she was going to do?

Xena chuckled under her breath. Let him wait. She studied the land before them a few moments more, then she motioned the men to follow her, and she started off down the wall, her eyes intent on the ground ahead of her.

Hard to tell which way the Persians had come. She could ask Heydar, but her pride kept her from doing that and she had no way to tell if he was telling the truth anyway unless she half killed him again. That got old after a while.

So she went along the wall out of instinct, reasoning the door was closer to the treeline on this side, and Sholeh would have sent her men down the treeline and up the wall's shadow the same as she'd done herself just a few days earlier.

It felt good to be outside. The wool surcoat was a little itchy against her skin, but she felt her body loosening up as she walked, and she focused her eyes on the ground, sweeping the faint silver shadows before her.

She knew the men would follow her without question. She knew without question everyone's ass was riding on her shoulders.

Every step was moving further into uncertainty. What if Sholeh had come the other way, and was expecting the men back near the river? Wouldn't that have made more sense, using the sound of the water to cover their tracks?

Why hadn't she thought of that? "Because I'm an idiot."

"Did you say something?" Gabrielle whispered, tugging on the back of her cloak.

"Just sneezed." The queen muttered back. "Keep your eyes open for people trying to kill us."

"Okay, but I can't see anything except your butt."

Xena almost pulled up short, remembering just in time there were men with sharp, pointy weapons behind them who couldn't see squat either. "Shh."

"It's cute."

"SHH." The queen repeated, turning her attention back to the ground with fierce intent. Now she was almost sure she was going the wrong way, sure that by heading in this direction, she'd screwed up, but knowing turning around like a nitwit wasn't really an..

Ah. "Tsst." Xena hissed a warning as she slowed, and then knelt, her fingers spreading the grass carefully. Her eyes had picked up the barest glint, and now she carefully nudged the tiny shard free of the dirt with her gloved finger, and picked it up.

She knew the shape without looking further, but it was common enough, and meant little. Or did it?

"What is it?" Gabrielle knelt next to her, peering through the darkness unable to see much but the outline of the queen's hand.

“Arrowtip.” Xena answered, raising it up and sniffing at it cautiously. “Theirs.” She stood and put the broken bit of metal into her belt pouch. “Stay here.” She strode down the line until she reached Heydar, standing quietly against the wall with his thumbs in his belt. “Why poison?” She asked. “Afraid six times the number wasn’t gonna get you in?”

She held up the arrowhead, her brows lifting.

The big Persian gazed at her. “It’s the way of it.” He said, with a half shrug. “Why leave to chance? This only takes a graze and they’ve got some not so much a soldier there.” He tilted his head to look at the bit in her hand, his eyes as sharp apparently as her own were. “Hit against the wall and broke off – I remember it. I almost throttled the one it belonged to, figured it would bring hot oil down on us.”

Ah. Her shot in the dark hadn’t come around to hit her in the ass after all. Xena folded her arms. “You see no value in a fair fight?” She asked, after a pause.

“No.” He answered honestly.

“Mm.” Xena turned and walked back down the line. “Me either.”

**

Xena parted the grass with her hands, once again flat on her belly on the ground. She lifted herself up a bit, watching the line of men moving quietly through the forest of tents just ahead of her. Given the lateness of the hour, the amount of activity made her nape prickle.

Definitely not settling down for the night. She studied the small curls of smoke rising skyward, and her nose twitched at the scent of horses nearby.

Okay.

So now she was here. Xena peered through the long grass, searching out an edge she could knock the point off of, finally spotting a small group of men around a firepit to one side by the rear. Marking her target, she then lowered herself down and half turned like a snake chasing it’s tail, leaning on her elbow as she looked back down the line of her men.

Gabrielle poked her head out from the grass, a smudge of mud half obscuring her features.

Men and muskrat. Xena caught Brendan’s attention and motioned him forward. She waited until her captain had crawled up next to her before she lowered her head and whispered. “Get the damn Persian up here.”

Brendan frowned. “Don’t like that cat back there, Xena. He’s trouble.”

“So am I.” Xena replied. “Just get him up here.”

Still frowning, Brendan turned and slithered back down the line, using a sinuous, side to side motion that barely rippled the grass.

Gabrielle peeked past Xena’s body. “Oh! We’re really close!” She uttered softly.

“Mmhm.” The queen rested her head on her fist. “Keep an eye out for someone spotting us willya?”

The blond woman’s eyes widened a little and she blinked, staring hard across the top of the grass at the enemy army which now seemed unbelievably large, spread out as far as the eye could see in the dim starlight.

Xena was glad enough to get a minute to rest, since she'd been setting the pace for the last two candlemarks. They'd made their way to the edge of the grasslands, and then it had been a slow crawl from there amidst muffled curses and Gabrielle's occasional sneeze.

"What are we going to do?" Gabrielle whispered, crawling up next to Xena and pressing against her legs.

"Have sex." The queen replied, watching her lover's eyeballs wiggle as she fought to keep her attention on the enemy and not look at her. "Just kidding. We're going to go attack the Persians."

"Just us?"

"Just us."

"Ah oh."

Heydar arrived, a little ahead of Brendan. The tall Persian stopped shy of where Xena was, his eyes flicking briefly to Gabrielle before he folded his hands together and waited for the queen to speak.

"Go." Xena said, with little preamble.

Heydar studied her. "Where?"

The queen looked like she wanted to poke him in the eye, but she kept her hands where they were. "Get up, and go back to your mistress. G"wan."

The Persian frowned, and pursed his lips. "You make little sense, Xena. I am no friend – why allow me to go? Would I not just reveal your location to my cohorts?"

"I said I'd send you back." Xena said. "I don't need to keep watch over you, and I don't need you killing my men from behind. By the time you get in there we won't be around."

Heydar studied her intently.

"You should go." Gabrielle suggested suddenly. "She doesn't ask twice."

The queen bestowed a charming smile on her. "That's my girl." She praised Gabrielle, then turned back to the Persian. "You heard her. Take off." She said. "Before I change my mind."

It seemed crazy, all of them sitting there, whispering in the darkness with an entire army standing just bodylengths away from them, but Gabrielle was glad to be given the moment to relax and she hoped the Persian would take his time deciding to take off.

She watched his face as he watched Xena. His dark complexion was almost indiscipherable in the starlight, but she could hear him breathing, and almost feel the tension in his body, he was so close to her.

What would he do? Did Xena know? Did he know what Xena was going to do? Gabrielle watched his eyes. He wanted to know.

He wanted to know.

He wanted Xena. Gabrielle felt her skin prickle, and as she took in a breath, she felt Xena's shoulder press against hers, casually deliberate as if the queen could read what she was thinking.

"What are your plans, then?" Heydar asked.

"Are you stupid, or do you think I am?" Xena asked. "G'wan. You'll find out what my plans are. Eventually." She drew her dagger and fingered it. "Get lost, or I'm going to start carving pieces off ya."

His body tensed, and for a second Gabrielle was sure he was going to attack Xena. She reached out and grabbed hold of her spear, pulling it under her and bracing it so that the pointy end was headed somewhere moderately useful.

He hesitated and glanced her way, his eyes dropping to the point of the spear. His eyebrow lifted and he turned his head fully to look at her. After a moment, his eyes dropped, and he pushed himself up onto his knees. "As your will says." He said. "But beware, Xena. Fates winds mean other things for us."

Xena merely stared evenly at him, until he finally got to his feet and with a final glance back at the small force, he slunk off through the grass, his big body moving with a lithe grace that surprised everyone watching him except the queen.

"We go?" Brendan exhaled. "Fore that bastard brings the rest of em down on us?"

"We'll go." Xena turned and prepared to lead them off again. "But he won't come after us." She flexed her hands and resheathed her dagger. "To the left. That small group there. Let's take em." She waited for Brendan to get ready, then she looked over at Gabrielle with her spear. "Hey."

"Creep." Gabrielle scowled.

"I love you." Xena said, in a mild voice that carried. "C'mon, let's go kill people." She turned and began to wind her way through the grass, moving rapidly in a line even with the edge of the army's encampment. Moving steadily, she cocked her ears towards the troops and hoped she hadn't lost her mind as most of the people behind her surely thought she had.

No time for worrying about it. Xena paused as she came to a shadow in the grass, and then she eased forward slowly, straining her eyes to detect the details of it in the low light. It was vaguely man sized, but rounded, and as she came closer the wind drifted a bit and brought her the musky, intense smell of animal.

Animal? "Psh." Xena held her hand up, and then went on alone. The grass was very thick around the obstruction, and she got her knees under her to free her hands as she gently moved the last layer aside and got a good look at it.

A bristly, tusked face looked back at her and they both froze as Xena screamed a few virulent curses strictly inside her own head. Then she recovered, and whipped her knife out, uncoiling from where she was to lunge at the boar, spreading her arms out as wide as they could go.

Fifty fifty chance. The boar, a huge, grizzled animal, reacted and scrambled to it's feet, opening it's tusked mouth and then turning and bolting away from this bizarre creature attacking it.

Xena landed with a thump in the spot it had recently been in, the stink of it's hide rising around her. She went still, hearing the trash and the chaos as the animal charged through the grass and in a moment, as she'd expected, she heard the sounds of yelling.

With a faint smile, she turned and motioned her men forward, heading diagonally away from the direction the boar had run. She could see the sudden dancing of torches and risked a peek above the grass to see a group of soldiers racing after the animal.

Sometimes, the Fates did really kiss her ass. Xena headed for a small patch of bushes just to one side of where the fire was, hoping she hadn't jinxed herself and they weren't using the bushes as a convenient midden.

“Wow.” Gabrielle mouthed softly. “That was amazing!”

Xena heard her, and smirked. But she kept her senses sharp, unwilling to believe a single boar would distract the Persians completely. So she was patient, crawling through the grass until she was just behind the thick patch of thorns, one of the few, isolated patches of cover in the long, flat plain.

Slowly, she straightened up, grateful if nothing else for the chance to stretch her back out after all the damn creeping and crawling.

Through the leaves, she could see movement, and she leaned forward, putting her hands on her thighs as she peered through the branches at the army.

They had come a long, long way, she realized. They were halfway around the side of the troops and she could see the back end of the army if she stretched her neck out and squinted. There were lines and lines of siege engines in front of her, strings of horses, and endless wagons that spoke volumes of how prepared, and how massive this army really was.

She refused to look behind her at her handful of men. What was the point? She was here to make history. “Okay.” She returned her attention to the small group of men nearest her. They were all busy working at something in the light of the fire, and this close, she could smell something pungent and acrid coming from it. “Here’s the plan.”

Brendan was at her side, and Gabrielle squirmed over to the other side of where she was kneeling, peering through the bushes with wide eyes. “Lot of em.” The old captain commented.

“We’ll just kill them all one at a time.” The queen told him. “It’ll just take longer than it used to.” She pointed at the group of men. “We’re going there, along that ground line there. Get as close as we can before they see us, then you, Brendan, take three other men and just act like you’re the bunch returning from the city.”

“Aye.” Brendan nodded.

“Tell them you didn’t make it in.” Xena said. “Gabrielle and I will stay behind you. Once we’re up next to them, attack.”

“Surely.” The captain looked happy. “Fine time for it. Good night, clear weather. Good for fightin.”

“What do you want me to do?” Gabrielle asked.

“Stay alive.” Xena told her briefly. “After we take them out, we’ll see where we go next.” She shrugged her cloak into place, and slid her hood up over her head. “Everyone ready?”

Soft murmurs answered her.

“All right. Let’s move.” Xena stepped around the edge of the bushes and walked along the ridge line, her body blending in with the ground cover and the shadows, a line of equally dim figures right behind her.

**

Gabrielle could hardly believe the daring of what they were doing. She was just behind Xena as they walked casually into the army camp, in the center of the rest of the soldiers.

They were noticed. Brendan raised his hand casually and greeted the nearest of the men, and after a heartstopping second, the man returned the greeting and went back to what he was doing.

“Back then are ya?” Another soldier asked, looking up from pounding a dagger straight on a small anvil. “Any luck?”

“Nah.” Brendan shook his head. “Door’s locked. Somethin went wrong.”

“Figures.” The man went back to his pounding, only glancing up briefly when a tall shadow fell on him. “Needing something?”

Xena cut his throat in an instant and caught his body as it slumped without so much as a gasp. She grabbed him by the belt and collar and quickly tossed him down the small rise they’d come along, hiding the body as she dusted her hands off and picked up the hammer, having caught the dagger he’d been working on as he fell.

By the time the nearest enemy looked up the ring of the anvil was sounding again, and he looked away, bending close over his task.

Gabrielle had no idea what to do, so she went over to where Xena was beating on the dagger. After a pause, the queen whistled softly under her breath, and the rest of the men moved on, spreading out in an easy, casual manner.

Xena put the dagger to one side. “Gimme the spear.” She muttered, in a low tone.

Gabrielle handed it over at once, half turning her back to the army and leaning against the framework the anvil was resting on. She watched Xena turn the spear at an angle, and then the hammering began again, the edge of the heavy tool striking the metal of the spear and straightening it.

Xena’s face, only barely seen in the dim firelight, was calm, and after a few strikes, Gabrielle turned slowly and looked across the open space, no longer able to distinguish their men from the Persians.

Then she spotted Brendan, rubbing his gauntleted hands together as he joined the men around the firepit, talking in a low voice, but attracting the soldier’s interest as they turned from their tasks and focused on him, not really aware of the shadows wandering around behind them.

Gabrielle could see their faces, the Persian soldiers. They weren’t much different from Xena’s men, these ones weren’t. She saw their smiles, and then heard laughter at whatever Brendan was telling them as he focused them on him.

On him. Not the men behind them, who casually came up as if to hear what he was saying too, except they had blades in their hands and the Persian’s cloaks were pulled around their throats as they were gutted. Xena’s men laughed louder, and slapped their victims on the back as they died.

“Nice.” Xena complimented the action, watching the almost random motion as her soldiers laid their enemies down, rolling them inside their cloaks and tucking them up against the berm as though they were sleeping.

Gabrielle swallowed against a suddenly dry throat, despite everything she’d been through.

Xena’s men casually gathered back around the table the others had been working on, and the queen continued hammering until she’d straightened the spear out to her satisfaction. Then she handed it to Gabrielle and set the tool down, dusting her hands off as she casually headed over to where the troops were standing.

Gabrielle followed her, hand clenched around her spear, as she tugged her hood up a little more. She could feel the danger all around them, and she could hardly breathe, knowing at any moment, one look, one word, one realization would strip them bare of their cover.

They'd die, probably. She firmly believed there was no better fighter in the world than her lover, but as Xena had once said, she was just one person, and there were many, many, many soldiers here. She shifted her grip on her weapon and thought, for just a minute, about what it would be like if she had to use it.

The soldiers looked up casually as Xena joined them, their eyes hooded as they gathered around the worktable, fingering the items on top of it. "Look here." Brendan uttered. "Strange."

Xena focused her attention on the table, but shifted her senses to the encampment around them. From the corner of her eye she could see another small group of men, set aside by themselves in the same livery that Heydar had worn.

They weren't working, rather, they sat on crates around their small fire, drinking from folding camp mugs, paying little attention to those around them. As Xena watched, though, a few of them looked over to where her group was standing.

Interest. Xena's heart skipped a beat, then she let out a breath when that wasn't followed up as suspicion. She knew they'd be discovered but she wanted to get a run in before, and....

"Eh." Brendan actually bumped her on the elbow. "Look at this."

Xena refocused again, gazing down at the worktable. Piled on it were stones, and stacks and stacks of rough cut hide. The acrid smell was coming from the hide, and she picked up a piece with her gloved hand, sniffing cautiously at it.

"There's writing." Gabrielle uttered softly, keeping her voice pitched as low as she could. "What are these?"

Xena put the hide down. "Don't touch this, any of you, without gloves." She ordered. "It's tree frog poison. It'll make you sick as a dog if you touch it."

Gabrielle pulled her hand back and put it behind her. "Ugh."

"Mm." Xena picked up a finished bundle from the pile the men had been working on. The stones had been wrapped in the hide, and tied shut. Nearby, she could see a wagon, and in the wagon were sacks. "What the Hades is it with that bitch? Can't she just fight like a man?"

Gabrielle looked up at her. "What's this for?" She asked, peering at the scraps again, but not touching them. "It says surrender terms... what does that mean? Are they going to throw them?" She asked. "At us? Do they really think we'll surrender?"

Xena picked up a stone and juggled it. "No." She said. "But they know those people in there, in the city'll pick these up and read them. They know they helped us." She said. "I guess they didn't like that."

She thought about all the people who had already suffered at the hands of Sholeh, and about how it would be if hundreds of them, maybe more, fell sick.

Died. After reading a warning to surrender. "Tch tch thc." Xena clucked softly. "Gabrielle, I've been out bitched. Damn it."

"Huh?"

"Keep working." The queen ordered softly. "Wrap the stones with this stuff, and keep putting them in the sacks. Give me a few minutes to figure out who to kill next."

The men started in, gingerly picking up the hide and wrapping the stones inside it.

Xena shifted her body and slowly turned her head, her eyes scanning the darkness and shadows around them. She caught motion from one side and followed it, the huge shadow of a siege engine moving slowly along the line of the troops, heading for the front lines.

“You there.” A loud, male voice nearly made her jump. Instinctively, her body shifted and she only just kept herself from reaching for the sword tucked into its sheath along her back and blowing everything right then and there.

“Aye?” Brendan answered quickly for her. “What d’ye want?” He turned, and two other men turned with him, sliding over to block the man’s view of their queen.

“What do I want?” The Persian captain, a regular, got to the edge of the group and put his hands on his hips. “I want real soldiers instead of you mangy pigs, that’s what I want, but I’ll take this lot of sacks in the wagon faster than you’re putting them or you’ll get your hands cut off.”

“Nice.” Xena muttered, under her breath. She had her face half turned from him and her head a little down, trying not to be tense, or make Gabrielle tense. Her lover had knelt to pick up a bunch of the stones, and she remained crouching there, one hand resting on Xena’s boot.

“Sorry, m’lord.” Brendan answered meekly. “We’ll be faster. You want the wagon somewhere as we’re done?”

“Take it to the front lines. We’re almost ready to pitch the damn things and good riddance.” The Persian seemed mollified by his attitude. He raked the group with his eyes, then he snorted and turned to leave. His foot caught on something and he almost tripped, sending him hopping a step with a curse. “What!”

No one was stupid enough to laugh. “Clean up your damn place here!” He yelled at them. “Bad enough you smell like pigs!”

He turned and kicked what he’d almost fallen over, then stomped off, tossing his cape behind him. “Get your asses up and eat now!” He ordered as he walked through the camp. “It’ll be the last you see of anything until we’re at the sea.”

Xena slowly relaxed her hands, her eyes going to the dead man’s leg the soldier had kicked, now visible from under its cloak covering. “All right you heard him.” She said. “Let’s get that wagon loaded up, boys.”

“Are we going to help them?” Gabrielle whispered, tugging her legging.

The queen slowly looked down at her, pale eyes glinting in the firelight. “No.” She grabbed hold of Gabrielle’s shoulder and tugged her upward. “Just go with the flow, muskrat. One thing I learned in this long, hoary old life of mine was that if you’ve got nothing but dust and an empty mug..”

Gabrielle got up and put the stones down. “Make the best of what you do have?”

“No.” Xena wrapped a stone in one of the scraps. “Steal someone else’s stuff and use that.” She tossed her bundle into the center of the table and reached for another one. “Hurry up.” She ordered. “We’ve got a delivery to make.”

**

The one positive about the whole situation was there was a horse in it. Gabrielle waited at the animal’s head, stroking him as the last of the sacks were loaded aboard and the soldiers got ready to move out.

The bustle in the camp had increased, and she kept very close to the horse, hiding her small stature next to his bulk as she tried to stay out of the way.

Brendan came up to join her. "Little one, her Maj says to go into the wagon bed and hide yourself." He whispered. "Safer for you there, eh?"

"I can't." Gabrielle whispered back. "I'll throw up." She admitted, as Xena's tall figure approached where she and Brendan were standing. "The smell of that stuff is making me sick."

"Figures." Xena arrived, putting a hand on the horses's bridle and hearing her lover's last words. "That's all right. I've thought of something I want you to do while we go." She motioned to the soldier behind her. "Put those up on his back, poor bastard." She held the horse still as the last sacks were loaded on him and he shifted, snorting at the scent.

"Ready, Mistress." Brendan murmured.

"Stay around the horse." The queen said. "If someone spots me or her we're dead before we can do anything."

"Aye."

Xena started forward, leading the horse, motioning Gabrielle to fall in behind her as the route took them between the encampments and towards the front of the lines past the real Persian soldiers.

"You.. uh want me to tell a story?" Gabrielle whispered uncertainly. "Was that the thing?"

"No." Xena half turned her head. "You're gonna lose your blood innocence the hard way. Got your gloves on?"

"Uh.."

"Suck it up."

"Okay."

**

Part 26

Gabrielle felt her heartbeat getting faster every step they moved closer to the Persians, closing in on the first little encampment with their wagon load of nasty. She kept close by the horses side, just behind Xena's tall form and tried not to think about what Xena had just said to her.

There was no time anyhow. Xena put a hand on her shoulder, and Gabrielle took a deep breath before she looked up at her lover. "Yes?"

"When we stop, we'll distract everyone." Xena said, in a soft, yet inflexible tone. "You take one of those bundles, and you drop it in the pot. Got me? Then you get back here."

Gabrielle took another breath. "Will it hurt them?"

"Yes."

Gabrielle chewed the inside of her lip, knowing she was being given a choice, but that she actually had no option in this. Why her? She was the smallest, and the most likely to get to the pot and back without being caught, obviously. "Okay." She said, after a hesitation. "I'll do it."

The queen bumped her lightly, then she put her head down a little and patted the horse on the neck, as her men started talking louder, approaching the first group of soldiers.

Gabrielle tried not to look at them. She heard Brendan's casual hail, and from the corner of her awareness saw the group of men begin to trail towards the wagon, greeting Xena's men as though they were brother soldiers.

Which they were, in a sense, she guessed.

"Get ready." Xena's whisper reached her.

Gabrielle moved back a little, tugging open the neck of the sack on the near side, and removing one of the bundles tucked inside. She held it in her gloved hand, the weight of the rock suddenly seeming huge as Xena steered the wagon closer to the cookfire the men had been standing around.

"Yah, we've got the goods here." Brendan said, indicating the wagon behind him. "Heading for the front, yeah?"

"Think'll work?" The Persians soldiers eased around the other side of the wagon from where Xena was standing patiently holding the horses bridle. One brought a torch around and it cast their camp into gloom, as though obeying the queen's unspoken will.

"T'gods know." Brendan shrugged. "Nasty stuff though."

Xena waited until the last of the soldiers came over to examine the bags before she gave Gabrielle a little shove. "Go on." She uttered softly. "Just do it."

The blond woman hesitated, then she stepped away from the shelter of the wagon and crossed the small space between it and the cookpot, sitting lonely and untended.

"Yeah? Thought they were nuts looking them frogs up. Crazy." The Persians said, one of them standing up on his tip toes to look inside the wagon. "Plenty of em in there."

"Yeap."

Gabrielle glanced around, but no one was paying any attention to her save a single pair of pale eyes, and she reached the pot without incident. All she had to do now was drop it in, and go back to where Xena was, a simple enough matter.

Simple enough. She could even really tell herself that she didn't know if it would really hurt the men, or if they would even have time to eat any. It could end up completely harmless.

Maybe some of them didn't even like soup. She thought about the soup she'd eaten just before they'd left the city and tasted almost a copper tang on the back of her tongue. What would it feel like to be poisoned?

Would it hurt?

She lifted her hand and extended it to the pot, the stone thick and heavy against her palm as she went to turn her hand over and release it.

The hide it was wrapped in was well soaked in the poison, she could see it in the faint light, and smell it, and for a second, she imagined the men eating it falling to the ground.

They were the enemy. She forced herself to think of them that way, since there were so many of them, and Xena was counting on her. They had such a scant chance, anyway, and probably they would be caught and then it wouldn't really matter anyway, would it?

Would she go to Tartarus if she did it?

Would that mean she'd end up with Xena?

She turned her hand over and felt the steam from the soup warm her wrist through the leather of her glove, the bland scent from the thick liquid bathing her face. With a deep breath, she readied herself to take that step across the line, and leave behind a big slice of who she'd thought she was.

So. Like Xena said, just do it.

And she couldn't release it. She took her hand back and backed up quickly, ending up thumping against Xena's hip as the men laughed about something Brendan was saying, her heart sinking deep to her boots as she steeled herself to look up at her lover's face.

Her wrist was grabbed, and she felt the weight of the stone vanish, then she sensed a quicksilver motion of Xena's body and heard, as though an echo, something moving through the air and then the splout as it landed in the pot.

"All right, we've got to move on." Brendan responded to Xena's very soft whistle. "Get er moving, yah?"

The wagon started to move, and Gabrielle had little choice but to move with it, her hand tangled in the traces as she followed Xena's silent form past the men, who, still chuckling, were heading back to their momentarily abandoned dinner.

"Sorry." She whispered, after a moment.

"Me too." Xena said, in a mild voice.

"I just couldn't do it."

The queen sighed. "Yeah.." She said. "Haven't found your tipping point yet."

"What?"

"Ya thought about it too damn long."

Gabrielle had to admit that was probably true. "They're just people too." She explained. "They're not that different from our guys, heck, some of them are our guys now and I just..."

"Who'll be trying to kill us pretty soon." The queen said. "Who were bundling up the stuff in this wagon to kill everyone inside the walls. Does that count?"

Was that a good enough reason to kill them first? Gabrielle felt nauseously conflicted, fighting against her own heart as her instincts warred with her desire to please her lover. "Xena.."

"Never mind." Xena glanced over the back of the horse, to find the seasoned Persians watching them from down the line. She could see their profiles, and the interest they were drawing was making her guts tickle. Not a good feeling.

Almost as bad a feeling as she'd gotten from what Gabrielle had just not done.

"I'm sorry."

"Shut up." Xena told her. "It's probably better this way. Let's just hope my aim's gotten better over the years or I'm going to blow this little party sky high."

They kept walking, moving towards the next group of men, all of them working on armor amidst a forest of spears and several more crude anvils. Some of the men were singing a rude song, and by

their own cook pit, a long, shallow pan had something roasting in it that was letting off a surprisingly appetizing smell.

“Find me a small one.” Xena uttered, as she started to slow the wagon down. “Not much room in there.”

Gabrielle nodded, reaching into the sack and feeling around as she walked, feeling a mixture of guilt and relief at her altered role. She had only sorted through a few of the bundles when a loud noise made her pause and peeked past Xena’s arm.

“Damn.” The queen cursed, grabbing the horses bridle and pulling steadily on it. “Whoa, ya’bastard.” Her boots slipped in the churned earth as a bunch of the Persian soldiers poured out of their little camp in some excitement. “What in Hades..”

“Take that you pigface!” A man yelled. “Call me a girl, will ya?”

The second man picked up a pike and swung at him just as Xena came even with them, and before the queen was really ready for it the argument escalated and there were men swinging everywhere..

“Cut that out!” One of the seasoned Persians yelled over from their camp. “Can’t you idiots keep your heads on right for more than a candle?”

“Stupid bastard! That’s my hammer!!!” One of the men picked up a stack of spears and swung at the other. Two of his fellow soldiers grabbed him by the arms, and twisted, and then four of them ended up crashing into Xena’s men.

“Hey!” Brendan called out .”Watch yerselves!”

“Watch yourself, old man!” The first soldier swung his pike at Brendan. “I’m taired of all you stuck up snoot balls!!!” He missed Brendan and smacked his weapon into the horses shoulder instead, luckily on the blunt side. “Yahhh!”

The horse took exception. He snorted and backed up, then he reared, almost taking Xena with him as his head went up and he dragged the queen off her feet as she fought to control him.

Gabrielle darted backwards out of the way, her jaws clamping down tight on a reflexive yell of her lover’s name. She grabbed hold of the yoke and it was yanked out of her hands, sending her stumbling to one side and into a stack of boxes.

“I said cut that out!” The captain who’d yelled at Xena’s men before stood up off his barrel near the fire and stared coming towards them.

Xena grabbed at the horses bridle and hauled his head around, getting her lips up near his ear. “Stop it.” She growled softly. “Or you’ll be shoes.”

The horse snorted, but merely backed up a step again, as the fighting men swirled past him and into the pathway, blocking the way. Xena got a better grip on the leather, then she turned her head quickly, looking for her little lost muskrat.

Seeing no sign of Gabrielle, she let out a short whistle.

“I said – STOP THAT!” The Persian captain arrived and grabbed one of the fighters, drawing his sword and slamming the hilt down on his head, sending bone chips and bits of skin everywhere.

Xena released the horse and headed for the pile of boxes, spotting a boot on the ground. She heard a yell behind her, and turning, she grabbed up a bit of stone from the earth and whipped it back over her shoulder at the horse, smacking him in the rear with it.

The animal reacted explosively, bolting forward and smashing into the fighting soldiers, and the Persian captain, and her own men.

Xena ignored it all, reaching the stack of boxes and grabbing the first one, lifting it and tossing it to one side. She saw a hand reaching up and she took hold of it, kicking a second crate aside painfully as she yanked Gabrielle out from under a pile of metal scrap armor and leather straps.

“Ow.” Gabrielle yelped softly, grabbing her arm as she shook of the tangle of items. “What th..” She stopped as Xena suddenly went very still, the queen’s hand going past her to pick up the draping of old leather to stare at it. “Uh.. “

The chaos was growing behind them. Xena broke out of her stunned shock and stuffed the bit of leather under her belt as she whirled and headed back for the wagon, dragging Gabrielle behind her.

“M’okay, thanks.” Gabrielle muttered, trying to pull herself together as they got back to the center of things just in time for the Persian captain to behead one of his own soldiers, sending spray of hot, rich blood over everything.

It got in her eyes. It smelled like Hades. The horse started bucking again, and the next thing she knew she was being picked up by the belt and hauled through the air in powerful, violent surge, rising out of the stench of blood and feeling hide and leather slam against her hands.

She wondered if it was about to all be a very brief, though probably exciting and painful moot point.

**

Xena pressed her back against the siege engine, pushing her hood back just enough to allow her a full range of vision for the first time since she’d entered the camp. Next to her, Brendan thumped to a halt, breathing hard.

Around them, the army was in motion. Captains were starting to call their men into formation and as she faced the eastern sky, she could see the first, faintest hint of gray tinging the horizon.

She’d been right, after all. Sholeh had waited, not that it was doing her a damn bit of good right now. She put her back against the wooden surface again and tried to ignore the feeling that the whole damn thing was starting to get away from her now.

The machine she was against was tall and massive, a roughly hewn basket almost the size of the cart itself attached to one end of a long arm, counterbalanced by a weight and now winched down into position to fire.

Huge. She’d used them, now and again, but dragging the things around slowed the army down and she’d grown to dislike them, preferring a fast, unruly cavalry and the best ground fighters she could train in place of fancy machines and the drudgery of a long war.

Lack of patience? Maybe. Xena knew she liked getting what she wanted, and getting it now and laying siege out in a field with bugs chewing her ass had never appealed to her.

Never.

Now she turned and looked at the big device, studying the well made structure, considering it’s usefulness, and decided it still didn’t appeal to her. It was still too big, too slow, and still a pain in the ass to work and aside from the road that bisected the grasslands, it wouldn’t be easy to maneuver save pointed right at the gates.

Well, that's where they wanted to hit anyhow. "Damn." Xena sighed, cursing the luck of her life. Then she regarded the wagon, nibbling the inside of her lip.

And yet, they'd made it here through the center of the Persian army, right between columns of soldiers just like she'd planned they would. Was her luck turning?

"Hades." The old captain coughed. "How'd we get through that I dunno."

"Don't ask." Xena took the chance to catch her breath, watching a troop of regular Persians start to approach as they saw the wagon roll up to the launcher. "Toldja not to ask. Ya cursed us. Here come those damn bruisers."

The men were talking to each other, and pointing at the wagon, one miming putting on gauntlets. The rest started doing just that, evidently intent on helping what they thought were their comrades load up the launcher – looking well rested and perky.

Xena cursed softly under her breath.

They hadn't hit nearly enough of the cookpots. Most of the army was down in little hillocks, and she'd only been able to poison a handful of them.

Damn it.

Gabrielle scuttled underneath the horses belly and came over to where Xena was standing, breathing a little hard. "Xena."

"Sh." The queen was watching the approaching Persians, who were talking casually and getting closer with every step, the one in the lead already looking up and searching their little group for someone in charge.

"Xena." Gabrielle tugged her cloak. "Look over there."

"I told you..." Xena glanced over the smaller woman's shoulder, past the wagon, and her eyes widened. "Ah." She spotted a large group of soldiers heading towards them, from the opposite side most of them mounted.

From yet another direction, the big Persians who'd yelled at them were approaching, and her men hastily formed around her, their faces nervous in the torchlight as they realized they were rapidly becoming the very center of some unwelcome attention.

"Now what are we going to do?" Gabrielle whispered. "We're in the middle of them!"

Xena's nostrils twitched. "All right. We're going to.."

She paused, and considered. What in the Hades **was** she going to do? What in Hades had she been doing the last two candlemarks? Her peripheral vision caught the motion of the army closing in on them. So they made it here.

For what? What's next, Xena? You're in the middle of an enemy army with a wagon of crap, ten men and a muskrat. What were ya gonna do once you stopped being a clever jackass and ended up here?

Puke on the Persians? Strip naked and dance? Did you even have a plan, other than just to keep moving and figure out what happens next when your ass was on fire?

Damn.

Now, with her back to the launcher and surrounded by the enemy she questioned again her fitness for leading these men.

Brendan sidled over. "Got em where we want em, eh?"

"Yeah." His queen exhaled and glanced around, seeing all eyes on her, everyone waiting for her to make it all right. A freshening breeze cooled her face, bringing a hint of the sea and Xena felt a sense of impending pain and embarrassment that made her seriously dread the dawn.

Damn. She just didn't have time to be incompetent. "Grab the torch." She told the nearest man. "When I tell you, toss it in the wagon. Then get ready to fight like hell."

No time to find another leader, either. Xena tightened her belt and shucked her cloak back over her shoulder to expose her sword hilt. Her eyes tracked to the oncoming Persians and the two men in the lead separated a little, exposing the shorter, more ornate figure behind them.

Ah.

"Xena, that's..."

"A frilly sock worth of attitude two toes short of a foot, yeah." The queen murmured. "My favorite person."

"Ugh. Now what?"

Xena paused a moment,, then she turned and looked at Gabrielle. Her former slave, current lover, and newly wedded partner was scuffed up and bruised, but even through all that, looking at Xena, there was nothing there but a slightly anxious love in her eyes. "Gabrielle."

The blond woman didn't answer for a long moment. Then – "Yes?"

Xena gently put one hand on her cheek. "I'm going to go do something really stupid." She said. "But it's also something I've cornered myself into doing." She added. "And I think it's crazy enough to maybe be the right thing to do."

A wrinkle of deep worry creased the middle of Gabrielle's forehead.

"Maybe the only thing to do, other than just croak."

"Oh."

Xena felt a sense of calm settle over her. "I think you'll be proud of me." She leaned over and kissed Gabrielle on the lips. "I hope you will."

She released Gabrielle's jaw and readied herself, walking forward towards where the wagon blocked the view of the oncoming Sholeh. She was halfway there, when she felt a presence at her heels, and she glanced aside to see Gabrielle catching up with her. "Where ya going?"

"With you." Gabrielle answered, in a quiet tone. "I don't want to miss any details." She tightened her grip on her spear and lifted her hand, brushing her hood back to expose her pale hair.

Xena slowed, but kept walking. "If you go with me, ya won't be around to tell anyone the story about what happens." She said. "That'd be a bummer."

Gabrielle remained quiet for a long moment, then she exhaled and straightened her shoulders. "Someone else will tell the story with both of us in it." She kept her steps even with Xena's and got herself ready to do ...

Well, whatever.

"Fair enough." Xena said, just before they got to the wagon. "But don't say I didn't warn ya."

"I won't."

Xena pushed her own hood back as she ducked past the horse, taking a breath as the breeze from the sea blew against her face. She stood there briefly with her hand on the animal's neck, hidden in almost plain view from the oncoming crowd by the night.

She took her gauntlets off and wiped her hands on her cloak, then tucked the gloves into her belt and flexed her fingers, her palms already feeling the ghostly shape of her sword. She could hear Brendan and the men behind the wagon and she caught the eyes of all the Persian soldiers turning away from the launcher and towards the oncoming royalty.

They were ready to fight, that was for sure. Sholeh had her retainers around her, and they all had war banners on the top of their spears, with an air of anticipation about them.

Sholeh was dressed in armor, with her head bare and her hair shining in the torchlight held by her retainers. She was the very picture of a princess, her long cloak lined with fur and her Persian style armor glistening.

A curved sword was fastened on her saddle, near her knee, where she could draw it if she needed and Xena readily reckoned she knew how to use it. It was smaller than the rest of the soldiers and seemed to fit her.

As Xena's own fit her, having been hammered to her length and shaped to her hand all those years ago. She thought a minute about that far off city on that far off shore, when she'd sat and watched impatiently as the blade took shape before her eyes.

A handful of gold in her pocket from their first big conquest. The weapons master glancing up occasionally and smiling at her, competent in his trade, and glad to have a young woman there watching him, instead of the usual.

She remembered taking it out of its newly sewn sheath, stiff and tannin scented at the fire that night, lifting the blade and toasting the stars with it, reveling in the feel of its weight and the sharpness of its edge.

"What a little idiot I was." She sighed.

"What?"

"Never mind." Xena briskly cracked her knuckles. "C'mon." She waited for Sholeh to stop her little parade not far away, and prepare herself to harangue her troops. The men started to gather near, and she and Gabrielle snuck in at the back of them, shoulder to elbow as Xena's soldiers appeared around them, making a bubble of friendly faces and blocking them from view.

"Thought I told you all to stay back there." Xena growled.

"Too much noise from that one." Brendan indicated the Persian. "Didn't hear ya."

"Stupid bastards."

"We love ya as well, my queen." Brendan answered back, in a low, but clear voice. "An where you choose to go, then we do as well."

Xena clamped her jaw down tight and refused to breathe, as she felt tears sting her eyes with shocking unexpectedness.

"I think that's my line." Gabrielle added, in a low whisper.

"All of you just shut the Hades up." Xena got out from between her clenched teeth. "Or else."

Gabrielle leaned closer, and gave her a pat on the behind, bumping her head against Xena's elbow, and then looking up at her with a look of perfectly idiotic devotion.

Luck was on Xena's side. Sholeh picked that moment to start her speech, rising up in her stirrups and raising her hands, a dagger clenched in one of them.

The army yelled back at her.

Xena drew her sword, and after a brief moment, smiled.

**

"My subjects, attend me." Sholeh waited for all the noise to settle down, her head turning slowly to survey her troops. The men had gathered closer, a mass of dark bodies in the dim light from the coming dawn, the outline of the stars slowly fading around the tall siege engines.

"Very soon, we will be moving to take the walls before us." Sholeh said, after a brief pause. "The traitors who locked the gates against us have been dealt with. Resistance will be slight. "

Gabrielle slowly took hold of Xena's hand and gripped it, as the horses shifted a little and a rider next to Sholeh came into view. "Hey.." She whispered.

"Mm." Xena uttered a low sound in her throat, having already seen Heydar.

"Ready yourselves." Sholeh concluded, then she turned and looked at the siege engine. "Is that not ready? Load it! Fools!"

The men jerked into motion around her. Xena lifted her hand and made a signal, and the time was past for asking questions.

Behind her, Brendan took a step back and turned, throwing his torch over his shoulder and landing it in the wagon, over the heads of the other soldiers. The rest of her men started pushing and shoving, letting out yells to trigger confusion as the torch quickly caught on the oil soaked hide.

"Fire!" One of the Persians at the back yelled, with an excess of the obvious. "Get water! What happened?"

Sholeh stood in her stirrups impatiently. "Put it out! Quickly! The sun comes!" She uncoiled a whip at her waist and struck out with it at the nearest men around her. "Move!"

"Figured her for a whip, didn't you?" Xena remarked, as the crowd milled into motion in front of her, separating and clearing a path as she stood quietly in the shadows, waiting.

The Persian princess rode forward a few steps, lashing the whip to either side of her with a good deal of expertise, scattering the troops as she drove them on. "Heydar! Get these men moving!"

The armored Persian obediently rode towards the wagon, removing his sword from its sheath in a lazy motion as the soldiers scattered more quickly, splitting out in front of the princess and her entourage and pouring to either side to get out of the way.

“Stop that fire! Get the engine loaded! I want those people in there to know my wrath before I kill them!”

Xena came very, very close to bursting out laughing. Instead, she merely waited for the final line of soldiers to clear out in front of her, leaving her outlined from behind in the growing flames, facing her enemy.

“I will torture them for their actions!” Sholeh yelled. “They will..!”

“YOU WON’T.” Xena sucked in a lungful of air and yelled back, her lower, stronger voice ringing out over the ground. As the last echo rippled past, the wagon burst into furious flames, and she stepped quickly forward, resting her sword on her shoulder as she circled Sholeh, turning so the light from the fire hit her.

Shading her eyes, Sholeh hauled her horses head back around and backed him a step, as the soldiers all thumped into each other, everyone turning to see where the other voice was coming from.

Xena straightened her back and lifted her head. “You won’t, you smarmy cowardly excuse for a bastard’s stepchild.” She bellowed. “Poisoning kids cause you don’t have the guts to fight? The Hades you will!”

“You.” Sholeh rasped.

“You men RAN from the city!” Xena hollered. “The city didn’t do squat to them ya stupid nitwit! I did it!” She pointed at herself with a thumb. “I set your damn ships on fire with that coward’s upchuck you were stupid enough to carry in one them and chased their asses out the gates!”

Every soldier turned, and stared at this sudden, noisy, unexpected bit of chaos in their midst.

“You.” Sholeh repeated, in a different tone.

Xena took another step forward, lit by the fire from one side, and the first gray mist of dawn from the other. “Me.” She stopped. “So you’re not going to take out your damn embarrassment on those people.”

Gabrielle found herself frozen in place, her hand clenched around her spear her eyes glued to the tall, wind whipped figure facing off against the whole of the Persian army, whose leader was surrounded by a hundred men on horseback with at least two swords apiece.

There was no escape. Even she could see that.

It was crazy, but as she shook off the shock and listened to what Xena was saying, she knew that in this, at least, the queen had been right again.

She was proud. Proud to be here, and to be a part of Xena’s life, even in a moment like this.

Or maybe, especially in a moment like this.

“Take her.” Sholeh said, in an emotionless voice. “Tie her, and we’ll see which one of us is the fool.” She waited, then she looked around when no one moved. “Take her!” She ordered, in a louder voice.

Xena simply stood, her sword resting on her shoulder, her weight resting on one leg as she crossed the other at her ankles. “C’mon.” She scanned her immediate enemies. “Come and get me.”

The men behind Sholeh hastily dismounted, and drew their weapons, their bearded faces tense and inscrutable as they started forward, drawing their curved swords.

“You sure don’t want her getting away.” Gabrielle piped up suddenly. “Cause boy, that’ll be a story to tell, huh?”

Sholeh turned abruptly. “Heydar – kill that one.” She ordered, pointing to Gabrielle. “Shut her tongue.”

Xena’s men immediately surrounded Gabrielle and drew their swords.

Xena eased from her relaxed stance to one a bit more martial, letting her sword come down off her shoulder and twirling it a few times. “Get near her, Heydar, and I’ll cut your manhood off.” She warned. “Think about it. You might need it someday.”

“Do it for you, Majesty!” Brendan called out.

“That’s a pretty good idea too.” Gabrielle sidled out away from Xena’s men. “Cause I’d tell everyone I could get my hands on how this whole big army got beaten up by this one person.”

“Shut her UP!” Sholeh bellowed. “Or I’ll do it myself!”

The string of Persians rushed forward, as the princess threw herself off her horse.

Xena resisted the urge to run and throw herself in front of Gabrielle, hoping her squad could hold off the one pissed off princess while she concentrated on not getting her head cut off by her troops. Accordingly, she set herself and met the first of the soldiers, deciding fast was the best choice of action.

He tried to backslice her, an odd opening move. Xena ducked and let the blade go over her head as she drew her dagger and gutted him with it, lunging and slamming into him with her shoulder as he doubled over then jumping past him.

She turned and slashed out, cutting into one mans arm as she kicked out with her boot and knocked the blade of a second out of the way.

They were good. She was better, and as she drove and cut and hacked her way in a circle she realized they realized that as they took a step back and tried to regroup. “What’s the matter?” She called out. “Fraid of a girl? Ya little wimps!”

Furious, they came at her again.

Xena felt her blood pumping strongly inside her body and every breath she drew in made her feel more powerful as the excitement of battle overtook her and she let out a wild yell. She sheathed her dagger and pulled her chakram out instead, alternating backhanded swipes with it’s razor edge with battling off the swords of the Persians with her other blade.

She sensed the blow from behind before it hit, and it let her drop to a knee as she heard the whistle of a pike over her head. Instead of getting back up she put her hands down on the ground and kicked backwards with both feet, knowing she guessed right when she felt them impact a heavy body that made her body coil forward.

She let it, then she shoved backwards, arching her back with a powerful surge just as she sensed something coming fast from one side.

No problem. She flipped herself up right and dodged the moving soldier, whipping her sword around and grunting as the blade impacted his head with a heavy shock.

Her chakram went the other direction, deflecting a dagger in the hands of a man already bleeding from a gash half across his face. She kicked her first opponent right in the side of his knee, feeling the crunch as the joint collapsed all the way up her leg.

He fell, and she brought her sword around to bury its length in the second man's gut, keeping her momentum up as she yanked her blade free and let him fall past her.

A moment. A breath.

A glance through the crowd to see her men battling furiously, in a tight circle whose back was guarded by the burning wagon. Against them, a line of regular Persian soldiers who'd come over from the far end of the camp where they'd been working.

A look around her, to find six men on the ground, and a dozen more headed her way.

Xena spread her arms wide and let out another yell. "C'mon you weak bastards!" She bellowed. "I'll kill all of ya!" She pointed her sword at the silent lines of troops. "You wanted to fight? Get over here!"

Then she saw motion from the corner of her eye and she half turned, in time to see Heydar headed for her, an intent look on his face and his sword out. There was blood already on it.

Sholeh was back on her horse, at the back of a line of her men fighting Xena's men. She pointed towards Xena with her hilt and yelled something at Heydar, who lifted his blade and then she was out of time because six or seven big Persians were rushing at her.

The sun was edging into the sky. She dodged the first of the new fighters and got her back to dawn, using the pearl tint to outline her opponents and pick up on little shifts of their body as she met the first sword with her own.

These, knew how to swordfight. Xena got her other hand up onto her hilt as her opponent twisted hard and tried to disarm her. It was a scary moment, but her wrists held and she twisted savagely back in the other direction, surprising him.

She locked eyes with him for a long moment, then instinct made her turn, and dive for the ground, the earth hitting her hands and forcing them into her body, nearly making her cut her own guts open as she managed to roll over onto her shoulder and elbow her way back up onto her knees.

A spear was in the ground, buried up past its blade right where she'd been, its hilt carved with thick sigils. She lunged to her feet as Heydar grabbed the spear and yanked it back out, and then she had five of them facing her, with Heydar in the center, forming a shield wall of protection as they advanced on her in a line.

This, a tiny voice in her head said calmly. This is what legends are made of, Xena.

One very stupid person, doing one very stupid thing. Add a beautiful sunrise and you ended up being lauded by the bards from one end of the land to the other.

"Don't fight us, Xena." Heydar said, suddenly. "Don't die like this."

Xena laughed, feeling the laugh all the way down into her guts. "Can you think of a better way to die?" She countered. "The more of you I kill doing it the less of you can rape places like that and if I leave the world one asshole fewer, good for me."

"You'll die for nothing."

Xena shook her head. "I've already died for something." She told him. "You lost already, Heydar. Too many people saw one beat up old hack fighter and a handful of old goats stop you cold."

For a moment, they all just looked at her, and there was a strange bit of silence there in the growing dawn. Then Heydar shook his head, and signaled the men and the fight was on.

Xena was glad of the sun at her back. It felt warm, and the glow let her see what was coming at her in exquisite detail. She took a deep breath, called on that animal that lived deep in side her, and just let whatever was going to happen..

Happen.

**

And it happened. Xena found herself in the center of a circle of men all trying earnestly to hack her to death, no quarter given no quarter asked, her favorite kind. She set aside any thoughts of what was going on, and gave herself over to the pure science of fighting.

Vaguely, she knew there was a whole army out there closing in, but her world had narrowed to the ring of her adversaries and now that her breathing had settled, and the nervous jitters had smoothed out into powerful confidence she met the attack.

The circle was a disadvantage to them, even though they didn't realize it. None of them had space to move without crashing into the guy next to them, and they could only get so close to her without crowding each other out.

It became almost a rhythm, a sword coming at her, deflecting it, moving, turning, catching another on her hilt, moving again, turning the other way, blocking a third, kicking a fourth, ducking...

She was aware of the yelling outside the circle. Even the ringing of the enemy swords against hers couldn't block that out and always, always, one ear was cocked to catch the faintest start of a squalling of her name that could only mean one thing.

Or maybe not. Sometimes it meant she was about to get her own ass kicked. "Yahh!" Xena let out an unexpected bellow, making one of the soldiers jerk and pulling his blade out of alignment just enough for her to turn and swing her own against it and send it flying off to hit the grass.

It made an opening in the circle and she took advantage of it, jumping forward and slamming her elbow into the face of the next soldier before he could get his weapon up to block her. His head snapped backwards and she followed the motion, turning to do the same to the soldier on the other side of her.

Unfortunately, he realized what she was up to and the next thing she knew she was just barely keeping herself upright as he smacked her in the shoulder hard with his hilts, the blade coming perilously close to her head.

It knocked her offbalance, and she stumbled to one side outside the ring where she found she had a completely different problem.

Her blade came up almost by itself and knocked aside two arrows, and she grabbed a third, turning and lunging back through the scrambling crowd of adversaries and ducking behind them as two of them were spitted by their own men.

"Stop! Idiots!"

Xena wasn't about to look a gift horse in the ass. She took advantage of the moment and stabbed one of the soldiers in the side as he tried to get back around to face her.

He let out a yell and slammed his arm into her, knocking her backwards right into Heydar whose sword missed spitting her by a hair.

Xena crouched and leaped as the two men grabbed for her and catapulted over their heads, flipping in a somersault and landing behind them as she brought her sword around and blocked another soldier from cutting her head off.

More soldiers were running towards them. Xena ducked under a mace and dodged a dagger, seeing the wall of men heading her way and wondering if she'd lasted long enough and killed enough men to rate that future campfire mention.

The wagon was now burning brightly in the morning light, and at the very least, she'd kept the city from that. It counted right?

An arrow made it's way through and nearly got her in the throat. She moved sideways, then she twisted sharply to one side as two soldiers reached her at the same time and swung at her from two different directions.

They missed her by a hair, but in staying out of both swords way, she took herself right off any semblence of balance and the next moment Heydar crashed full into her and she went flying to the ground with him half on top of her, pinning her legs to the ground.

Several things happened at once then. First, she realized she was in deep trouble. Second, she realized there was a man with an ax two steps from her already beginning to sweep downward with it and she couldn't turn over fast enough to stop him.

Third, she heard her name being yelled and that pretty much put the nail in it.

She gave it a shot anyway, savagely twisting her body to bring her self as much over on her back as she could as she got her arms off the ground and tried to raise her sword to cover her head.

She heard Sholeh laugh.

Pissed her off.

The ax was coming towards her and she grabbed her hilt with both hands as she felt Heydar clutch her arm to try and lower it. The anger made her muscles surge, and she felt a low growl escape her as she yanked back against the pull and slammed her shoulders back against the ground as her torso twisted painfully.

The ax impacted her blade and she turned her face to one side as she felt her arms start to give. The ax blade smashed into her then turned slightly, and the next thing she felt was shower of hot blood as the man wielding it lurched over her and toppled forward, flailing his arms and sending the ax past her and into Heydar's face.

She felt the hold o her lower body release and she curled her legs up instinctively, kicking out like a demented mule under a wagon as the soldier with the ax tumbled over her and fell, dropping his weapon and grabbing for the spear head shockingly emerging from the front of his chest.

Xena stared at it, putting the bloody weapon together with the bellowing sound behind her and she rolled over and got to her knees as Gabrielle stumbled past. She grabbed at her lover's belt and stopped her from falling into the soldiers and for just a second, the world hesitated.

The soldier feebly touched the spear, then his eyes rolled up and he collapsed on top of Heydar, trapping the big Persian in place as he struggled to free himself and continue the fight.

Gabrielle turned, and looked at her, eyes wide as robin's eggs in a face covered in mud and blood, but lit with a fiery determination and at their fringes, a touch of rage.

Nothing of fear. "C.. couldn't let him hurt you." Gabrielle managed to get out, half rasp, half groan. "Right?"

Ah. Xena inhaled sharply. Found your tipping point, eh? "Right."

No smile, but the faintest of twitches on the side of Gabrielle's mouth that might have been the barest thought of one.

Then the world exploded into motion again and she heard horses coming and something else behind her and she twisted and ducked again as a hoof smacked into her and Gabrielle was ripped from her grasp.

She rolled out of the way and got up again, impaling a soldier with her sword as she smashed past the line of men and into an open space, to see Sholeh on her horse wheeling, Gabrielle held over her saddlebow and a fiercely triumphant expression on her face.

Damn, life just sucked sometimes. Xena shook the gore off her hands and reached for her chakram with no hesitation, blocking a lunge from one of the soldiers as she set her body to throw her other weapon.

Sholeh seemed to sense it. She yankned Gabrielle up and put a dagger to her throat, her eyes fastened on Xena's face. "Hold!!"

The men stopped. Xena, reluctantly, stopped, since with the motion of the horse there was no way she could guarantee hitting the Persian and not her lover, and cutting Gabrielle's throat or scalping her wasn't on her royal schedule today.

"Now." Sholeh said. "I take my piece of flesh, since you have had yours." She told Xena. "But before I do, let me see what nectar this is that has so captured you."

Gabrielle was laying, completely limp across the horses shoulders, only the sharp rise and fall of her chest betraying if she was alive or already dead.

Sholeh grabbed her hair and hauled her head backwards, her hand steady right at the blond woman's throat, the blade pressing against the skin and drawing tiny, visible drops of blood. She laughed at Xena, then turned her head to kiss Gabrielle, the blade digging deeper as she moved.

Xena surged into motion, her arm whipping backwards as she chopped her way free of the clutching arms of the Persians, twisting and lunging as she fought to get a clear shot.

Gabrielle stayed limp right up to the moment Sholeh's lips touched hers. Her head moved very suddenly, and with a flash of white teeth, she sunk her bite into the Persian princesses face, clamping her jaws shut with a visible bunching of her jaws.

Sholeh released the dagger in shock, just as the chakram slashed through the air and knocked it away.

Xena caught it as it returned and bolted towards the horse, letting out the loudest sound she was capable of and ripping through lines of men like they were geese, moving so fast they didn't even have time to lift their swords against her.

Gabrielle's body twisted and wrenched, as she shook her head like a dog, then tore herself free, sending a spray of blood flying as she tumbled off the horses shoulders, released abruptly by Sholeh, to fall to the ground at the animal's feet.

Xena reached her a moment later, grabbing her from the ground just as the horse reared and yanking her backwards, past a soldier, slamming into a second, and then, blessedly, incredibly surrounded by a ring of bloody men wearing Persian colors but carrying her own distinctive battle stance.

Sholeh screamed, one hand raised up to her face, blood showing all the way down her arm.

Gabrielle spat something out. Then she spat again, and then again, her breathing rattling in her chest as she stood and shook next to Xena's tall form.

Xena didn't even dare look at her. She petted the back of her lover's neck tentatively, and tried to catch her breath, as the army stood there facing them, a bloody, dirty mass in the center of a sunlight green field.

**

Sholeh screamed again, and pointed, jerking her free hand and pointing again in a frenzy of manic instruction. Heydar recovered and ran over to her, extending a hand towards her as she clutched her face with her other hand and her horse shifted nervously.

Xena wished she'd thought to bring along a wineskin. She shook some gore off her hand and drew in a breath. "Okay boys, this aint gonna be pretty."

"S'allright, Xena." Brendan had a cut down the side of his face, and the left half of his surcoat was covered in blood. "Fight of a lifetime. It's worth it."

"Yah." Jens wiped his forehead with his gauntlet, blood running down his leg. "Held em all off. Only thing that got past us was the little one."

Gabrielle coughed.

"Take as many of em with us as we can." Xena said, quietly, as the army started to collapse towards them from every direction. "Whoever's left won't ever forget this."

"No." Brendan set himself and shifted his grip on his sword. "That they won't."

Xena finally peeked down at her companion. "Specially after Gabrielle's revenge there."

The men chuckled softly, and shook their heads.

Gabrielle hesitated, then she turned her head and looked up at Xena, her face smudged with blood. Her eyes were shadowed and almost unrecognizable from the churning emotions in them and she looked very much like she was about to throw up.

Xena studied her, aware of the approaching carnage. "Thanks." She said. "Partner."

For a moment, there was no reaction at all. Then Gabrielle straightened up and her head lifted, some of the discord in her eyes fading. She reached out and gave Xena's arm a squeeze, then she pulled the queen's dagger from its belt sheath and wrapped her fingers around it, her lips pressing into a frown. "This is going to hurt, isn't it?"

Xena faced forward, watching the line of men advancing. "Not for you." She said. "I promise." She twirled her sword, and brandished it. "C'mon you stupid bastards!" She threatened the oncoming army. "Little pissy girls!"

Gabrielle looked quickly at her, both eyebrows going up. She peered at the queen, then at herself, then she shook her head.

The army responded with a roar, and sped up.

A horn rang out in the morning light. Then a second, and then a third, ringing out from the city walls and echoing over the field.

“What the..” Brendan muttered, shading his eyes to see the walls. “What’s they up to?”

Sholeh’s army’s yells started to falter, as horns in their own army started to blow in reaction and heads turned towards the city. The gates shuddered, then they slowly started to open outward, revealing a huge crowd of men and horses, which started pouring out across the field towards the Persian lines.

Xena scrambled up onto the rigging of the launcher and peered towards the city, watching the sudden advance with disbelieving eyes. Then she remembered the half of the Persian army behind her and she turned as she sensed something at her back, crouching instinctively as she brought her sword around.

The men had stopped approaching and were just watching her.

It had been their eyes she’d sensed, all of them focused on her with a strange intentness that made her throat go a little dry and she dropped down off the rigging before she became a target. “All right, let’s..”

“Xena, look.” Brendan grabbed her arm. “It’s the inn kid.” He pointed at the rider in the lead, now passing out of the shadow of the walls and into the sunlight.

Xena sighed, the sound ending in a groan. Now that the lines were closing, she could see the awkward riders, and mismatched armor. “Idiots.”

“Aye.” Brendan said. “Waste of dying, that.”

Leaderless, the troops such as they were would be slaughtered as soon as they reached the Persians, and Xena was a little ticked off that she’d worked so hard sacrificing herself for idiots who were willy nilly sacrificing themselves anyway.

Waste of dying, just as Brendan had said. Though the fact that she and her men were still alive astounded her, the goal had been to draw Sholeh’s attention from the city, and give her something else to focus on. Killing Xena would have paled her interest in the city and maybe, just maybe, convince her to take her army and march down the river, as she’d originally planned.

Ah well. Best laid plans of monarchs and muskrats down the garderobe again. Xena shifted her grip on her sword, deciding on a spot to send her men against, knowing they couldn’t get through the Persians to help out the oncoming city men.

The launcher creaked as she bounced a little, and her head turned, as she observed the weapon. “Ah.” She brightened. “Gabrielle, c’mere.” She changed her intention, spotting a possibility.

Holding the knife carefully in one hand, her companion joined her on the device. Xena took the dagger from her and sheathed it, then she wrapped her arm around Gabrielle’s body and with a twist, and a surge, and a wrench of her body she hauled them both over into the launcher basket.

“W...”

“Hold on.” Xena reached behind her and whacked the ropes holding the launcher in position with her sword, slicing through them with a single, powerful slash.

The launcher released, the arm moving forward and up explosively and in a breath they were both being flung out over the army, through the air with frightening speed.

“YAHHHHHH!!!!!!” Gabrielle yelled at the top of her lungs.

“XXEEEEENNNNNNAAAAAAA!!!!” Underneath them, soldiers scattered and ducked, covering their heads, unsure of what was going on. “YahhhhH!!!!!!”

It was terrifying, and exhilarating, and Xena wished she had a few more minutes to enjoy it before the ground would come up and she'd have to play out this crazy action of hers. The wind rushed against her face, and she clutched Gabrielle to her as the morning light splashed over them.

“Relax.” She advised her squalling parcel. “I’m gonna hit first.” She twisted them both in mid air as the ground came up fast, hearing the Persians screaming behind her and the city force yelling in front of her as they recognized the unexpected missile heading their way.

Xena bent her knees and exhaled, grunting as her feet hit the ground with dizzying force. She let her legs buckle and take the impact as she got herself between the ground and the limp as a dishrag Gabrielle, slamming her shoulders against the dirt as she got the breath knocked out of her. “Ugh.”

No time. Xena released Gabrielle after they rolled to a halt and continued up on her knees, then her feet, letting out a loud whistle and crossing her fingers. She reached down and grabbed Gabrielle’s collar, hauling her to her feet as a horse’s scream answered her. “You okay?”

“Bbbbbbb.”

“Good enough.” Xena felt a sense of utter relief as she saw the lines of city troops parting and a big, black form rocketed through them towards her. “Want to go for a ride?”

‘Bbbbbbb.’

Xena took that as a yes. She waited for Tiger to skid to a halt and then she leaped up onto his back, getting herself settled before she reached an arm down to her still brain rattled companion. “Grab.” She waited for Gabrielle to reach up, and then she grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her up behind her on Tiger’s back.

“Xena!” Lennat managed to stop the bay gelding he was riding. “We came to help you!”

The queen looked at him, sorted through all her possible retorts, and sighed. “Thanks.” She motioned to either side. “Spread out! All of you spread out! Horses in the front, slow, then arches behind. Got me?”

The city men scrambled to obey, crashing into each other as they dodged the nervous horses.

“Oh boy.” Gabrielle found her tongue. “This is crazy.”

“No kidding.” Xena lifted her sword. “Charge!” She ordered. “Idiots.” She added, under her breath. She pressed her knees into Tiger’s bare back and started him in the direction of the Persians, who were struggling to form up to resist the attack.

“Yell!” Xena said. “Loud as you can.”

“What?” Lennat was trying to stay even with her. “Why? What for? What was going on? We could see everyone f..”

“SHUT UP AND YELL!” Xena thundered. “You came out here to die damn you – then shut up and get on with it!”

Lennat opened his mouth to answer her, then he abruptly shut it with a click, and just nodded. His eyes flicked to Tiger’s other passenger, then he looked right ahead and yodeled as loud as he was able.

Xena winced.

The men around him rallied and started shouting as the horses started to pick up momentum, the men carrying ill assorted weapons running along behind as fast as they could.

There were, perhaps, five hundred of them. Every man.. Xena glanced behind her. Every person who could pick up a stick, a bow, or a sling was in the field, running towards the Persians, and as she caught a glimpse of their frantic, eager expressions it made her stop for just a second and realize how monumental what they were doing really was.

Monumentally stupid, yes, but...

Xena turned and lifted her sword, urging Tiger to the fore as they bore down on the front lines of the Persians. She could see disarray in the ordered ranks, men on horses trying desperately to get in front and beating footmen with pikes out of the way.

Behind them, a huge cluster of men were gathering around what she figured was Sholeh, and to one side of that, she saw a disturbance that had to be Brendan causing what trouble he could. Taking advantage of the enemy's confusion.

Just as she was. She aimed Tiger for the very center of the lines, where the men and the horses were at their most contentious and wrapped one hand in Tiger's mane and the other around the hilt of her sword. "Hang on!" She ordered Gabrielle.

"Oooohh. Yyyyaah." Gabrielle's voice was vibrating with Tiger's gallop. "Dddoon't worrrrry." Her arms wrapped around Xena's middle and tightened, and she plastered herself against the queen's back. "Waake me up when it's over!"

Xena tightened her knees and increased Tiger's speed, letting out a yell of her own, and brandishing her sword. "Kill em all!" She bellowed. "Follow me!"

The horsemen waved their swords and yelled back at her in excitement as they headed right into the heart of the Persian lines.

Xena hoped they'd at least get to hit one of the enemy before they hit each other. She put her aim towards a knot of archers struggling to set themselves to fire and rode into them, slashing downward and splitting a man's head open as Tiger's hooves scattered two or three more into the grass.

She heard a loud noise from behind her, and realized it was her name, being shouted. To her left Lennat had couched a spear he'd been carrying across his saddle and as she watched, the point skewered a foot man as they drove into the still assembling lines, the Persians frantically trying to get into formation.

She didn't need any stinking formations. She didn't even need a stinking army. "Yahhhh!" Xena slammed her hilts into a soldier's head and kicked a second trying to grab her leg.

All she needed was a little more good luck.

**

Gabrielle kept a tight hold on Xena with one arm, but loosened the other one as they plunged into battle in case she needed it to fend something off.

Everything was in a blur around her, horses moving, men moving, yelling, the clash of weapons... she was grateful just to have a place to be above most of it with Xena to hang on to.

Her body felt a little numb. Her mind felt very numb. She focused intently on the whirl of activity around them searching for something that might threaten the queen. Thoughts of the recent past were shoved aside, as she watched what Xena did, and tried her best to copy it.

A man came close and aimed a spear at them. Gabrielle felt Tiger shift, and she used the momentum, kicking her boot out and hitting the spearhead with it. The point smacked into the ground and the man, who'd been running with it, halted suddenly and tripped, landing on his knees.

A horseman plunged through the crowd, the animal kicking aside some of his own troops as he fought to get to where Xena was, the man on his back wielding a huge, long handled battle mace.

Xena saw him. Gabrielle could tell, because the queen switched hands and got her sword over on the right hand side the Persian was coming in on and then grabbed her round weapon with her other hand. She could feel the shift as Xena's legs clamped down and she took a deep breath as the man and his horse thundered into them.

She could see the horse's eyes, wide and rolling, his head shying aside as Tiger whirled to meet him, the black horse baring his teeth and snapping as Xena's sword rose to meet the mace over his head.

It seemed impossible. Xena's arm was moving upward, and the man's was moving downward in a powerful stroke and as the two weapons met she knew the Persians should have continued down and hit them.

But it didn't. It stopped, held by Xena's blade and with a twist her shoulder, deflected off to one side as Xena reached across her body and slashed the soldier's wrist with her chakram, cutting deep into it and making him drop the mace.

He signaled his horse. Instinctively, Gabrielle grabbed the horse's bridle, and the animal only crow hopped, his head jerked downward as he tried to obey the order to rear. Kicking out his back legs, he unseated his rider and the crippled soldier rolled off him, landing on the ground as Tiger did rear, smashing down on top of him with both front hooves.

The stallion's iron shoes shattered bone.

Gabrielle released the horse, turning her head as something brushed her arm just in time to see a blade coming right at her face. Xena was battling off another horseman, and all she could do was duck fast, shoving her head against Xena's back as the blade sliced across the back of her neck, leaving a searing pain behind.

She felt Xena shift, the back of the queen's arm hitting her as she turned to meet the attack, the grating sound of metal against metal making Gabrielle's teeth ache. She heard a grunt, then a thud, and then Tiger was moving again so she risked looking around.

"You okay?" Xena called back.

"Yes." Gabrielle answered, afraid to reach around to her neck to really find out. "I think."

"Oh no. Not thinking."

The scrabbling attempt at humor warmed her, and she gave Xena a squeeze in response, glad she'd done so when Tiger reared up on his hind legs, and a second later they were airborne again. She rocked forward as they landed and bumped her face on Xena's shoulderblade, feeling a yank on her boot.

She looked down to find a Persian soldier about to cut her foot off. Frantically she yanked against his hold and let out a yell, reaching out her free hand to grab his hair and pull it hard. "Stop that!"

The soldier cursed, trying to get a better hold on her but a moment later, he was gutted through from behind, and he fell against Tiger, then underneath the stallion's feet, as Gabrielle hastily released his hair.

Behind him, a soldier was standing, in Persian gear. Gabrielle looked at him, then she squinted, trying to resolve his features into the familiar ones of Xena's troops, realizing a moment later she didn't know him.

"Thanks." Xena yelled.

The soldier lifted his sword, covered in blood, to his forehead. Then he turned and started fighting at the side of the struggling city folk, engaging a Persian soldier with grim intent.

Gabrielle grabbed Xena's elbow. "Xena, I don't think that's one of our guys."

Xena was busy fighting off a horseman. "He is now." She lunged forward suddenly, reaching over the enemy horse's neck and chopping savagely right and left, sending the Persian's sword spinning off out of reach. "Die, you stupid, useless bastards!" She cut his throat, and then sent Tiger's shoulder into the other horse, shoving the man out of the saddle.

A horn sounded. "Forward!" Xena could sense the momentum, as the Persians simply could not get themselves in order to resist the somewhat confused attack. "Drive em into the ground, the little sissies!"

Gabrielle grabbed a tighter hold again and grimaced, as she felt the pain in the back of her neck. She shifted forward and gripped with her knees as Tiger moved faster though, since now wasn't the time to be worrying about it.

Would there be a later? Gabrielle honestly didn't know. But she believed in her heart that if it was within her power, Xena would make a tomorrow for them.

She wanted to live. She thought Xena wanted to live. Things were changing very quickly and she wanted a time to just experience everything and explore what was happening.

Explore what she'd seen in Xena's eyes, there in the middle of the battlefield.

She pressed her forehead against Xena's back and wrapped her other arm around her, hugging her tightly as she felt the wind brush against her. The sounds around them got louder all of a sudden, and she heard horns start to blow.

The city men yelled louder.

Xena yelled louder.

She heard a loud crash, and unable to resist any more, she arched her back and straightened so she could look over Xena's shoulder to see what was going on.

It was strange. She blinked a few times, seeing groups of men seemingly at random going in different directions. More of the city men had gathered near Xena on their horses, and they seemed to have Persian weapons in their hands.

What was going on?

**

Xena charged up and down the line, smashing Tiger's big body into both horses and men, using his size and her own skills to batter the Persians. Against all odds, her ratty group of wannabees had carved a dip in the defenses, and now Sholeh's men were really scrambling to stop them.

The whole fight had caught them by surprise. They had been finishing up their rest, preparing to march on the city and expecting little if any resistance. The strife in the center of the army had drawn all the attention inward, and by dumb chance when Lennat had lead the city troops out they hadn't been ready for it.

Still weren't. Xena sheathed her sword and grabbed a crossbow from the hands of a stumbling soldier, lifting it and aiming between Tiger's ears. She released the shaft, and watched a rider come off his horse with a sense of savage satisfaction. "Kill em!" She thundered. "Move!"

Her men surged forward, making up in enthusiasm where they lacked in skill. The horsemen rode forward, smashing into foot soldiers, while the men behind ran in with spears, and poked anything that was moving – sometimes perilously close to Tiger's legs.

Xena looked around, and spotted the cluster of men around Sholeh. At that moment, two of the men next to her looked back at Xena, and when she saw their eyes, a big grin appeared on her face. She let out a bellow, and whipped her sword out again, raising it over her head and pointing.

"YahhhhhH!!!!!"

The men around Sholeh shifted and milled, and a moment later, one of them raised a horn and blew it.

"Forward! Kill em all!" Xena yelled to her men. "Kill em! Cut their heads off! Cut their other heads off!!" She lifted her body up then slammed her sword down on a man's head, breaking it open and splitting the helm he was wearing. "C'mon!!!"

Another horn blew. Xena glanced around, past the horsemen to see the back lines of the army moving away, some so far off they had to have started way before the sounding of the alarm. "Yahhh!!" She urged her men on. "Go Go!!!"

The Persians before her were faltering. The horsemen wrenched their animals around and started to fight their way through the melee towards Sholeh's party.

Heydar burst from the ranks around the princess, and rode towards the forward lines. "Hold them! Hold them! Remember you are Persians!" He yelled, racing his horse up and down behind the footmen. "Fight for her glory!"

"Fight so the rest of those bastards can escape!" Xena bellowed back at him. "Look! Turn and look you stupid mules! Stand and die, while they run!"

The Persians nearest her hesitated.

"She's right!" Lennat added, in an excited tone. "Look!" He pointed back over their heads. "See? Wow! They're running! They're really running!"

"Listen to her." Gabrielle added her own half dinar. "Why fight?" She made eye contact with one of the men. "Look at all your friends around you. Don't fight us! Help us! You're not Persians!"

"Fight!" Heydar charged forward, and slammed his sword into the back of the head of a man hesitating. "Or I'll kill you myself!" He turned and spit another rman, then went after a third.

Xena hauled Tiger's head around and kneed him hard, sending him into the lines as men scattered and dove to get out of her way. She was at a flat gallop in a few strides and as Heydar raised his sword to strike one of his own men, she whipped out her chakram and let it loose.

It sliced through the air, then carved it's way across Heydar's knuckles as he swung, smashing into the blade and sending it twirling out of his hands.

He turned his horse in a tight circle, the animal's eyes rolling with fear as he spun away from the oncoming Tiger and bolted back towards the royal contingent now in hasty retreat. "For now, Xena!" He yelled back. "But the gods will see you crushed before the next sun sets!"

Xena pulled Tiger up and realized she was smack in the center of a crowd of Persian soldiers. She let her head drop forward a little and glared around her, finally meeting the eyes of the man she'd just saved from Heydar's sword.

A conscript. He had lowland herder written all over him. Now he just looked back at her and after a long pause, he lifted his sword hilt to his head, and gave her a salute.

Men all around him simply dropped their guard, letting their weapons lay along their sides.

Xena exhaled, looking past them to see the archers finally forming up around the bulk of the retreating army to protect their flanks.

Left behind were the siege engines, one fallen over on it's side. Smoke still drifted up from the debris of the wagon. Brendan was leading her men forward through the now silent troops remaining.

Gabrielle sighed and slumped against her back in a warm, and stupidly comforting way. "Did we win?" She asked, in a low mumble.

"We did something." Xena replied.

"Awesome."

Yeah. Xena slowly turned her mount, to survey the carnage around them. Awesome.

Part 27

Gabrielle slowly stretched her legs out, watching her heels scrape light tracks in the rich earth as her body relaxed on a sun warmed boulder.

Around her, the army, Xena's army, swarmed around, the plain before the city walls full of men and horses, and curious other folk wandering out across the grass to inspect the battlefield. No one really seemed to know what was going on, but spirits were high, and the weather was gorgeous.

It felt good to just sit down. She let her hands rest on her thighs, blinking a little as the sunlight spilled over the skin of her knuckles, stained red and brown and rubbed raw across the tops of her index fingers.

Xena was not far off, talking to a bunch of the soldiers. Gabrielle was sure the queen would come over to her next, and she was content to wait, finally letting her mind ramble over everything that had happened to her in the last hours.

It was hard to think about it all. She remembered bits and pieces, the fighting all around her, the yelling, the smell of the poison hide.

She remembered looking between Brendan and Jens and seeing Xena fall.

She remembered running.

Gabrielle gazed at her hands, turning them over to look at the palms. She remembered running towards Xena, and being so mad because she'd seen the queen leading them with such courage, and such boldness and it was horrible that those damned Persians were all ganging up on her.

Not fair. There were so many of them, and only one of her.

Gabrielle curled her fingers slightly, feeling the stiffness in them.

She hadn't really intended on.. Her thumb moved, rubbing against her fingertips. All she'd wanted to do was get Xena loose, get the Persian soldier off her. Away from her. She hadn't even thought about what she was going to do when she got close.

Had she? Could she have forgotten she had the sharp tip on the top of her spear, when she rammed it at the soldier?

Maybe. Gabrielle sighed, unable to really remember for sure. She had just felt relief when the soldier was gone, and she saw Xena twisting free and she knew they were okay again, for a few minutes.

She sighed again, then she looked up as she sensed motion and spotted Xena heading her way, the queen's walk powerful and confident as she approached. "Hi."

Xena seated herself on the rock next to her lover and likewise extended her legs out, her armor so covered in dirt, mud, and battle ragged she seemed more like a walking scrap wagon than a person. "Hi."

Gabrielle licked her lips. "Are we okay now?"

The queen lifted up one ankle and placed it on her knee, folding her hands over it. "Well." She exhaled. "Given the alternative, yeah. We're fine." She said. "We beat them, Gabrielle."

"Yeah." Gabrielle agreed mildly. "That was kinda unexpected, huh?"

Xena chortled under her breath. "As unexpected as meeting you was for me." She admitted. "And almost as pleasant a result." She studied the ground around them.

To one side, debris from the siege engines was burning in a pyre, consuming the bodies being dragged over to it. On the other side, city folk were combing the leavings of the Persian army, reclaiming boxes and stores that had been taken from them, and scavenging for other goodies left lying in the grass.

Lennat and his buddies were romping all over, happy as dogs with a dead deer. Xena's original men were exhausted, but bemusedly pleased, sitting in a bunch not far from where their queen was, tending to many and various injuries from the fight.

Sholeh and her army had retreated down the road, back towards the pass. It wasn't what Xena wanted to have happen, but since she'd just driven a far superior force away with a dozen men, a muskrat, and a bunch of townies she really wasn't one to complain.

Besides. She turned and looked at Gabrielle's profile. "How ya feeling?"

Gabrielle returned her gaze. "I don't know." She answered honestly. "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel." She added. "So I guess I'm just tired, and hungry and sort of glad it's over for now."

Xena pondered this, then slowly nodded. "Me too." She put her boot down, and rested her elbows on her knees. "Me too." After a little silence she laced her fingers together and propped her chin on them. "Damn, I'm wiped."

Easing a little closer, Gabrielle rested her head against Xena's shoulder, resisting the urge to simply close her eyes and surrender to the exhaustion herself. "What are we going to do now?" She asked instead. "Do we wait for them to come back here?"

"No." Xena sighed. "We've gotta go chase them down and kill them all, unfortunately. They went the wrong way, the stupid bastards." She shifted to one hand and flexed the other, covered with cuts and scrapes. "You know, I almost miss that damned castle."

"Me too." Gabrielle murmured. "Are we going to chase them now?"

Xena thought in silence for a while. "No." She said. "No, we're not." She added. "I've got to convince these nitwits to follow me, for one thing, and for another, we need supplies."

"Ah."

The queen blinked slowly. "And I need to get some sleep." She admitted softly. "I can't even see straight."

Gabrielle lifted her head and peered at her companion. "Can we go now?" She put her hand on Xena's shoulder. "You really don't look so good."

"Yeah." Xena pushed herself to her feet before her body got any more funny ideas and waited for Gabrielle to join her. She whistled a short, sharp whistle and waited, as Tiger heard and broke away from the small herd of horses that had come out from the city and moved towards her. "Let's go get cleaned up and take a break. I think we earned it."

"I think so too." Gabrielle held out a hand as Tiger trotted up, and stroked his nose as he snuffled her fingers. "Do you think they have any ale left? I could use a big cup."

Xena pulled herself up onto Tiger's back then offered Gabrielle a hand up. It took all her remaining energy to haul her companion aboard, and she was very glad to turn her stallion's head towards the wide open city gates and move away, past the half giddy city folks.

"Xena." Brendan rose up as she went past. "Want an escort?"

The queen gave him a look. "You think there's anyone in the city more dangerous than the army we just beat?"

Brendan half shrugged, managing a sheepish look. "Nah." He said. "Just wondering, is all. We'll take care of things out here, get ready for what's next."

Xena sidestepped Tiger over to him. "No you won't, you goofy old man. Take these poor bastards and go in there, and get some rest. We're not chasing that bitches tail now."

"That mean you do want an escort?" Her captain asked, ingeniously.

The queen sighed. "Come on." She started Tiger forward, and her soldiers filed in behind her. She played idly with the horse's mane as she felt Gabrielle lean against her, the arms slipping around her waist and gently hugging her providing a warm and comforting touch.

Strategically, going after Sholeh while she was offbalance, and the army was running was a much better idea. Xena knew that. However, she also knew that her force truly consisted of perhaps a score of men plus her and Gabrielle, and she was on the verge of falling off her horse.

So strategically, she was throwing away a golden opportunity in favor of probably living, and keeping her men alive, and giving her muskrat a rest she obviously needed as much as Xena did.

Shame, really. Xena sighed. "You know something, muskrat? I'm an idiot."

"I don't think so." Gabrielle murmured. "I think you're amazing and brilliant." She was glad to turn her mind to this more pleasant subject. "You knew exactly what to do, and you did it."

Xena snorted under her breath. "I so have you snowed." She sighed. "Lucky for me, I've got everyone else snowed too. But you know what? I shoulda taken that damn army with me."

Gabrielle exhaled against the skin peeking through Xena's armor. "Which army, the Persians?"

"No."

"Oh. You mean our army." The blond woman murmured. "That we left back on the other side of the mountains."

"Mm."

Gabrielle scratched her nose. "They'd be kinda handy right now, that's true."

The queen chuckled wryly. "They sure would." She agreed. "If they were here, I'd split them into two forces, and take one directly after that crazy bitch and send the other against her flank on the far side. Get em between two pinchers, and crush em." She lifted a hand and curled her fingers into a fist.

"Oh."

"Maybe I can steal Sholeh's army." Xena mused. "I think I got some of em turned around there.. doncha?" She glanced back at her passenger. "At the end there? Some of em stayed."

Gabrielle thought about the end of the fight. "Yes." She said. "Some of them did, and I think if you'd been at the back still more of them would have stayed too. I think the ones at the back, where we came in, they were running away more than anything."

"Hm."

"I thought Heydar was going to be less of a jerk."

"Me too." Xena grimaced. "Damn it. I should have killed him when I had the chance. What the Hades is wrong with me?" Her shoulders slumped a little, and she shook her head. "I don't understand how I keep screwing this up so badly and still we kicked their asses. I don't get it."

Gabrielle patted her on the side, unsure of what to say to comfort her friend. "Maybe you'll feel better after we get some rest?" She suggested. "It's been a kind of long day."

Xena pondered that. "I'll feel better once I get washed and we have sex." She informed Gabrielle. "And maybe have some peaches. Think you can find me some?"

Gabrielle blinked a few times, amazed at the odd combination of reactions her body was producing. "Uh.. yeah. Sure."

Xena chuckled softly, then sighed.

They approached the gates, and Xena could see inside where most of the city seemed to be gathered. The square that had held her tiny force was now filled with people and makeshift tables where the merchants had gathered all that they had left, and were offering it for sale.

Abruptly, everyone started yelling. Tiger shied, and Xena nearly got dumped on her butt as she grabbed for the horses mane, hearing Gabrielle squeak behind her. "What in the..." She looked quickly around for the threat, then she realized the sound wasn't as much yelling as it was..

Cheering.

Cheering her name.

“Xena! Xena! Xena!!!” The crowd surged towards her, smiling faces upraised and hands waving. “Xena!!”

“Wow.” Gabrielle straightened up and peered past her companion’s shoulder, feeling a smile appear on her face as she saw the happy greeting. “That’s pretty cool. Xena, look – look at those children! I didn’t even know there were that many children here.. “

“Huh.”

The cheers rose again, along with whistles and the sound of drumming on the wood crates scattered around the square. Xena’s back straightened and she sidestepped Tiger a few lengths, raising a hand to acknowledge the accolades.

A huge flock of kids were pouring through the square, their small feet making a soft rattle against the stone ground as they headed for the battered soldiers in their midst. As they reached where Xena was, tiny bodies squirmed through the crowd only to pull to a halt just short of Tiger’s tall form, to stare up at Xena in utter awe.

“Wow!” The closest one said. “Mama! Look!”

A woman hurried up and put her hands on his shoulders, holding him still. “I see, Kiva. Hush.” She looked shyly up at the watching queen. “Your majesty, forgive him.”

“For what?” Xena seemed more bemused than anything. “He didn’t call me an ugly old wart, so what’s the problem?”

The crowd laughed, and Xena chuckled along with them, her mood vastly improved. She relaxed on Tiger’s back and let her hands rest on her thighs, as several of the city elders came bustling through the crowd to face her.

“Your Majesty.” One bowed at her. “Forgive us for not formally welcoming you to our city before now.”

Xena looked at him, looked at the wreck of the square, then she turned and looked back through the gates and the controlled chaos beyond. She turned back around. “Nope. Off with your head.” She drew her sword. “Next!”

“Xena!” Gabrielle grabbed her arm, as the man’s eyes almost came out of his head.

“Just kidding.” The queen put her blade back in its covering. “I’ll forgive ya if you can dig up a bathtub big enough for both of us and a keg of ale to wash the taste of Persian cat out of my muskrat’s mouth here. Deal?”

“Bh...” The man moved his mouth as though searching for his tongue inside it. “Ah..”

“We.. we surely can.” The man next to him bravely took over. “Of course, of course – please, come with us.” He said. “Everyone, three cheers for Queen Xena!”

The crowd burst into wild applause and yells.

“Shoulda killed him.” Xena uttered under her breath as she smiled and waved. “Always go with your first instincts, Gabrielle. Otherwise, you just get kicked in the...” She stopped speaking as she was pulled gently backwards and found her lips being nibbled. “Ass.” She finished, as Gabrielle resumed her seat and the crowd continued to cheer.

“Good advice.” Gabrielle said. “Can we go take a bath now?”

“Sure.”

“Awesome.”

**

Gabrielle would have been happy for a bucket of water and a corner of the stables, to be honest – but she was glad enough to be sitting on the verge of a big marble tub, leaning back against the wall as she ruffled her hair dry with a piece of sturdy, clean linen.

It felt amazing to be clean. She rubbed the edge of one ear as she listened to the soft crackle of the fire in the nearby fireplace, hearing Xena’s voice low and soft just past it. It felt amazing to be clean, and to be sitting still with no immediate impending bad things about to happen.

She got the impression the city was expecting Xena to stick around for a while. The city elders had brought them to a tall, two story townhouse on the far side of the square that had rich tapestries on the wall, thick rugs, and the marble tub she’d just gotten out of.

Not the home of the city mayor, as she’d expected they’d go to, but the former home of a very rich merchant who had fled when the Persians came along with the rest of the aristocrats.

Gabrielle dried her arms and legs off, then she reluctantly got up and went over to where a simple silk robe was waiting, running the tips of her fingers over the fabric before she set down her towel and put the other garment on instead, its folds cool against her body as she fastened it.

Her whole body was aching, from her fingertips right up to her head, right down to her toes. She felt like she’d been out in the fields gathering in the harvest for days, the memory of the noise and the chaos of the battle blunting and blending into a fading nightmare.

She walked over to the narrow stone window and looked out, seeing the big impromptu market had spread, and now there seemed to be people preparing for a celebration as well. Did the city think this whole thing was over?

Gabrielle perched on the edge of the window. Was it over for them? Maybe it was. She tried to imagine it from their side, thinking about having the Persians in control for as long as they had been, and then having Xena come and roust them out in a matter of days.

No matter how tired she was, it made her smile.

So if they were going to continue the fight, and go after Sholeh, it would be closer to their own home area and maybe it was over for this river port city, who would now have stories and tales to tell for years and years to come about it.

It felt so strange to know she’d be a part of those stories. Gabrielle turned her hand over in the sunlight coming in the window, the warmth easing the stiffness in her fingers a little. Slowly, she closed her hand and remembered the feel of the spear in it, and the jolt that had almost stopped her in her tracks as the point hit the soldier’s back.

Almost stopped her. She remembered digging her feet into the ground and surging ahead, feeling no fear, no anguish at what she was doing, only a sense of fierce determination driving her along with a surprising amount of...

Anger? Gabrielle frowned. She had been upset, desperately wanting to get the soldiers away from her lover and protect her from them hurting her even though she knew very well that Xena needed no protection. Had she been angry?

She put her head back against the wall. Yes, she had been. Angry at the Persians, and even more angry at Sholeh, who had grabbed her like a sack of wheat and thought she could do what she willed with her.

Reflexively, Gabrielle licked her lips, her jaws still aching a bit from the savage clenching as she'd used this most primitive of weapons against the Persian princess. Now that, she had to admit if even just to herself, had felt good.

"Hey."

Gabrielle turned her head and spotted Xena in the doorway, the queen's long frame draped in its own silk covering. It wasn't quite as long as Gabrielle's, and it was a little small on her, but it was good to see her in something other than armor in a place other than a battlefield. "Hello."

"What are you doing?" Xena left the entrance and crossed over to where she was sitting. "You like this bathing room so much you want to sleep in here or something? Get in the bedroom."

Gabrielle was almost too tired to stand up. But she made the effort, getting to her feet and wincing at the soreness in her body as she straightened up and met Xena in the center of the room. "I was just watching the stuff out the window." She explained. "Are you finished with the men?"

"I've been finished with men for about twenty years now Gabrielle." Xena took a step past her and peeked out the window. "But thanks for asking. What the Hades are they doing out there – getting a circus together?"

Gabrielle put her hands around Xena's wrist, rubbing her thumbs against the skin on the inside of it. She could see so many bruises and scrapes everywhere on her body and the set of the queen's shoulders indicated how tired she was. "A party I think." She tugged gently. "Want to go lay down?"

Xena shook her head. "A party." She turned and faced Gabrielle, gazing down at her. "I want to make my own party. Wanna come?"

Gabrielle managed a half grin. "Yeah, but I don't think I can stay awake long enough." She admitted.

Xena put a hand on the back of Gabrielle's neck and scratched it. "C'mon." She bumped her companion through the doorway and into the bedroom, where a big, comfortable looking bed was waiting.

Outside the door were soldiers, guarding them. Xena had found herself too damn tired to argue about it, and now that she'd gotten herself cleaned off she had another problem on her mind. "I need you to do something for me before we both keel over."

"Anything."

Xena went over to the dusty saddlebags that she'd had brought to them. "My side's bleeding. Bandage isn't enough, it needs stitching." She removed her healers kit, and brought it back over to the bed. "Hurts like Hades."

Gabrielle took the kit and knelt by the bed as Xena lay down on it, glancing up as she heard the faint sound, almost a grunt that came from the queen. "Is that the only thing wrong?"

Xena had her eyes closed, and now she opened one and peered in Gabrielle's directly. "The only one likely to ruin the sheets." She untied the robe she had on and opened it, exposing a bloody bandage just under her ribs.

"Oh." Gabrielle took a cloth and went to the water basin, wetting it and bringing it back over so she could gently clean the skin. "Xena, this is awful."

"Feels awful." The queen had her eyes closed again. "But then, everything else does too." Here, away from the men she didn't have to pretend and put on that good front. Here with Gabrielle, she could just feel how she felt, and say how much it hurt and she knew she wouldn't be thought worse of.

"Okay, I'm starting."

Xena felt the shift as Gabrielle leaned forward, and she reached over to put a hand on her partner's back as the needle pricked her side. "Guess they've got a right to party, huh?" She asked, to distract both of them.

"It's been tough here, yeah." Gabrielle focused hard on what she was doing, her tired eyes blurring a little as she painstakingly worked on the stitches.

The cut was just under Xena's ribcage, and it looked like the end of a sword had gone right into her, puncturing a deep slice the span of Gabrielle's hand that was slowly pulsing dark red blood out. Around it, the skin was dark with bruises, and she could see the queen was breathing more shallowly than she usually did.

"Thanks for saving my ass."

Gabrielle carefully put in another stitch. "I was glad I could do it." She answered, after a long silence.

"Were you?" Xena asked. "Even if it meant you killed that guy?"

It was quiet again for a while. "Yes." Gabrielle finally said. "I didn't really think about that. I just wanted to help you."

"Mm." Xena rubbed Gabrielle's back with gentle fingers. "I said you were a fighter." She said. "I remember the night you got to the castle, you were out in the courtyard beating the crap out of a post and I said then, uh oh. Watch out for that one."

"You did?" Gabrielle put in a last stitch, and wiped the cut carefully, glad she was done. "It's hard for me to remember that." She paused, and bit the gut she'd been using close to Xena's side, then rested her hands on the bed. "I remember how horrible it seemed to me to see people die."

Xena watched her face, seeing the sadness in it's lines. "It is horrible." She said. "But it's part of our lives, and there ain't much you can do about it, little one." She held steady as tired green eyes shifted to meet hers. "Do you know what the biggest difference between you and I is?"

Gabrielle hesitated, then shook her head slightly.

"I'm a killer." The queen told her. "You're not."

"That's not true anymore." The blond woman replied huskily.

"Yes it is." Xena shifted her hand to Gabrielle's face. "Protecting people you love who are about to get their heads cut off doesn't count."

Gabrielle remained thoughtfully silent.

“You do love me, right?” Xena traced her companions cheekbone with the edge of her thumb. “I don’t want you to feel bad about doing what your heart told you to do, Gabrielle.”

It made uncommon sense. Gabrielle set the kit aside and leaned forward, kissing Xena’s side just under where the now closed cut was. “I said I’d do whatever it took, didn’t I?” She said. “And I did.”

“You did.”

Xena smiled at her, eyes half closed. “Bet you didn’t feel bad at all for tearing a chunk out of Sholeh.”

Gabrielle couldn’t help grinning, just a bit. “I didn’t.”

“Killer.” Xena pointed at herself. “Fighter.” She pointed at Gabrielle, then she cupped her cheek. “Partners”

“Partners.” Gabrielle got up and crawled into bed next to Xena. “We kept those guys from hurting everyone in the city, didn’t we?”

“We did.”

“And we chased them off, right?”

“Yup.”

“So I guess it was a good day, really. Wasn’t it?”

Xena put her arm around Gabrielle and gently drew her closer, nuzzling her hair as she felt her lover relax, and their bodies pressed against each other. She wasn’t sure if Gabrielle was trying to convince herself or just make Xena think she was convinced, but she was too tired right at the moment to worry about it. “It sure was.”

A cool breeze puffed in the window, bringing the scent of roasting meat and the sound of children’s laughter, and that was enough to carry her away into sleep knowing that in fact, it had been a pretty damn good day since they both were here to argue about it.

**

Xena could have happily remained sleeping. It was dark, there was a cool breeze coming in the window, it was comfortable in the bed, and she had Gabrielle snuggled up next to her, keeping her side all nice and warm.

However, the noise outside had shook her out of a dream, and now that she was awake the discomfort of her body was keeping her from going back to sleep combined with the fact that she was hungry and the smell of roasting meat was driving her nuts.

Knowing there wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it was driving her more nuts. “Damn it.” She shifted just a little, and nearly bit her lip through.

“Xena.”

The queen scowled. “Why are you awake?” She asked. “Did I say all you could take was a catnap or something?”

Gabrielle shifted and half rolled onto her side, stretching her legs out with a small grunt. “You were talking. It woke me up.” She said. “Wow. How long were we asleep?”

“Not long enough.” Xena cautiously straightened her limbs out, folding her hands over her stomach. She was definitely still tired, but not desperately as she had been before, and the pounding headache that had been blurring her vision was at least gone.

However. Now she had another problem. A lot more dangerous problem.

“Mm.” Gabrielle pushed herself up, leaning on one hand as she gazed towards the window. “Whatever they’re cooking outside smells great, doesn’t it?”

“Uh huh.”

“Want some?”

“Uh huh.”

Gabrielle pulled the covers back and scooted out of the bed, finding her body less sore than she expected as she walked across the thick carpets and went to the window to look out. “Oh. Wow.”

“Use that imagination of yours and be more descriptive.” Xena requested. “What’s going on outside there? Trouble? Chaos?”

“They’re having a big party down there.” Her lover supplied obediently. “They have three.. no, four fires going and tables set up. There’s lots of people.”

“Nice.”

“I see ale kegs.”

“Even nicer.” Xena exhaled. “Wanna go grab us one of everything?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle turned and went back over to the bed, then she paused, seeing Xena’s face in the dim light coming in the window. “Are you all right?” She reached out to touch the queen’s arm. “You look really pale.”

“Not really, no. Matter of fact, I suck.” The queen said. “Looks like I threw my back out. I can’t really move. Chances are, I can’t get out of this bed.” She informed Gabrielle. “So while you’re at it, bring me my kit over there and cup with water in it so I can breathe without screaming.”

“Oh wow.” Gabrielle’s eyes widened in alarm. “Xena, that’s horrible!”

“Damn good thing I didn’t ride out last night.” Xena moved slightly, and closed her eyes as a jolt of pain went right up her spine. “Knew I did something to it the other day. Guess it finally caught up to me.” She lifted her arm and rested it on her forehead.

Gabrielle stroked her shoulder comfortingly. “Let me go get your stuff.” She circled the bed and went to the sideboard, picking up a taper and leaning close to light it from the banked fire. The candle flared, and she lit two others, bathing the room in golden light.

All thoughts of sleep were now gone. She could feel nervous energy filling her, and she carefully set the last candle down and retrieved Xena’s herbal kit from her saddlebag. “Would a cup of wine be better than water?”

“Sure. Some left over there?”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle checked the pitcher, sniffing it cautiously. It smelled unsurprisingly like wine, and she lifted it to her lips and took a swallow, keeping her back turned so Xena wouldn’t see her do it. She

licked her lips, setting the flask down and waited a few beats, but nothing horrible seemed about to happen so she released her held breath and went on with her work.

“What are you doing?”

“Just getting your stuff.” Gabrielle put the kit on the small tray that held the wine flask and its cups and brought the whole thing back over to the bed. Now that it was lighter, she could see the tension on Xena’s face and the furrows in her brow. “At least you have a bed here, huh?”

Xena produced a sound that was not quite a groan. She put both hands on the surface of the bed and very carefully pushed herself upright and back so she was half reclined on the pillows instead of flat on her back.

She held her breath, but the muscles in her lower back didn’t seize again, so she relaxed and took the cup of red wine Gabrielle had just poured for her and sipped it, then swallowed it in a long series of gulps. It was rich and a touch fruity, and on her empty stomach it made her blink a little.

Gabrielle put the kit on the bed and opened it, kneeling at the bedside. “Which one do you need?”

Xena licked her lips. “Powdered muskrat. Got any there?”

“Xena.” Gabrielle looked up from under her sleep disordered bangs and managed a smile.

“Sorry.” The queen examined the kit. “I figure at least I can joke and get laugh out of the fact that I can’t move. Told you we should have had sex last night.” She sighed, and selected two of the herb packets she’d taken pains to pack.

Gabrielle covered her eyes with one hand and her shoulders shook.

“Here.” Xena handed her the packets. “Put that in this cup, put more of that wine in it, and give it a stir with your fingers.”

Gabrielle did as she was told, and handed the cup back, curiously putting her finger into her mouth to taste the results. “Oh. Gross.” She removed it immediately. “Xena, that’s awful.”

“Thanks.” Her lover steadfastly drained the cup. The taste was awful, but she knew the herbs would kick in fast and the pain, this kind of pain, wasn’t something she could work around. “Damn, my timing sucks.” She set the cup down and leaned back. “Last time this happened I was in bed for three damned days.”

“Hm.” Gabrielle made a thoughtful noise. “Okay, well, let me go get you some dinner.. I’m pretty hungry too.” She got up and went back over to the side board, pulling out her livery tunic and a pair of leggings. She pulled them on and got the fastenings done, then she looked around. “Oh, darn.”

“What?”

“They took our boots.” Gabrielle sighed. “Well, I used to herd sheep barefoot.” She headed for the door, running her fingers through her hair to order it a little. “Be right back.”

Xena watched her go, then she folded her hands over her stomach again, waiting for the herbs to work. The odd tension in her back before she’d passed out should have warned her, but she thought the rest would resolve the issue rather than make it worse.

Wrong.

She could ride with a lot of things. Broken arm. Broken leg. Broken ribs. Her guts split open. Her head split open. This particular injury though she knew full well would keep even her from walking or riding no matter how inured to pain she was or how big her ego.

She had gotten damn lucky. Xena studied the ceiling. There were bones in her backbone that just got out of place down near the bottom of it and made everything seize up. Her one, true, physical weakness that now a total of three human beings alive knew about.

The real reason she'd retired, figuring she'd just get out when she could, in a decent place that didn't involve her having to be on campaign in the wild risking this very thing happening at the very worst time. "Funny." She addressed the ceiling. "You'd have thought I'd have remembered that stupid detail before I started this insanity."

Having that happen while she was fighting would have put her on the ground and at the mercy of whoever she was up against and the fact that she'd gotten through what they had yesterday in one piece was a gift from the gods.

No question. She'd been halfway expecting this since she'd been trapped under that damn horse, but lasting as long as she had, well.. "Figured I got lucky." She murmured. "Eh. Maybe I did. Or maybe the Persian bitch did. Hard to say."

This threw her plans right in the middens. Sholeh would have time to regroup, and come back at her, or worse, plow through the pass and go the other way, right through the heart of her realm with nothing left to defend it aside from a leaderless army and the gates of her stronghold.

Damn it. Xena slowly reached her arm out, biting her lip as a spasm hit, her other hand clenching on the covers as the pain built and built before it started to subside. "Ow." She muttered, once it was over. "Next time I'm just gonna tell her to let them cut my head off."

She carefully poured another cup of wine and brought it over to her lips, the two previous cups and the herbs not doing all that much yet. Three days? Three days if she was really lucky, and if she stayed put and didn't try to push things like she had the last time.

That had ended up with her losing sensation in her legs for a week, terrified she'd never be able to walk again.

Sucky. Just sucky. Xena sipped the wine, feeling the beginnings of a mild disassociation as the herbs started to kick in.

She thought about Gabrielle, and briefly, she wondered how smart it really was to send her out into the chaos to grab food for them, and just as briefly she dismissed the wondering figuring if Gabrielle could chew a hunk out of the leader of an enemy army she probably could handle getting a couple of lamb kabobs and some cheese out of their hosts.

At least, she hoped she was.

**

Gabrielle paused outside the door to the townhouse, looking around to choose her best path. She gave the soldiers on guard a little nod, and they saluted her, one of them edging closer as she hesitated.

"M'lady?"

"Yes?"

“Is there something you wish? Something her majesty needs?” The man asked, in a gentle voice. “May we serve you?”

Something definitely was different. Gabrielle could hear a note in his voice directed at her that hadn't been present before. She turned to face him, his battle stained overtunic bearing the same hawk's head as hers, and as she did, she realized she felt differently about the men too. “I'd like to get the queen some dinner.” She said, in a soft voice. “Do you think you could help me with that?”

“Of course.” The man signaled his mate. “M'lady, would you like to just tell me what it is you wish? I can go get it.”

“Let's go get it together.” Gabrielle said. “I don't know what they have, so it's hard to say – but I know what she likes.”

“After you then, your Grace.” The man bowed to her. “It would please me greatly to be of service to you.”

You. Gabrielle straightened. “Okay, let's go.” She started off down the slope towards the square, with her soldier in tow, part of her mind already back in the townhouse with her suffering friend, while she chose her path with the other.

What would Xena do now? Did it really mean she had to stay still for three days? Gabrielle could hardly imagine her lover staying still for three candlemarks. But she knew that the queen had been hurting more and more the past few days, and maybe this was the gods' way of forcing the issue.

Three days. So much could happen, so much had happened already in a time span like that. Gabrielle thought though, that maybe it would give Xena a little time to recover from what they'd been through, the battered, skin and bone condition she'd seen last night while sewing her friend up not escaping her.

Maybe war could wait a few days. Gabrielle eased between two lines of people, towards where the tables were set up, piled with platters of food and drink. “Excuse me, sorry.” She apologized, as she was caught between two revelers.

The one nearest turned, attracted by her voice. “Why, there, ma'a... bithegods!” He backedpeddled rapidly. “Your majesty!”

That made Gabrielle stop, and blink.

The crowd heard him, and they turned and spotted her, and a path formed as if by magic, a buzz of excitement rising.

Having little else to do, Gabrielle made her way through the open space, blushing aware of her bare feet and only just keeping herself from hiding behind her escort. “Hello.” She gave the crowd a little wave. “Looks like a great party, huh?”

One of the elders hurried forward. “M'lady!” He bowed. “You grace us with your presence! We didn't wish to disturb the queen's rest. Will you join us in our celebration?”

Gabrielle emerged into the open space in the middle of the square as he met her. “Oh. Ah, thanks.” She looked around, realizing she was becoming the center of attention. “Actually, Xena asked me to bring her back some dinner.” She said. “We've had a pretty rough day.”

“Oh! Of course.” The elder held up his hands. “Of course! We offered to do that earlier but the men said.. ah.. they said...ah..”

“They said the queen was occupied.” Gabrielle's escort supplied amiably. “And her majesty was.”

The elder turned to look at Gabrielle. "What is her majesty's desires?"

Gabrielle had to blink a few times, before she realized he meant food. "Ah." She looked around. "Well, if you have some meat, and bread and cheese.. she's not picky, really."

The elder took her elbow and led her over to the table, another man rushing over with a platter. "Of course. Let's see, there's some left here, yes." He indicated three carcasses, roughly half consumed. "Resar, get some bread and cheese, if you will, and a flagon of wine for our honored guests."

"White, and sweet if you have it." Gabrielle politely suggested. "That would be great."

Her soldier took the platter from the man and stood while it was heaped with slices of roast. He glanced at Gabrielle as she walked alongside him. "Some sauce for her maj?"

Gabrielle blinked a few times again, but then she went to where the bowls of sauce were, and dipped her pinkie into one, tasting it. "No." She liked the taste of vinegar, but she knew the queen wasn't fond of it. "Let's see what this one is." She moved on to the next.

"Gabrielle."

Ugh. Gabrielle turned from her tasting to find Perdicus there, his face haggard and bandages across his neck. "Hello." She said.

"We need to talk." Perdicus said, without preamble.

"Well." Gabrielle added the next bowl of sauce, a sweet plum-my one to the tray. "We can, later. I'm in the middle of something right now."

"Like what?"

Gabrielle caught her soldier giving Perdicus a dour look. "I'm getting something for Xena. Excuse me." She edged past him and grabbed a few apples that were left on a platter, plunking them down next to the meat.

"You're her slave." The disdain in Perdicus' voice was unmistakable.

"No, I'm not." Gabrielle replied. She smiled and took a loaf of bread from one of the city men and added it, then she clutched the flagon of wine to her the man also held out. "Thanks."

"Are we ready then, your grace?" Her soldier escort said, in a slightly louder voice than necessary.

"Your what?" Perdicus got in the way of them leaving. "What did you call her?"

The soldier glowered at him. "T's the Queen's consort. Get out of the way, you pitiful excuse of a man. Where you were you when we was out fighting? Saw you run from the gates before we left."

Perdicus stared at him, then at Gabrielle. "Consort. Is that what they call you?"

"No." The blond woman said. "Gabrielle is what they call me." She cradled the wine and stepped around him, as her escort eased between her and Perdicus. "Excuse us."

"Wait." Perdicus put his hand on her arm. "Just talk to me for a minute, Gabrielle. Is that too much to ask?" He glanced at the soldier, then back at her. "Just for a minute?"

Gabrielle hesitated, then she looked up at her escort. "I'll be right back." She took a few steps towards the center of the square, nearer the cookfires, to give them a bit of privacy. "Yes?" She watched him warily, feeling an impatient tug to her conscience to head back to her suffering friend. "I've got to get going."

“To where?” He asked. “Back to that insane woman?”

“She’s not insane.”

“Listen, Gabrielle.” Perdicus took hold of her arm firmly. “Now that the army’s gone, you need to come with me.”

“No I don’t.” She said, with a frown. “Let go of me.”

“You do.” He got closer. “There’s a lot of craziness and talk going on around here, and it’s better we leave and go home. Now.”

“What craziness?” She asked. “We got the other army out of the city, that’s not crazy. That’s wonderful!” Her voice sharpened. “Xena was amazing!”

“She’s crazy!” Perdicus hissed. “You have no clue, Gabrielle! I was with her by the river she was going to run!”

“She didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, she’s still crazy.” He said. “So I’m not taking a risk sticking around here and neither are you. Come on. We’ve got a chance to get out while she’s inside.”

Gabrielle took a step back. “Perdicus, stop talking like that. I’m not going anywhere. You don’t own me.”

“Yes I do.” He said, softly. “I paid your price, and I’ll get what I paid for.” He grabbed her arm more tightly. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing in all this but..”

“Your grace?” The soldier handed off the tray to one of the townies and drew his sword, heading in her direction. “Need a hand there?”

“Perdicus, let go of me.” Gabrielle said, in a low, urgent tone. “I don’t belong to you. I belong to Xena.”

He stared at her. “Thought you said you weren’t a slave.”

“I’m not.” She said. “I was, but she freed me.”

“Okay, then that’s set.” He started pulling her along.

Gabrielle dug her heels in and halted them both, just as the soldier caught up to her and put his sword point in Perdicus’ face. She yanked her arm free and backed up. “Yes, thanks. I think I could use a hand.” She was glad enough to retreat behind the man. “I think we’ve had a misunderstanding.”

Perdicus backed up away from the sword. “I understand you want to cheat me.” He said. “I’m not going to stand for it, Gabrielle. I have a claim.” He glared at the soldier. “Get away from me.”

“Get yourself away.” The soldier said. “This here is our queen’s chosen one. She’s got naught to do with the likes of you.” He shifted the sword forward. “Careful she doesn’t treat you like that Persian bitch yeah? Doubt you’d taste better.”

“What?” Perdicus moved away from the point again. “Keep out of this. She’s betrothed to me, and I’ve got a right!”

“No you don’t.” The soldier laughed. “She’s joined to the queen, you githead.”

“What happened back in Potadeia doesn’t mean anything to me anymore.” Gabrielle said. “I’m not that person, and I’ve got a different life now.”

“With the likes of HER?” His voice took on a coating of disgust.

“Well, you sure weren’t worried about your claim when we were taken, were you?” Gabrielle snapped back.. “I didn’t see any sign of you heading after us, those weeks we were on the road”

His eyes narrowed. “I was... I had to go somewhere.” He said.

Gabrielle took another step backwards. “Well, so did I.” She said. “So forget about that. I’m the queen’s consort, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave me alone.”

“And that’s a fact.” Her escort sheathed his sword and folded his arms. “M’lady? Should we get you back where ye belong now? Meat’s coolin.”

“Yes, thanks.” Gabrielle was glad to see three of the men from the town approaching, one carrying her tray, the other two looking like city guardsmen, maybe even some of the men who had come riding out to join the battle.

“M’lady, is there a problem?” The city guard nearest her asked. “How can we assist you?”

Gabrielle realized, of a sudden, that if she wanted Perdicus taken away and locked up somewhere, all she had to do was ask, and these men would do it for her. It was an unexpected twitch to her conscience, and she hesitated just long enough to make him wonder what she was going to do.

“No.” She finally said. “It was just a misunderstanding, thanks.” She smiled at the tray, which seemed to have sprouted several more people’s worth of food in the meantime including a nice pile of grapes. “That looks great. I know Xena’s going to appreciate it.”

The men all smiled, save Perdicus. They turned and as she started walking back through the crowd they formed a rough circle around her, leaving her old beau behind standing there alone.

“We put some sweetcakes on the edge there, your grace.” The elder pattered next to her. “Perhaps the queen would be pleased with them?”

“I think she would.” Gabrielle focused on the path ahead of her, putting the one behind her out of her mind. “Got any more of them?”

“I’m sure we can find some.”

**

Gabrielle had them settle the trays down in the outer chamber, one ear cocked but hearing no sound from the inner one. “That’s great. Thanks.” She kept her voice low, and put a finger to her lips. “I think her Majesty’s still resting.”

“Resting?” The elder murmured.

“Yes.” Gabrielle folded her hands together. “Fighting’s really hard work, and um...”

“She fought magnificently!” One of the other men said. “I saw her. It was incredible! Of course she would want to rest for a bit after that.”

“Right.” The blond woman gave him a grateful look. “Wasn’t she something?”

“Of course. Of course.” The elder said. “Perhaps tomorrow she will do us the great honor of allowing us to thank her properly?” He asked. “We have so much we would like to talk to her about.”

What to answer to that? Gabrielle pondered a moment. "I'm sure she'll be more than glad to receive you.. ah.. after she finishes her.. uh...planning. Of the next phase of the war." She explained. "I know it's great for your now, but we've still got a lot of work to do."

The men looked a little surprised. "Oh." The elder said. "Oh, of course." He tapped his head with his fingertips. "Silly of me, really. The barbarians headed off towards your homeland, of course Xena will have to deal with them. How shortsighted of us. My deepest apologies, M'lady."

"That's all right." Gabrielle murmured. "So I guess we'll talk more later." She glanced at the inner door. "Right?"

The men smiled at her, and backed out with laborious silence, closing the door with a tiny, scuffing snick.

Gabrielle studied the tray, remembering the days when she'd taken care of Xena during their first encounters together. She picked up a cup, and the wine flagon, and juggled those as she took one of the sweetcakes before she turned and went to the inner door.

She knocked the cup against the door before she worked the latch and pushed the door open, peering around the edge of it as she entered and bumped it closed. The candles had burned down some, but the room was still filled with golden light, and as her eyes turned towards the bed, that light gilded it's occupant.

Xena had her eyes closed, her planed face outlined by the shadows as she lay quietly, her hands at her sides.

For a moment, she was so still, Gabrielle's heart almost crawled out of her throat and ran across the room ahead of her, but then the queen's head turned, and her eyes opened, and one of those dark eyebrows hiked up. "Hi."

"Hi." Xena returned the greeting. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

Gabrielle set her burden down on the bedside table. "I am?"

"You are." The queen confirmed. "Sore eyes, sore asses, you just make everything feel better."

Gabrielle knelt by the bed, hearing a quiet weariness in her friend's voice through all the kidding. She curled her fingers around Xena's lower arm, rubbing her thumb against the soft skin on the inside of it. "How are you feeling?"

"Sucky."

"I have some wine, and some honeycakes." She told the queen. "And a bunch of other stuff out there but I thought maybe you'd want to start with that."

"Good thought." Xena gathered herself together and very slowly, eased herself up towards the headboard, so that she was half reclined. After a moment's pause, she relaxed again. "Okay, muskrat. Bring it on." She accepted the cup Gabrielle handed her, and watched as it was filled with a rich, fruity smelling pale liquid. "What's going on out there?"

Gabrielle eased down onto the edge of the bed, and broke a corner of one of the cakes off, waiting for Xena to take a sip of the wine before she offered her the pastry. "Everyone's celebrating." She said, as the queen delicately licked the flakes off her fingertips. "I think they think it's all over."

"Heard what you said to the nabobs out there." Xena chewed the pastry and washed it down with another sip of wine. "Idiots." She stared pointedly at the cake, and was offered another piece. "Good

line, though. Maybe I can convince them my regular after battle action is to take my partner to bed for three days. You think?"

Gabrielle broke off another piece of cake. "Um."

"Hey, it's worth a shot." The queen said. "Bring in the rest of whatever you've got and start having some before your guts crawl out your ears. I can hear them bitching."

Gabrielle surrendered the rest of the cake and got up, going into the outer room and recovering the big tray. The smell of the roasted meat was making her mouth water, and she was glad enough to bring it back to where Xena was resting.

"Are those grapes?"

offered it to Xena hesitantly. "Do you want to hold this? I could keep giving you stuff."

"No." Xena carefully took the plate and let it rest on her stomach. She picked up a piece of meat and bit into it, the taste sweet and a little spicy.

Sort of like Gabrielle. "Mm." The queen swallowed. "So didja hear them talking about me out there?"

Caught with her mouth full, Gabrielle merely nodded until she could get her mouth clear. "Yes. They were all saying they wished they'd been able to hear what was going on before the city guards came out to help us. They could see something was going on and all that, with the fire."

Xena put a grape in her mouth and bit into it. "You need to tell them what went on." She suggested. "Make it good. Give me three heads and six hands." She looked up after a long moment of silence to find her lover gazing at her intently. "What?"

"Nothing." Gabrielle went back to her slice of cheese. "I was just imagining you with all those fingers and lips."

The queen burst into laughter, regretting it a moment later when her back seized up and she almost tossed the plate on her stomach up right at her companion. "Ow. Son of a bacchae!"

Gabrielle quickly ditched her own plate and grabbed Xena's, setting in on the bedside table before reaching for the queen and getting her arm around the woman's shoulders. "Xena.. are you okay?"

Xena clenched her jaw tightly and pressed her forehead against Gabrielle's shoulder as the pain built and built before it finally eased off. "Gods."

Gabrielle held her still, cupping her hand against the side of the queen's head, until she heard the rapid, sharp breathing ease and felt Xena relax a little bit. "Wow."

"Ugh." Xena blinked, feeling tears wet her lashes as she was able to take deeper breaths and the spasms slowly eased off. "Well, that was about as much fun as crapping a coal would be."

Gabrielle winced. "You say the most amazing things." She advised her lover. "Are you okay now?" She felt Xena shift, and she cautiously helped her ease back onto the pillows. She let her hand rest on the queen's shoulder. "Can I do something to help?"

Xena very slowly moved into a more comfortable position, extending her legs out and letting her body lay down flat. She didn't really want to repeat the experience, and so she put her hands back folded on her stomach, and glanced sideways at her worried looking muskrat. "Make that offer again?"

"Which one?" The blond woman asked softly.

“Giving me stuff?”

Gabrielle picked up a piece of roast and dipped it in the sauce, then she offered it to her queen, absorbing the look of quiet gratitude in her eyes. “Of course.” She murmured. “I would do anything for you.”

Xena chewed and swallowed. The spasm had been a sobering reminder of the fact that she now had to come up with some actual reason to put everything, the war, the city, her future, on hold for a few days until her back healed.

Telling everyone she wanted to stay in bed with Gabrielle for that long, while giving her a personal kick, would do nothing to stabilize her standing with the soldiers, and even less to encourage the city men to follow her out on campaign.

Momentum was everything. Losing three days, assuming of course that’s all it would take her to heal this time would stop that momentum cold, and turn it back on itself. Easier for the men to stay here in the city and go on with their lives, than risk everything just for the glory of war.

And yet, there was no way for her to ignore this injury, nor bluff her way past everyone with it as she had with her arrow wound and Bregos.

With some assistance, maybe, she could walk across the room. Fighting, out of the question. Sitting on a horse, really out of the question.

Damn, damn, damn.

“Xena?” Gabrielle offered her another morsel. “What are we going to do?”

“I dunno.” The queen replied in a quiet voice. “What **are** we going to do?” She turned her head carefully and looked at her lover. “If we wait for me to get off my ass, it’ll be too late.”

Gabrielle blinked at her. “Are you asking me?” She hesitantly pointed at her own chest.

Xena nodded. “We need a damn good imagination here, and we both know who has a better one of those in this room, you cute little storyteller you.”

Thunderstruck, the blond woman sat there in silence, her eyes huge and round.

“C’mon, muskrat.” Xena nudged her with one hand. “Make up a story. I know you can do it. Imagine what would be the craziest, most amazing way to get our asses out of this, and tell me what it is. We’ll go from there.”

Gabrielle blinked again. “Xena, that’s not how that’s supposed to work.” She stammered. “You’re supposed to do things and I’m supposed to tell people about them. I’m not supposed to tell you what do!”

The queen shrugged, cautiously. “Life’s short.” She said. “Gotta try new things.” She nudged Gabrielle again. “Start thinking.”

“But..”

“I’m waiting.”

“Xena!”

“Still waiting.”

**

Gabrielle sat quietly in bed next to Xena, her legs tucked up crossed under her, her elbows resting on her knees, and her chin propped up on her hands.

The queen had her eyes closed, and her breathing was slow and deep. Outside, the noises had finally petered out, and it was almost as quiet outside the window as it was inside their rooms.

The candles still fluttered faintly in the breeze.

Slowly, Gabrielle straightened up, sighing, and reaching over to the table on her side of the bed to pick up her cup and take a sip from it. The wine, now room temperature, slipped down her throat to burn lightly in her stomach, as she tried to focus her thoughts on coming up with a plan.

Crazy. Totally crazy. She scratched the side of her nose, shaking her head a little bit. She understood that Xena was in a very tough situation – that they all were, really, if they had any hope of getting home and having home be in one piece.

So why ask her? Gabrielle frowned at her cup. What kind of plan was Xena really expecting her to come up with anyway?

Sholeh, she was pretty sure, would maybe go through the pass and rip everything to pieces just because she could, because it was Xena's and Xena had pretty much embarrassed the Hades out of her.

Or maybe, Sholeh would lead the army back against the city.

In either case, for sure Xena couldn't just hang out in bed for a couple of days while everything happened. She couldn't. Even Gabrielle, who knew very little about war, and about planning, knew that.

She turned her head and watched Xena sleep, her lover's face at rare peace, dark hair in some disarray. So what could they do?

What, really, could they do? Was Xena really expecting her to come up with some plan when Xena herself couldn't think of anything?

Sheesh.

Gabrielle took another sip of wine, rolling it around in her mouth before she swallowed it. The responsibility, whether real or something Xena had just said to her for her own somewhat twisted amusement, lay heavily on her shoulders.

What would Xena do?

What should Xena do?

She let the cup bump lightly against her lip. Well, the first thing she should probably do, she reasoned, is find out if Sholeh were running the other way, or coming back. That was sort of important, wasn't it? So she should get a bunch of the guys to go and find out, and come back to tell her. That would take a little while.

So then...

Gabrielle found herself starting to think in pictures. She could picture Xena calling the men in, and telling them what to do, and she knew the men would be glad to do her bidding. So then, if they came back and it turned out the Persians were coming back too, then what?

Then she could picture Xena telling the city people what to do. How to close the gates and what preparations to make. But they all knew the Persians could take over the city again, there being so many of them, so would they listen?

Should Xena just get in one of the ships and leave? What would Sholeh do then? Gabrielle thought that Sholeh would probably destroy the city no matter what, because she knew they'd really pissed her off. So since they really pissed her off, would she come back, or...

Or. Gabrielle considered another picture. What if Sholeh decided to cut her losses, and just keep going? She might be mad, but after all, Xena had already beaten them once – what if the Persian thought it would be a bad idea to take another shot at her?

So then she was back to the problem of having to picture out what Xena should do if they had to chase after the Persians and make them stop trying to destroy their homes, and that was the tough part.

She thought Xena thought she should ride right out after them and not let them get too far. Gabrielle, inexperienced as she was, thought that too. So what could Xena do?

She pondered. "What if we took a wagon?" She asked, in a soft whisper, aloud. "That's how the nobles ride... I've seen them. What if Xena could ride in a wagon so we could go after them?"

She imagined that in her head. She could see the structure, and the team of horses that would pull it. No one would think that was unusual, after all, queens were supposed to be treated like royalty – even if Xena herself shunned that most of the time.

Most of the time. But not this time. She could get the wagon from the city, they'd be glad to give it to her, Gabrielle was sure, and take all the men who were anxious now to fight and gain glory and they could follow them out as soon as tomorrow. "Yeah, a wagon."

She turned her head, and studied her sleeping companion.

What would Xena think of that plan? Gabrielle knew that her lover hated anyone to think she was weak, in any way. How would she think of riding in a wagon? Would she reject the idea because it meant she had to actually act like a queen, or would she embrace it as a clever way to disguise her injury and still get to go out fighting?

Hard to say. Xena was a tough read sometimes. She sometimes did exactly what Gabrielle expected her to do, and sometimes did exactly the opposite and there never really was much indication either way. But she also knew her lover was very smart, and because she was very smart, she sometimes would do things she didn't like to do just because they were the right thing.

Maybe this would be one of those things.

Gabrielle set her cup down and slowly leaned back against the pillows, stretching her legs out under the covers and allowing her body to relax, glad of the chance to lay still and get a bit more sleep herself before they had to face the coming morning.

She was still tired, even though they'd gotten a nap, but at least now she wasn't hungry anymore, and her body wasn't riding that fine edge of total exhaustion. She did feel sore, in spots. Her jaw still hurt a little, and her legs were stiff, the big muscles in the front of them aching when she flexed them.

She had a few cuts on her hands, and a big bruise on her arm. Even so, having lived through the battles she had in the last few days, she knew herself to be unspeakably fortunate and she was glad enough to let her body go limp against the soft surface of the bed.

It felt wonderful. Now that she'd sort of come up with an idea for Xena, she could even relax now and enjoy it, knowing that probably it would be the last time she'd get the chance for a while.

The room was relatively small, much smaller than her and Xena's quarters in the castle, but it had a sense of decorum, and a richness that reminded her just a little bit of their home.

She wished they were back there. Adventuring was fine and all that, but she was tired of the sleepless nights and the suffering, and the constant fear. Being here, being in this nice, comfortable bed reminded her of what her life with Xena had been up until a moon or two ago, and she had to admit even if only to herself, that she missed it.

She missed the quiet, sunlit mornings, and the big, always burning fire in the well made fireplace that had rock ledges nearby to hold her cooking things.

She missed the familiarity of making tea for Xena, while the queen prepared for the day.

She missed the long nights of winter, where she'd learned about the pleasures of the body, and those equally long hours up in Xena's practice chamber, where she'd kept her lover company while she did her sword drills.

She wanted to go back home and know that all again.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and exhaled, stretching her hand out and feeling the slightly rough texture of the sheets against her fingertips, and then pausing, as the cool feeling disappeared and her fingers were surrounded with living warmth and held.

She opened her eyes and looked at Xena, but the queen's eyes were still closed, and her chest was still slowly rising and falling in sleeping rhythm.

Gabrielle returned the clasp on her hand and lay still for a moment, then she turned over onto her side and eased closer to the queen, not wanting to disturb her sleep, but just close enough to feel the warmth of her body under the covers.

She watched Xena's profile, it's distinctive angles softened in the candlelight and gentled in sleep, taking away a bit of the queen's tense energy and leaving behind a more youthful, peaceful image she let fill her mind's eye.

This was hers. Gabrielle remembered that moment when she'd killed the enemy soldier on the battlefield, and for a second, her eyes, and Xena's eyes had met. She hadn't realized it then, but now as she lay here watching over the queen she understood that she'd passed a solemn milestone in her life.

She had, in a sense, gone from being someone who things happened to, to being someone who caused things to happen.

It was silly, and yet profound. Xena was the ultimate person who made things happen, and Gabrielle wondered if she had that kind of moment herself, when she'd crossed that line, and made that choice to be what she was.

It was a good feeling, which surprised her. Having Xena ask her to come up with a plan was a good feeling too. She felt like she was growing up, and becoming someone of some significance in this wild and crazy life that she was living.

Good feeling.

Gabrielle exhaled, then she glanced up again at Xena's profile, very surprised to see those pale eyes half open, watching her. "Oh!"

Xena studied her. "You figure it all out yet?"

"Mm." Gabrielle made a face. "I had a few ideas."

"A few?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah. Because there's more than one thing that could happen, isn't there?"

The queen smiled. "There sure is."

"So, anyway." The blond woman exhaled. "I thought about that, and about you, and made a story in my head about it."

"Good." The queen pulled her hand a little. "C'mover here and keep me warm." She said, in a low, sleepy burr. "Let's enjoy this while we can. Save your plan for tomorrow."

Gabrielle carefully squiggled over and pressed herself against Xena's right side, resting her head against the queen's shoulder and cautiously putting her arm across her waist. "Hey Xena?"

"Hey muskrat?"

"I love you." She gave Xena a gentle squeeze.

Xena touched her back, and rubbed it a little. "I love you too, Gabrielle." She answered, in a quiet voice. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Just thanks." The queen kissed the top of her head.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and soaked it all in. "You're welcome." She responded, with a tiny smile. "For whatever."

**

Part 28

Gabrielle woke slowly, her body drenched in sunlight from the window nearby. She let her eyes blink open, unsure of where she was for a minute until she remembered the war, and the battle, and why she was lying in an unfamiliar bed with a very familiar bedmate.

She took a breath, and eased away from Xena's still sleeping body, rolling over and stretching her limbs out with a sense of utter luxury. It felt blissfully good to be able to wake up in her own time, and feel restored instead of forcing herself to push forward into yet another day of war.

Outside, she could hear the sounds of the city. Men's voices were calling out and hoofbeats moved past, echoing slightly against the stones of the square. After another stretch, she rolled out of the bed on the far side, and got to her feet. "Mmph."

The stone floor was cool against the soles of her bare feet and she flexed her toes before she wandered over to the window and looked out.

The city center was a buzz with activity. Wagons were crossing from one side to the other, and in the city square, soldiers were busy with various activities involving weapons and armor. After watching a moment, she turned and went over to the sideboard.

The wine jug still had a little in it, and she poured it into a cup and sipped from it, using the rich wine to rinse the sleep from her mouth.

She was still a little stiff. Her calves hurt, and the front of her legs, and she straightened first one than the other out, clenching one hand and feeling the residual ache in her fingers. But other than that, she was surprisingly hale and she took advantage of the scraps on the tray she'd left to quiet a rumbling stomach.

Not too different than back in the castle. She'd always woken earlier than the queen back at home, and she'd used the early morning time to get herself sorted out, and arrange for their breakfast so that everything was ready by the time Xena got up.

Gabrielle turned and leaned against the sideboard, studying the still figure in the bed. Xena's breathing seemed normal, and she hoped the queen would be feeling better when she woke up, but in any case there was a lot to do and she decided she'd better get on with it.

She went over to the washbasin and dipped her fingers into the remaining liquid, glad to find it more or less tepid enough for her to wash herself and not get her teeth chattering. She dunked a piece of the linen left by into the basin and soaked it, then she started running it over her body.

The breeze brought a little chill in it's wake, and she shivered a trifle, but persisted. Though she'd bathed the night before, and though she'd done little more than sleep in a reasonably clean bed, she scrubbed her skin until it tingled and then washed her face with handfuls of the cool water.

You never knew, she mused as she dried herself off, when you might get a chance to get clean in the middle of a war, so she wasn't going to lose any opportunity now that she knew what it felt like to be grubby for days on end.

Finished, she donned the robe she'd been given the night before and tied it, running her fingers through her hair to sort it out a little. Then she walked to the door and gently opened it, peeking out into the outer chamber and looking around.

Finding it still and empty, she crossed it and went to the external door and repeated the process, this time finding a soldier stolidly on guard outside.

"M'lady." The man said, spotting her. "Best of the morning to you."

Gabrielle smiled at him. "Good morning to you too." She responded. "Do you think I could get some morning ale, and maybe some bread and cheese brought over? They haven't brought my boots back yet and I feel sort of weird going out there barefoot."

The soldier gave the impression he was trying to untie his tongue from around his tonsils. "Why, m'lady, of course." He spluttered. "Give me a moment, and I'll get something straight back to you." He turned and leaned out of the doorway, signaling to someone. "Ho, Jens! Need yer here a minute, yah?"

"Thanks." Gabrielle waited for Jens to appear, and smiled at him. "Good morning!"

"Your grace." Jens ducked his head in a graceful motion. "It is indeed a good morning. Is her majesty wanting any reports?"

Gabrielle hesitated. "Well, I'm sure she will want some." She said. "I know she's going to want to get everything arranged today."

"Of course." Jens agreed. "We have been working to gather supplies."

"Right."

“And there are men who wish to go out with us.” The soldier produced a brief smile. “Some, are useful, unlike others.”

“Sure.”

“M'lady, let me go tend to your wants.” The older soldier told her. “I'll be back shortly, I see you are in good hands with Jens here.” He hustled off, ducking past the arch that covered the stairwell and rambling down it at a rapid pace.

Jens turned to watch him in surprise before returned his attention to Gabrielle. “What's gotten into him then?”

Gabrielle eased the door open a bit more. “I asked him to get something.” She explained. “Anyway, I'm sure Xena's going to want every single detail about what's going on, and what you're doing, and what's being prepared.. she's got to plan, you know.”

Jens blinked. “W... ah, yes, of course!”

“And she really depends on you, and on Brendan.” Gabrielle breezed on. “So while she's.. ah.. planning strategy on what to do about the Persians, she needs you to get everything ready so she's got all the stuff she needs when she needs it.”

The soldier straightened up. “And that's exactly what we're doing.” He said. “You can let her majesty know she can count on us, for sure. We'll get everything settled up.” He turned and started off, then started back. “Ah, a guard...”

“It's okay.” Gabrielle made a shooping gesture. “Your friend will be right back, and we'll be fine until then. Go on – you know how Xena hates to be kept waiting.”

Jens needed no further prompting. He gave Gabrielle a grin, and left.

Gabrielle waited, but the hall remained very quiet, and she pulled her head back inside and shut the door after the last of his footsteps had faded away. She turned, and regarded the outer room, which was small, but well made, with heavy furniture against the walls and dressers in the corners.

Curious, she wandered over to one of them and opened the door to it, peeking inside to find fine garments hanging on wooden dowels, and folded on the polished wooden shelves inside. The smell was of lavender and spice and for a moment, it almost reminded her of the one good cabinet in the home she'd grown up in.

Her mother's things, precious to her, were in there. Hand made dresses and things her own mother had left for her, bits of tattered finery that represented what she'd brought into the household she'd made with Gabrielle's father.

Gabrielle reached out and touched the soft fabric, seeing the flames in her mind's eye that had consumed their home, and everything in it, including the cabinet and all her mother's memories.

Then she let her hand fall and closed the door, turning to walk back to the inner door and then through it, slipping back into the sleeping chamber and glancing quickly toward the bed to see if Xena had woken.

She had. “Good morning.” Gabrielle went over to her side of the bed and crawled into it, squirming right across the mattress until she was close enough to Xena to lean forward and kiss her shoulder. “Do you feel any better?”

Xena had her hands clasped across her stomach and she turned her head to study her companion. "Mm." She rumbled. "Better than what?"

Gabrielle pressed her cheek against the queen's arm. "Than yesterday." She clarified. "I sent someone to bring some breakfast back for us. There's a lot of stuff going on outside."

Her bedmate made a face. Then she very cautiously shifted, and turned onto her side, drawing one knee up to bump lightly against Gabrielle's. "Hm."

"Is that good or bad?"

Xena considered the question, pursing her lips. "Well." She sighed. "It's more than I could do last night without wanting to pull one of my arms off and beat myself over the head to take my mind off the pain in my ass so I guess it's progress."

Gabrielle moved a bit of the queen's hair away from her eyes so she could see them better. Then she traced one of Xena's eyebrows. "You're so pretty." She murmured, watching a charmed expression grudgingly work its way onto her lover's face. "I wish I could make you feel better."

She expected a smart retort back, but Xena's lips merely pursed, and then relaxed as she lay, her lashes fluttering closed a few times as she continued stroking her face.

"I wish you could too." Xena finally answered. "So, what's the plan?"

It took Gabrielle a very long set of heartbeats before she remembered what Xena was talking about. "Oh." She said, suddenly feeling very nervous before those sharp eyes. "Well.. um..."

"Um?"

She bit her lower lip. "Don't laugh at me, okay? It's my first plan."

A wry, but merry twinkle appeared. "If I ever told you what MY first plan was you'd disown me." The queen admitted. "Hades, I'd disown me."

"Never." Gabrielle shook her head. "Anyway, I thought... well, I thought maybe it would be.. if you want to go and chase Sholeh.."

"Chase." Xena mused. "Like it so far. Keep going."

"I guess if you hurt like that riding a horse is a bad idea, huh?" Gabrielle watched the queen's expression intently.

Xena snorted.

"So what if we could take one of those nice wagons, like what the nobles use, and you could ride in that?" She got the words out as fast as she could, almost biting her tongue as she closed her mouth when she was done talking.

Xena looked thoughtful.

"I mean.. " Gabrielle was encouraged by the lack of immediate derisive laughter. "You could use it sort of as a.. uh.. planning station?"

One dark brow cocked.

"You are the queen, right? You sort of should have something nice to go in, shouldn't you?" She went on. "That way, you could have some time to get better, and we could still go and head back towards home and do whatever you want to do with the other army."

“Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle peeked at the queen’s face. “Yes?”

“The thought of riding my ass in a cart like an old woman is making me want to throw up.”

“Oh.”

“But it’s probably the best plan I’ve heard in days.” The queen admitted, with a genuine, frank smile.

“At least only my ego gets damaged in this one. Let’s go for it.”

“Oh!” Gabrielle was astonished. “You mean it?”

“I do.” Xena confirmed. “I feel like an ass for not thinking of it myself, but I’m not going to throw away a good idea just because it wasn’t mine.” She paused. “At least not one of your ideas.” She amended.

“I’d just steal anyone else’s and make them believe it was mine.”

Gabrielle exhaled in relief. “Wow. Okay.” She said. “Do you.. should I tell Brendan to find one? A wagon, I mean? I told them to gather up all the stuff they would need and get everything else ready for you.”

The queen chuckled wryly. “I can just imagine what he’d come back with.” She said. “I’ve got a better idea. But let’s get some food into you so I have peace and quiet to think in, and then we’ll start making trouble.” She patted Gabrielle’s knee. “Then I need you to find me a nice big stick.”

“A stick?”

“Yep.”

“Are you going to beat people up from bed?”

Xena chuckled wryly. “They only wish.”

**

Gabrielle tugged on her boots, glad at last to have some protection from the cold hard stone against her feet. She wiggled her toes, then she stood up and shifted her shoulders inside her surcoat, brushing her fingers across the hawkhead insignia bold on her chest.

She liked it more and more, every time she wore it, and now, after the last battle, she felt she even had a right to be a part of Xena’s army because she’d done something to deserve it.

With a final brush, she picked up the tall, gnarled staff she’d found and headed for the bedroom, careful not to smack the stick into anything as she opened the door and maneuvered it inside. “Xena?”

“Yes.” The queen was now lying sideways on the bed, with her legs extending off it, and her bare feet on the floor.

Gabrielle came around to her side and peered down at her in puzzlement. “What are you doing?”

“Watching spiders race.” The queen told her. “I’ve got a bet on that big one with the white spot.”

The blond woman tipped her head back and studied the ceiling for a moment. Then she turned and sat down on the bed, laying back next to Xena and getting her head as close to the queen’s as she could.

“Xena, I don’t see any spiders.”

She turned her head and found a pair of mischievous blue eyes watching her. “Xena.”

"You're so easy." The queen chuckled. "Got my stick I see." She looked at the gnarled staff. "Nice. Give it over here." She carefully lifted her hand and accepted the staff as Gabrielle passed it to her. "Okay. Promise you won't laugh at me."

Gabrielle rolled over onto her side, propping her head up on one hand as she laid her other on Xena's arm. "I'd never do that." She reassured the queen. "Besides, you're hurt. What's funny about that?" She rubbed her thumb against her lover's skin.

"You ain't seen me do this yet." Xena carefully slid off the bed and onto the ground on her knees, grabbing for the mattress surface as she forced herself upright, holding onto the staff as she shifted her weight. "See.." She stopped talking and clamped her jaw shut as her back took violent protest at the motion. "Urf"

Gabrielle scrambled off the bed also, her hands twitching as she tried to figure out how to help. "Oh my gosh.. "

"See, with this problem I've got.." The queen grunted, as she waited for the spasm to pass. "I can lay down or I can stand up." She exhaled, and blew her bangs from her eyes with a puff of air. "It's sitting that's a bitch."

"Can I do something?" Gabrielle watched her anxiously. She could see Xena's chest heaving and the awful tension in her shoulders despite the casual words and the desire to fix her lover's problem was driving her almost half crazy.

"Sure." Xena readied herself. "Take your clothes off and do a dance for me."

"Xena, I'm being serious!"

"So am I." The queen regarded her with a wry smile. "You can't haul me upright and you can't fix my back, so at least give me something to take my mind off how much this hurts."

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips and exhaled.

"Just kidding." Xena motioned cautiously with her head. "C'mere."

Relieved, Gabrielle came around to her side and put a hand on her back. "Okay."

"I'm going to pull myself up." The queen said. "You can try to keep me steady, but if I start to go down, shove my ass back towards the bed and get the Hades out of the way. I don't want to land on the floor and I don't want to land on you."

"I got you." Gabrielle immediately wrapped her arm around the queen's shoulders, bracing herself as Xena wrapped her hands around the staff and started to rise. She helped as best she could, getting her own shoulder under her lover's arm and taking some of the strain off as she managed to pull herself upright and onto her feet.

It was shocking and somewhat scary seeing Xena like this. Gabrielle kept a tight hold of her as she let out a distressed hiss, and she felt the body pressed against her go rigid with tension.

After a long moment, the queen relaxed a trifle. "By the gods." She muttered. "I think croaking would be less painful than this." She shifted her grip a trifle on the staff and leaned forward, breathing hard. "Oh, damn it."

Gabrielle was out of things to say, so she just held on, giving her lover as much support as she could. At least the queen seemed likely to remain upright. Through her hold, she could feel her breathing slowing, as Xena rested her head against the hands she had folded around the staff.

She gave the queen a one armed hug, careful not to pull her off balance.

Xena waited for the sparks to fade from her peripheral vision and until she was sure she wasn't going to fall down before she moved her hands a little higher on the staff and got all the way upright. For a minute, she thought her back was going to go out again, but the bones merely popped into place unpleasantly, a grinding sensation that made her stomach lurch. "Ugh."

"Wow." Gabrielle murmured. "That sounds really bad."

Xena sighed. "Next time I get any stupid ideas about going to war, remind me of this, willya?" She said. "Okay, now we're gonna go over to the other side of the room, and get my clothes on." She eased the staff forward and took a cautious step, leaning as much of her weight on the stick as she could.

Gabrielle stuck to her like a tick, keeping her arm firmly around Xena's waist as they slowly crossed the room and ended up near the dresser. Once there, Xena turned and leaned back against the wooden edge, releasing one hand off the staff and patting her companion on the back with it. "Thanks."

Gabrielle really didn't want to release her hold, but she did, taking a step back and watching Xena's pale, and tense face. "You sure you want to do this? Maybe you should just lay back down, Xena.. you look horrible."

"Thanks." The queen repeated, in a wry tone. "I'd love to go lay down, but I've got to be the queen for a while, and I can't do that on my back in a shift." She paused. "Despite popular opinion to the contrary."

"Okay." Gabrielle studied her. "Do you want the leather things, or the metal things?"

Xena placed her staff between her feet and folded her hands around it. It was taller than she was, and had lots of knobs and curls to hold onto. "Leather." She said. "And by the way, thanks for the stick. It's perfect."

She watched her bedmate trot off to the outer room to fetch the requested garment, then she turned her attention to the basin of water nearby.

Wash herself? Or wait and ask Gabrielle to do it. Xena pondered the serious question until the door re-opened and her muskrat reappeared, her leathers clutched in her cute little fingers. She came back over to where Xena was leaning and set the garment down, giving it a pat.

"They cleaned all our stuff." Gabrielle said. "Let me get your underwraps."

Gabrielle wasn't her body servant any more, but Xena was content to let her act as one since she was really incapable of doing most of it herself anyway. She waited for her lover to come back over and then she steeled herself to stand upright again. "Need you to do me a favor."

"Anything." Gabrielle replied instantly.

Xena chuckled a little. "I'll remember that when I can stand up without screaming again." She said. "Right now I need you to get this rag off me and wipe me down." It occurred to her, as the blond woman willingly started to do her bidding, that there were achingly few people in her life she could ever have asked to do this, much less wanted to ask.

Somehow, over the course of their relationship, she'd realized Gabrielle was the one person in her life she could tolerate seeing the unglamorous, crabby, unpretty side of her. Now, she stood quietly as her lover untied the laces on her shift and eased it off her, half unconsciously leaning close to give her a kiss her, and a little nip there.

Natural as breathing. Xena found herself accepting it naturally as breathing, this solicitous affection that had become so much a part of her life she'd almost... almost forgotten what it was like before Gabrielle came into it.

A burnishing of her soul she'd never expected.

Xena smiled as Gabrielle picked up a bit of linen and doused it in the water, then moved closer and started gently wiping her skin with it. Despite her discomfort, and the knife of pain riding the edge of every motion, the touch and the faint almost grin on the blond woman's face took her mind past it.

"Your cut looks okay." Gabrielle washed around it. "At least."

"At least." The queen nuzzled her hair, nibbling a bit of the soft blond locks close to her shoulder. "I don't think I could take having my guts hanging out at the same time, know what I mean?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle leaned closer and kissed her right between the breasts she was cleaning. "I know what you mean."

Xena felt a pleasant surge of passion overtake the discomfort in her back, and she reveled in the momentary bliss as the tension relaxed a little. She draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulder and rested her cheek against her companion's head, fighting the urge to hobble her cranky ass right back into the bed and take Gabrielle with her.

Tempting. Very, very tempting.

However.

"The head of the city was waiting outside." Gabrielle murmured as she worked. "He wants to talk to you."

"Uh huh." Xena felt the cloth bring a wash of coolness across her back, then travel over her hip down her thigh. "What's he want to talk to me about?"

"I don't know." Gabrielle sounded apologetic. "I didn't ask him." She washed the inside of the queen's legs, pausing to give the queen a little nibble.

"S'allright." The queen leaned back against the credenza. "Keep doing that and I won't care."

Her companion chuckled softly. "Brendan and Jens are there too. I think they want to tell you all the stuff they've done to get ready."

"Great." Xena tilted her head just enough to nibble on Gabrielle's ear. "Then I only have to get through this once, and we can go find something more interesting to do before we have to go chasing after that massive pain in the ass from Persia."

Gabrielle finished her washing and got the queen's wraps in place, not without the odd nip and chuckle in the process. "Okay." She put her hand on Xena's hip. "Ready for your other stuff?"

"No." Xena sighed. "But let's do it." She decided staying leaned back was probably her best course, and she braced one hand on the top of the counter and gripped her staff with the other. She held her breath as Gabrielle very carefully eased the leathers over her feet. "Don't lift em up." She said, grimacing a little as an injudicious motion jarred her back.

Gabrielle patted her knee before she eased the leathers upward, standing and pulling the garment up over the queen's hips and into place around her. "Okay." She looked up and saw the closed eyes. "Xena?"

One blue orb appeared. "Yes?"

"You okay?"

"Really want me to answer that question?" Xena sighed. "Fasten those straps, willya? Then I'll go behind that table there and pretend to look at maps without crying while you let the crowd in. How's that?"

Gabrielle folded her arms. "I'd rather just go lie down in bed with you."

"Seductionist."

"Xena."

"Sooner you let em in, sooner we hit the sack. Move it."

**

Xena leaned on the edge of the table, studying the big parchment rolled out on top of it. She kept her eyes on the surface after she heard the door open, only lifting her head when the footsteps that entered stopped. "Morning. "

"Mistress." Brendan ducked his head respectfully.

"Oh, your majesty." The town elder made a pretentious, sweeping, ridiculous bow, almost touching his head to the floor. "I am so grateful you allowed me this audience."

Xena's eyebrow cocked. Gabrielle walked around to join her behind the table, folding her hands on the edge of it. "Be nice." She whispered. "We need him to give us the best wagon."

"You're spoiling my fun, muskrat." Xena uttered back. "Is that nice to do to someone in agony?"

Gabrielle looked mutely at her, from under adorably shaggy bangs.

Xena rolled her eyes. "You're welcome." She addressed the elder. "Thanks for the shack. It's nice." She indicated the room with a careful hand. "Unfortunately I won't be spending much time in it."

The man bowed again. "So I understand, your Majesty." He said. "Your captain tells me you wish to leave this evening, even? We thought we would be graced with your presence at least another night, so that we might properly thank you."

A hot jolt of pain lanced up her spine as she moved the wrong way and she almost stopped breathing.

"Thanks very much." Gabrielle spoke up. "It's really nice of you, and we do really appreciate it." She took a step away from the queen, drawing the man's eyes. "We just have so much left to do, and there are people back home counting on us to stop the Persians from doing to our home what they did to yours."

"Of course." The man bowed to Gabrielle. "So you said before, and we understand, your highness."

Xena exhaled and was able to lick her lips, blinking her eyes a few times before she focused her attention back on the elder and her thankfully perceptive bedmate. "Right." She said. "So here's what we need from you instead of a banquet."

"Majesty." The man bowed. "Anything."

"Ten elephants, twelve ships of war, and three hundred casks of wine."

The elder froze, staring at her. Brendan put his hands behind his back and peered out the window. Gabrielle merely sighed.

“No elephants?” Xena hazarded a guess. “Ah well.” She lifted her hand and let it drop to the table’s surface.

“Majesty, ah.. I... “ The man cleared his throat. “I’m sure we could find some.”

The queen managed a wry grin. “What we really need is provisions for the army.” She said. “I know you’ve been raped clean, but whatever you can spare cause that bitch won’t leave much to forage off of.”

The elder looked profoundly relieved. “Of course.” He blurted. “Already, they are bringing baskets of what we have into the square there, and oxen carts to draw it.”

“Nice.”

“And.. aside from..ep..ph...whatever those were, is there something else we can offer you?” The elder asked in an earnest tone. “Your majesty, with no jesting, you have offered your all for our city. We owe everything to you.”

“Mm.” Now that she was at the brink of asking, Xena found herself unable to. Her pride clamped her jaw shut, unable to wrench the request for what she knew everyone who knew her would view as a weakness from her lips.

“Xena.” Gabrielle. “Can I ask a favor?”

Huh? Jerked from her internal wrestling, the queen turned her head and looked at her companion. “Here?” She flicked her eyes to the men then back to Gabrielle. “Now??”

Gabrielle closed her eyes as a blush colored her skin, vividly visible in the sunlight. “Not that kind of favor.”

“Damn.” Xena replied in a mild tone, watching the faces of the two men also redden. “What kind, then?” She asked curiously.

The blond woman collected her composure and put her hands behind her back. “It’s... “ She paused. “I know we’ll be riding hard after the Persians, and I’m not a good rider. Do you think I can ride in the ox carts”

Xena blinked at her, both dark eyebrows knitting into an almost straight line as her jaw dropped a trifle.

“Oh, your highness!” The elder threw up his hands. “Please, let us not hear of you riding so! You must have a coach! You may take my own coach, in fact, with two sturdy horses to draw it we cannot think of you riding behind the cows!”

Gabrielle went over to the man and grasped his hands. “Oh, that’s so nice of you!”

Xena’s jaw clicked shut, and she had to look at the table to keep from bursting out laughing at the cutely diabolical smile on her lover’s face. “You little fox.” She muttered under her breath. “I’m gonna make you squeak for that.”

“Majesty?” Brendan cleared his throat. “Did you say somewhat?”

The queen straightened carefully. “Nah.” She said. “I was just talking to myself.” She gave the elder a gracious if tentative nod of her head. “On my consorts behalf, thanks.” She said. “Hades knows, I don’t want her bottom bounced raw from the saddle before I get my chance at it.”

The elder looked a bit faint, and he released Gabrielle's hands. "Ah... well, of course we'd be.. ah.." He covered his embarrassment with another bow. "It will be my honor, your highness. I will have it prepared at once."

He backed towards the door, bowing all the way, until he backed right out of the room and the door swung closed behind him.

"You." Xena leaned on the table again, trying to ignore the increasing pain along her spine that was reaching down into the backs of her legs. "Are trouble."

"Me?" Brendan asked. "Why, Mistress?" He looked around in a puzzled manner. "Did I do something and not see it?"

"I think she means me." Gabrielle ducked around the table and put a gentle hand on Xena's back. "Wasn't that a good story though?"

"It was." Xena replied quietly. She hesitated, then she looked up and met Brendan's eyes. "Backs out." She said, briefly. "Same old story."

Brendan's eyes popped wide open. "Is it?" He blurted. "Ah, Xena."

The queen nodded. "Went out last night." She shifted carefully. "Just my luck, huh?" She gave Gabrielle a sideways look. "My pride owes you one." She managed a grin for her lover.

Brendan came over to the other side of the table, a look of deep concern on his face. "For the love of the gods, Xena. Stay here. Let us go." He said. "It's not worth your risking it, not after the last time, I remember.." He stopped, when Xena lifted her hand in a warning gesture. "Xena."

"I know." Xena cut him off. "I know, Brendan. I've got no mind to spend the rest of my life in bed." She draped one arm over Gabrielle's shoulders. "That's what the coach is for."

"B.." Brendan stopped, and looked at Gabrielle, then he looked back at Xena. "The coach? The one the .." He let his hands rest on the table. "For you?"

The queen nodded. "Only way I can do it." She tasted the bitterness of the words and felt a moment of intense self anger. "Damn it."

"Bigods." The old captain chuckled, shaking his head. "Little one, that was well played." He complimented Gabrielle. "Had me head over knuckles, for sure."

Gabrielle didn't really have time to enjoy the praise, her eyes watching the paleness grow across the queen's face. "Thanks." She said softly. "Xena, do you want to sit down?"

"Oh no." Xena closed her eyes and leaned her weight onto her hands, the darts of pain making her sick to her stomach. "That's the last thing I want to do." She could feel the blood draining from her face and the world started to fade out a little as she closed her eyes and the insides of the lids flashed bright red with the throbbing in her spine. "Hang on a minute."

"I'm going to hang on to you." Gabrielle got an arm around her.

Xena concentrated on breathing deeply and slowly, forcing muscles up and down her torso to relax in order to ease the pain of the spasms. She'd forgotten what it felt like to do it, so many years having passed since she'd felt this particular agony.

The warmth of Gabrielle's arm penetrated her leathers, and she was aware of Brendan on her other side, the touch of his scarred hand on her shoulder a fragile reassurance.

Slowly, far too slowly, the ache faded a little, and her legs stopped shaking. She opened her eyes and let them focus on the map, the blurred greens and browns easing reluctantly into focus. "Damn."

"Xena, let me get a healer." Brendan said.

"To do what?" The queen asked, biting off the words. "You think I wouldn't have done something already if there was anything to do other than drug me senseless?"

The old captain sighed.

"Do you want to go lay down?" Gabrielle asked. "I think you felt better laying down."

Xena stared the table top, then she exhaled and slowly eased her weight off her hands and back onto her legs. The pain was there, but it didn't intensify, and she pushed her hair back off her forehead with a sense of impotent fury.

Damn it, she hated this. "Yeah." She finally muttered. "Might as well take it while I can get it." She started to reach for the staff, but somehow Gabrielle had half her weight, and Brendan had the other half, and she was part walking part being carried back over to the bed.

She considered protesting. Her often ignored better sense, though, kept her jaws shut and she gratefully let herself down on the soft surface and stretched out again, feeling a sense of utter relief as the pain subsided to something more or less bearable.

Gabrielle was petting her like a kitten. Xena felt like biting her lover, but decided risking another spasm wasn't worth the pleasure of hearing her squeal. With a sigh, she tucked her arm under her pillow and eased onto her side, drawing one knee up to ease the strain on her back.

She found herself nose to nose, almost, with Gabrielle, who was leaning on her elbows on the bed, her eyes filled with anxious worry.

Aw. Xena leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the lips. "Cheer up." She kindly advised her lover. "I'm not dead." She paused. "Yet."

Gabrielle scowled.

"Can I bring you anything, Xena?" Brendan asked, from a few steps away. "Remedies? Herbs? I've got the men out scrounging."

Xena was still looking into those gentle eyes across from her. "Got everything I need right here, Brendan." She said. "Thanks anyway. Just get the men ready to move out before sundown."

"Aye."

"Beat it."

"Aye."

Brendan closed the door behind him, leaving the two of them alone.

**

"Xena." Gabrielle said, after a long moment of them just staring at each other. "Please tell me what I can do to help you. Not that.. " She held a hand up a little as the queen was about to speak. "Not that silly stuff. For real."

For real. Xena took a few breaths, grateful that her body seemed to be settling down at least for the moment. "I don't know." She answered honestly. "I don't really know what to do, outside of swilling more of that herb and losing the world for a while."

"So do that." Gabrielle urged. "It's just morning. We've got time, right?"

Time. Xena knew she really didn't have time. "Maybe." She said. "Depends how sure Brendan is no one's heading this way." She fingered the pillow edge. "I don't want to get trapped here, Gabrielle. If Sholeh does come back, this place is toast."

"But.."

"But?" Xena looked at her. "Sweetheart, the only thing keeping that army back before was me, and I aint' doing that any time soon today."

Gabrielle put her chin down on her crossed wrists. "What did you call me?" She asked, a puzzled smile on her face.

Xena felt a blush warm her skin quite unexpectedly. "Shut up." She scowled. "Anyway, we've got to get out from these damn walls and the sooner the better."

"Okay."

Xena slid her hand across the sheet and closed her fingers around Gabrielle's arm, feeling the muscles shift under her touch and the warmth of her lover's skin against her palm. "Thank you."

Gabrielle's eyes shifted right and left, then she looked back at Xena, head cocked in puzzlement.

"For sacrificing your bravado in honor of my hoary ego." The queen said. "Since when do you not like riding?"

A half grin appeared on the blond woman's face. "I remembered when you were hit by the arrow." She said. "You didn't want people to know."

"Mm."

"I figured.. maybe this wasn't the same thing, but you still wouldn't want people to know."

"Mmhmm."

Gabrielle moved her head a little and gave Xena's knuckles a kiss. "And I figured it would be better if I got to fix it up so all the soft pillows and nice things in it could be blamed on me."

Xena sighed. "Am I that obvious and transparent?" She complained. "I should just go off and be a fisherman or something." Her grumbling only got her a few more kisses. "Take off your clothes and get into bed with me. Make me feel better."

Gabrielle figured that would probably make her feel better too. In fact, there wasn't anything she'd rather do than take her clothes off and climb into bed with Xena, snuggling up next to her and feeling her body touch..

"Gabrielle?"

"Uh?" Gabrielle blinked, and looked up at her companion. "Sorry."

"Do I want to know what you were just thinking about??"

“Well... you in bed, actually.” She straightened up and reached for the buckle holding her belt closed. “Let me just..”

Xena reached out and touched her hand. “Wait.” She said. “I’m not thinking straight. “ She paused. “Too much of those damn herbs. Go get the wagon squared away, and in the market – get me all the medicinal crap you can find.”

Gabrielle hesitated, the desires of her body almost overtaking her desire to do what Xena wanted her to do. She let her hand drop to the bed as she tried to refocus her thoughts, her mind stubbornly unwilling to turn away from the quiet figure in the bed.

Her mind and her heart were marching resolution in different directions. It was the strangest thing she’d ever felt and she didn’t really like it at all.

“Gabrielle?” Xena’s voice took on a hint of question. “Did you hit your head again or something?”

“No.”

Xena’s brow wrinkled. She could detect an odd, nearly grumpy expression on her companions face, not at all normal for her. She reached out and touched Gabrielle’s arm again, and when the blond lashes lifted and she could look at her eyes, she was surprised to see a dark look of passion peering back at her.

Oo. Xena bit her tongue as she opened and then closed her mouth, her brain scrambling to articulate the directly warring instincts of brain and groin. She ended up sneezing, and that nearly made her back go out again as she gripped the sheets and gritted her teeth as Gabrielle put her arms around her in alarmed instinct.

“Xena! Take it easy!”

Easy for you to say. “Just get in the bed.” The queen sighed. “Keep me company for a while since my brains are leaking out my ears and I may end up writing poetry or something equally inane unless you distract me.”

“Uh.”

Xena unlatched the belt that was in easy reach of her hand, and loosened her surcoat, giving the heavy fabric a tug. “C’mere..”

Gabrielle captured her hands, a look of mixed embarrassment and pleasure. “I will. But let me go get things started first, okay?” She said. “And I’ll bring you back everything I can find that’s green.”

Paradoxically, now that her wishes were being attended to, Xena found herself profoundly disappointed. Her body had already been anticipating Gabrielle’s touch and she battled the need ferociously as she released her lover and put her head back down on the pillow. “Okay. G’wan.”

“I’ll be fast.” Gabrielle gave her hand a squeeze. “I want...”

“I want too.” Xena interrupted her, adding a pout to emphasize the statement.

They looked at each other. Gabrielle blinked and shrugged her shoulders, producing an engaging grin.

Xena sighed and shook her head. “I think I’m going nuts.” She admitted. “Maybe I got my head kicked one too many times this round.”

“Well.” Gabrielle settled onto her elbows again, bringing her head down to almost the same level as the queen’s. “I didn’t get my head kicked at all and I feel the same way.” She said. “It feels so weird. We have all this stuff going on but I don’t really want to do anything but..um..”

“Mm.”

“If this is being nuts it sure feels good.”

Xena had to smile at that. Both for the fact that it was true, and because knowing it was true made her feel lighter inside, no matter how much she was hurting. “Being in love kicks you in the ass, doesn’t it?” She remarked.

“I guess.”

“In a good way.” The queen said. “In a good way.” She repeated, in a softer tone. “You know something, Gabrielle.. I get a real kick out of you telling stories about me.”

Having taken a breath to speak, Gabrielle now let it trickle out her slightly open lips, thrown off her thoughts by the sudden change of subject. “Uh.. um. Thanks.”

“I want this story to have a happy ending.” The queen said. “I want us to go on and have a wild and sexy life with each other. I don’t want to just keep on nearly dying and hurting and...” She paused for a moment, aware of the still, quiet form kneeling next to her. “Why is life being so hard on me right now, huh?”

Gabrielle reached over and stroked Xena’s forehead.

“Was it because I wanted to go out and kick people’s asses?” Xena wondered. “Or maybe this is what I get for being a jerk all these years. You think?”

Her companion uttered a soft sound, then she leaned back and tugged her surcoat off, letting it drop next to the bed as she got up to sit on the edge of the mattress to pull her boots off. “You know what I think Xena?”

“Bet I’m going to in a second.”

Gabrielle dropped her boots on the ground next to her surcoat and very carefully climbed over Xena’s half curled form, snuggling up and pressing her body against her lover’s back. “I think I don’t give a sheep tail about what’s going on out there.”

“We should care.”

“I care about you.” Gabrielle kissed the back of Xena’s neck and wrapped her arm around the queen’s waist. “I care about how you feel, and making you hurt less. I don’t care about Persians and war and tomorrow.”

The sudden warmth enveloping her sore back nearly made Xena start cooing. Instead, she cleared her throat and settled her hand over Gabrielle’s arm. Her body relaxed as the heat penetrated stiff muscles and she surrendered to the gentle, teasing nibbles going across the back of her neck.

It felt like a taste of Elysia.

She also felt guilty, for not going and doing and being the leader her people expected her to be, no matter that she understood trying to do any of those things in the condition she was wouldn’t get her even so far as the damn door.

Gabrielle should go get the damn wagon ready.

She should call Brendan back and start giving orders.

“Xena.” Gabrielle murmured into her ear. “Our story will have a happy ending. I promise you.”

On second thought, Brendan was older than she was and if the hoary bastard didn't know how to prepare an army to move out by now, she should just kill him. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

After all, she was the damn queen, and she should act like it for a change. Xena eased her shoulders back a little, and turned her head enough to re-aim Gabrielle's attentions, allowing the sensual flow of passion distract her body from it's misery.

Maybe life was kicking her ass, but nothing said she had to stand there and take it, now did she?

Gabrielle pushed open the stable door and slipped inside, smiling when she heard Patches whicker on hearing her. “Hey Patches.” She gave Tiger a pat on the side as she eased between the big stallion and her pony. “Are you guys ready to go home?”

Patches presented her with a mouthful of hay, which he liberally sprinkled all over her surcoat as he nuzzled her chest in greeting.

“I'm going to get you guys ready.” Gabrielle told him. “And we're going to go out with the guys and Xena, and we're going to head off down the road back towards home. How about that, huh?”

Patches seemed agreeable to the plan. He stood quietly as she put his bridle on, and lipped at his water trough as she settled his saddle onto his back and cinched it. “There you go.”

Gabrielle was aware that outside, there were at least three dozen men who would have been thrilled to have done this for her, and she was also aware the city grooms she'd dodged on the way into the stable would have also.

But she liked the horses, and she had a few minutes before the wagon was ready. “Okay, Patches. Hang on while I get your friend here.”

Tiger eyed her as she approached his head, his nostrils flaring just a trifle as she eased on his bridle, his tongue scraping against her fingers as he took in the bit. Gabrielle stroked his nose and gave him a kiss, then she stepped back and walked around the stallion to where his saddle was laying across a wooden divider, the leather of it roughly burnished in the fading light.

Gabrielle studied the saddle, then she turned and looked at her lover's horse, whose back was high above her own head. “Hm.”

She was dressed in her surcoat again, with a clean shirt and leggings underneath. The last thing she'd done in the nice room they'd been given was taken a bath, and now she felt refreshed and ready to travel after a long day of doing nothing much but necking with Xena.

“Tough job, Tiger, but someone has to do it, you know?” Gabrielle considered, then she led the stallion over to where the saddle was and stopped him. “Now, hold still, okay?”

She carefully climbed up onto the wooden partition and caught her balance, leaning against the horses side as she bent down and got a grip on Xena's saddle. “Don't move.”

Tiger snorted.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and heaved the saddle up, it's weight more than double the one that her pony used. She grunted as she got it up to the level of Tiger's back, then squawked as the stallion started to move away. "No!"

Patches came to her rescue. He turned and butted his friend in the side with his head as he started to walk off, making him take a step back swing his nose around.

"Buh." Gabrielle took advantage of her luck and swung the saddle over Tiger's back, nearly losing her balance as the horse shifted. "Tiger!"

Tiger gave her an evil look, but he was unable to shift further as a scruffy pony body thumped against him from the other side, nearly knocking him back into the partition. He snorted, and nipped at Patches, but the pony merely butted him in the stomach as Gabrielle got the saddle settled on his back.

"Thanks Patches." Gabrielle hopped down off the partition and fastened the stallion's girth strap. "Tiger, I'm going to tell your mommy you did that." She muttered, getting the saddlebags that held some of Xena's traveling gear and sliding them into place.

Now that his opportunity for mischief was over, Tiger nibbled at some hay, until Gabrielle grabbed his reins, and Patches and started for the door. "C'mon, guys. Let's go."

Patches ambled after her. Tiger stood his ground for a minute, then he complied, following his smaller companion out the door as they emerged into the late afternoon light.

Outside, the square before the gate was filled with motion, as several hundred men walked among perhaps a hundred horses, and scattered wagons filled as high as they could carry standing behind stolid teams of oxen.

Gabrielle was in turns amazed and impressed with the number of city people coming with them. She could see some were the younger men, some just past adolescence, but a good portion of them were older, solid merchant types and workers, all of them somewhat self consciously carrying various weapons and bearing tabards hastily made with Xena's crest.

"Your grace." Jens came up on her other side, ducking under Tiger's head as the stallion halted. "We would have brought them out for you, surely."

"I know." Gabrielle dusted the hay off her chest. "It's okay. I like them." She indicated the horses. "Anyway, you're all pretty busy." She looked at the square. "Wow, lots of people, huh?"

Jens looked moderately pleased. "More than I figured, aye." He agreed. "Some are not bad fighters, neither." He added. "Mistress'll be able to do something with them."

Gabrielle fervently hoped so. "Are we almost ready to go?" She asked. "I know Xena's just finishing up some.. um. Last planning things."

"Just about." The soldier said. "Is the wagon they brought to your liking?" He asked, as they started walking towards the now wide open gates. "Was a nice touch, I thought, the old man bringing it for you to ride in. I'm sure her Majesty liked the idea."

"I love it." Gabrielle replied frankly. "I like riding Patches, but with all the stuff that went on the last couple days I think I... " She touched the back of her neck hesitantly. "I just don't think riding all night's going to feel really good."

Jens nodded. "Better this." He pointed at the wagon, which was standing off to one side with a team of four hitched to it, and they angled towards it as the crowd parted for them.

Mm. Gabrielle eyed it. The wagon, a coach really, was taller than she was, and carved in stately ornate wood. It had tall walls, and big, heavy wheels, and a top that covered it but still let air and light in.

There was a seat at the front for someone to sit and drive the horses, and a step she could get up on in order to climb inside. It was well made, but not overly frilly looking, and she patted the side of it as they came even with where it was standing.

Gabrielle tied off Tiger and Patches reins to the wagon and opened the door, hopping up onto the step and peeking inside. There were three bundles inside near the front, which had a low bench across it for someone to sit on.

The bench had some folded blankets on it, and a pile of pillows that made Gabrielle grin, just a little.

In the back half was a larger, wider bench with thick padding both on the seat and against the back wall of the coach that was obviously meant for the owner to sit on. Before the bench were padded stools, and hanging on the inside walls were various nets and slings to hold things in.

Nice. Gabrielle backed out and shut the door. "Okay, let me go get Xena and tell her we're ready." She said.

"I can go for you, if you like, your grace." Jens said. "It's no trouble."

"No." Gabrielle reached out and touched his arm. "Thanks, but I'll do it. Be right back."

She circled the wagon and headed across the square, easing between lines of men moving towards the gates amidst a growing sense of excitement she could feel as she ducked past.

The city people were also gathering. Gabrielle returned many shy hellos, but she didn't stop to talk. She trotted up the steps to the townhouse and the door was opened for her, Brendan's familiar form standing just inside it. "Hi."

"M'lady." Brendan greeted her. "Tis all ready then?"

"I think so." Gabrielle ran her fingers through her hair. "Let me go see how Xena's doing." She said. "I hope she feels a little better after her rest."

Brendan looked worried. "Better if she..." He sighed. "Tis a bad thing, that injury." He said. "Hasn't bothered her in the longest time, not since we took over back when. I thought she was past it, honest."

"I think she did too." Gabrielle murmured. "I never suspected it anyway.. she's always so.. "

"Such a fighter." Brendan supplied.

"Reckless." The blond woman disagreed. "Like she can't get hurt. But she does. I'm really worried about her." She turned and made for the steps to the 2nd level, trotting up them to the closed doors, broad and grand, that led to the queen's temporary chambers.

Two soldiers were outside. They had their traveling sacks with them, and all their weapons, and when they spotted Gabrielle, they both saluted and reached for the door to open it for her. With a smile, Gabrielle walked past them, and waited for the door to close behind her before she took a deep breath and continued on to the inner room.

She had left Xena resting still, in bed. She thought the long day had helped a little, but she knew Xena had been in a lot of pain even so.

Now, she opened the inner door and peeked around it, quite surprised to find the queen out of bed and standing at the window, one hand placed to either side as she looked out. "Oh!"

“C’mon in muskrat.”

Gabrielle entered and shut the door behind her. “Are you feeling better?” She asked hopefully, heading in her direction. “I think we’re ready to go. I got the horses.”

“I saw you.” Xena turned her head as her companion came up next to her. “No. I’m not feeling any better. But I swallowed enough herbs for me to get down the stairs and into your little pansy wagon down there.” She sighed. “I’d try to ride that bastard horse of mine out the gates but I think I’d fall off.”

Gabrielle put a gentle hand on her back.

“Okay.” Xena turned carefully and took hold of her staff, leaning on it to cross over to the dresser. On top, her armor was laid out neatly, burnished to a somber shine. “Let’s get this over with. My ego can just barely stand to get in that wagon, but it can’t deal with doing it half naked.”

“You’re not half naked.” Gabrielle kept pace with her. “I like the way you look in those. They’re really sexy.”

Xena gave her a look. “Stop trying to distract me.”

Gabrielle picked up one of the pieces of armor and knelt to fasten it around Xena’s knee. “I’m not. It’s true.” She carefully buckled it in place, then she stood and grabbed the other knee cover.

The queen glanced at her reflection in the mirror, and produced a wry grimace. “If you say so.” She clasped both hands around her walking stick and let Gabrielle continue the process of arming her, a completely pointless task in reality as she was no more capable of fighting at the moment as she was flapping her arms and flying up Sholeh’s nose.

“There’s a lot of guys going with us, did you see them?” Gabrielle grunted as she got hold of Xena’s chest armor and lifted it up, carefully laying it across her shoulders. “I think that’s great.”

“You do?”

“Well..” The blond woman fastened the worn straps under the queen’s arm. “I mean, I think it’s amazing they have so much faith in you that they’re willing to go out there against that whole big army.”

“Mm.” Xena rumbled under her breath. “Yeah, I think so too.” She shifted her body cautiously, settling the armor down as Gabrielle finished strapping her in it. “I’ll try to give them a little thrill before I get them all slaughtered.”

Gabrielle picked up one of her arm bracers. “You think that’s going to happen?” She asked, fitting it on her companion’s arm and starting to tighten the laces. “You said that would happen the last time, and you know XEna... it didn’t.”

No, it hadn’t. Xena gazed somberly at her reflection again. “It’s different now.”

“Because you’re hurt?”

The queen nodded. “I made the difference, Gabrielle. I don’t need your stories to know that.” She said, with a sigh. “I used to wonder what it was like, to lead an army and just have to watch them do.. what you told them to do... and you can’t help them.”

“When you were going to fight Bregos.” Gabrielle said. “You wanted to be out there with the men.”

A faint smile appeared. "I did." She turned slowly and then she leaned against the dresser. "Now the boots. That's the tough part." She took a few breaths, her body fighting against the herbs that put a veneer of fog between her and the room. "Then we can get out of here."

"Then we can go home."

Xena smiled faintly. "Yeah."

"I told Patches and Tiger we were going home."

"Did they answer you?"

Gabrielle looked up from her task, lacing Xena's left boot. "Xena."

"With you I never know." Xena felt a sense of resignation flooding through her, now that her choices were made, and things were moving forward again. "I want you to do something for me."

"Something else?" The blond woman finished one boot and held out the other, fitting it around Xena's hesitantly raised right foot. "Sure."

"Carry my sword when we go out."

Gabrielle paused in mid lace and looked up. "Huh?"

Xena pointed at the weapon, resting on the table. "If I put it on my back, and something... " She hesitated. "I don't think all the time before I react. If I go to draw it, I'll end up on the ground."

"Oh." Her lover stood up and put her hands on Xena's hips. "Of course." She paused, looking up at the queen's drawn face. "Ready?"

"No." Xena flexed her toes and looked around, wistfully wishing it was all over, and she didn't have to leave. "So let's go." She continued, setting her staff ahead of her as she made her way very stiffly toward the door. "Grab the pigsticker and the chakram, and let's get this mutt and muskrat show on the road."

Gabrielle went to the dresser and picked up the bag that held the chakram, tying it to her belt with reverent fingers before she laid her hands on the sword.

It felt strange, lifting it and cradling it in her arms. She followed in Xena's footsteps with a thoughtful expression. "So.." She said. "Does that make you the mutt?"

"Uh huh." Xena leaned on the staff and opened the door, shoving it open ahead of her. "It sure does."

"Oh."

"Got something to say about it?"

They moved through the outer room towards the door to the hall. "Well." Gabrielle said after a pause. "You've got a really cute tail."

Xena let out a low whistle, and the doors opened immediately. "Dare ya to say that again." She said, as she straightened, and moved forward with stolid, steady steps, head up, the staff used apparently as a casual prop. "Hello, boys. We ready to move out?"

"Majesty!"

Gabrielle just managed a rueful grin, as she followed along.

Cheers erupted as soon as Xena appeared on the steps and she paused, her hands casually resting on the staff as she took in the adulation. After a moment she lifted one hand and waved it casually, then she draped that arm over Gabrielle's shoulders as they started down to street level.

Gabrielle tucked the sword into the crook of her right arm and put her left one around the queen's waist, ready to offer assistance if it looked like Xena needed it.

Right now, it didn't. Xena strolled along between the lines of city folk and soldiers, giving a gracious nod here, and a raised eyebrow there, smiling at her men and giving the new city fighters the once over.

The subterfuge was breathtaking. Gabrielle could feel the tension in the back her arm was resting on, but from Xena's attitude you would never have guessed there was a thing wrong with her. It had been the same when she'd been shot by the arrow, but this was different.

This was a triumph of Xena's will over her body, and Gabrielle was taken aback by the fierce nobility of it. "You're amazing." She uttered under her breath.

"I'm a lunatic." Xena replied, with a smile for the crowd. "Better hope I stay a lunatic until we get to that wagon or you're going to have to carry me to it."

"I'd do that."

Xena almost stopped walking. She did turn her head and regard her companion with a very dubious expression.

"Well." Gabrielle sighed. "I'd try."

"Its almost worth keeling over to see that." The queen remarked. "However." She released Gabrielle as they got to the wagon and turned, facing the crowd that was growing around it as she stopped next to Tiger's flanks.

A speech seemed to be called for. Xena wasn't really in the mood for a speech, but everyone was looking at her so she rested her weight on her staff and waited for the noise to die down.

Two of the elders hurried forward. "Your majesty." One of them bowed as he came closer. "Is everything to your satisfaction?"

Is everything to my satisfaction. Xena mused about that. She was going after an army of thousands with a couple hundred bumbling untrained men, a squad of tired soldiers, a muskrat, a bad back, and a day's head start to catch up to. "Sure." She concluded. "Thanks."

The man took a breath, then released it. "Ah." He recovered. "We are very happy to hear that, and we wish you good travels!" He looked around and waved his hands, and everyone did, in fact, cheer. "We wish you, and those of our brothers who go with you, great success!!"

Another cheer.

"Thanks." Xena repeated. "To all that have chosen to join us, welcome." She added, in a louder voice. "You will be rewarded for your guts" She said. "And stupidity." She muttered. "Let's move out."

"Form up!" Brendan let out a bellow, as he mounted his horse, lifting his sword up. "Ready to march!"

Xena turned and edged her way around her horses' big body, getting close enough to the wagon to open the door of it for Gabrielle. "Your chariot awaits."

Gabrielle got up on the step and looked around, finding the elder in the crowd every near by. "Thanks." She smiled at him. "This is beautiful." She gently put Xena's sword inside and patted the door. "Just wonderful."

The man beamed at her. "My lady, your words charm me." He bowed. "I hope you get wonderful use of it."

"I'm sure I will." Gabrielle paused, half in the wagon, and glanced over at Xena. "Hey, Xena..."

It wouldn't be so bad, Xena decided, if the weakness she was seen to have was indulgence in her partner, would it? "Yeeess, Gaabbrielle?" She bantered back, giving Tiger a scratch on the nose as he realized she was leaning against him and started snuffling her.

"Would you ride with me for a little while?" The blond woman asked. "I wrote a new poem for you."

Oh by the gods. "Does any of it rhyme with 'spank'?" The queen asked. "Or 'squeal'?"

Gabrielle blushed, as the men started to chuckle around them. "Well.."

"Oh, all right." Xena sighed. "Brendan, have someone lead my big bastard here, and the scruffy runt." She eased over towards the wagon and shifted the staff to her right hand, grasping the door to it with her left and getting most of her body weight up off her legs that were just about to give out under her. "Let's get this damn show on the road!"

"Aye." Brendan untied Tiger and Patches and handed their reins off to one of the grooms that had hastily ran up. "Let's go boys – start down the road, yah?"

"Yah." Xena felt the sweat rolling down her neck and spine, even the high dose of herbs unable to hold the pain at bay any longer. "All right, inside, you." She ordered Gabrielle. "I'll give you a poem, all right."

Gabrielle ducked inside the wagon, and once there, she turned and held her hand out as Xena swung around the door and offered up her staff. She took it and pulled it inside, throwing it on the other side of her as she got hold of the queen's hand as she started to climb inside.

One look at Xena's face, and she lunged to catch her as she came through the door, grabbing hold of her as she started to collapse and wrenching them both sideways so she fell onto the larger of the two couches instead of onto the floor of the wagon. "Oof!"

Xena let out a laugh. "You little wench!!" She spoke loudly. "Close the damn door." She added, in a hoarse whisper. "By the gods."

Gabrielle got her feet under her and went to the wagon entry, peeking out to see a sea of faces looking back at her with knowing eyes. She grinned bashfully and shut the door, feeling a sense of relief once the wall of people were out of her sight and Xena out of theirs.

"Wow."

"Hades left nut." Xena was now on her back on the couch, her forearm over her eyes. "Take that damn sword and spit me with it, will you please?"

"Boy that was close."

"Close?" Xena said, through gritted teeth. "I hope I can get up from here again."

Gabrielle scrambled across the wagon and knelt next to the bench, touching the queen's arm hesitantly. "Oh my gosh.. Xena..." She could see tears on her lover's eyelashes. "Can I get you something? More of the herbs, or..."

"Not going to spit me, huh?"

"Xena, I can't."

The queen sighed. "You said you'd do anything for me." She groused. "I ask for so little...mmph."

Gabrielle lifted her head to look down into the eyes of the woman she just kissed. Then she lowered her lips to gently kiss the tears off her cheekbones. "Don't ask me to hurt you." She said. "I'd rather spit myself first." She whispered.

Xena felt a jolt, both in her guts from the kisses, and in her body as the wagon started to move. The top of the wagon was open tracework to let the air in, but the sensation of motion without having control of it suddenly made her feel just a bit queasy. "Don't do that." She said. "Help me sit up instead before I chuck up all over the both of us."

Gabrielle leaned forward and kissed her on the lips again. "Okay." She straightened up and got onto her knees, holding her hands out for Xena to grasp them.

Xena took hold of her, and steeled herself. Then she took a deep breath and concentrated on contracting her stomach muscles, thankful for the long sessions up in her tower as her body responded and with Gabrielle's help, she was able to sit up on the bench.

It hurt. She got herself straight and settled back against the padded support behind her, half reclined due to the slope of the wagon's wall. "Okay."

"Okay?"

Xena gingerly flexed her toes, glad she could actually feel them. She'd gotten that odd, weak sensation in her legs as she'd entered the wagon, a stark memory of the last time she'd been hurt in this way. "Yeah." She put her hands flat on the bench and looked around at the inside of the coach. "So this is it, huh?"

"Yeah." Gabrielle got up and sat next to her. "I thought you could lay down on this." She patted the surface. "And I have pillows over there for you." She pointed at the other side of the wagon.

"Good thought." Xena exhaled, looking up at the open spaces. "Nice work."

"It's pretty, isn't it?" Gabrielle agreed. "I had them put some stuff in here, fruits and some little rolls so you can snack on them if you want to."

"Hm."

Gabrielle patted her knee. "We'll get through this, Xena. You were so amazing out there – I know you'll find a way to make everything right."

"You do?"

"I do." The blond woman stated positively. "You can do anything."

Xena studied the top of the wagon, listening to the sounds of horse hooves all around them, and the yells of the men as they moved out past the gates. "I can do anything." She mused. "Guess we'll find out." She turned to look at Gabrielle. "There's just one problem"

Gabrielle had gotten up to fetch the pillows, holding on to the side of the wagon as it moved under her. "What's that?" She turned and looked back over her shoulder, frowning at the pale complexion on Xena's face.

"I just remembered why I don't have one of these things."

"Why?" Gabrielle gathered up an armful of the pillows and brought them over. She knelt again by the bench and sorted through the soft fluffy items, setting them down next to her lover. "What's wrong?"

"I get sick riding in them." Xena lifted her arm and covered her eyes again.

"Oh."

"Damn it."

Gabrielle looked around at the interior. "Um.. I have some water... "

"Shh."

"Do you have any herbs for that?"

"Shh."

"Do you want me to kiss you again?"

"Hold that thought."

Part 29

It was dark. The army moved through the night, along the road – their presence betrayed only by the sound of hoofbeats and the faint flutter of the few torches they allowed themselves to find the path.

In the midst of the soldiers, moving steadily along were the supply wagons, and in front of them rolled the royal coach that held their leader and her consort. As the moon traveled over the sky and skewed their shadows from one side to the other, the men walked and rode with a quiet confident attitude.

Inside the coach, however, it was a different story.

"Xena." Gabrielle carefully wiped her lover's face with a bit of damp cloth. "There's got to be something we can do for you." She looked at the suffering woman. "Isn't there? Should I tell the men to stop?"

Xena gazed pitifully up at her. Her face was stark white, visible even in the low candlelight inside the coach, and her forehead was damp with sweat. She had one hand over her stomach and the other holding onto a wooden bucket.

"Do you want to go back to the city?"

The queen's eyes took on just a bare hint of amusement. "I want you to kill me."

"Xena."

"Do you know when the last time was that I felt this bad?"

Gabrielle wiped her face again. "No."

“Neither do I.” Xena sighed. “Well, at least there’s nothing else left in my guts to throw up.” She studied the ceiling, the misery in her stomach so bad it overshadowed her back, fortunately for her since taking more herbs for the pain for that wasn’t an option at the moment.

The irony wasn’t lost on her.

“Should I tell them to stop?”

“Only if you kill me first.” The queen told her. “Because I won’t survive the embarrassment if we have to turn around because of this.” She closed her eyes as another wave of nausea hit her, her body too tired really to even retch.

“I’m sorry.” Gabrielle rested the back of her knuckles against Xena’s cheek. “I thought this was a good idea.”

“Me too.” Xena opened her eyes again. “Here I was, looking forward to having fun in your rolling love buggy.”

Gabrielle made a face. “Do you want some water?” She changed the subject.

“You want it back in your face?” Xena licked her lips though. “Wish I could. Mouth’s dry as a bone.”

Darn, darn darn. The blond woman gave her companion a pat on the arm, then she stood carefully in the moving wagon and moved across it, standing straight to see out the openings in the top of the wall.

It was a beautiful night out. Gabrielle leaned mournfully against the wall and thought about how nice it would have been for them to be riding in the cool breeze, under the canopy of stars that stretched overhead and lit the road in pale silver.

She could smell the horses around them, and the torch’s pitch and the rich grass that held a stale taint of decay on it she knew was from the recent battle.

Gabrielle sighed and turned, studying her poor friend. Xena looked just utterly miserable. She’d gotten her armor off, and she was in just her leathers, her body slung across the rear padded bench with one booted foot propped against the wall and the other planted on the floor.

The motion of the wagon was.. Gabrielle put a hand out to steady herself again. Well, it was sort of side to side slow wagging and when you couldn’t see outside, it was a little bit unnerving. She wasn’t sure she liked it.

Ah well. She went to her own little pouch she’d brought from the city and felt inside it to see if there were any more herbs she might have picked up that Xena could use. Her knuckles knocked against something in the bag and she paused, then reversed her hand to feel what she’d hit.

“Okay, so you won’t kill me.” Xena spoke up. “How about you just hit me over the head? Can ya do that?”

Gabrielle pulled a smaller bag out of her sack and stared at it, somewhat puzzled. “Can I do what?” She glanced at her lover.

“Hit me over the head.”

“No.” Gabrielle opened the bag and peered inside it, surprised at a light, sweet scent that emerged.

“Oh.” She slapped the side of her head as she remembered where she’d gotten the bag. “Hey, Xena?”

“WWhhhhhaatt?” The queen whined piteously, closing her eyes and covering them with her forearm.

Gabrielle brought the bag over and sat down on the edge of the couch. "When I was heading out to get Patches and Tiger, I saw this man who had these things on a pole he was selling, so I got some." She dug in the bag and brought out one of the contents between her thumb and forefinger. "It's a candy ball. Do you want to try sucking on one?"

Xena slowly opened one eye and studied the item. "A candy ball?" She sounded dubious.

"Mmhm." Gabrielle put it in her mouth. "Mm." She made an encouraging sound. "Mmmm."

The queen pondered the idea, then she poked her tongue out and stared pointedly at the bag until Gabrielle retrieved a second and gave it to her. She accepted the roughly roundish item and pulled it into her mouth, surprised at the agreeable taste. "Mm."

"Itth good." Gabrielle stuck the ball into her cheek so she could talk. "I think they make it with honey."

It was good. Xena rolled the candy around in her mouth. It wasn't overwhelmingly sweet, and it had a hint of spice in it and as she cautiously swallowed, she found her stomach didn't immediately object as it had to the water, and the wine, and anything else she'd tried to swallow.

She put her head back down on the pillow and tried to relax a little, the motion of the wagon transmitting itself to her body through the solid surface she was laying on. "Nodontthinkabout that." She muttered to herself.

She felt a touch on her arm, and she reached out with her free hand to clasp Gabrielle's, her lover's skin feeling warm and comforting against her fingers.

Just being next to Gabrielle felt good. Well. Xena reflected, as good as it could feel given her back was out of whack and her guts were hovering around the back of her tongue.

"Any better?"

The queen thought about that for a long moment. "A little." She admitted grudgingly. "Either that, or my guts are tired of heaving themselves up for nothing and went to sleep for a while." She shifted cautiously, then she rolled over onto her side. "Do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Anything? You already refused to either kill me or hit me over the head so how could it be anything?" Xena grumbled.

"Xena." Gabrielle leaned on the pillow and put her arms around her suffering friend, giving her back a very gentle rub and kissing her cheek. "I'd do anything for you except hurt you."

The queen was never one to lose out on an opportunity and since Gabrielle's breast was about touching her nose, she nipped it.

"Yow!"

Laying on her side made her stomach feel better. "Take one of those extra pillows and stick it between my knees, willya?" Xena said. "Then come back over here so I can chew on you some more."

Gabrielle did as she was asked. She got the pillow settled, then she came back over to Xena's side and resumed her seat, though this time she kept her chest away from Xena's teeth. "Do you want me to tell you a story?"

"How far down the road are we?"

"I don't think I know that one." The blond woman admitted. "Can you say the first few words of it?" She saw those pale eyes open and look up at her, and she had to smile in response, as a surge of emotion filled her and made her heart fairly ache.

"C'mere and I'll bite you again."

Gabrielle leaned over and risked it, kissing Xena on the forehead before she got up and went to the front of the coach to look out. "So did the candy ball help?"

Xena grunted noncommittally.

The blond woman put her hands on the top of the partition. She could see the men on either side of them, and far off, forest that she remembered passing through. Ahead of the wagon she could see the curve of the road that started on the long slope up to the first pass, and as far as she could tell, everything looked very quiet. "I think..." She hesitated.

"Have no idea how long the road is?"

"Well." Gabrielle frowned. "We have all those trees on either side of us, where we went around the back side?"

Xena sighed, and rolled herself right off the bench onto her knees, holding on to the wall of the wagon as she pulled herself upright. Standing was painful, but since she could hold on over her head and support most of her weight that way, it was bearable.

She slowly moved across to where Gabrielle was standing and peered through the opening next to her. "Ah." She put her hands on either side of her lover and leaned against her a little, feeling the wagon rock a bit under their combined weight.

It felt painful, but good to be standing. Her stomach seemed to like that position better, and the cool, fresh air coming in the opening soothed her grumbling guts surprisingly quickly. She looked past the soldiers riding alongside the coach, enjoying a moment of relative comfort.

"See?" Gabrielle pointed. "That's the bit we went through, isn't it?"

"Yes." Xena was pleased with the progress. The army had pushed on and they were coming close to the edge of the plateau. "Brendan!" She let out a yell, spotting her captain trotting by. "Get over here."

"Ow." Gabrielle covered her ears. "Boy, you're loud sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Xena leaned a bit more against her as Brendan came even with them. "How's it going?"

"Fair well." Brendan moved his horse closer. "Got a scout out front way a bit." He lowered his voice. "Figured to see sign of em by now."

"Nothing?" Xena frowned.

Brendan shook his head. "Not a scrap left on the ground, or a body dropped behind." He uttered. "Like they went into the mists."

"Mm." Xena felt a prickle of foreboding. "Not good."

"Nah."

"We're sure they went this way, right?" Gabrielle spoke up.

"Lass, only one road here." Brendan said, diplomatically.

“Yes, but we found two ways, didn’t we?” The blond woman said. “So what if they did too?”

Brendan gazed at her, his head cocked slightly in question. He lifted his eyes and looked at Xena, who now had her elbows resting on the edge of the wagon window and her chin on top of Gabrielle’s head. “Think so, your Maj?”

Xena exhaled slowly. “I think there’s too many of them to be anywhere but on the road. Anything else, they’d be going single file for a sevenday to move.” She pondered a moment. “But if I were that Persian bitch, I’d maybe think of leaving some people behind to gut anyone following me.”

“Have guards out for that.” Brendan said, succinctly.

What was Sholeh up to? Xena figured she’d either race ahead, or be laying in wait for them. Neither option made her happy, but chasing people got you killed less often than being ambushed. Just a fact of war. “What would I do?”

“Mistress?”

“What would I do if I were in her place?” The queen asked again. “What are her options, what’s her motive here, where’s she going to end up – taking over my realm? Burning us out?”

Gabrielle turned around so she was plastered against Xena’s body. She slipped her arms around her waist and just held her there, not squeezing.

“Or getting revenge.” Xena looked past her head towards the shadows they were riding into. Then she looked over at the quietly waiting Brendan. “Put a squad of men over in that patch of forest there.” She lifted her hand carefully and pointed. “The one before the pass.”

Brendan gazed that way. “Before the pass?”

“Yeah.” The queen said. “Because I’d figure whoever’s chasing me will figure I’d bushwhack them in the pass, and worry about looking for signs there.” She studied the far off smudge of dark trees. It was a very thick stand, off to one side of the road as the road curved into the foothills that took them to the narrow pass that would be a natural ambush. “I hate surprises.”

“As do we all.” Her captain agreed. “Think she’ll turn then? Not head through?”

“She’ll turn.” Xena stated flatly. “The only way she’ll save face is to defeat us, Brendan. Not run. Not wait until she’s in a stronghold and hold it. She’s got to come after us and beat us into the ground or else she loses everything.”

“She loses her reputation?” Gabrielle asked. “Is that what you mean?”

“Persia loses it’s reputation.” The queen smiled darkly. “She may not be afraid of me, but you bet your ass she’s afraid of her father with good reason.” She looked at Gabrielle. “She loses here, she has no home to go back to.”

Gabrielle blinked at her in some shock.

“I’ll take care of it, Xena.” Brendan said. “Are you faring better?” He asked, in a very low tone.

“I suck.” The queen replied frankly. “But that ain’t changing, so let’s get this war rolling. Have the men make arrows as they’re walking if they aren’t and put up more torches so they can see what they’re doing.”

“But...”

“Yes, they’re targets. But if you’re planning an ambush in a spot no one expects it, you don’t ruin it by shooting at lights on the road.” Xena’s voice took on a stronger, more confident tone. “Let’s turn it, Brendan. We’re hunters now. Not hunted. I don’t care how many rats she has following her.”

“Aye.” Brendan saluted. “On my way, Mistress.”

He kneed his horse and disappeared ahead of the coach, his voice lifting up over the sound of marching feet as he cantered through the ranks.

“Xena.” Gabrielle gently rubbed her lover’s back. “How long do we have before we’re by those trees?”

“Three of four candlemarks.” The queen replied. “If they don’t come after us first.”

“You think they will?”

“I want them to.” Xena smiled.

“You do?”

“I sure do.” The queen tilted her head and kissed Gabrielle on the lips. “Every damn odd is against us, Gabrielle. But if we beat them.... There ain’t a corner of the world that isn’t gonna hear about it.” She went back for another kiss, keeping a tight hold on the side of the coach as they rumbled along.

Not a damn corner.

**

Xena leaned her folded arms on the wagon’s wooden wall. She’d decided on the trade off of accepting the pain of standing up to relieve herself of the misery of being sick to her stomach, and now that the cool night air had given her some relief from the latter she was relatively content.

Relatively. “Know what I need right now?”

“What?” Gabrielle came over to stand next to her.

“A hammock chair.” The queen said. “Hanging from this damn roof so I can get the breeze but not be standing up.” She clarified. “You any good at knitting?”

Gabrielle was briefly silent. “What?” She eventually said. “You want me to knit you a chair?” Her voice rose in question. “I think I better stick with telling stories. The last time I tried to sew something I ended up sewing my shirt to my pants.”

Xena chuckled softly under her breath. She watched the army, such as it was, shift and move past the wagon, the rumble of the wheels and the sound of horse hooves sounding above the lighter scuff of the foot soldier’s boots. “Ah.”

“What?” Gabrielle peeked over the edge of the wall. It was much lighter now, every couple of soldiers holding a torch cradled in the crook of their arm, the bobbing line of light outlining the road in a golden glow.

“Thought we left him behind.” Xena sighed. “I knew I should have just killed him back on the damn ship.”

Gabrielle craned her head, blinking in surprise when she realized one of the nearby riders was a dour looking Perdicus. “Oh!” She jerked back a little. “What’s he doing here? I told him..”

“Off?” Xena turned her head carefully to look at her companion. “And I missed that? Gods be damned. Where was I?”

The blond woman curled her fingers around the wood. "In bed I think." She murmured. "I went out to get you.. to get us something that first night and he was there, saying all kinds of things. I told him..."

"All kinds of things?" Xena asked. "Like what kinds of things?"

Gabrielle gave her head a half shake. "Just mean things." She said. "He thinks.. I guess he thinks..." She let her voice trail off. "I told him to leave me alone." She glanced up at Xena, surprised to see the narrowed eyes, and lightly flaring nostrils.

She reached out and touched Xena's elbow. "He's just a jerk, Xena. I think he always was a jerk, but he's gotten.. um... jerkier now."

"Did he touch you?" Xena asked, in a deceptively calm voice.

"He grabbed my arm, but the other soldiers were around there, Xena. It didn't really do..." Gabrielle stopped as the queen turned and faced her. "He still thinks we're betrothed, I guess." She shrugged, not sure what to make of her companion's silent anger. "I'm sure he's got it straight now, though. I told him about us."

"Bring me the chakram, willya?"

Gabrielle was halfway across the coach, her hand outstretched to pick up the bag before she paused and turned. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Kill him." Xena replied mildly. "He's a jackass, and I'm not putting up with him being around." She extended her hand and wiggled her fingers. "Give it here. C'mon, c'mon. don't tell me you're feeling sentimental about him."

Gabrielle picked up the bag mechanically and held it, her eyes turning to meet Xena's. "You're not really going to kill him, are you?"

The queen nodded. "I am." She said. "Be good for morale. Nothing like blood spurting all over the road to get the juices flowing." She wiggled her fingers again. "C'mon. I want to see if I can toss it from inside this crate anyhow."

It occurred to Gabrielle that her lover was, in fact, serious. She slowly crossed the wagon, her fingers tightening a little on the bag. "Xena, he didn't hurt me." She said. "I don't want you to kill him."

Xena studied her. "You don't?" She let her hand rest on Gabrielle's head, and tilted it up, so that the torchlight fell on it and she could watch her eyes. "You really don't, Gabrielle? You want him out there, following you, watching you... wanting you?"

Gabrielle found herself captured by that look, the queen's words penetrating and making her feel a little short of breath.

"Be honest, Gabrielle." Xena said, in a gentle voice. "This guys trouble for you. He's here because he wants something." She added. "I don't want him here.."

Oh wow. Gabrielle felt like sitting down, and a moment later she did so, sinking down on the shorter bench and feeling the rumble of the road jar through her spine. Perdicus was being a jerk, but did that mean he should die?

How could she say that? "Xena." She murmured. "I can't tell you to kill him. Please don't ask that of me."

"You still got the hots for him?"

Gabrielle's head jerked up. "Huh?" She stared at Xena. "Of course not. I don't think I..." She considered. "He was just.." She shook her head. "Xena, you just can't go killing people because they're inconvenient for me."

"Sure I can."

Sure she could. Gabrielle felt overwhelmed. "Well, please don't." She finally said. "I'd hate to see someone die like that just because of me." She exhaled. "Just because they annoyed me, anyway."

Xena reached up to the roof spars and eased her way over to where Gabrielle was sitting. In the flickering light from the candle, she could see the distress in her expression and she paused next to her, reaching down to ruffle her hair. "All right." She conceded. "But I'm warning ya, if he lays a finger on your again, his arm's coming off the hard way."

Gabrielle's shoulders relaxed, a visible motion in the golden light. She put the chakram in its bag down on the bench and stood, putting her arms around Xena and burying her face into the queen's shoulder.

Having been on the receiving end of a muskrat load of solicitous attention all day, Xena found it somewhat refreshing to be on the giving end for a change. She scratched the back of her lover's neck with her free hand, keeping hold of the roof spar with the other so they both didn't end up crashing to the ground. "I'd do anything for ya." She told Gabrielle. "Even stuff you don't really want me to."

It was a very odd mixture of horror and endearment, and Xena smiled, as she felt the soft exhale against her skin. She still wanted to kill Perdicus. It drove her nuts having him out there, watching them. Watching Gabrielle, and stewing in what was obvious to Xena was a horny funk.

She paused and considered that for a moment. Then her eyebrows wiggled a little, and she smirked. On the other hand, death wasn't much of a torture really, was it? Especially the way she tended to do it.

"Thanks." Gabrielle said.

"I haven't done anything yet." Xena understood, however. She nibbled her lover's hair, tasting the smoke from the torches outside in it.

If she looked out, she could see the forest approaching, the line of trees moving from a far off smudge to a looming reality, obscuring anything in their midst as the line of them curved towards the road bringing the edge of the woods to within arrow's range.

Within arrows range.

Xena rubbed Gabrielle's back as she turned her head to look out the opening, her eyes slightly unfocused as she counted up her resources, and figured the angles. Within a candlemark they'd be close enough. She had that long to... figure out what to do?

No. Unable to ride at the front of the troops, Xena found herself putting her mind to use instead and rather than figuring out on the fly what would happen next she was in the middle of planning what she was going to do in order to make things happen the way she wanted them to.

Interesting perspective. Xena wiggled her nose, which itched a bit. Could this be the gods way of teaching her a lesson?

Nah.

Better not be. Her eyes narrowed. Not of those suckers wanted to keep on being worshipped.

She turned her attention back to the army, letting out a low whistle to attract Jens attention. Her second captain kned his mount over and came even with the coach, and he eased his cloak back and set his hand on his sword hilt.

“Majesty?” Jens glanced inside. “Your grace.”

Gabrielle, caught in a somewhat compromising position, could only produce a weak smile. “Hi.”

Jens grinned at her.

“Go around the lines.” Xena spoke in a low tone, that nevertheless projected. “Spread the word we’re marching right through to the pass.”

Jens glanced around. “I will do so.” He said. “Men are up for it, Mistress. We got a middling good lot with us, this time.”

“Surprised?”

“Aye.” The soldier admitted freely. “Didn’t think they had much there, but maybe so many years at peace made men feel like they wanted something different. “

The queen snorted, chuckling under her breath. “Let it be known.” She added. “That my goal is to get that Persian bitch and put a collar on her.”

“Mistress?”

“Just say it.” Xena said. “Make sure the lot of them knows. Understand?”

“Aye.” Jens did understand the instruction, if not his mistresses mind. “Will do, Majesty.” He raised his fist in salute, then he pulled his horse aside, letting the wagon pass before heading towards the men riding behind it.

“A collar?” Gabrielle whispered. “Why do you want them to think that?”

“Because it’ll get them excited.” Xena replied, in a droll tone. “Trust me, muskrat, there’s a method to my madness.” She thought about releasing the roof spars completely then thought better of it as an injudicious motion made a jolt of pain go down the back of her thighs. She settled on a nibble around the edge of Gabrielle’s ear instead. “Even if it’s usually more madness than method.” She added, with a chuckle.

“How does your back feel?” Gabrielle asked, chuckling softly herself. “You sound better.”

“Hurts.” Xena replied. “Think I’ll lay down for a little while again.” She waited for her lover to release her, then she made her way back over to the back bench. “Got any more of those candy things?” She eased herself down onto her knees, then managed to roll onto the bench without throwing her back out.

Having the weight off her legs felt so good she made herself ignore her awareness of the motion again and she accepted the candy ball that Gabrielle produced for her with a smile. “Lay down here with me.” She patted the bench.

Gabrielle set the chakram down in it’s bag and then she crawled over Xena’s body, ending up squished between the back wall of the coach and the queen. She put her head down on the pillows and kissed Xena’s shoulder, watching her angular profile. “If you put a collar on Sholeh, can I make her roll over?”

For a moment, Xena was absolutely still. Then she turned her head to look at Gabrielle, her face twitching as she fought not to laugh.

“Sit up and beg?”

“I’m gonna make you sit up and beg in a minute.”

“Can I lick your ear.. ow!”

**

Xena folded her arms over the wooden spar, leaning her weight partly on her arms, and partly on her knees as she knelt on the bench at the front of the coach.

The forest was now close on their right side, and she could plainly see the curve of the road as it headed into the past just in front of them.

Brendan’s cadre was on her right, and as they came even with the closest part of the forest, she let out a low whistle. “”Stop this thing.” She instructed the driver, whose leg wasn’t far from her elbow.

“Majesty.” The man obeyed, as the army slowed around them, Brendan’s yells echoing up and down the lines. “Is this damn thing rattling your bones, Majesty, as it is mine?” The driver asked, glancing down at his royal passenger. “Bloody crats there didn’t go more than the length of that place in this I’m thinking”

“Eh. It’s all right.” Xena replied, as she whistled again, and both Brendan and Jens turned their horses to respond to her call. “My consort’s loving it. Aren’tcha, muskrat.?”

Gabrielle’s pale head appeared next to her. She was kneeling next to Xena on the bench, and she peered outside with somewhat energetic interest. “Loving what?” She asked. “You? Absolutely.” She watched the motion of the army as it stopped around them.

Xena rubbed the bridge of her nose with her fingers, then sighed, as she was rescued by Brendan and Jens arrival. “All right, boys.” She said. “Listen close.”

The two captains obligingly herded their mounts over, Brendan grabbing the horses reins as the driver hopped down to stretch his legs out. “Thought we were moving straight through, Majesty.” Jens said, loudly.

“We are.” Xena responded, in a similar tone. Then she dropped her voice. “Circle and say we’re taking a break.” She said. “The back lines face inward, to the road. Put their backs to the trees.”

Both Brendan and Jens watched her, closely.

“Send a group of volunteers.. three or four.. into the pass. Tell them to look for signs of the Persians.”

“Majesty.” Brendan leaned on the driver’s seat, within arms reach of the queen. “We’ve got scouts out there already.”

“I know.” Xena met his eyes steadily. “Make sure you call for volunteers, and don’t take any of the guys who came from home with us.”

Brendan went silent, then he nodded in understanding. “Will do, Majesty.” He said briskly. He turned his horse and started off down the line, with Jens behind him.

“Can I do anything?” Gabrielle asked.

“Yes.” Xena said, in a surprisingly brisk tone. “I want you to go out there, to where those men are around that wagon, and ask for a crossbow and a quiver of arrows. Tell them it’s for you.”

The blond woman looked a little confused, but she scrambled off the bench and straightened her surcoat, running her fingers through her hair as she opened the door to the coach and hopped down to the ground.

It felt good to stretch her legs. Gabrielle shut the coach door and walked towards the supply wagons, which had been rolling along behind the queen’s coach. Some of the soldiers were gathering there as well, handing over bundles of what she thought at first were sticks, and then realized were arrows.

The men parted as she approached, and salutes and bows made it dangerous to walk for a moment so she stopped until they were done, then moved forward again. “Hello.”

“Your grace.” The man in the first supply wagon bowed, almost throwing himself off the seat of the wagon and onto the ground. “Is there something we can get for you?”

Gabrielle glanced around at all the avid eyes watching her, and felt a touch embarrassed. “Ah, well, yes.” She said. “Could I please have one of those crossbows, and some arrows to go with it?”

Two of the soldiers immediately started to jump up onto the running board of the wagon, crashing into each other before they managed to grab hold of the bundles of spare weapons stacked on top. “Here, careful! I’ve got it!” One said.

“I’ve got it.” The other grabbed one of the weapons and hopped off the wagon, carefully extending it towards Gabrielle. “Is this what you want, m’lady?”

Gabrielle had no real idea of what it was she was supposed to want, but she figured the soldier probably knew. “Yes.” She opened her hands and took the crossbow, feeling it’s surprising weight as she brought it close to her body.

It was wooden, mostly, with iron parts to it, and she cradled it as she remembered, in a single, vivid flash that this was the weapon that had killed Lila.

She almost dropped it. The iron felt cold against her hands, against her fingers that had curled instinctively around the triggering mechanism. Her breath came short, and she felt the sounds around her grow strange and loud, barely aware of her surroundings until a hand fell on her shoulder.

“M’lady?”

The crowd, and the sounds of the army faded back in, and she turned her head to find the soldier who handed her the weapon standing at her side, his face crumpled in concern. “Ah. Sorry.” Gabrielle murmured. “I was just thinking about something.”

The other soldier had hopped off the wagon, and now approached with a thick quiver full of arrows. “Here you are, your grace.” He said. “Will this be enough?”

Was it? “Um..” Gabrielle studied the quiver. “Maybe I better take two.” She said. “Do you have another one like that?”

The soldier jumped back up onto the wagon hurriedly. “For certain, m’lady. Just be a minute.”

“You’ll protect her Majesty with that, yeh?” The first soldier asked. “You’re a fierce one, you are, your grace.”

Gabrielle’s eyeballs popped, just slightly. “Ah, well..” She murmured.

“Aye.” The second soldier came back with another quiver. “For sure her majesty feels safe with you around.”

“Uh.”

“Did you see her tear that chunk out of that Persian?” One of the other men said. “Saw it from the side I did – and so did those damn curly beards!” He added. “Looked like their mammas smacked them.!”

Gabrielle accepted the other quiver and managed a smile. “Well, I do try to.. uh.. contribute in any way I can.” She edged backwards. “So um.. let me go.. uh.. get ready to take care of the queen.” She ducked past three or four more soldiers and started back towards the coach.

“Twas a very brave thing you did, Gabrielle.” Brendan had caught her up. “Don’t be shy about it.” He had the reins of his horse in his hand, and he walked alongside her, his gloved hands clenching and unclenching just a bit.

“I didn’t really do it on..” Gabrielle paused, and frowned. “Well, I can’t really say that because you don’t really do something like that by accident but it was just the only thing I could think of to do to get away from her. It wasn’t brave, just kinda desperate.”

“Aye.” The old captain agreed. “But it saved us.”

“Well, I don’t think...”

“Gabrielle.” Brendan paused and put a hand on her shoulder. “If they’d have taken you, we’d all be dead.”

Gabrielle faced him. “Oh, I don’t think so.” She disagreed. “You guys are great fighters.”

“Gabrielle.” Brendan repeated, his eyes taking on a wry expression. “If she’d have taken you, she’d have taken Xena.”

Opening her mouth to protest, Gabrielle could only let the breath trickle from her lungs as the meaning of his words penetrated. “Oh.”

The army was gathering up to one side of the road, and breaking out travel rations as they stood in clumps and lines, their back to the forest.

“All right, men. Just a short break.” Jens was coming back towards them, calling down the line. “Get a rest, and water, and get ready to move on.” He came back up to where Brendan and Gabrielle were standing. “Got the advance party gone out, Brendan.”

“Good.” Brendan said.

“That bad lot that was bothering you went with em.” Jens told Gabrielle. “No offense, he’s from your home, they say, but a complainer like nothing else I’ve seen. Glad he’s decided to make himself useful.”

Perdicus? Gabrielle took tighter hold on the arrow quivers. “Oh. Well, that’s great.” She said. “I’m glad too.”

“Aye, bet you are.” Brendan remarked. “Let’s get this gear back to her Maj. Things’ll start popping soon enough.”

They walked back over to the coach, where a visibly impatient Xena was waiting for them.

“What in the Hades took so long?” The queen growled. “I thought you went back to the damn city for it.” She had her head poking through the opening and looked almost comical. “Get back in here.”

Gabrielle pulled the door open and put her burden inside, then she climbed after it. “Sorry about that.” She apologized. “Is this what you wanted?” She brought the crossbow over to where Xena was standing. “The guys were..uh...”

“Fawning over you?” Xena regarded the crossbow. “Yeah, that’ll do.” She said. “Good.”

Gabrielle set the crossbow down and went back for the arrows. “How long are we doing to stop for? Should I get something for you to eat?”

“We’re not stopping.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle climbed back up onto the bench. “I may not be an expert on armies, but I know when people are standing still.” She pointed at the troops. “We are stopped.”

“We’re not stopped.” The queen informed her. “We’re setting a trap.” She slowly tested resting all her weight on her knees, wincing as she felt something pop out of place. “Damn it.”

“We are?”

“Get behind me.” Xena instructed. “Grab hold of the edge there and.. yeah.” She felt the support as her lover pressed up against her, and held her in place. “Now hand me up that bow.” She said. “And get ready to pass me arrows.”

“Um.. okay.” Gabrielle was confused, but willing. “What are you going to shoot at?” She asked. “It can’t be Perdicus, because he went with the scout people.”

Xena chuckled very softly under her breath. “Did he?”

“Yeah.”

“Well well. Imagine that.” Xena fitted an arrow to the crossbow mechanism and cocked it. Then she let the weapon rest against the wooden partition, and peered out. She let out two whistles, short and sharp, then a long one.

Brendan and Jens started slowly sauntering down the lines, stopping from time to time to chat with the groups of soldiers.

“Now we wait” Xena watched the trees intently.

“What are we waiting for?” Gabrielle asked, feeling somewhat silly, but glad she was being of some use to Xena.

“Flies.”

“Huh?”

“Big old stinking, stinging horseflies.”

**

Xena settled the business end of the crossbow against the wooden coach wall and sighted down it. Outside, the men were lined up along the road, or sitting on it’s edge, a low buzz of casual conversation breaking the night stillness.

The torches had been moved up, so that the coach was in shadow and now Xena reached over to douse the candle inside to plunge the interior into darkness as well.

“Oo.”

“Don’t get excited.” The queen let the darkness settle around her, then she focused her vision on the trees. Mentally, she counted the fractions of a candlemark moving past and when she got to a certain number, she let out a slight, low whistle.

Brendan heard her. He pushed off from his position next to the coach and started up the line in an almost casual stroll. As he passed the first group of soldiers Xena put her head down and sighted along the crossbow length.

The shadows were deep against the edge of the forest, the pale line of the grass stark against the heavier outlines of the trees and as she watched, between one breath and the next, she saw the shadows move. “Know something, muskrat?”

“Not a whole lot, no.” Gabrielle replied in a mournful tone.

“There’s only one thing I like better than sex.” Xena’s finger tightened on the trigger.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” The queen chuckled softly. “Being right.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle could feel the energy building in the body she was pressed against, and she moved her head a little so she could peek past Xena’s shoulder to see what she was looking at.

Trouble was, she couldn’t see what she was looking at. She could see the outlines of the soldiers on the road, but past that, it was just all pitch dark and though she knew Xena was watching something - she could see the faint twitches in the skin of her face as her eyes moved - darned if she knew what it was.

“Okay.” Xena breathed. “Here we go.”

“Where are we going?”

“See that line over there?” Xena whispered back. “Where the grass meets the trees?”

Gabrielle studied the darkness. “No.” She answered honestly. “All I can see is the butts of the horses pulling the coach and those five or six guys with spears.”

Xena was momentarily silent. “Really?” She asked, after a second. “You can’t see those trees over there?”

“No.”

Xena reached up and scratched her eyebrow, then she rubbed her eyes. “There’s a bunch of Persians coming up behind the men.” She explained. “They’re sneaking up to attack us.”

Gabrielle stared harder. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why are we letting them do that?”

It occurred to Xena that if her beloved muskrat couldn't see the attack coming, maybe the men couldn't either, especially those closest to the torches. "Strategy." She held back the whistle she was about to let loose, and watched the line move forward instead.

"Oh." Gabrielle decided to stop straining her eyes. She let her chin rest on Xena's shoulder instead, both her hands gripping the wooden planks to either side of the queen and providing support for her.

Xena put her finger back on the triggering mechanism and swept her eyes over the grass, watching the waving tips as the line of Persians moved closer and closer to the road.

Jens came to stand by her, hands clasped around a spear as he apparently relaxed against the coach, his body posture casual and unconcerned. "Bit like a rabbit here, aren't we?"

"A bit." Xena agreed. "How far can you see past the lines?"

Jens studied the scene. "Length, maybe behind the men." He told his queen.

Xena turned her head and peered at Gabrielle's profile, then she looked back at her captain. "Okay." She muttered. "There's a line of those bastards about ten body lengths and closing."

Jens stiffened.

"Don't blow it." The queen cautioned. "Wait."

Jens' head moved forward, and the skin next to his eyes crinkled. "By the gods, Mistress." He whispered. "Athena has given you the eyes of an owl, I swear it." He glanced at Xena's sharp profile. "We're targets out here, though."

"Sh." Xena felt her breathing increase as battle neared. "Trust me."

"With everything." Jens said, fervently.

Xena swallowed, and licked her lips, watching the quivering grass tips as they fanned out, spanning the line of her men and coming even with the supply wagons. She wondered briefly if they knew where she was, then she disregarded the notion as the line started moving faster. "Get ready."

Jens straightened up from the wagon and stood with one hand gripped around his spear, letting the other rest casually on the hilt of his sword. All along the line, soldiers were doing the same, watching Brendan, who was watching Jens, who was watching Xena.

The queen waited, counting her own heartbeats, and the breaths against her ear and the flickering of the torches as she watched the threat coming closer and closer, now within her bow range, and yet still she held off.

Held off until she saw the motion stop and sensed the energy change, and then she took in a deep breath, pressing back against Gabrielle as she sighted down the crossbow and released the shaft, along with a piercing whistle that echoed and echoed over the suddenly still space.

Her arrow thunked into the torch nearest to her, taking it right out of the hand of the soldier holding it and sending it flying into the grass behind him.

The army turned in a swirl of men, and armor and weapons as a line of dark figures erupted from the grass, launching an attack that was met with ready swords and thrusting spears as the two lines clashed in a flurry of yells and crashing.

"Oh!"

Xena quickly reloaded, and picked her target, sending a shaft through the helmet of an oncoming Persian. Since it was dark in the coach, she knew she was relatively hidden, and she took advantage of that as she cocked the weapon again.

The Persians were surprised they weren't a surprise. Xena could see it in their faces, now visible to her as the torches extended their glow and the grasses she'd set on fire caught. They had anticipated an ambush, and now faced with very ready soldiers their attack faltered.

"Xena, watch out!"

Xena spotted the Persian making a dash for the horses. She loaded her crossbow and waited, watching the man fight off one of the city volunteers and dodge past him to reach for the nearest animal, his sword moving back away from the animal as his hand grasped for the reins.

Interesting. The queen shot him in the neck, sending his body plunging past the horse to the ground with a spurt of blood. She pondered as she reloaded, then she let out three short, sharp whistles, before she settled the crossbow back on the ledge and found her next target heading right for her, a spear ahead of his body as he charged towards the coach. "Think he saw me."

"Uh.. I think so too." Gabrielle fought the urge to duck, holding herself and Xena in place more by will than by using her now shaking arms.

The man looked angry, and desperate. Xena watched his eyes as he closed in on her, seeing the shift to the horses before he made a lunge towards the opening. Several of her own soldiers were pelting towards him, seeing his aim, but Xena calmly sighted down the front of the crossbow and let it fire, burying it in his shoulder and sending the spear off course to thunk solidly in the wall of the coach and stop him cold in his tracks.

He spun backwards, holding onto his shoulder as Xena's men caught up with him and cut him down.

Xena turned her attention back to the lines, spotting an older man in more ornate armor, with the thick, curly beard common to the true Persians. "Bet he's in charge." She loaded an arrow into the bow, and waited, glad of the protection of the coach as she took her time to take aim.

The man got past Jens and ducked under his sword, whipping a mace from his belt and aiming a blow for her captain's head. Xena gauged angles and let the arrow fly just as his arm reached its backswing, nailing him in the bicep as Jens sensed the attack and dove for the ground.

The Persian dropped the mace and grabbed for the arrow, as one of the city volunteers rushed at him, knocking him off his feet as the man bravely stabbed at him with a short sword. They tumbled together as Jens recovered, getting up and plunging his spear into the Persian's chest.

"Wow." Gabrielle sighed, right into her ear.

"Sure is a lot easier than using that damn sword, ain't it?" Xena cocked the weapon again, watching the battle alertly. "I don't know why I never thought of this before. Woulda saved my ass a lot of trouble." She let out a whistle, seeing one man throw down his weapons and stand, arms raised. "Not to mention saved me a lot of nights drinking the pain away."

Brendan let out a yell of his own, and raised his sword up. "Surrender and live, ya bastards!" He called out. "Or die in the grass like the snakes ya are!" He slammed his hilts into one of the nearby enemy soldiers who was grappling with one of Xena's men and knocked him to the ground.

"Nice." Xena chuckled softly.

"It sure is a lot less dangerous for you." Gabrielle watched the action, seeing the Persians starting to drop their weapons. "Is that it? We won again?"

"Sure looks like it." The queen reloaded, just in case. "It's a lot less dangerous for you too, muskrat." She added, as it became obvious the Persians were, in fact, surrendering to Xena's men who gathered them into small pockets, collecting their weapons.

"That's for sure." Gabrielle peered over her shoulder. The high spirits of Xena's troops were becoming evident, as the seasoned soldiers herded their captives and the new men from the city chattered excitedly about their sudden, and somewhat unexpected victory. "I think I like this better."

Xena set the crossbow down and leaned her arms on the wood. "Okay, you can let go now." She told her lover. "Let me get my ass together before I have to go out there and talk to those bastards."

"Want some wine?"

"Might be a good idea." The queen felt the pain mounting, now that the excitement of battle had faded. "And get me those herbs."

Gabrielle put a hand on her shoulder. "Xena." She hesitated. "Can I go talk to them for you? I hate to see you hurt yourself more."

Xena leaned against the wall, sorely tempted. She could feel the spasms starting up, and she knew no matter how many herbs she poured down her throat in how much wine, that swaggering around outside was going to mean candlemarks and candlemarks of agonizing pain afterward.

She wanted to go out and consolidate her victory.

She didn't want to end up screaming because of it.

"Damn it, life sucks sometimes." The queen sighed. "I'm getting too damn old for this." She carefully eased her way down from her knees, aching and half numb from the pressure, and laid down flat on the couch. "Tell you what..."

"What?" Gabrielle finished relighting the candle, bringing a soft, warm glow back to the coach's interior. "What should I tell them?" She sat down on the edge of the bench, taking Xena's hand in her own.

It felt so good to be lying still and flat. Xena watched the candle flickers outline Gabrielle's face and thought about what to tell them. She finally smiled and squeezed her lover's hand. "Don't tell them anything." She said. "Let's let them wonder."

"Okay." Gabrielle smiled back. "Still want the wine?"

Xena nodded. "And the herbs." She sighed. "Maybe I can drug myself senseless before we start moving again."

"Down the road?"

The queen's eyes took on a slightly mischievous twinkle. "No." She shook her head. "Someplace I might even be able to get a few winks of sleep."

"Sleep?"

"Or maybe have sex with you."

"Xena!!"

**

The army had formed two lines down the road, the ditch off to one side filled with bodies laid head to foot. Men were sliding extra swords into belts, and shouldering spears taken off the dead Persians. Brendan had captured one of the long, curved swords and he slid it partly from its scabbard with a satisfied smile.

“Good night’s work.” Jens commented. “Maj nailed it.”

“Always does.” The old captain replied. “Got a god’s sense, she does. Third eye, or something.” He slung the new sword over his shoulder. “Let me go find out what she wants done with the rest of these rats.” He started towards the end of the line, where the captured Persians were being guarded by about a dozen of Xena’s men, soldiers with grim faces and ready crossbows.

Brendan slowed to regard them, before he shook his head and circled the guards, heading towards the royal coach standing squarely on the road. The moon had set, and now only the stars twinkled overhead, dimmed a little by the fluttering torches.

“You there.”

Brendan stopped and turned his head. He found himself looking at one of the Persians, a tall man with heavy, broad shoulders and the air of a warrior. “Aye?”

The man ducked his head diffidently. “A word with you, captain.” He said. “To our mutual good, maybe.” He added, clasping his hands before him.

The grizzled fighter studied him, and let him wait for a few moments before he walked over and faced the man, letting one hand fall casually on his sword hilt. “Talk.” He said, briefly. “I’ve got work to do.”

**

It was exhilarating. Xena rested her hands on her stomach and twiddled her fingers, her body stretched out in grudging comfort. She heard footsteps approaching the coach, and she reached over to grasp her wine goblet, taking a sip as a deferential knock came at the door. “Come.”

Brendan poked his head in. “Majesty, this man would like a word with ye.” He held the door open, exposing the face of one of the enemy soldiers.

“Does he now?” Xena casually crossed her booted feet and regarded the man. “You almost done getting rid of those useless carcasses?” She asked Brendan. “I want to get moving.”

“Almost, Mistress.” Brendan said. “What’s to be done with the rest of em?”

Xena smiled at the other soldier. “Depends on what he’s got to say, doesn’t it?” She sipped her wine. “Well?”

The man was half hidden in shadows, but he had the thick, full beard of the true Persians, and he reminded Xena just a bit of Heydar. He put his hands in front of him, clasped carefully and dipped his head in a reasonably respectful manner. “Your Majesty.”

“Nice start.” Xena kept her eyes on him as Gabrielle came over to her side and knelt, offering her a platter. She took a piece of whatever it was and bit into it, hoping her lover hadn’t picked this very moment to try slipping her some nasty vegetable or other. “Keep going.”

It was a piece of apple. Xena munched on it as the soldier collected himself, his eyes darting to Gabrielle and then back to her.

"We have traveled a long way." The man said. "We came to conquer, and gain great riches for ourselves, and what we have found here is not easy conquest and gold, but defeat and a minion from Ahriman at every corner."

"Did you just call me a minion?" Xena's eyebrows lifted. "Gabrielle, get me the chakram."

Gabrielle looked at her, then she put the plate down and turned, rising to head back towards the shelf she'd stored their gear on.

"I meant no offense, your Majesty." The soldier said, in a mild tone. "To be called so in my land is to be feared, and respected."

"We're not in your land." Xena accepted the bag Gabrielle was holding out to her. She slid the worn leather off the glittering weapon and ran her thumb along the side. "You're in my land, and in my land, I'm not anyone's minion."

Gabrielle knelt again, and picked up the plate, her ears cocked to listen for the man's reaction.

"Do you not serve your gods as we do ours?" The soldier asked.

"Do I look like I do?" Xena shot back, as she accepted another piece of apple from her solicitous bedmate. "You said you had something to talk to me about. Talk, or I'll start the killing now. We've got places to go, and people to beat into submission."

The Persian studied her briefly in silence. "Your majesty, we would join you." He said. "We would rather kill in your service than die from it."

Xena took a sip of her wine, watching him over the rim of her goblet. "Why?" She asked, finally.

"Why would we rather die than live?" He asked, in a slightly quizzical tone.

"Why should I believe you'd fight for me instead of kill us as snakes behind the lines?"

"Ah." The soldier nodded. "That is a hard question."

"Not for me." The queen told him. "I'd just as soon kill you as worry about it. You're not worth me risking my men's skins for."

Brendan stood a little taller, without really moving. Just a shifting of his body, catching the Persian's attention in a flick of his eyes.

"We are Persian soldiers." The man straightened also, for a completely different reason.

"That and a dinar can get you a roll in the market." Xena gave Gabrielle a sideways glance, and was rewarded with another slice of fruit. "So what, you're Persian soldiers?" The queen chuckled. "I've been scattering Persian soldiers right and left with little more than my royal guard and my consort's teeth."

The Persian, to give him credit, mustered a wry smile. "That, your Majesty, is why we want to join you." He said, with another graceful bow of his head. "We greatly dislike losing."

Xena chuckled again. "Now we have something in common." She just as gracefully countered. "I see you're smarter than your friend Heydar."

The man's lip curled. "Sholeh's bastard brother? I wish no part of him."

Xena's pale eyes widened a little, and she heard Gabrielle make a tiny, surprised sound. "What's your name?"

“Kourosh.” The man answered. “I am the son of a warrior, and the grandson of a warrior, and my greatest wish is to live to father another like me, not to die here in this strange, cold land at the hand of one I could learn much from.”

Oo. Xena almost smirked. “If you can wave that sword as well as you wag your tongue you might be useful after all.” She allowed. “Are you sure you speak for the rest of your bunch?” She watched him carefully, seeing his body shift and his shoulders relax, though his face remained quietly impassive.

Kourosh nodded. “They asked me to speak for them.” He added. “As I am the senior, and perhaps the only one with the heart to speak with a demon.”

“Am I a demon?” Xena turned her head and looked at Gabrielle. “You think so?”

Gabrielle smiled at her, a gentle, loving look. “Of course not.”

The queen turned her attention back to her visitor. “Kourosh.”

“Your Majesty.”

Xena crooked a finger at him. “C’mere.”

Brendan’s eyes widened a little, but he stood aside and the man carefully climbed into the coach, the ceiling cramping his body as he walked across the creaking floor towards her.

Xena held his eyes as he approached, projecting an air of amused confidence that overshadowed his greater bulk and fact he was towering over her.

He paused, and stared down at her for a long moment.

Gabrielle swung around, bringing one foot up so she was kneeling on one knee, and she braced her hand on the padded bench, looking as cutely intimidating as she was capable of.

Slowly, Kourosh turned his head to study her, then he exhaled, and with a motion admirably graceful, he lowered himself to both his knees, and then, to Xena’s surprise, he leaned down and touched his head to the floor before her.

Gabrielle studied him in mute puzzlement, then she turned her head to look at Xena, her shoulders lifting in a half shrug.

Xena cursed silently, recognizing this gratifying obsequence required her to respond in some manner. She reached over and took hold of her sword hilt, and pulled the weapon free of its sheath, twirling it as she brought it across her body and scattering flashes of candlelight over all of them.

Kourosh didn’t stir. He remained in his crouched position, as Xena’s blade whispered through the air, coming to rest on the top of his head as the queen sat up and braced her weight on her free arm. “I’m no demon, Persian.”

Kourosh looked up at her, lifting his head just enough to see her face. “You are more than what I am, your Majesty. That is enough for me.”

Xena studied him a moment more. “I accept your service.” She said, in a quiet voice. “If it’s falsely given, I will cut your heart out and walk over it.”

His lashes fluttered, and then he nodded.

“And if that’s not bad enough.” Xena tapped him on the head with her sword, then she drew it back. “I’ll let Gabrielle beat you up and then tell everyone you screamed like a girl.”

Startled, Kourush looked at her, then at Gabrielle, then back at her.

“She’s mean.” The queen warned. “And she’s already had a taste of Persian.”

Kourush looked back at Gabrielle. Gabrielle met his gaze, then after a second, she licked her lips.

His nostrils flared and he edged up and away from the ground, settling on his knees and folding his hands in his lap. “I understand, your Majesty.”

“No you don’t.”

“Majesty?”

“Get out of here.” Xena whacked him on the cheek with her sword before he could move. “Go tell your buddies they’re not going to die right away and let’s get moving. Brendan!”

“Mistress.”

“Move out!”

**

Gabrielle held on tight to the wall with one hand, her other arm around Xena’s back as the queen knelt and watched out the opening. “Oh boy.”

Xena had both hands gripping the wall in an attempt to keep her body from being slung from side to side as the coach rumbled over the broken ground heading for the forest. The one bright side from her perspective was the violent motion didn’t disturb her stomach nearly as much as the slower one did.

“Look out!” Gabrielle yelled, as a wheel hit a rock and she bounced off the bench, losing her grip both on Xena and on the wall. “Whoa!”

Xena hesitated, then she released one hand off the wood and grabbed Gabrielle’s belt, regretting it instantly as her back seized up and she buckled and slid backwards, ending up falling onto the bench as her lover grabbed at her and they both were bounced off onto the floor of the coach.

“Ow!” Xena grunted, flailing around looking for something to hang onto. She held her breath and bit the inside of her mouth as the coach tipped to one side and she started to slide, only to be halted unceremoniously by Gabrielle flopping on top of her and holding her still.

“Sheep!” Gabrielle panted. “For the love of Zeus, Xena... this is crazy?”

Now flat on her back, and not moving, Xena had time to let the spasm fade as the coach bounced and rolled. She was able to brace her boots against one wall and press the back of her head against the floor so the motion wouldn’t knock her unconscious.

“Do you want me to..”

“Stay right where you are.” The queen ordered. “Don’t move.”

Gabrielle was nose to nipple with her, and halfway through getting up, she settled back down with a grunt. “Okay.”

Xena listened, as she heard Brendan yelling orders to the men. No one understood what she was doing, Hades, she barely understood it herself, but she had a gut feeling she needed to get the army under cover and she’d learned long ago not to ignore stuff like that.

“Oof.” Gabrielle bounced a little, as the coach did. “Sorry.”

The wagon righted itself, and went along a little more smoothly. Xena waited, then she glanced down at her adorable sack of turnips, making out Gabrielle's profile in the dim light. "Okay." She said. "I think we're almost there."

"Can I get up now?"

"You want to?"

Gabrielle's nose wrinkled up a little. "Not really." She confessed, dredging up a grin before she carefully got up on her hands and knees and crawled over to the bench, using it to get upright so she could see out the opening again. "Oh.. Oh!" She yelped in alarm.

Xena didn't stop to think. She rolled over and got to her feet, jumping over to where Gabrielle was kneeling before her body had time to seize up on her. She got her hands on the wall and peered out, in time to see branches about to swallow up the horses pulling her coach. "Whoa!"

The edge of the coach slammed into something, and they both went flying backwards to end up on the floor again, tumbling in a ball of arms and legs and stifled curses as the coach came to an abrupt halt.

"Son of a Bacchae!" Xena groaned, half curled up helplessly in a ball.

"Oh my gosh." Gabrielle untangled herself from the floor and scrambled over to where her lover was slumped, taking hold of the queen's shoulder gently. "Xena!"

The pale eyes fluttered open. "What?" She responded. "You're not going to ask if I'm okay, are you?"

Gabrielle's jaw shut with an audible click.

"Go find out what's going on." Xena said. "Everyone should get inside the treeline, so you can't see them from the road. Hurry."

Her lover was caught between wanting to obey, and wanting to stay and comfort her. Finally, though, Gabrielle patted her arm and got up, going to the door of the coach and opening it. She hopped outside and closed the door, the sounds of the army surrounding them floating through the air.

With a sigh, Xena slowly rolled over onto her back, easing her boots up so her knees were bent and she was looking straight up at the roof of the coach. The pain almost brought tears to her eyes, and she spent a few seconds just breathing.

Outside, she could hear the rambling chaos of the army. She could hear Gabrielle's voice, nearby, possibly beside the horses, and hear the driver working the traces to get the animals free of the coach.

After a few minutes, the spasms subsided, and she rolled over again, towards the side of the coach. She took hold of the side spars and pulled herself upright, grabbing the top support as her legs threatened not to hold her.

Not a good sign. Xena tensed her arms and shoulders and lifted her weight up, slowly rotating her lower body until she felt a set of uncomfortable pops in her back and felt a wave of prickling sensation go down the back of her thighs.

Then she lowered her self down again, this time breathing a small sigh of relief as she remained upright. She waited until the tingling stopped, then she made her way over to the door and knocked it open, leaning out to see what was going on.

The driver spotted her and came over, leaving the horses behind. "Majesty, begging your pardon. The horses..."

“Relax.” Xena leaned one arm on the coach door, and held casually on the top with her other. She studied the ground they’d covered, the road and the bend into the pass just visible over the tops of the grass. “The ride made it all the more fun.” She glanced back at the man. “Get the horses unhitched.”

The driver scuttled gratefully off.

Brendan took his place. “Mistress..”

“Get the men into attack formation just behind the trees.” Xena cut him off. “Quickly. Archers and spears in the front, and get the mounted riders ready to come out behind them.”

Brendan looked out over the peaceful plain, then up at her. “Aye.” He replied briefly, turning and heading back to where the troops were milling.

“Xena.” Gabrielle came up to where she was standing and put a hand on her leg. “They found the Persian camp. Those new guys said we should take stuff from it.”

“Yeah?” The queen studied the lines. “Go tell them to get... no.” She paused and turned, cocking her head a little and turning her ears into the wind. “Wait.”

Gabrielle waited. She rubbed her arms a little, in the very early morning chill, exhaling and seeing her breath in front of her as she stood in the long grass. She wasn’t really sure why Xena had sent them all scrambling for the trees, but she hoped it meant they could take a little break now.

“We don’t have time.” Xena said. “We need to get ready to attack.”

Gabrielle, as Brendan had, looked out over the silent plain, and then back at Xena. Unlike the old captain, she put her hands on her hips and tilted her head in question. “What are we attacking? I don’t see anything out there except maybe some rabbits in the grass on that side.” She pointed at some moving tips.

Leave it to Gabrielle. “The Persians.” Xena said. “Jens!” She called her other captain over. “They have a fire still on in that camp?”

“Banked.” Jens reported. “Want me to take some fellers in there to sort it out?”

“No.” Xena said. “I want you to get ready to fight. Keep them men on the lines. We have time for scavaging later.” She paused. “Maybe.”

Jens scratched his ear. “Think they’ve got more scouts out, Mistress?” He asked, after a second. “The men here, they don’t think so. Said they were the ones Sholeh picked to stay behind, said she was heading fast as she could up our way.”

“No scouts.” Xena said. “She’ll turn around.”

Jens half saluted and moved quickly off, clapping his hand on the shoulder of one of the archers and pointing him towards a line of boulders just inside the tree line. “Line em up, men!” He ordered the soldiers. “Get ready to fight.”

Gabrielle got up on the running board of the coach, now disengaged from it’s team. “Are you sure they’re coming?” She asked.

“I’m sure.” The queen responded. She turned her head and let out a low whistle, pausing until she heard Tiger respond. “Tell them to let him loose.” She told Gabrielle. “I want him over here.”

“You said you didn’t want to ride.”

"I don't have a choice." Xena said. "I can't lead the battle from this damn wagon and.. " She hesitated. "Just go, Gabrielle. We're running out of time."

Gabrielle put a hand on her leg, then she turned and trotted off towards where the horses were loosely circled nearby.

Xena turned her head to watch the pass. Was she sure Sholeh would turn around? Yeah. She was sure. Would she bring her entire army back through the pass, something Xena desperately wanted her to do? Maybe.

Could her rag tag little band of city wags, tired soldiers, and converted Persians handle Sholeh's army?

Xena had to smile. Even though she was in pain, and she wanted nothing more than to be home, in her own bed, with a hot cup of mulled cider and a naked muskrat, she had to smile because being here, directing this battle and taking this chance was about as much fun as she could handle having at the moment.

Strange. It was such a risk, and yet, she savored the challenge of it, this rolling of the dice that could end up giving her either a great win, or a truly harrowing loss.

Ah well.

Xena looked up as Tiger trotted over, shaking his dark head as he stuck his nose right into her chest and exhaled. "Hey you little bastard. How are ya?"

Gabrielle appeared leading Patches. "We're ready."

Xena looked from her tow headed little lover to her lover's shaggy haired little pony and chuckled. "We sure are." She motioned Kourosh over. "You ready to fight on the other side now?"

The Persian had just seated a dagger in his belt and he came over, his dark eyes twinkling a little in the starlight. "Think you to draw her back, your Majesty? She was bound to take your seat."

"She'll be here." Xena smiled at him. "Sooner than you think."

The Persian studied her, and then he smiled back. "We all knew, wasn't your seat she wanted, truly. Begging the rudeness."

Xena stroked Tiger's head, giving him a kiss between his eyes. "No chance." She said. "That's given elsewhere. Along with the rest of me." She took a steadying breath, then she grabbed her saddle bow and back and mostly with her arms pulled herself aboard the stallion's saddle. "Such as it is."

It hurt. But after she hastily removed her boots from her stirrups and let her legs dangle, her body straightened up a little and the pain eased. "All right." She gathered Tiger's reins in her fingers. "Heads up!" Her ears cocked. "Weapons ready!"

Gabrielle tugged at her leggings, and she looked down.

"Want yours?" The blond woman asked. "Weapons, I mean?"

Oh. Oops. "Yeah." Xena muttered. "Probably would help." She cleared her throat. "Then get on scruffy's back cause I don't want to lose you." She watched Gabrielle disappear into the coach and cocked her ears, hearing a low, faint rumbling at the very edges of her hearing.

C'mon, ya bitch.

Let's get this done. Xena stared at the road, her fingers twitching. I want to go home.

Part 30

Xena leaned forward and rested her elbows on her saddlebow, gazing across the dark grass towards the barely visible road winding into the pass. A line of soldiers were racing into position on the berm, spreading out to either side of her and Brendan gathered his mounted riders up to either side of Tiger's big form.

After the soldiers settled, and Patches had taken up his spot at her side, all eyes turned to Xena, watching her in question as silence spread over the plain.

Xena was aware of the attention. She kept her head straight, as slowly, the sounds of the night started up around them now that everyone wasn't crashing and banging and yelling their heads off. Crickets chirped softly, and an owl hooted, somewhere nearby.

Peaceful.

"Xena, what are we waiting for?"

"Shh." Xena glanced at her companion. "Listen."

Obediently, Gabrielle sat up straight in her saddle, and her face creased in concentration. "I'm listening."

"Hear that?"

The blond woman paused, her head cocked to one side. "I think I just heard one of these horses poop. Is that what you meant?"

Xena sighed. "No."

"Sorry, Xena" Gabrielle gave her an apologetic look. "I just hear stuff, like people moving around here. What do you hear?"

Xena didn't answer for a moment, then she exhaled softly. "I hear an army coming." She said. "And you know what, Gabrielle? I want this to be over."

Gabrielle listened hard, the sounds of the rustling grass and the men around them almost overwhelming to her as she fought to figure out what the queen was talking about. She didn't hear an army, all she heard was...

Wait. She rubbed her ear. "Xena, that sort of.. that rumbling.. is that what you hear?"

The queen's brows hiked in mild surprise. "You hear it?"

"I think I feel it more than I hear it." Gabrielle admitted. "What are they going to do?"

Xena let out a low whistle, then two shorter ones. "Hold your fire until my mark!" She added, shifting her elbows a little to ease them from falling asleep holding up her weight. "When I signal, just fire as many damn arrows as you can fast as you can into everything that moves."

The heads closest to her swung her way in puzzlement. "Mistress." Brendan rode up. "What are we aiming at?" He pulled his horse up next to Tiger "There's nothing out there."

"There will be."

Brendan shaded his eyes with his hand and stared towards the road. Then he looked at Xena in question.

“We can hear them coming.” Gabrielle stated. “Really.”

Brendan looked at there “Ye can?”

Solemnly, the blond haired woman nodded.

“Get ready.” Xena felt a deep, nervous quiver in her guts, as the low rumble now rolled lightly over the grass, and Brendan heard it as well. “This ain’t gonna be pretty.”

She could feel the weight of her sword on her back, but she knew this time it was only for show, and as she waited and watched the opening to the pass she had to admit to herself that for the first time in a long time she was going into a fight scared.

She didn’t like it one bit. She knew the expectation of these men, who’d seen her fight now for the last few sevendays, and she knew her own expectations for herself.

Knowing she was near helpless chewed her ass.

“Hey Xena?” Gabrielle was shifting her spear around, finding a good place to hold it without smacking her pony in the side or poking Tiger in the butt. “Won’t they attack us if we start shooting at them?”

“I hope so.” Xena took a deep breath, as the sound abruptly got louder. She whistled, then she leaned forward, staring intently through Tiger’s forward cocked ears. For a moment more, the quiet scene held it’s magic.

A moment more, and the starlight reflected on waving grasses, and an empty road.

Then with a shocking suddenness, the pass was filled with a flood of racing horses, truly almost soundless given the size of the force that exploded through the space between the hills.

“Bigods.” Brendan drew in a breath.

“Mm.” Xena watched the Persians thunder past, yells that had started to come out of throats dieing down as the army they’d expected to meet inexplicably wasn’t there.

The horses slowed, and the men running full out behind them pulled up in a cluster, captains riding back and yelling orders with waving swords as a group of ten riders broke off and bolted further down the road.

“Xena.”

“Steady.” The queen whispered. “Steady, Brendan. Wait for it.”

“Shouldn’t we let them just...”

“And have them go sack the city?” The queen asked, sharply. “Find your balls, old man.” She whistled softly. “Get ready.”

A shiver went up and down the line, and Xena nudged Tiger forward just a bit, so the men could see his outline against the trees. She focused on the Persians, taking in the shifting motion and the momentum, that was bleeding away, some troops lunging into the grass to get out the way of the ones behind them.

She watched the edge of the pass intently. The last line of soldiers piled out of the pass and into the confusion and only then did she lift her hand up and after a brief pause to consider what kind of insane stupidity she was about to launch them into this time, she dropped it. "Fire."

The long line of crossbowmen stretched to either side of her obeyed, aiming at the troops outlined in torchlight and the silver sheen from the cloudless sky of stars.

A line of Persians went down. "Keep firing." Xena ordered. "Then get ready to run."

"Run?" Brendan looked at her. "To where, Xena? Not in these trees, surely. It's a full thicket in there."

"I remember." The queen agreed. "Just be ready."

The Persians were diving for the ground, and the men on horseback milled around, some ducking in their saddles, others bolting down the road. The captains were gaining control over them though, and as the arrows continued to hail from the trees, arms began to point towards them, and Xena's ears caught the sound of arrows coming back at her. "Careful!" She called out. "They're shooting back."

"Xena, they're gonna come at us." Brendan gathered his horses reins, as lines of soldiers began to do just that, gathering behind tightly held shields that now protected them from Xena's forces fire.

"Yup." The queen agreed. "Listen up!" She projected her voice, and heard the troop leaders echoing her down the lines. "Go right at them – then when I signal, FOLLOW ME." She bellowed the last two words. "UNDERSTAND!"

The troops yelled back.

Xena now gathered herself up and studied the Persians, waiting for a lull in the fire before she let out a piercing whistle, and nudged Tiger in the ribs. "Stay with me, Gabrielle." She told her consort. "And keep your head down!"

"I will!" Gabrielle settled her spear on the side furthest away from Xena, and urged Patches to follow his big friend forward as they rode through the trees, slowly enough to allow the foot soldiers to keep up.

The Persian's shields helped them avoid the arrows, but the same items, big and bulky, prevented them from aiming back and cut their force effectively in half as bowmen slung their shields on their backs and hid behind other's, trying to take a shot at Xena's men.

But Xena's forces were dressed in dark clothing, and their backs were to a dark forest, and they were making the most of both that, and high grasses. The front line of the Persians started to falter as Xena slid Tiger to the right hand side and let the troops go past her, keeping her horse in the deepest of the shadows.

She had a dark cloak on. Tiger was black as pitch. Xena alertly watched the lines movement, letting out short whistles as she rode slowly forward, one hand on her chakram, the other leaning on her saddlebow to keep her weight up off her back.

She caught sight of one of the Persian captains, circling the men and pointing vaguely in her direction.

"Xena!" Gabrielle saw the same thing, and suddenly Patches was surging forward as they got between Xena and the oncoming men.

Unwilling to allow her lover to be spitted like a hog, Xena unhitched her chakram and carefully squeezed her knees tighter as she cocked her arm and let the weapon fly, stifling a curse as her back unhelpfully seized up and nearly sent her toppling from Tiger's tall back. "Gods be damned!"

The chakram hit its mark though, smashing the Persian captain in the face before it arced around to return to her hand so quickly she almost missed catching it.

Then she wished she had missed it, as another spasm hit and she fell forward against Tiger's neck, startling the stallion. He crow hopped a few steps and snorted, and she just barely got the chakram back on its hook before she had to grab hold of his mane just to stay onboard. "Stop that you idiot!"

"Xena!" Brendan rode over, threading his way between the lines.

"Keep moving forward!" The queen ordered, getting her horse back under control. "Don't worry about..."

Her peripheral vision caught the motion just in time, and she whirled Tiger around, sending him headlong into a clump of Persian soldiers about to surround Gabrielle. "Yahhh!"

Gabrielle had her spear up and she was frantically pushing the men off with the blunt end of it, flailing around Patches' head as the Persians tried to pull her off his back. "Hey! Stop that!"

Tiger plowed into them, rearing up onto his hind legs and striking up with his forelegs as he responded to signals from his rider. His big hooves slashed out at the soldiers, who ducked and threw their arms over their heads as they dove out of the way.

Two of Xena's men came into view, engaging the Persians as Gabrielle recovered her composure and started whacking around her with more confidence, letting out little yelps as her spear connected.

Xena caught her breath and then grabbed hold of her saddlebow, reaching out with her boot to snag a crossbow from one of the Persians rushing towards her consort. Her toe caught in the string and the man released the weapon in surprise, whirling around as Xena got her hand on the bow and brought it up.

The soldier lunged at her, reaching for the bow just as she got her finger on the mechanism and released it, driving the shaft at point blank range right through the man's eye. She hastily shoved the weapon to one side and reached out, grabbing the arrow as the man reeled backwards and yanking him back over to thump against Tiger's side.

He started to go down. Xena got her boot into his armor and held him up long enough for her to grab the quiver of arrows on his back, then she let him fall to the ground, just as Patches backed up right into Tiger's chest.

Okay, so this probably was a bad idea. Xena juggled the weapon as she looked around, seeing a mostly swirling mass of fighters clustered in front of her, and wondering where they'd all come from. She could see the Persian lines, the front of them engaged with her men, but a cavalry group was gathering behind them evidently intent on charging.

Not good. "Brendan! Turn the horses!" Xena let out a yell. "To the right! To the right!"

Six of the men fought their way over to her and she kned Tiger forward with them clustered around her, swinging around the right end of their own lines and surging forward just as the Persians started their charge.

Xena was aware, in the corner of her eye, of a flash of shaggy white to one side, and she was also aware that what she was doing was suicidal. The motion of the canter was already seizing her back up, and all she could do was clamp her knees down and lean forward, clutching the crossbow in one hand as she led the way to intercept the enemy.

No way to load the damn thing. No way to draw her sword. No real way to use anything but maybe the dagger she had strapped under her left knee if someone got that close to her and she didn't fall off the damn horse first.

She let out a yell, loud as she could, since she didn't know if it might not be her last chance to.

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Gabrielle pulled her spear back in and got her hands somewhere in the middle of the length finding it easier to move either end when she did that. She swallowed against a dry throat as the chaos swirled around her. She held tight with her knees as Patches almost stumbled, then she urged the pony after Tiger as the big stallion started to move forward and away toward the enemy.

Things were moving too fast for her. She could see the Persians coming towards them on their horses, and she could see the front line.. well, really, the only line of Xena's army clashing with the enemy just a few horse lengths from where she was.

Scary.

She could hear Xena yelling, then a bunch of the horse soldiers formed up around her and they were running towards the Persians as the footmen scrambled out of their way. "Oh boy." Gabrielle grabbed the reins she'd tied off on her saddle horn and steered Patches after them. "Patches, this is a mess."

Her pony shook his head.

Xena was leading the way though, so she nudged the pony until they caught up, just as the Persian horsemen. She saw the queen set her boots into her stirrups and then she tossed the crossbow she'd taken from her and reached over her shoulder to draw her sword out.

She could see Xena's profile. She could see the pain her lover was in, but overriding all that was the fire that forced everything to the background save the need to fight.

To win.

Gabrielle understood that Xena understood well what drove her. The difference between, as she'd said, a fighter and a warrior.

Right now, she was wishing both of them were neither, as she got her spear going oin the right direction and got ready to...

Uh. Gabrielle realized there were huge horses heading right at her and Patches and in the next moment she was ducking past a mace that threatened to crush her head in as they squirted past the first of the Persians. "Whoooooa!" She whacked the horse in the ribs with her spear as she went by and heard the animal snort.

Patches added his teeth to the mix, nipping the animals rear as he circled around the back of the horse and ducked between two others.

Gabrielle hesitated, then she grimaced and poked with her spear tip, making the first horse jump forward and rear. She felt something coming up behind her and turned, the back end of her weapon catching another horse right in the nose as it's rider leaned forward to clobber her.

She ducked, as the horse slammed into Patches rear and the rider started to come off next to her, then she heard Patches whinny and something big and fast came past her.

She heard the clash of metal.

A shower of something warm hit her in the back of the head, trickling down her neck as Patches somehow escaped from between the two hurtling bodies and ended up scrambling past them. Gabrielle swung her spear around as the pony turned, and felt it connect with something.

She hoped it was a bad guy. Frantically, she craned her head around and spotted Tiger rearing, his outline unmistakable against the starry sky. In horror she watched as one of the Persians drove towards his ribs with a spear, her hands already grabbing for Patches reins to bring him around.

The pony seemed to sense it. He dodged two fighting men and scrambled up a low rise, then bolted back towards the dangerous mix of fighting me and fighting horses.

Gabrielle tucked her spear under her arm and held tight to it as they hurtled into the battle. She closed her eyes and grabbed for the saddlehorn with one hand as her spear tip hit a Persian right in the thigh and the momentum nearly shoved her back off and out of Patches saddle. "Yow!"

The man fell off his horse, grabbing for the spear as Patches collided with the animal and bit at him, making the bigger horse crow hop sideways and swing his head around with bared teeth to respond.

Gabrielle's eyes widened, and she yanked her spear up and out of the soldier, smacking the Persian horse on the nose with the other end then hanging on as he reared up and Patches scooted under his forelegs in a determined lunge back to where Tiger was.

The big stallion was in the act of rearing again, striking with his forelegs as Persians came at him and his rider from both sides, one swinging a mace, the other slamming a sword overhand.

Gabrielle watched as if in slow motion as Xena's body twisted and she met the sword with her own, but couldn't avoid the mace that slammed into her shoulder. The impact knocked the queen back and as Tiger reared again, Xena fell off out of the saddle, tumbling off on the Tiger's far side.

Patches charged. Gabrielle yelled loudly as she aimed for the mace wielder who was turning his animal to get another shot in. The man's horse started and plunged away out of his control, though, and a space opened up for her to move into, the starlight sparkling off the hilt of a dagger sticking out of the animal's side.

A man rushed at her. A foot soldier, his sword swinging right at her. Gabrielle got the butt end of her spear into his chest before he could see it, and knocked him backwards, then held on as Patches jumped over his body, nearly tossing her from the saddle. "Oh!"

The shadows parted as she closed in to reveal the horror of seeing Xena's body dangling along Tiger's side, one boot stuck in her stirrup as Tiger careened around mostly out of control. "Oh my gosh!" Gabrielle steered Patches over to his buddy just as Tiger returned to all four legs, allowing her a moment to get close to Xena. "Xena!"

"Get over here!" The queen yelled, reaching up to grab Patches leg as the pony closed in. "Take this!" She thrust her sword hilt first at Gabrielle. "Go cut that damn strap!"

Gabrielle grabbed the sword as she scrambled off Patches back, landing on the ground and rushing over to Tiger's side. The horse moved suddenly and nearly crashed into her, and she saw two Persians coming at them as she tried to get Xena's boot untangled.

Swords really sucked at cutting leather straps, she discovered quickly. She glanced behind her, seeing Xena's body suspended between the stallion and her pony as Xena grabbed onto Patches saddle and pulled herself up off the ground.

"Oh!" Gabrielle hoped Patches would stay right where he was. "Patches, be good!"

The pony stood stock still, craning his head around to find out what this was that was yanking his saddle off.

Desperate, Gabrielle turned back and sawed at the strap, its end tangled tightly around the queen's leg. She sensed something approaching but kept her head down, rightly guessing her chance of survival rested more on getting her lover loose than defending herself against whatever it was.

"Hurry!" Xena punctuated the idea hoarsely. "Damn it!!!!"

Gabrielle felt the world closing in on her, Persian battle yells and the thunder of horses hooves growing louder and louder as Tiger shifted and moved, letting out a scream of his own. The motion made it hard for her to keep her grip on the stirrup, and even harder to keep the sword in place and not stab the horse with it, or cut her lover's foot in the process.

She felt her hands start to shake and it was hard to breathe.

But she finally got the edge of the sword against the edge of the leather and she applied as much pressure as she could as the sounds got so loud around her she knew she only had seconds.

"Gabrielle! Watch out!" Brendan's voice cut through the melee with sharp urgency.

"I can't!" Gabrielle yelled back, shoving hard against the resisting strap.

The leather parted as Tiger screamed again and before she could react she was shoved under the stallion's belly and ended up on the ground, tucking herself up into a ball as hooves and boots and yelling people were swirling all around her.

She heard Xena's battle yell, wild and strong, behind her. That gave her the courage to scramble to her feet and looked quickly around, unspeakably grateful to see Patches scruffy head appear from the darkness right next to her. "Patches!"

The pony nudged her, and she quickly got on his back, sensing a shift in the battle as the horses in front of her started moving forward.

"Gabrielle! Are you all right!" Brendan appeared briefly, holding out her spear to her. "Here!"

"Thanks! I'm fine!" Gabrielle managed to answer, looking hard through the darkness until she spotted Tiger, and the distinctive profile of his rider already back in his saddle.

A wave of relief washed over her. She urged Patches after the big black horse as the army started to move ahead a little faster.

She had no real idea of what was going on. She suspected they were doing all right, since she could hear Xena's army yelling, and she thought she'd heard one of the Persians blow a horn. But it was dark, and full of shadows, and all she knew at this point was that they were heading somewhere else.

"Drive em forward boys!" Xena's yell rang out. "To the left, pull the line there!"

Gabrielle got her spear settled, and she nudged Patches between two of the other horses and finally got back to Tiger's side. "Xena!"

The queen swiveled her head and looked down. "Muskrat!"

Surprised at the good humor in her voice, Gabrielle reached out and patted her boot. "You okay?"

“Aside from a lost stirrup, yeah.” Xena leaned on her saddlebow and smiled. “Thanks.” She added. “Having my ass hauled out of my saddle and dragged behind this big bastard did my back a little good.”

“Really?”

“Either that, or I just can’t feel how badly hurt I am now.” Xena cheerfully acknowledged. “C’mon, muskrat. Let’s take advantage of the moment.” She drew her sword and let out a whistle as they drove against the left hand side flank of the Persians, who were stumbling in confusion. “Before my body realizes what I’ve done and gives out on me.”

“Uh. Great!” Gabrielle spluttered. “Glad to hear that.” She shook her head, and kept Patches close to Tiger’s side, as the Persian lines started to waver before them and fade back. “Hope she’s all right, Patches. That sounds crazy.”

Patches snorted, and hopped over a log.

“Stay on the right hand side!” Xena ordered. “Brendan, we’re heading for the road, I want to cut off their retreat through the pass.”

“Right.” Brendan rose off circling the troops and yelling orders. The crossbowmen were advancing steadily, kneeling on the ground to fire past the foot soldiers engaging the Persian fighters.

Things were going well, Gabrielle guessed.

“Die you bastards! You fight like girls!” Xena bellowed. “We’re gonna kill you all!!”

Xena’s forces let out a yell at that. “Kill em! Kill em!” They chanted.

Yeah. Gabrielle took a tighter grip on her spear. Things were going well, unless you were a Persian.

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Xena leaned forward as Tiger leaped over the last ditch on the side of the road. His hooves sounded clappingly loud on the firm dirt surface, and she sidled him over to the start of the pass to look around the rocks into the opening as the rest of her army rolled onto the road behind her.

The beginning of the pass was empty, the rocks rising to either side reflecting the starlight and echoing softly with the sounds of her men.

Jens reined up next to her. “Looks like we’re beating them good, Mistress.” His eyes were bright with excitement.

Xena glanced behind her. The field they’d just crossed was littered with enemy bodies, and three of the remaining horsemen had been tied hand to foot over their saddles and sent down the road. It was a stunning, spectacular victory, though she’d lost a number of her volunteers in the process.

Not unexpected. It was war, after all. Xena turned Tiger around and surveyed the battle, spotting a line of men fighting just past the other edge of the road. “Take those guys down.” She ordered Jens. “Then we’ll see if we’ve got any more defectors.”

Jens darted off, leaving her to lean on her saddle and study the action. She had her sword in one hand, it’s point laying quietly on Tiger’s shoulder, and at least for now, her back was blessedly numb. Or, well, not exactly numb, since she could feel herself sitting in the saddle, and her knees had the strength to grip Tiger’s sides.

It was just that, the pain had vanished so quickly, she was afraid she'd taken the injury past where it had in the past and if she slid out of the saddle, she'd just collapse on the ground.

At least she could ride. The queen exhaled, flexing her fingers on her hilt. At least she could use her sword, and breath without hurting.

Acceptable tradeoff?

Xena gazed quietly down at Tiger's dark mane, aware of the faint tint of gray in the eastern sky that meant the long night was almost at its end. What would her life be like if she couldn't walk?

Would she want to live it?

"What are we doing to do now, Xena?" Gabrielle eased in at her side, her pony picking his way carefully over the rocky ground.

"Good question." The queen replied. "You did a great job with the pig sticker, muskrat. You were right there with it."

"Yeah." Gabrielle had the butt of her spear resting on the ground, her hand curled around its shaft. "Do you think this will be over soon?"

"Why?" Xena regarded her. "Aren't you having fun?"

"No." Gabrielle admitted. "I'm really tired, and my head hurts."

Glad of the distraction, Xena reached over and scratched her consort's neck. "Sorry about that, muskrat. We're not half over with this yet. We just started." She kept up her kneading as she watched the battle going on in front of them.

A line of soldiers were guarding her position. Behind them, the foot men were engaged in fighting the Persians, the Persian captains trying to exhort their men from further down the road. Xena evaluated their temper, sensing the desperation in the air that made her smile.

After a moment more, she straightened up a little and placed her fingers between her teeth, taking a deep breath then letting out a truly piercing whistle.

"Ow." Gabrielle covered her ear, and Patches put both of his back. Tiger ignored the sound, well used to his mistresses odd noises.

The sound of clashing metal slowly faded.

"Take aim." Xena told the bowmen strung out in front of her, who had been holding fire to keep from hitting their fellow soldiers. She waited until the line was bristling with arrows, and then she looked across the battlefield, seeing most every eye on her. "Had enough?" She yelled.

One of the riders, dressed in the formal battle coat of the Persian regulars, hauled his horse around to face her. "This battle isn't over, wench!" He spurred towards her, raising his curved sword in the air defiantly as he drove towards the line of men protecting Xena with fine disregard to the bows pointed in his direction.

Xena shook her dagger loose and with a flick of her wrist, sent it through the air, spinning low to get lost in the shadows until it curved up at the last moment and buried itself in the man's throat. His eyes widened, and he choked, a red froth coming to his lips as he pitched forward out of the saddle and hit the ground, his mount bucking and careening away as he thumped against his ribs.

“Yours is.” The queen observed, in a loud voice, before she turned her attention back to the troops.
“Next?”

One of the other captains gathered his reins in his hand and stared at her, his body outlined against the coming dawn. “You are a demon, as they claimed.” He said. “A minion of the gods sent to destroy us.”

Xena considered that. “Well.” She said. “I’ve had worse said about me.” She slowly flipped her sword in her right hand.

“No she isn’t.” Gabrielle rallied to her defense. She nudged Patches forward, coming up behind the line of bowmen. “Xena didn’t attack the city. Xena didn’t take everything those people had.”

The man stared at her. “You know nothing of what you say.”

“Of course I do.” The blond woman replied. “I was there. Xena wasn’t the one who brought that awful fire, or poisoned arrows, or that stuff you were going to throw into the city, that would have made everyone sick.” She sat up straighter in Patches saddle. “If there’s a demon here, it’s not Xena. It’s who YOU follow.”

Her voice rang out over the suddenly silent battlefield. As the dawn paused, highlighting everything with the faintest hint of silver, it was as though the whole world was holding its breath, waiting for what was going to happen next.

The man stiffened. “Do you malign my royal highness??” He shouted, as the rest of the horsemen gathered around him. “Do you dare?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle shouted back. “She’s ugly, and she tastes like a wet DUCK!”

Xena scratched her jaw. “Y’know, Gabrielle..”

“You will die for those words!” The Persians charged, and all the rest of the soldiers took up the call, yelling loudly and rushing to engage Xena’s men.

“Fire.” The queen shook her head. “Speaking of which, boy did that backfire.” She tightened her grip on Tiger’s sides and waited for the first round of arrows, then she headed around the lines and rode to meet the mounted Persians.

“Sheep!” Gabrielle grabbed her spear. “C’mon, Patches!” She urged her pony after Xena and held on tight as Patches went down into a ditch and half leaped, half bucked out the other side. “Ooof!”

Xena charged, the horsemen charged, the bowmen charged, and Gabrielle charged at the Persians who were running at them until the conjoined yells made them pause just for a moment. “Die, you stupid bastards!” The queen hollered, sheathing her sword and unhooking her chakram to let it fly right in the face of a hapless footman, slashing him open before it returned to her hand.

She seated it, then drew her sword again, raising it up and bringing the hilt down on the staggering man’s head, splitting it like a melon. It felt good and she chuckled, twirling her sword and looking up through Tiger’s ears right at the lead Persian.

The pre dawn light lit her face, and she smiled, her eyes meeting his.

He hesitated, his hands shifting on his horses reins and his shoulders twitching, but falling short of moving to slow his charge.

She grinned wider. “C’mere, boy. Mamma wants to cut your heart out.”

They rode right at each other as the lines clashed, clearing space in the center for the horses to move through.

At the last moment, he yanked his horses head to one side and shoved another horsemen out of the way, causing a knot of chaos in the middle of the Persian lines as the horses crashed into the struggling soldiers on foot and several of them went down under their hooves.

Xena laughed.

A second soldier turned his horse and bolted away, as the first soldier clashed with a third, and they started fighting each other, screaming at the top of their lungs as their horses went sideways, away from the oncoming Tiger.

Abruptly, the Persian lines broke, and men scattered as Xena's line of horses thundered through and their nerve was gone, all their bravado fading away as the gray light of a new day exposed their defeat to everyone's eyes.

Xena leaned down and grabbed a crossbow from a stumbling soldier, then she lifted it and aimed the shaft at the fighting Persian horsemen, shooting and hitting one in the side and sending him slumping out of his saddle.

The man he was fighting turned and stared at her, then he froze as she casually pointed her re-armed weapon at him. "You've got one last chance!" Xena yelled. "Aren't you tired of losing yet?" She swept her gaze over the battlefield, the Persians and her own men covered in mud and blood, and almost indistinguishable.

The mounted Persian was breathing heavily, his hand clenching and releasing on the hilt of his sword.

"Come win with me." Xena rested the crossbow on her saddle and let her eyes sweep the field again. "Want coin? Want land? You aint' gonna get that from her, cause she ain't got any."

"She is the daughter of our king." The Persian called back, but only after a pause.

"Like I said." Xena didn't miss a beat. "She doesn't own a damn thing." She turned her head to the right, and then to the left. "I do."

The conscripts, the foot soldiers, shook their head, the first couple of them closest to Xena putting their weapons down and holding their hands out. "We don't want more fighting." One said, an older man with a tired face, and a bloody surcoat. "I just want to go home."

Xena gazed at him with more understanding than he probably realized. "So go." She said, lifting her hand and making a throwaway gesture. "Just understand.." She added as he started to move. "I find out you went back to the city and started trouble and you'er not going live another day. Understand?"

The man looked at her. "Well understand, your Majesty." He said, in a tired voice. "But you'd better not count your calves before the spring." He indicated the pass. "She kept the best of them around her."

Xena smiled. "So did I."

The soldier looked around at her ragged, tiny force, then he looked back up at the confident, relaxed expression on her face, and simply shook his head again, but after a pause, he smiled back. "The gods go with you, Majesty." He said. "Come, lads. Leave this."

"Cowards." The Persian seethed.

Xena shot him. Then she looked at the last mounted Persian as she reloaded the bow. He gazed back at her, then he slowly spread his arms out, hands empty.

The queen shot him anyway, putting the bolt right through his eye. Then she lowered the bow and tossed it to one of her soldiers as the Persian fell out of his saddle. "Catch those horses. They're good blood." She told Jens. "And we'll need em. Move on."

Her army gathered in from the grass, as some of their former adversaries moved off a little way, sitting down in evident exhaustion.

Not all though. Some unbuckled their Persian livery and took it off, letting it drop to the ground as they mingled with city men, and Xena's guard as the queen turned and faced the pass, and the next stage in their journey.

"Wow." Gabrielle murmured.

Xena looked over at her. "Pretty good story fodder, huh?" She inquired. "My ego by itself tosses smelly Persians right and left, and marches on."

Gabrielle licked her lips, then she handed up her waterskin. "Want a drink?"

"Only if it's your bathwater."

"Xena."

The queen chuckled as she started Tiger up onto the road towards the pass. "Laugh, Gabrielle. Savor every second of this march down to the river Styx, cause at least we're going together."

Gabrielle smiled at that, and leaned over to kiss Xena on the knee. "Let's go home, Xena. I owe you some peaches." She said. "To Hades with these people."

"To Hades with them." Xena agreed, listening to the sound of troops falling in behind her. "Because he sure wouldn't know what to do with me."

**

The pass was a dogleg, one short narrow space that curved sharply to the left, then back to the right again in a winding pattern before it rose up a steep incline before ending in the valley that bordered Xena's lands.

As the slowly growing dawn light started to banish the shadows, Xena found herself wishing she was through the opening in the mountains and into the valley beyond, her eyes aching for the familiar rolling hills and the tall, stone stronghold waiting past the far pass.

Even the knowledge that the entire Persian army, what remained of it, was standing between her and that didn't faze her. She'd won a set of skirmishes, and she'd killed her share of the enemy but she knew the bulk of Sholeh's forces, the best of them, waited just down the road and at the moment, she honestly really didn't care.

For the first time, she found herself really missing the old rock pit she lived in. She'd left it with every grandiose intention of bringing back spoils and glory, showing off in front of Gabrielle and maybe reliving a bit of her youth she'd been scared of losing?

Xena scanned the shortened horizon, then she glanced down at her hands and exhaled. Maybe. Or maybe it was just a matter of wanting to impress her new girlfriend. Her eyes slid over to watch Gabrielle's profile, now becoming visible in the dawn light. Partner. Consort.

Gabrielle, perhaps sensing the regard, glanced up at her, and smiled, through the evident exhaustion and the grubbiness of battle.

Love of my life. The queen smiled back, shaking her head a little as she savored a few minutes to just wipe her sword off, and get ready for whatever was ahead of them.

“Xena.” Jens rode up next to her. “I’ll get some folks and ride ahead, yah?”

“No.” The queen said. “I know where they are.” She took out her sharpening stone, and started scraping her blade against it, working out the nicks in the blade. “They’re at the far end, probably up on the rocks, waiting for us.”

Jens digested this. “We just going to them?” He asked, eventually, in a hesitant voice.

“Yep.” Xena agreed. “There’s only one way through this pass, Jens. They know it, we know it, if they’re not blocking the far end, then they’re stupider than I thought they were, and if they are blocking it, sending a bunch of targets ahead to get spitted does no good.”

“Ah.” Jens murmured. “Aye, yeah, that’s true.”

“So relax as much as you can, and get ready to fight really hard.” Xena continued. “Because either we’ll come out the other end into the valley, or we won’t. Either way, you’ve done a fine job, and I appreciate your hanging in there and sticking it out.”

The soldier was speechless, his eyes going big and round as he watched Xena’s face. “It was my honor to do so, Mistress.” He finally said, in a faint tone.

Xena put the finishing touches on her blade edge, then she glanced at him and winked, as she put the sword back in its sheath. “Go tell the men to be ready to fight as soon as we clear the leg up ahead. We should hit it just as the sun comes up, and lights up anyone on the walls for us.”

Jens looked at the walls, then at her, then he grinned, and pulled his horse’s head around, heading back down the lines at an easy canter.

Gabrielle had taken an apple from her saddle bag, and her small knife, and was cutting it into halves. She kept one half and the knife in one hand, and extended her other hand over to Xena. “Did you plan that?”

Xena took the apple half and bit into it, enjoying the slightly tangy taste. “Did I plan what, the sun rising? Sure.” She said. “You know I can make the world turn at my pace, right?” She gave Gabrielle a wink as well.

“I noticed that.” Gabrielle replied mildly. “At least, you sure can do that to my world.”

Xena paused in mid bite and raised an eyebrow.

Gabrielle’s eyes twinkled gravely. “Are they really going to be waiting for us around the corner, Xena?” She asked, after a pause.

The queen nodded, nibbling carefully around the half core. “Got any more of those?” She asked. “We’re a little short on time.”

Gabrielle handed over her own half, fishing in her bag to see what else she could find. “I wish they’d all just disappear.” She admitted, as she found another apple and set about cutting that one in half too. “I just want this all to be over. I’m tired.”

“Me too.” Xena agreed. “And I’m not looking forward to getting out of this saddle and having to be carried into my castle.”

The blond woman looked over quickly at her. “Do you..”

"I don't know." The queen shook her head. "I don't really want to know." She glanced over at Gabrielle again. "Think you can handle living with a cripple?"

The soft, green eyes looked directly at her. "Think I care?"

Xena felt a tiny flush of surprise warm her skin, as she recognized the newly burnished maturity in her lover's face, and in the layered answer she'd given. "No, I don't." She answered, in a quiet voice. "I think you're crazy enough not to."

"I don't." Gabrielle bit into her own apple. "You can depend on me to be there for you Xena, no matter what happens." She chewed thoughtfully, one hand tangled in Patches reins and her fingers ruffling his shaggy mane.

"Like I said, you're crazy enough for both of us." The queen licked her fingertips and rid herself of the apple cores, tossing them to one side as she took a deep breath and expelled it, settling her boots firmly in her stirrups and relaxing back into her saddle.

She was handed a waterskin, and she took it this time, sucking down gulp after gulp of the liquid inside. She was still hungry, the apples not doing all that much to quiet her rumbling guts, but the water at least eased the empty feeling.

She handed the skin back to Gabrielle and ran her fingers through her hair, moving it back out of her eyes before she pulled her gauntlets back on, turning one hand over to examine the cut out palm, the fabric removed to allow her to grip her sword with absolute precision.

The exposed skin was scraped and bruised, and on the whole, that pretty much summed up how she felt at the moment. She closed her fingers and opened them again, then she let the hand drop to her thigh as she refocused her attention on the road ahead of them.

Her army was making no effort to hide their presence. It felt good, in a way, just to be marching along, without any of the subterfuge she'd been forced to use up until now.

"Hey, Xena?"

"Hey Muskrat?"

Gabrielle was fiddling with her spear, shifting to her other hand so it lay on the far side of Patches from where Xena was. "What do you think happened to the people you sent to see where the Persians were?"

"Those four?"

"Yeah."

"I think they told the Persians we were closing in on them and they better attack before we caught them up." Xena replied placidly.

Gabrielle didn't say anything for a minute, then she cleared her throat. "You mean, they were against us?"

"Yes."

"But Xena, Perdicus was one of them."

"Yep."

Gabrielle frowned and fell silent. They walked along in silence for a few minutes, then both of them almost jumped when behind them, the army started singing, a low, marching tune that rang out in the dawn light and bounced off the rocks to startling effect.

It brought the hairs on Xena's neck up and her face twitched a little. Then she smiled, chuckling a little under her breath.

"Wow. Guess they'll hear that." Gabrielle had turned in her saddle to look at the men, now she swiveled back around and looked up at Xena. "It doesn't matter any more that there are so many more of them than us, does it?"

"Not so much." The queen said. "It's all in your mind, Gabrielle. Mind over matter, as an old friend of mine used to say. You just have to really think you can do something, and ... well, what the Hades. Sometimes you just can."

"Oh."

They came to the end of the first straight part of the pass, and started around the hard bend to the left. Since Xena was in the lead, she was by default the point guard, and she craned her neck and swept the narrow area quickly, relieved when it was empty.

Still, her ears cocked, as past the men's singing she heard a rattling of rocks, and she put her senses on high alert, sweeping her head from side to side as she led the way into the next section.

Ahead, perhaps a quarter candlemark's ride away, the pass curved again to the right and she could already see in her mind's eye the enemy army defending it.

They would have the advantage. The rock walls were tall and full of crags, and there were plenty of places to take cover behind while they launched their attack on Xena's approaching army.

Her heart started to beat a little faster. Xena drew in a breath, and started singing along with the men, picking up the tune and projecting it forward, her higher, clearer voice contrasting sharply with theirs and sending an even more pungent echo against the rocks.

Insanity. Xena enjoyed the moment. It felt bold and crazy to her, and where her life was at the moment, bold and crazy seemed to fit the need just right. She squeezed Tiger's sides a little and picked up the pace, sensing the rising light behind her and catching a bit of the breeze from the valley beyond, full of leather and iron and...

Fear.

Xena chuckled, and breathed it in, and sang all the louder.

**

She turned the corner first, and saw them.

Shockingly, right where she'd imagined them, lined against the walls and filling the entrance to the pass, massed bodies and weapons that surged towards them as soon as they rounded the bend.

Stolidly, the men kept right on moving forward, bowmen readying their weapons and foot soldiers drawing their swords and shifting maces as they watched for Xena's signals, the queen's body posture calm and relaxed in front of them.

The Persians let out a mighty yell, the echoes thundering against the rocks and drowning out the sound of the marching song, but when the echoes faded, the sound of the singing came right back.

Xena kept up Tiger's relaxed motion forward, her eyes fastened on the front lines of the Persians, who were shaking their weapons at her, but not moving forward. Towards the center of the lines was a large group of horsemen, and a banner, and she figured she and Sholeh were about to go another round.

She felt a little nervous. "Got any more of that water?" She asked Gabrielle.

"Sure." Gabrielle passed the waterskin back over to her. "Boy, there are a lot of those guys huh?"

"Uh huh."

"But they're not attacking us."

"Nope." Xena swung the skin up and drank from it, watching carefully over the edge of it in case that was changing. Aside from the noise, and the posturing, however, Sholeh's troops appeared content to wait for Xena's men to come to them.

"Maybe they just want to talk to us?"

Xena almost breathed in a lungful of water at that. She coughed and handed the skin back, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth. "C'mon, muskrat. Don't go all simple on me now." She judged the time, and lowered one hand, moving her fingers in a subtle sign.

The large group of horsemen in the center shifted a little, and two at the front parted and circled back around to the sides, revealing Sholeh's horse, it's rider distinctive and diminutive on his back. From where she was, Xena could see the Persian's face covered in a silk cloth and a grin worked it's way onto her lips as she realized the probable reason.

Heydar was next to her on a big, strapping red stallion, with a finely drawn head that drew an appreciative look from Xena though she made a point of dismissing his rider with a brief glance.

The walls were in shadow, but her sharp eyes caught the faintest hint of motion in the crags spread out to either side, a brief reflection, quick as a minnow's flash behind a boulder halfway up.

So.

Sholeh and her party started to ride slowly forward, apparently intent on meeting them, banners waving, her guard pacing sedately behind her.

Did she want to talk? Xena swept her eyes over the pass, over the slowly closing distance, over the enemy army, judging angles, judging motives...

Peace? War? Should she give Sholeh a chance?

Sunlight flooded the pass, warming her shoulders and lighting up the walls with a touch of warming fire.

A motion caught her eye, and she saw two of the Persian riders turn, and head for the edges of the rock and her instincts sent a warning jolt deep in her guts.

"Fire on the walls." Xena raised her arm and lowered it, keeping her sword in it's sheath but angling Tiger just a little so that Gabrielle and Patches were shielded as her men lifted their weapons behind her and responded, shooting their bows past her and upward, aiming at the now evident men clinging to the side of the rocks.

Chaos.

A horn rang out.

The Persians surged forward, charging towards and past the horsemen around Sholeh who had pulled up when Xena's men had started to fire. She turned and lifted her hand, and the men drew their swords, circling around her in a protective shield as yells rang out in warning.

A horn blew.

Men fell from the walls like flies under the attack, unable to see to return fire. Xena watched the scrambling confusion for a moment and then she held up her hand, clenching her fist and the flow of arrows stopped, as she pulled Tiger to a halt. "HOLD!"

"Oh boy." Gabrielle had her hand on Xena's leg, as she peered over Tiger's neck. "Now what?"

The Persians boiled towards them.

"Form up." Xena called back calmly. She turned and faced the oncoming army squarely, looking past the soldiers to where Sholeh's guard was in turmoil, staring steadily at the beautiful, exotic horses in the center of the crowd. "Get ready to fight!"

The army scrambled, falling into formation since the rock walls around them would allow for nothing else.

Heydar was arguing with Sholeh. He looked back over his shoulder, and his eyes met Xena's.

The Persian army was almost in spear range, rushing headlong towards Xena's troops, who were formed up in a defensive square behind their queen and her consort, Xena's horsemen stretched out in a wedge behind her protecting the men.

Sholeh turned and faced Xena also, frustration evident in every line of her body. After a second, she reached out with a crop and slashed Heydar across the face with it, then she turned and said something to a man next to her.

Xena lifted her arm, and drew her sword, raising it high enough to catch the sunlight and send sparkles flashing across the pass, sitting a little deeper in her saddle and readying herself to take it to them as best as she was able. "Get ready to kill them all!" She bellowed, her voice ringing out against the stone.

Sholeh turned again and stared at her. Xena grinned and twirled her sword in one hand, making a come hither gesture with her other. "You first!" She looked directly into Sholeh's eyes. "Little girl."

For an instant, everything slowed down. Sholeh turned and grabbed Heydar by the shirt, pulling him close and saying something to him. He shook his head, but she suddenly had a knife in her hand, at his throat.

Xena's brows rose.

Heydar lifted his hands, and signaled.

A horn blew.

Arrows flew towards them. Xena reached out and caught one with casual ease, tossing it to one side as most of the others went wide of their targets. "Stay behind me." She cautioned Gabrielle, as she knocked a couple more aside with her sword.

"No problem." Gabrielle watched the oncoming soldiers in apprehension. "Are we gonna do something?"

"Eventually." Xena caught another arrow, then a third. She was starting to regret her attack, and tried an offhand look around to see what the retreat possibilities were.

The horn blew again.

The Persian lines slowed, the ones in front turning in frustrated anger, so close Xena could see their features behind their helms and smell the stench of sweat and blood on them. Her heart was thumping like crazy, the danger of the moment so potent it made her breath catch.

Several of them clenched their spears, and turned back to face her, shoulders tensing.

She unhooked her chakram and simply held it, running her thumb over the flat edge of it as she swept her eyes over the lines, cocking her wrist as she let her gaze fall on the Persian closest to her, the one with the big spear pointed towards her, the one who looked like he was about to release it.

Another horn blew, this time, with a sharp, commanding tone.

The soldier stared into Xena's eyes and his lip curled. His dark beard was partly missing on one side and he made a motion towards her, but only to shake his spear before he fell back with the rest of the line, the men retreating back towards Sholeh's position.

"Whew." Gabrielle exhaled. "I thought they were going to run right over us!"

"Me too." Xena returned her chakram to her belt. "Question is, why didn't they?" She sheathed her sword and licked her lips, trying to size the situation up again, as it changed moment by moment before her eyes. Had she guessed right?

Brendan edged up next to her, Jens on the other side of Gabrielle. "Tight spot." The old captain said. "Where do we take this, Xena? Front to front, it'll be a hard row."

"Let's see what they have in mind." Xena gathered Tiger's reins in one hand and nudged him forward. "You and Jens, come with me." She paused. "Come with us." She corrected herself, in a mild tone as Gabrielle let out a muffled grunt. "Cause y'know she actually runs this outfit."

Gabrielle blushed a little. "Xena."

They rode forward slowly, Xena relaxed in her saddle, the two soldiers stiff and wary. Gabrielle kept close to Xena's side, her eyes a little wide as she hefted her spear, holding it upright so she didn't poke anyone accidentally.

The group of Persians on horseback forced their way through the retreating lines, clearing them and continuing across the hard, rocky ground. Sholeh was in the lead, her face still swathed in cloth that also covered her head, and draped her body.

She seemed smaller than Xena remembered. Maybe it was the draping, or the fact that her horse was a couple of hands shorter than Tiger as well as her companions.

Or maybe, Xena considered, since she'd beaten her force back a few times, it just didn't look so intimidating to her anymore.

"I wish I had a big herd of sheep."

Xena blinked at the sudden mental whiplash. She turned and looked at her consort. "What?"

"I'd get them to stampede, and run right over these guys." Gabrielle sighed. "I'm so tired of being freaked out."

Xena reached out and draped her left arm over Gabrielle's shoulders, pulling her closer and giving her an awkward hug before she released her, and straightened herself up in her saddle. She turned her head and met Sholeh's eyes as the Persian closed in on her.

The emotion in them surprised her. Xena saw her look transfer to Gabrielle, and become one of anger, and she reached up to scratch her jaw a little as she wondered what was going on behind those dark, enigmatic eyes.

They were close enough to speak now, for the first time since she'd left Sholeh's camp. Xena rested both her hands on her saddle horn and waited, keeping the rest of the army in her peripheral vision as she felt the sun warming her back, knowing the light casting her shadow sharply in front of her was also dazzling her enemies and throwing her own face into darkness.

Sholeh shook of Heydar's hand, that had been resting on her arm, and moved her horse a few steps forward, then stopped. "At last you choose to face me rather than run." She called out in a loud voice. "Come forward, if you dare."

Xena let her wonder for a moment, then she pressed her calves against Tiger's side and felt him shift into a walk under her. "Watch my back." She muttered to Brendan, as Patches shaggy head came up even with her knee. "If things go bad, just make them pay."

"We will, Xena." Brendan said, quietly. "We will."

**

"If I dare?" Xena tucked Tiger's reins in one hand and left the other relaxed on her thigh. She stopped her horse almost nose to nose with Sholeh's. "If I dare? I've been kicking your ugly little ass all over for the last two candlemarks you poser. I dare? I'm surprised you dare to get this close to me and not worry you're going to end up plastered on the rocks over there."

She made sure she was talking loud enough for everyone to hear her, both her side and the Persians. For one thing, it was part of the little fencing match they were having and for another, it was true.

It was true. Xena sat back a little, not bothering to muffle a smirk.

"You dare." Sholeh said, in a quiet voice. "I'll have your tongue on a stake for that."

"You and what army?" Xena rolled the words off her tongue, enjoying them immensely. "Not that army?" She indicated the Persians. "Do yourself a favor, kid. Take them and go back home, and get the Hades out of my way."

She nudged Tiger forward, making Sholeh's horse bob it's head nervously. "Gwan. Scat."

Sholeh stared at her. "You're mad." She finally said. "Do you think these men behind me, these flowers of Persia, will run like the little dogs we picked up from these parts?"

Xena tilted her head and regarded the army she faced. "If I kill enough of them, sure." She turned back and met Sholeh's eyes. "Admit it – you're over your head. You can't beat me."

The Persian glanced behind her. "Look at what you face me with, Xena." Sholeh said. "You have nothing but dogs and old men."

"Excuse me?" Gabrielle spoke up for the first time.

Sholeh looked at her, then back at Xena.

"Don't get her pissed off." Xena advised. "She'll take your arm off this time and all the lace in the world wont' make it look good."

“You are mad.” Sholeh said, after a pause. “It will be good to rid the world of you. I will enjoy it.” She started to pull her horse’s head around, but stopped when Xena reached out and grabbed the animal’s bridle. “Turn her loose.”

“Listen.” Xena’s voice deepened, a serious expression on her face. “Take what you have left and get out of here. You value those men? Don’t waste their lives.”

For a moment, Sholeh hesitated, her body going still. Then she sidestepped her horse next to Xena so they were knee to knee.

Xena knew there was danger here. Sholeh had shown no inclination to fighting fair and this close, if she chose to stick Xena with a bit of her fancy armor covered in poison, she only had a fair chance of avoiding it.

“My honor will come out of this valley.” Sholeh said, in an intense whisper. “You will not take that.”

Xena met her gaze, leaning on her saddlebow and bringing them even closer together. “I already have.” She uttered back. “So I’ve got nothing left to prove. Just clear out, I’ll go home, and you can head off down the river.”

They were both quiet, breathing almost in unison.

“Do you really think this collection of offal can stand for a moment against my men?” Sholeh’s voice was incredulous.

Xena smiled. “I believe it.” She said. “What’s more, they believe it.” She added. “We’ve got nothing to lose. You do.”

“You cannot do that.” Sholeh finally said. “No more than I could.”

“I can.” Xena shot right back. “No matter what happens here, I win. If I win, I win, and if I lose, against a force four times mine, I still win. You can’t win. You can just get out of here alive, because the first person I’m gonna kill if you decide to fight is you.”

Gabrielle sat there, very still, her eyes wide, and her jaw clamped tight shut. She was holding on to her spear with one hand, and had her other hand resting on Xena’s leg. The queen’s body was tense, but not overly rigid, not the hair trigger stillness she often displayed when she was about to attack.

It was hard to believe what Xena was saying. Hard to believe how straightforward, and honest she was, giving Sholeh a chance to avoid this fight, this battle that would surely leave many people hurt and dead.

Maybe even her and Xena.

Gabrielle watched Sholeh’s eyes, since she couldn’t see her face. They were dark, and hidden, but she could see the faint twitching at the corners of them and she knew the Persian princess was really listening to what Xena was saying.

Would she take the offer? Gabrielle exhaled a little, thinking of what it would be like to simply walk away from the pass, heading down into the valley she’d been born in, just on the road home.

She felt tears sting her eyes, and she crossed her fingers, wishing as hard as she could that Sholeh would just take the offer, take her army, and just...

Go.

“You think much of yourself.” Sholeh said, finally.

"I am who I am." Xena half shrugged.

The Persian sat back in her saddle, her eyes shuttered and unfathomable. "I will make a bargain with you." She said. "I will take my army, and continue on my way, leaving you to your sheep, and your goats, and your dirty little peasants."

Xena's hand moved like a tiny bit of lightning, a sparkle of a blade flashing into view and then spinning across the space between them, taking Sholeh's veil off before she could make a motion to defend herself.

Underneath, half her face was reddened and swollen, huge black marks carved through the flesh where Gabrielle's teeth had torn into her. She grabbed for the veil and glowered at Xena, fastening it as she pulled her horse's head back out of range.

"You were saying?" Xena maintained a calm air. "Something about my dirty peasants?"

Sholeh gathered herself up. "Give me your slave, and I will give you your life, in return." She said. "That's my price, for your insolence."

Xena merely smiled, her body seeming to rise taller in the saddle without her really moving. "You mean her?" She indicated Gabrielle.

Sholeh inclined her head. "A small price, don't you agree? What are your men's lives worth, Xena? What is your life worth? No matter how you boast otherwise, we will destroy you."

"Xena." Gabrielle tensed her fingers.

The queen turned her head. "Okay. What silly thing are you going to say now? Is it 'let me go and sacrifice myself for everyone' or 'you're not going to do that are you?'"

Gabrielle let her breath trickle out from slightly parted lips. "No." She said. "I just wanted to say I love you." She smiled. "Since I don't think I'll have a chance to say that in a minute."

"Smart muskrat." Xena leaned over, kissing her on the lips. She straightened up, and faced Sholeh. "Go run back to your mules there before I cut your tongue out you stupid nitwit." She drew her sword. "Your daddy's whole kingdom isn't worth her spitting on it."

The men heard her. Her men heard her. Everyone shifted, the energy around the pass spiking up in a heartbeat as battle became suddenly real, and close and imminent.

"So be it." Sholeh grabbed her reins and half turned, then stopped in mid motion and slowly, incredibly, toppled off her horse to the ground, a long, black shaft buried deep in her neck. She choked and gasped, one hand weakly reaching for the arrow, the veil falling aside from her face and exposing an expression of shock.

Of pain.

Of horror.

Xena let her blade fall to her shoulder and looked past the dying woman, to find Heydar staring right at her, his crossbow cradled in his arms, already reloaded.

"Sheep!" Gabrielle gasped.

"Sheep swimming naked screwing ducks." Xena muttered back. "Now we got a whole nother story here, muskrat."

“Xena, he just killed her!”

“Saved me the trouble.” The queen sidestepped Tiger over to the now still figure and examined it. Then she looked up at Heydar, and raised her eyebrows. “Thanks. Saved me a nick.” She indicated the sword. “So now what? You got another deal for me?”

Gabrielle felt very lightheaded. She just managed to get Patches to follow Tiger, keeping her eyes off the small, huddled figure on the ground.

So much had just happened. It was hard to believe that Sholeh, though she hadn't liked her at all, was now gone, lying dead at their feet and being walked over like she was...

Like she was nothing. Gabrielle felt sick to her stomach. But wasn't that what she'd viewed Gabrielle as? Nothing? Or.. no, had she known what value Xena placed on her by her offer of trading her for the army's safety?

Was she hoping Xena would say yes? Or no? Gabrielle forced herself to look down at the dead Persian, her face stiffened in agony, eyes half closed, blood pooling under her head. The cheek she'd bitten was uppermost, and Gabrielle found herself tracing those marks with morbid fascination.

Was Sholeh hoping Xena would be torn, between her and the army? Had she been trying to hurt Xena, that way?

Well. “You're an evil person.” Gabrielle addressed the dead woman. “But I'm glad we didn't kill you, your own people did.” She then lifted her head and joined Xena as she watched Heydar slowly approach, a group of the mounted Persians with him.

So.

Xena kept her sword out, allowing it's potent, if silent message to stand as the mounted warriors spread out, heading towards her in a well metered phalanx. She pondered calling her own men up, then she merely smiled, and sat back in her saddle.

This was, she reckoned, either going to end very very well, or very very bloody.

Heydar stopped about a horse length from her. “Now the rules change.” He said.

“Now the idiot facing me has a beard and a manhood.” Xena replied. “My rules never change.” She watched his eyes, outwardly relaxed, but inwardly tensing as she reevaluated this new, and honestly greater threat.

Heydar's lips twitched, just slightly. “You don't seem shocked that I killed her.” He glanced at the still form. “Should you not be? The army swore their honor to her.”

Xena studied his face. There was no real hint to what he was thinking, but she tucked the insults on the tip of her tongue firmly into her cheek and assumed a faintly doubtful expression. “To be honest.” She said. “I don't think that army deserved having her screw them over.”

“After you described us so poorly?” Heydar said, in a sardonic tone.

The queen shrugged. “She called us dogs, I called you pigs. Seems about even to me.”

The Persian nodded a little. “So what did you offer her, Xena? What you offered me?”

“Her life.” Xena watched the sun penetrate more deeply into the pass, gilding the rocks and making her wish she was somewhere else and naked. “Want the same deal?”

Heydar picked up his reins and moved towards her. "I have a better plan." He said. "Enough mindless words between us, Xena. We both know these armies will do nothing but fight and die in this pass, and who wins or loses matters little."

Ah. "You get two more dinar's points for brains than she had." Xena said, taking her sword down off her shoulder and inspecting it. "Though she offered to run out of here."

Heydar stopped. "What?"

Xena turned her head and looked at him. "Funny. I thought that's why you killed her." She said. "She said if I handed over my consort she'd take the lot of you and run off."

"You lie."

"No, it's true." Gabrielle cleared her throat, then spoke up. "I don't think she cared at all about you. All she wanted was to punish me."

Heydar turned his head and studied her. "Punish you?" He queried. "Are you that foolish? My sister had no need to punish you. She merely wanted to silence your tongue."

Xena smiled briefly.

"Our history is told by those like you, those who tell tales." Heydar continued. "With you dead, the tales of what happened die with you."

Gabrielle frowned, and looked around. "Are you crazy or something? Everyone here saw what happened."

"Ah. But not everyone would tell it." Heydar's mouth twitched. "That takes a special talent, little peasant and one we can't risk letting loose in the world."

Gabrielle studied him, a look of pained disgust on her face. "I thought you were a creep from the start." She said. "I'm going to really like telling everyone I see about that, too." She shifted her spear and gripped it in a cutely threatening manner. "You're a jerk!"

Xena eyed her fuming consort, and had to smile again. "Take it easy, ya little wildcat." She advised Gabrielle. "He's not worth the piss off."

Heydar's eyes narrowed. "I should have killed her when I had the chance."

"I have killed you if you tried it." Xena answered in a mild tone. "And then we wouldn't be having this pointless conversation." She twirled her sword. "Cut to the chase, Heydar. If you have something to say, say it, or get the Hades out of my way."

Heydar drew his sword. "So now we come to it, Xena. Not your ... army.. and my army, but something more meaningful. Something that will recover our reputation and kill the stories just as well as taking her tongue from her would."

Xena cocked her eyebrow.

"You and I will settle this." Heydar smiled at her. "You and I. Here on the ground. Here between those who stand to win or lose the most from it."

Oh, crap. Xena heard the terms hoisted and petard ring in her head. Shoulda seen this coming. She didn't disagree with the tactic, since she'd used it herself to good effect more than once but there was a time and a place for everything and this wasn't either.

“What would that prove?” Gabrielle stepped up. “Xena can beat you. I saw her do it. We captured you.”

“But you didn’t kill me.” Heydar said, then he looked at Xena. “You should have. Because I can kill you, Xena. You know it.”

Right at the moment, Xena reflected, it was even money as to whether or not Gabrielle could kill her merely by getting in the way if she fell off her horse. Now she was in a trap and her options were getting a lot narrower by the second.

Fighting him – Xena just knew she couldn’t risk it. Not fighting him? How could she back out of that kind of challenge and not lose everything in it?

Damn it.

“I think it’s stupid idea.” Gabrielle said. “I think the only reason you want to do that is because you don’t want to explain to your king how sucky you are.”

“Be quiet, peasant.”

Xena turned her head and looked at him, her eyes narrowing. “Watch who you’re calling peasant you stinking goathead.” She said. “Because this peasant army and this peasant born bitch have skinned you raw.” She pointed at the men behind Heydar. “She’s right. This isn’t about anything but your ego.”

“We shall see if that is true.” Heydar said, with a smile. “Come then, Xena. Face me. You’re proud of your skills and those who follow you think you invincible. Prove it.”

Prove it? Xena thought back to the last few sevendays, and the perspective slowly realigned her thoughts. Was her reputation worth her life? She glanced sideways at Gabrielle and found her lover looking back at her, knowledge and apprehension clear in her eyes.

Peh. Screw the Persians.

“I don’t have to prove anything.” Xena sheathed her sword. “We’ve already done it. I’m not going to honor you by touching blades.” She gathered up her reins. “Enough.” She signaled Brendan, and in a blur of motion, her troops, that mix of city wannabees, and old soldiers, and honest yeomen squared themselves off and raised their weapons, ready to follow her.

Ready to follow her.

Trusting her.

Believing in her.

Xena took in a breath, both humbled and exhilarated at the same time. She’d come this far because of this ragtag bunch, and it felt right to take it to the wall with them. This wasn’t something for her to win, alone.

Lose alone.

“Xena!” Heydar called out. “You refuse my challenge? You fear me!” He spurred his horse and headed right for her. “Then I will spit you as you sit you coward!!!!”

Gabrielle clamped her knees around Patches and urged him forward, the pony going to from standing still to a sturdy gallop in a instant as his rider let out a yell and brandished her spear.

Xena’s mind almost exploded. “Wh.. td.. do... f... G...”

Heydar saw the pony at the last minute, and he tried to turn in his saddle to meet her. The two animals crashed into each other as the spear ripped into his armor and Xena's men broke into a run as they attacked.

Heydar's horse went down, and the Persian army broke out of their stunned disbelief and started forward, as Patches went down also, throwing Gabrielle under a sudden confusion of hooves and dust and running men.

Xena absolutely positively did not think. She didn't even know how she got out of Tiger's saddle, the only thing she was cognizant of was her boots hitting the ground as she bolted forward through the melee towards the spot she'd last seen her lover in.

Too late to worry about being hurt. Way too late to worry about not being able to walk.

She plowed into the side of one of the Persian horsemen who had reached Heydar's downed horse and grabbed his leg, yanking it out of the stirrup and getting leverage enough to throw him up and over the horses back as he tried to smash downward with his mace at something she couldn't see.

She drew her sword and smacked the horse in the ass with it, getting past it as it plunged forward and allowing her to see the circle of Persians all fighting to get into position and grab at the prize scrambling to her feet in their midst.

Heydar got an arm around Gabrielle, and pulled her down.

Xena felt a cold flush run over her skin, and the next thing she was aware of was a man's back in front of her and her sword plunging through it. She yanked it back out and spun to one side, letting a horse stumble past her as she turned and swept her blade over her head, deflecting a blow aimed at her head.

She ducked, and felt something slam against her shoulder, but her momentum carried her forward and then she saw men in colors that were hers, and the clash of steel all around her, and Brendan's voice yelling for her to go.

Go.

Go.

Xena went, hurdling over the down horse and seeing Heydar with a knife in his hand and Gabrielle's throat in his grip and then the noise cut out around her and everything went very quiet and slow.

She could hear her own heartbeat.

She could hear Gabrielle's heartbeat, as she turned and looked over her shoulder and their eyes met as Gabrielle grabbed at Heydar's hand and tried to wrench herself free.

Xena cleared the way around her. She was vaguely aware of throwing a body one way, and cutting open another, and the hot splash of blood on her skin as she raced the descending blade towards Gabrielle's throat while Heydar howled in triumph.

Too close in for the sword. She sheathed it and leaped, half turning as the blade caught her armor and she slammed into Heydar and knocked him backwards.

They fell together as he released Gabrielle and grabbed for Xena instead and in that moment, with his stench around her, she just simply got overly pissed off.

A howl erupted from her throat and she reached past his hands to grab his armor, getting her fingers around his chest plate and turning, hauling him up and then slamming him onto the ground in a

fury. He scrambled to his knees, swiping his sword viciously at her knees, but she crouched and uncoiled into the air, letting the blade go under her and then dropping right on top of him as he fought to recover his balance.

She felt something crunch, and hoped it wasn't her. Then she rolled off and onto her feet just as he did the same. She didn't wait for him to move, she just ducked past his sword and grabbed his armor again, yanking him right off his feet as she turned in a tight circle, dragging him right into the back of a horse that was moving sideways past them.

The horse kicked out, slamming him forward into her, and she got her dagger out just in time to slash the straps holding his chest plate on and rip it off as he shoved her back and slid to one side, flipping his sword to his other hand and raising it up to strike at her.

His eyes were wide, and a little bloodshot. Xena lowered her head and struck like a snake, getting her dagger out and going right at him, moving so fast the blade missed her and then she was face to face with him, chest to chest and her hand was slamming into his body burying the knife deep inside it.

He jerked.

She grabbed him by the throat and stared right into his eyes. "Got what you wanted?" She rasped.

He slammed her in the back, trying to cut her with the sword, over and over again.

She wrapped her hands around her knife and yanked it up as hard as she could, cutting his middle open and spilling his insides out on the ground around their feet.

The sword battered her once more, but weakly, then she heard a thud on the rock behind her and his lips just twitched, spittle flying from them.

"No one." Xena leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "Is gonna remember who you were."

And he died, then, his body growing heavy as she released it to fall on the ground.

She let him fall, then she spun and looked around, finding Brendan and Jens right behind her, their bodies braced against each other back to back, with Gabrielle trapped between them.

For once, staying still. Her face covered in grime, but her head held high, and her eyes bright in the sunshine as she saw Xena's attention, and smiled.

She drew her sword and crossed over to them, turning to look at the battlefield and then wishing she hadn't. The Persians were swarming all over her men, who were valiantly holding a line just shy of where she was, putting themselves into a death zone as blood flew, and the more experienced Persians carved their way through them.

Xena joined Jens and Brendan, as they moved aside to let Gabrielle out and they formed a small, gnarly triangle of battered warriors facing something way too big for them to handle.

"Good fight." Brendan said, as he drew his dagger out, and prepared to join the men in the lines. "And that was a damn fine killing you did there, Xena."

"Thanks." Xena sighed. "Wish I could say it made a difference."

"You did." Jens turned and looked at her. "You made us all heroes."

Xena gazed at him, momentarily speechless. Then she wiped her hands and got a grip on her hilt. "All rightie then. Let's go kick some ass." She started towards the fighting. "Stay close, muskrat."

“Like a sock on a foot.” Gabrielle asserted, still hanging on to her spear as she followed Xena into the lines. “Hey Xena?”

“Gonna be busy now.” The queen called back.

“I’m really proud of you.”

Xena lifted her blade and saluted nothing in particular. “I’m pretty damn proud of me too, Gabrielle. C’mon.” She let out her battle yell and swept her blade down to bury it in the neck of one of the Persians.

Her men heard her, and they answered, the tempo of the battle picking up as the thin line of Xena’s troops clashed with the leading edge of the Persian force.

The narrowness of the pass was the only thing in their favor. Xena straightened up to her full height and looked over the heads of her men, seeing a swarming mass of Persians fighting along the wall and another batch getting ready to start firing arrows at them.

Xena took a deep breath, then she put her fingers between her teeth and let out a loud, long whistle, hoping that Tiger would hear her and make his way over if he wasn’t already dead. She pointed at one end of the line. “Jens, brace em!”

Jens headed towards the two inexperienced city men she’d spotted getting spitted, as she heard her whistle echo softly against the rocks.

She scrambled up onto a rock to get a better angle on two of the Persian horsemen, her ears picking up the sound of crossbows firing. “Damn it.” She glanced quickly towards the archers, one hand coming up to ward off arrows, when she saw them all scrambling back, turning and facing the other direction.

Then it occurred to her that her whistle was still echoing.

“Xena!”

Xena felt Gabrielle grab her leg, and yank it. She swept her eyes across the battlefield trying to make sense of what she was seeing, and her eyes caught motion at the back of the pass, rapid, swirling motion.

Horses.

Banners.

“Oh my gosh Xena you see that???” Gabrielle fairly squealed.

Did she see it? Did she actually see that square of fabric against the rocks, standing out in the sun like a whore’s underwear?

Her gods be damned battle flag, held high in the hands of the advance line of mounted troops that were driving against the back of the Persians, pouring in from the valley in a long, unbelievably welcome wave. “Son of a Bacchae.”

No time to relax. Xena raced along the rocks and leaped onto the back of one of the Persian captain’s horses, grabbing the man around the neck as she clamped her knees down on either side of him. “Hey! Jackass!” She yelled into his ear.

He lashed back, trying to grab her. She knocked his helmet off and grabbed his head, turning it forcefully so he had to look back behind him to where her army was rolling in. "You all want to die or not?? Choose! Fast!!!"

The Persian froze.

"You think I'm bad? I got thousands there like me." Xena growled into his ear. "Call it off. Blow the horn or I'll let them butcher you and this pass'll smell of death for the next generation."

For a heartbeat, she thought he was going to be stupid. Then he lifted his hand, and dropped his sword, and picked the horn off his saddle ring with a grunting, disgusted sigh.

He blew the horn. The line of Persian horsemen turned towards him in outrage, screaming and brandishing their blades until they saw his pointing arm, and the rider behind him.

They looked.

The captain blew his horn again, and slowly, very slowly, the fighting eased, Xena's men shoving back their opponents as they stumbled around, trying not to trip on their comrade's bodies.

"Congrats." Xena said to the captain. "You're the first smart Persian I've met today."

The man let the horn rest on his leg, half turning his head to look at her. "Why not just kill us?" He asked. "We would not leave enemies alive."

"But you choose to surrender instead of dying?" Xena asked. "Interesting."

The man shrugged. "We are dead men anyway. Killing us would have been no matter."

"Killing you would take too long." Xena slid off the horses's saddle, feeling the jolt as her body hit the ground and praying her knees would hold up. "I'm over this crap. I want a bubble bath." She held her arms out as Gabrielle bolted into them, giving her consort a very heartfelt hug.

"Oooohhh." Gabrielle exhaled. "Xena,that was awesome."

Xena merely closed her eyes, as what was left of her little force clustered around her, smelling of dirt, and blood and unexpected victory. "If the Fates were here, I'd kiss em."

Gabrielle looked up at her. "You would?"

The queen smiled at the tone. "On the cheek."

"Oh. Okay. Me too."

**

Xena walked slowly towards the growing encampment, a huge ring of her men circling the captive Persians now moved through the pass and down into the more friendly confines of the valley that marked the start of her lands.

The Persians had been disarmed and now they were sitting quietly, most seeming exhausted and just glad of a chance to rest there in the grass.

Xena sympathized with them. She passed a group of her own men, who turned and saluted on seeing her, touching their chest with their fists as she walked by and waved.

She felt like kissing every damn one of her soldiers that she saw. She spotted a clump of her nobles, with Lastan in their center near the pavilion they were raising for her and damned well wanted to kiss all of them too.

Only the fact that she suspected that Gabrielle might start whacking them stopped her.

“Your majesty!” Lastay saw her and hurried over. “Praise the gods it’s a fine thing to see you well.” To his credit, he did actually look happy to see her.

Xena wondered if he was just glad he didn’t have to be in charge anymore. She understood that too. “Glad to see you too.” She answered without any rancor. “Sorry the war was so short for ya.”

“I am not.” Lastay said frankly. “When we heard the Persians had invaded... all thought the worst.”

Xena glanced around. “Save it.” She said. “Let’s go somewhere I can sit down and wash the guts off my hands.” She waved him, and then, after a brief pause, the rest of the nobles towards the pavilion that was pretty much finished nearby.

They seemed pleased with the invitation, and followed her inside as she pushed aside the flap, almost stopping in mid step as the scents of home hit her with unexpected strength.

She blinked, spotting Gabrielle kneeling next to a chest. Her consort turned her head as she entered and the look of utter, relieved exhaustion rang a very familiar bell with her. “Glad to see this stuff Muskrat?”

“Oh boy.” Gabrielle responded. “I sure am.” She looked past Xena, as the nobles entered and clustered in the front of the pavilion, where there was the most clear space. “Hello.”

“Your Grace.” Lastan bowed in her direction.

Xena trudged across the carpet, feeling incongruously soft beneath her boots, and settled down in the big, wooden chair draped in furs her men had set there for her.

It felt strange. Xena regarded her subjects and remembered, or tried to remember, what it felt like to be someone who had subjects. “Take a seat.” She indicated the chests and the low stools near the cot. “I’ve had a long day.”

“Lots of them.” Gabrielle settled on the rug cross legged. She was still in her battle stained tunic, bloodied and torn but she folded her hands together and rested her chin on them, producing a tired grin despite it all.

“Majesty.” Lastay knelt before her. “Tell us of how you come to be here?”

“Isn’t that my line?” Xena propped her elbow on her chair arm and rested her head on her hand. She eyed the rest of the nobles who had taken seats quietly behind Lastan. Her younger ones, mostly, not the old crotchety ones. “I thought I left you all scrounging supplies.”

Lastay remained kneeling. “We did that, Majesty.” He readily answered. “The weather turned, it did, and we..” He glanced around. “Seed was put down. A wagon train came through,, and we traded for what we didn’t have.”

“Mm.”

“We heard strange stories from the valley here.” One of the other nobles spoke up.

“Did you, Jelas?” Xena mused. “What did you hear? Stories about raiders?” She watched his face. “Burned out villages?”

“Stranger stories, Majesty.” Jelas riffled his hair, askew from being trapped inside a battle helm. “Stories of men doing atrocities, and the like.”

“A wagon came back to the stronghold.” Lastay added. “With a girl.”

“Ah.”

“Is she okay?” Gabrielle asked softly. “That seems so long ago.” She added, her voice trailing off.

“She is, your Grace.” Jelas said. “But then we heard other tales.”

“Of Bregos?” Xena drawled.

Lastay nodded. “Six men came, and said they were from him.” He said, briefly.

“Uh huh.”

“They said he had joined up with a big army, from the east.” Jelas said, sniffing reflectively. “I knew of whom they spoke, it was the ones I met with.”

“Uh huh.”

“Bastards said they’d let us off easy if we opened the stronghold and just let them take over.” Lastay said.

Xena studied the two of them. “And the rest of those nutball heads let you refuse?” She was honestly surprised. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy as Hades you did, but it doesn’t make sense.”

Lastay got up and paced, clearly a little discomfited. “There was some discussion.” He admitted.

“There were those who said, yes, that finally their views were the ones that were coming up on top, and that we had been wrong, those of us who had stuck by you.”

“Jerks.” Gabrielle commented.

Jelas and Lastay turned to look at her.

“She’s earned the right to call them jerks.” Xena said. “So what happened?”

Jelas folded his hands on his knees. “Word came that Bregos was dead.” He paused. “That you had killed him.”

“I did.” The queen agreed, wiggling her fingers. “Cleaned up that mess. Found him hunkered down in a burned out backwater eating his neighbors par boiled.”

Both men looked at her, then at their compatriots, then back at her. “Majesty?”

Xena reviewed her words. “What was too big for you, the backwater or the neighbors? Or was me using a cooking term too much?”

The men stared at her. “Bigods.” Jelas whispered. “The girl was saying the truth. We thought her mad.”

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Then Gabrielle cleared her throat. “We came on them looking for the raiders.” She said. “Xena was scouting the area, looking for the bad guys and she found those men around a fire, with that girl in a pot getting ready to cook her.”

Stunned silence.

“So, of course, Xena jumped into the fire and rescued her.” The blond woman said. “And we made them stop that.” She concluded quietly. “I guess they didn’t have much to eat over the winter and they went crazy.”

“Zeus.” Lastay whispered. “Horrible.”

“Before I killed him, Bregos spilled that he’d sold out.” Xena said. “So I went to find out who he sold out to.”

“We found the Persian army camped on the plain before the city.” Gabrielle picked up the tale again. “And... Xena didn’t want everyone to get hurt so she told the army to go back.”

Lastay sat down again on a trunk. “Some trickled back, aye, most didn’t.” He said. “Sent back to get all of us, they did, said we had to come out and back you up.” He added. “But...”

Gabrielle was tired, and she wanted a hug, and some lunch, and some quiet to think it. “We went into the Persian army, tricked them, chased them back to the city, broke into the city, chased the Persians out of the city, beat them up outside the walls, and then chased them back in here where you guys caught up with us.” She took a breath after all that. “And then we won. I’m glad.”

More stunned silence.

“Majesty.” Jelas finally coughed. “You mean to say.. you...this was... I mean, the Persian army, yes? You defeated it with this scant force of merchants and cowherds??”

Xena shrugged modestly.

“I helped, too.” Gabrielle offered.

“The Persian army?” Jelas repeated. “These men we captured..”

“The last of it.” Xena confirmed.

Jelas put his hand over his mouth and simply stared at her.

“Not that we’re not glad to see you.” Xena said. “In fact, you probably saved our asses because we’re a pretty tired bunch of merchants and cowherds.”

“Shepherds.”

“By the gods.” Lastay muttered.

“Did I mention that Xena also burned up all their ships?” Gabrielle mused. “Well, anyway, I’ll tell the whole thing properly but not right this moment.”

Xena watched them all watch her, seeing the unabashed awe from these men who were, at least, the most loyal of her nobles. But even the disloyal ones would fear and respect what she’d just done because frankly, what she’d just done was the unthinkable.

Funny. She’d started out to remake her name, come around to a place where she’d just have settled for surviving, and ended up looking like Ares, God of War’s cooler younger sister.

“Extraordinary.” Jelas murmured. “When the news of this travels the world....”

Yeah. Xena chuckled wearily. “So that’s that.” She ran her fingers over the furs, feeling the unfamiliar softness against her skin, soothing the raw ache in her bones. “Make sure they go back into the pass and burn those bodies. Otherwise we’ll get the stench all the way back home.”

Lastay pinched the bridge of his nose. "Tis already being done, Majesty." He said. "To be honest, this will sound insane but I feel a bit disappointed."

Xena's dark eyebrow lifted sharply. "At what? Not getting to croak?"

Her heir gave her a respectfully wry look. "Not getting the opportunity to become immortal in our history."

The queen cocked her head, then she turned and looked at her consort.

Gabrielle blinked at her. "I'm definitely going to be telling this story Xena." She said. "I may have to write it down and just start passing it out to people to read to give my tongue a rest."

"Hm." Xena pondered the possibility that she'd stumbled and hacked her way into unintended history. "Yeah, well." She exhaled. "All right. Jelas, get on your horse and take a dozen men. Go to the city and tell them they can stop pissing in their ale bowls."

"Majesty." Jelas stood up and bowed. "It would be my great pleasure." He said. "May I act as your envoy?"

The queen propped her chin up on her hand again. "Sure." She said. "They had a tough time. Maybe they're ready to think about a..closer relationship with us."

Jelas grinned unabashedly. "My liege, I will endeavour to make that idea delightful to them." He said. "But I am sure you have already opened the door to my suggestions."

Xena shrugged modestly again. "They appreciated my help." She wiggled her fingers at him "G'wan."

Jelas left, taking the rest of the nobles with him. Xena waited for the flap to stop moving, before she returned her attention to Lastay. "We need to put people in this valley. We screwed up. I screwed up, not keeping an eye on this place." She stated flatly. "We took it for granted we'd hear about trouble from the road."

"Aye." Lastay agreed. "But, Xena... you did take the army this way. Wasn't like they came up the back route unseen."

"They almost did." The queen said. "If I hadn't taken the army that way, they would have met up with Bregos, and we'd have had them up our ass before we knew what hit us."

"But you did take them."

Xena remembered, then, why she'd taken them the way she had. "Yeah, I did." She sighed. "So let's talk about getting settlers back in here, and a guard outpost near the pass. I don't want this to happen again." She regarded her crud covered boots. "All right. Let me clean up. Have them bring some... "

"Majesty, your servants are waiting outside with meat and drink, and a bath." Lastay said, with a wry smile. "They have been fretting. Will you wish to move on later this day?"

"Let me think about it." The queen said. "We've got some things to settle."

"Very good." Lastay bowed. "I will send in your comforts. Be at ease, and you as well, your Grace." He bowed to Gabrielle. "I am very much looking forward to hearing this whole tale, when you are ready to tell it."

He left, and then they were briefly alone in the pavilion, though the sounds of the approaching servants were loud and evident. Xena leaned on the arm of her chair and gazed at her lover. "You ready to be a princess?"

Gabrielle gazed at her. "I'd be happy just to jump in a lake." She admitted. "It feels so amazing for this to be over. I was so scared."

Xena held her hand out. "Me too." She waited for Gabrielle to rise, and come over to her. She patted the chair arm, and when her consort settled on it, the queen reached her arms around her and gave her a hug.

Gabrielle returned the affection, releasing a happy sigh as they sat there wrapped up in each other. "Sorry if I messed up things when that jerk was saying mean things about you."

The queen chuckled under her breath. "Hades of a way to find out my back wasn't really cracked." She admitted. "Ah, don't worry about it. This whole thing was so screwed up it had end up in a bloodbath eventually."

Gabrielle was briefly quiet. "Glad it wasn't our blood." She said. "Thank you for saving my life."

The flap moved aside, and a cluster of servants entered, glancing at Xena and smiling before they started putting down their fragrant burdens.

The queen rested her head against Gabrielle's side, blissfully at ease. "Had to keep even with you. How would it look if it were you saving MY ass all the time?" She nodded in approval as one of the servants knelt to remove her boots.

"You always look good, no matter what I'm doing with.."

"GABRIELLE!"

**

"Elysia can't feel as good as this does." Gabrielle gazed idly up at the stitched joins of the pavilion, her hands laced behind her head and the gentle breeze coming through the valley brushing against her. She was laying flat on her back on the pallet, bathed, in clean clothes and with the knowledge that tomorrow would hold good things for the first time in a moon.

It was almost intoxicating, knowing that. Gabrielle wriggled into a little more comfortable position. It felt great just to be hanging out in the pavilion waiting for Xena to come back, knowing there was no huge, threatening, crazy, Persian army waiting to kill them anymore, and that somehow, some way, they'd come through all the scariness in one piece.

Really, in one piece. Even Xena's back seemed okay, or at least wasn't excruciatingly painful as it had been before. Now the queen just seemed tired, and a bit bemused by it all, looking forward to getting back to their castle as much as Gabrielle was.

Though...

Now that it was over, she was wanting just a little bit to see the sea again, and take a ride on that boat. Gabrielle crossed her ankles and decided to hold off mentioning that to Xena for now, reasoning the last thing the queen would probably want to do is go off galavanting after everything that happened.

It had been exciting, sometimes. She'd gotten to do and see a lot of things, mostly bad and scary things, but also one or two good things, and she'd thought she'd been pretty brave about everything.

She thought for a while about whether she was really a soldier now.

She thought about that last moment, rushing towards Heydar, so angry she could hardly think straight after his taunting of her lover, and how she'd really wanted to hurt him.

She thought about him grabbing her, and knowing she was probably about to die, again.

Again.

She remembered looking up into his eyes, and seeing the triumph, and then seeing them widen and the fear appear and knowing without doubt what he was looking at and who was coming towards them. She let her eyelids shut and pictured the vision she'd seen on turning, of Xena powering through the fighting soldiers like a runaway oxcart.

Wild and unstoppable. Two of the Persians had tried to intercept her and Gabrielle didn't even think Xena saw them. The queen had simply knocked them back like they were nothing but straw men.

Awesome. Gabrielle had felt guilty about getting in trouble and making Xena jump off her horse and come save her but it had all worked out in the end so she guessed it was okay.

And then the army showing up. She wondered what would have happened if they hadn't? There were so many Persians and so few of them it was hard to imagine how they'd have won through but Gabrielle felt, deep in her heart, that somehow, some way, they would have.

They just had too much to live for, her and Xena.

"Hey, Muskrat!"

Gabrielle's eyes popped open to find Xena standing over her, hands on her hips, eyebrows lifted. "Oh. Hi."

"Sleeping?" The queen sat down on the edge of the pallet and nudged Gabrielle over to one side.

"No. Just thinking."

"Uh oh."

Gabrielle watched her lover's profile, putting a hand on her thigh as she saw the weariness there. "Are we staying here now?"

Xena was momentarily silent, then she looked over at Gabrielle. "No." She said. "I told the boys to pack up camp. If we hustle our asses we'll be at the castle before dark." She covered Gabrielle's hand with her own. "I've got a lot of stuff to settle out there."

"Great!" The thought of being at the castle that very day nearly made Gabrielle keel over.

"I just wasn't sure bringing the damn Persians with us was a good idea. But I kicked a few of them around and I think it's all right."

"What are you going to do with them, Xena?" Gabrielle asked, curiously.

"Dunno. Maybe sell them off." The queen said. "I can probably get a decent price for them from those bastards on the other side of the mountains."

Gabrielle blinked at her. "Really?"

Xena shrugged. "They're spoils of war, Gabrielle. What else is there to do with them? We can't keep em, and they've got no way back home unless they build rafts and maybe kiss some whales to drag em back across the sea."

"What's a whale?"

The queen smiled, and gently stroked Gabrielle's forehead, pushing her thick, pale hair back. "It's a fish the size of that boat we were on that blows fountains into the sky."

Gabrielle stared at her. "That's not true. " She said. "Is it?"

Xena nodded. "It's true. Maybe we can take that trip on the sea someday and find one."

Gabrielle sat up. "I'd really like to do that." She said. "When I said I wanted to sneak off with you.. that's what I meant. It was all new."

The queen thought about that for a moment. Then she smiled. "We can talk about it after we get back." She gave Gabrielle a slap on the shoulder. "Let's go. I want my tub, and you in it."

Outside, the sounds of the camp breaking up were clearly heard, men shouting and horses moving past. Gabrielle got up off the pallet and offered Xena her hand to pull her up as well, and they went to the entrance of the pavilion and passed through it, heading out into the organized chaos and on the way home.

**

It was just starting to be sunset when they came around the last bend in the road and saw the stronghold at the end of it. Xena gave the old rockpile a fond look, already hearing the sound of horns on the ramparts as the army was spotted behind her.

Lastay was riding to one side of her, and Gabrielle on her shaggy little runt on the other side. Her standard bearer was just behind them, and the rest of the army with their captives stretched far back at the tail of setting sun.

They were riding between the long, rolling fields just put under planting, newly churned earth releasing a rich scent into the air that also brought the sound of livestock and the creak of wagons moving somewhere in the distance.

The late afternoon golden light made everything charming, and Xena glanced around at the cultivated lands with a new appreciation and it occurred to her that maybe enhancing what she had might be a slightly better idea than going out again to find more trouble.

Brendan brought his bay up next to her, the old captain looking tired, but very proud. "Mistress."

"Good to be home, Brendan?" Xena asked. "Bet it'll be nice to see the barracks."

Brendan made a low sound that was half groan and half chuckle. "Where you want us to put these dogs?" He indicated their captives. The Persians had been quiet, almost meek on the trip to the stronghold, their weapons packed into the provision wagons.

Good question. Xena thought hard for a minute, then she nodded to herself. "Put them in the barracks that Bregos vacated." She said. "They could have made it a lot harder on us. Give them a little respect."

Brendan nodded in agreement. "Rough lot." He said. "You going to ransom 'em?"

"Maybe." Xena replied. "Depends if I think Daddy would send coin or more mercenaries after my ass." She privately figured it could go either way, depending on how many of Persias troops were either lying dead or marching meekly between her lines of soldiers.

On one hand, he could send her a literal king's ransom to get his troops back. On the other hand, he could be so pissed off he showed up with twice as many to kick her ass.

On the third hand, what kind of king was he to send out this many experienced troops under a petulant puissant like Sholeh? She studied the enemy men in their midst. "What a waste."

A horn blew again, and the gates opened in welcome as they got closer. Xena felt a sense of relief as she saw the guards on the walls raising their fists in acknowledgement, her half formed fear that someone had taken the opportunity of her absence to mess with her home unfounded.

"Wow." Gabrielle sighed. "Is that ever a sight for sore eyes."

"And sore asses." The queen agreed. She could see curious people gathering at the gates, and she even found herself looking forward to her pain in the ass courtiers, who certainly were among them staring at the exotic Persians as they came down the last bit of the road and passed inside.

Xena lifted a hand as she acknowledged the cheers of the castle dwellers, waving Brendan and the troops off towards the military compound as she continued on in the direction of the castle front steps, where Stanislaus and the staff were hurriedly gathering to meet her.

And nobles. Bunches of them like slightly rotten grapes popping out of doorways as she pulled Tiger to a halt and gratefully, wearily, hoisted herself off his back and set her boots onto the familiar granite flagstones. "Hey, you bastards. How are ya?"

Lastay and Gabrielle also dismounted, giving their horse over to the grooms who had raced up from the stables, still breathing hard. "Thanks." Gabrielle gave Patches a hug, and a pat. "Give him something really nice. He's been so brave."

The groom smiled at her. "As horse like rider, your grace." He said, with a little bow. "Glad to see you and her Majesty back home."

Gabrielle blushed a little, but smiled back. "I'm glad to be home too." She sighed. "It's been a long moon." She gave Patches a last hug, then she followed Xena up the stairs and in the throng of excited nobles, latching on to the queen's armor as she was hauled steadily through the crowd.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!" Stanislaus was chattering. "We heard such terrible rumors!"

"Yes! Yes! Is it true the whole of the army of Persia is coming after us?"

"And they had great creatures?"

"What about the ships of war! We heard the port city was destroyed!"

Xena stopped and lifted her arms up, letting out a sharp whistle. "Hush!" She waited for the noise to settle. "I have things to do and bubbles to attend to." She said. "So you.." She pointed at Stanislaus. "Make yourself useful and get a banquet going, and the rest of you get your asses out of my way and show up in the hall later on."

"But.."

Xena's eyebrows lifted, at the nearest noble, an older man with blinking, faded eyes. "But?"

The man hesitated, then he patted his hands together. "So good to see you again, your Majesty." He said. "Of course, of course we will go to the hall and await your pleasure."

"You can say that again." Xena held her hand out to Gabrielle. "And if you're really nice to my consort, and bring her lots of presents, she may tell you everything that happened."

Gabrielle took her hand and gave everyone a sheepish smile, as they started up the grand staircase that led to the queen's chambers. "See you later?" She waved.

The nobles and Stanislaus waved back, standing there and watching as the two disappeared and the big doors at the top of the stairs slammed decidedly shut with a bang.

**

Sounds of the stronghold floated in the open windows, bringing the smell of the cookfires and the rich scent of turned earth into the queen's chambers. A door opened, and a blurb of uneven music floated in, with voices and the clatter of boots following it that disappeared as the door shut again behind it.

"There's a lot of people down there, Xena."

"Sure there is." Xena wiggled her toes, her body submerged fully in warm, scented, very slightly bubbly water in her huge tub, lit with golden light from the candles placed around the bathing room. "This is the most exciting thing that's happened in this place since the bulls got loose and nearly ran the whole down down on their asses."

"Jellaus just found me."

Xena chuckled. "He sorry he didn't go?"

"I think so." Gabrielle called over. "I told him to wait to hear the whole story first."

"Mm." The queen crossed her ankles, glad of the chance to float there, stretching out the still stiff and sore aches in her back. "I think he'd still want to have been there."

Outside, the last bit of fading sunlight was reflecting crimson on the windows of her chambers, and behind her, she could hear Gabrielle pattering around to the accompaniment of tinkling glass and pouring liquid. "Gaaabbbrrrieellle..."

"Yes?" A soft clink made her open her eyes and look up, to find a crystal goblet parked near her ear filled with rich, golden liquid. "Oo."

"I thought you'd like some of this." Gabrielle shook a bit of still damp hair from her eyes, her newly bathed skin glistening a little in the candlelight. As she perched on the edge of the tub, Xena reached up and untied the belt holding her robe shut, letting it drift open to expose her bare skin.

"You thought right." The queen agreed, ignoring the glass for the moment and reaching up to rub her thumb over Gabrielle's nipple instead. "Mead's a nice idea too though."

Gabrielle leaned over the tub and laid a hand on Xena's cheek before she kissed her on the lips. The moment lengthened, until she lost her balance and fell into the tub with a splash, sending bubbly water halfway across the bathing chamber.

Xena dissolved into silent laughter, covering her eyes with one hand as the waves splashed against her chest, the fabric of her lover's robe floating and sending a puff of damp silk in her direction.

A second later, Gabrielle surfaced, spluttering. "Oh, wow." She coughed a little. "Boy, that was a surprise. Glad I hadn't really dried off and gotten dressed yet." She added mournfully, moving the wet hair from her eyes and peering at the now drenched head of her bathmate. "Sorry."

Xena licked her lips. "That's all right." She admitted, blinking the drops of water she'd been splashed with out of her eyes. "Worth the dunking. Laughing feels good." She gathered up a handful of Gabrielle's robe and tugged her out of it, bunching the drenched fabric in one hand and tossing it outside the tub.

"It does." Gabrielle hauled herself upright, her legs tangled with Xena's in the tub as she slid back and leaned against the side of the marble basin, reaching out to pick up one of the goblets and handing it over to the queen. "Here you go."

The queen swirled the cup, watching the liquid coat the glass, then she sniffed it, making a low sound of pleasure. "I missed this damn tub." She admitted, with a lazy smile. "I can't believe it, but I missed this hoary mausoleum of a room, too."

Her companion sipped from her cup thoughtfully. "I didn't."

Xena's eyebrows hiked sharply.

"But I did miss being alone with you in it." Gabrielle amended, giving the queen a mildly impish look over the edge of her glass. "A lot."

"Did you?" Blue eyes twinkled.

"I did." Gabrielle reached out under the water and stroked the queen's thigh. "It's not the same when some crazy guy with a sword can burst in any second."

"Oh really?" Xena put the cup down. "C'mere." She pulled Gabrielle closer, kissing her as their bodies pressed against each other, the motion making the water lap lightly at the edge of the tub. "You may have a point there." The queen finally said, sitting back again and taking the glass, swirling it around a few times before she took a sip of the contents. "Mmm."

Gabrielle licked her lips, and grinned, reaching up to wipe a few droplets of water out of her eyes.

They both sighed at the same time. Gabrielle squirmed around to sit next to Xena, pressing her shoulder against the queen's as they sat in silence for a few moments, drinking the rich honey mead.

The sweetness felt so strange on her tongue. Xena inhaled the scent and slowly let her breath out, tipping her head back and looking around the room, the stone walls covered in tapestries and beyond the draped entry, the bedroom with its huge and ridiculously comfortable bed.

Hard to believe she was here. She turned her head and regarded her tub mate, who was leaning against her shoulder cradling her cup with her eyes half closed.

Just a bit of a smile on her face.

"Tired?" Xena asked her.

"Not really." Gabrielle gazed up at her. "I don't want to go to sleep. I want to enjoy being here with you." She kissed Xena's shoulder, then nibbled the skin there a little. "Sleeping would be kind of a waste of time."

Xena rested her head against her consorts. "It would." She agreed. "Too bad we have to waste time on having dinner with the realm."

Gabrielle smiled, ducking her head a little. "It's so amazing."

"I know I am." Xena remarked drolly. "Are you going to tell everyone else how amazing I am, later?" She draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders. "No one expected me back this soon. Or at all." She mused. "I sure didn't."

"You didn't think you'd make it back?" Gabrielle asked. "Really?"

Xena shrugged, after a brief pause to consider. "I dunno." She said, turning back to Gabrielle and leaning over to gently bite her ear. "Let's talk about something else."

Gabrielle slid her arm over Xena's waist and half turned to face her, lifting her chin so their lips met. "Do we have to talk?" She eased closer, sliding her body up next to the queen's as her knee eased between Xena's thighs.

The queen blinked a little at this sudden, sensual assault. She set her cup down and rested her hand on Gabrielle's hip, enjoying the kiss, and the warmth and the passion knowing she wasn't about to be shot in the ass, or have to bullshit her way out of an impossible situation.

What a nice feeling.

"No." She wrapped her arms around Gabrielle and pulled her down, banishing the water between them and savoring the heat igniting in her guts as her lover circled her neck with her arms and nuzzled the side of her face.

Xena drew in a breath of warm, moist steam from the bath colored with the scent of Gabrielle's skin and allowed herself to relax, sliding back against the tub wall as her hands explored her consort's body. She felt Gabrielle press against her and her own body arched against the contact, savoring it.

The gentle, teasing touch against her breast made her eyes flutter, and she smiled. "Know what?"

"Mm?" Gabrielle's breath ruffled against the bath water, tickling her collarbone.

"Unless you learned to swim any better, let's go ashore." Xena eased herself upward until they were both kneeling in the tub, letting the water sheet off her as they continued to kiss each other.

She'd meant to keep going, standing up to get out but Gabrielle's hand slid up the inside of her thigh below the water and she paused instead, her body craving the contact as the motion of the warm water prickled her skin.

"I kinda like it right here." Gabrielle breathed, warming the skin between Xena's breasts, bumping the queen backwards just a trifle as she eased her knee between the taller woman's and leaned forward, kissing the curve just below her collarbone.

Xena took a breath to protest, but the sensual press of Gabrielle's belly against hers made her forget about standing up as a knowing touch brought a surge of passion and Gabrielle's lips found sensitive spots and teased them with shy confidence.

Oh well. Xena felt her body surrendering to the touch and she slid back down, pulling Gabrielle with her as the blond woman's hands reached and touched and made her breathing shorten, the warmth of the water and the familiarity of the passion comforting beyond all belief.

She let Gabrielle have her way, submitting with frank, unabashed moans as the blond woman scoured her skin, nipping and teasing until almost every inch of her felt like she'd been scrubbed with a hot sea sponge.

The rush of sensation surprised her, and almost landed them both out of the tub and onto the floor but at the last moment in a spasm of reaction Xena managed to grab hold of the side of the marble and keep them both in place.

The splashing faded into ripples and they lay there together, Gabrielle resting on top of Xena's half submerged body for a long few minutes, breathing hard. Xena let her fingers slide down Gabrielle's side and felt the faint inhale at the touch, making her smile as she circled her arm around Gabrielle's back and gave her a hug.

Yeah.

From one viewpoint, she'd set out on a fool's mission and totally failed at it. And yet, here she was, being lovingly pleased by her doting muskrat, victory draped over her shoulders, servants scrambling to do things for her, and nobles bowing and scraping and waiting to hear every detail of her success.

Ah well. Xena had caught her breath and now she smoothly turned and reversed their positions, surprising Gabrielle who only just kept from smacking her adorable head on the side of the tub. She braced her arms over her lover and peered down at her from narrowed eyes, leaning closer to playfully fasten her teeth on one of Gabrielle's nipples.

"Urmf." Gabrielle spread her arms out to keep her balance as her body reacted. "W.. wan to get out now?"

"Oh no." The queen grinned wickedly at her. "I **can** swim." She bit down a little, watching her lover's eyes widen just a trifle. Then she slowly started to work her way downward, past the scrapes and the cuts, some healed, some not, past the bruises and the too prominent ribs, until she was close to submerging her head, and then it was time to make good on her boast.

She sucked in a deep breath, and did just that.

**

Gabrielle scratched her ear, sighing as she reviewed the pretty, bright fabrics laid out over her clothing press. It was now full dark out, and she and Xena were getting ready to go downstairs to the big banquet hall, where everyone within the walls and some who had just arrived were scurrying in to get good seats.

She and the queen, of course, already had good seats.

Gabrielle folded her arms over her mostly bare chest, as she stood in her wraps and pondered her choices. It felt a little odd to have choices, she supposed, but really most anything the queen had ordered put in her closet would have been a fine pick, because even though she really didn't have much taste for clothes, her lover most certainly did.

"What in Hades are you doing?"

Gabrielle turned, to find Xena standing behind her dressed in a silk, purple gown. "Wow.' She said. "That's so pretty."

"That's so pretty is not the answer to "what in Hades are you doing." The queen said.

"No, I know." The blond woman turned and perched on the edge of the press. "I guess I just can't decide what to wear."

Xena looked at her, then she tipped her head to one side and looked at her again. "Gabrielle, there's only two dresses here. Pick one." She studied the half shadowed face, seeing suddenly a new, surprising maturity in her consorts expression. "Or go naked if you want."

Gabrielle looked away. "I don't want to go naked." She said, before the queen got any ideas. "I just don't know..." She looked at the pretty, frilly gowns. "I don't know if I want to wear these either." She admitted. "It was kind of nice not having to when we were gone."

She looked up at Xena after a moment's hesitation, when the queen didn't answer. She found those pale blue eyes studying her with a touch of pensive seriousness. "I know, you're going to say just get dressed Gabrielle." She grinned wryly. "I will."

“No.” Xena took a seat next to her on the press. “What’s your problem?” She hitched a knee up and circled it with her hands, disarranging the fine fabric with casual disregard. “Don’t like the duds? We can get more.”

Gabrielle remembered the first time Xena had left clothes for her, back in her little niche, those stacks of worn shirts and rough fabrics so fabulous and precious to her.

She owed so much to her lover. She knew Xena liked to wear pretty things, and she liked Gabrielle to wear them too. So was it crazy for her to not want to? She pondered the long scratch across the back of one hand, feeling very different than she had the last time she’d perched on this press, and had to wear something from it.

Xena waited quietly for her to answer, uncommonly patient for her. Gabrielle glanced up at her companions face, and sensed that Xena, too, had changed. Despite her flippant words, there was a more serious air about her and in her weather roughened face those eyes now held a new glitter of presence.

Less capricious. Less mocking.

It was all different now. They were different. The stronghold hadn’t changed, but here, in this closed dynamic of the two of them, all the things they’d just been through came settling home and possibly for the first time, Gabrielle gained a sense that her life, always in a whirlwind of change, had moved permanently to some new level.

She wasn’t sure if that was a good, or a bad thing. However. “I think they’re pretty.” She said, finally. “I just don’t think I’m cut out for those sort of clothes.” Gabrielle reached over and touched the neatly folded surcoat and armor laying nearby. “I think I like this stuff better.”

Xena didn’t seem surprised to hear it. She rested her hands on the edge of the press and extended her legs, crossing her bare feet at the ankles. “You want to dress like a guy?” She asked, after a moment.

“Well, no.. not..” Gabrielle paused, and frowned. “I just think.. I’m more.. “ She paused again. “It just fits how I see myself better. Or something like that.”

“Uh huh.” Xena pursed her lips. “Well.” She tilted her head and regarded her consort. “Gabrielle, you’ve earned the right to wear whatever the Hades you want to wear even if that’s a goatskin with bells on it.” She said, in a serious tone. “So tomorrow you call in those nitwit needle pushers of mine and have em make you up whatever you want.”

Gabrielle grinned, her face lighting up in relief. “That would be awesome.”

Xena reached over and affectionately ruffled her hair. “Whatever makes you happy, my love.” She said, in a casual tone. “Ya look sexy in whatever you wear to me, so go get something on and we’ll go scandalize the realm together.”

My love. Gabrielle felt a prickle across her skin and unexpectedly the sting of tears in her eyes. She looked up at Xena, seeing the wry understanding in her expression, and got up off the press to throw her arms around the queen and hug her as hard as she could.

Xena was a little puzzled at the reaction, but she never minded hugs from Gabrielle so she returned it, the surrealness of being home in the stronghold slowly growing less like a dream, and more like reality. She kissed the top of Gabrielle’s head and rubbed her bare back, frowning a little when she felt her lover’s spine clearly under her skin.

“Xena, you’re the best.” Gabrielle released her and leaned back, still in the circle of the queen’s arms. “It’s going to be so nice to come back here after dinner and just chill out.”

The queen unwound one arm and tweaked one of her consorts breasts. “Yes it will. Scoot.” She bumped Gabrielle towards her choice of clothing and wandered over to the window, peering out of it at the activity in the courtyard below.

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In the end, Gabrielle picked a long sleeved green silk tunic that came down halfway to her knees, held tight to her body by her beloved hawk’s head belt. She had soft indoor boots on and she felt comfortable and ready to face the crowd in the room.

Xena had stopped just short of the entry as was her custom, and Gabrielle was waiting behind her, hearing the buzz of conversation in the big hall as she looked forward to the banquet, hoping she’d get a chance to fill her stomach before she had to get up and talk.

“Gabrielle?”

“Coming.” She scooted up next to where Xena was standing, one hand braced against the doorway, and the other holding her sword in its sheath. “Can I hold that for you?”

“This?” Xena held up the sword. “Sure.” She handed it over, then she put her hand on Gabrielle’s shoulder and started forward, surprising the guard at the entrance who drew a startled breath to announce her.

“Sh.” Xena whacked him on the side of the head, then she headed up the aisle towards the high, raised dais that held her table, and the high backed throne shaped chair behind it.

Her presence, their presence, was noted quickly, heads turning and bodies moving in bows both awkward and honest, most of the room filled with richly dressed nobles and a scattering of her soldiers dressed in their field armor and surcoats.

Xena had considered wearing hers. However, unlike her consort, she enjoyed the feeling of soft silk on her body after a moon of nothing but leather and steel and she flexed clean, but slightly stiff hands as she glided up the low steps with Gabrielle at her side.

The table was empty. Xena hadn’t told Stanislaus to fill it with anyone, and she patted the right hand seat, the favored one, for Gabrielle to sit in as they both arrived. She waited for her consort to take a seat, still cradling her sword, before she faced the crowd and regarded them.

Big crowd. All eyes fastened on hers, filled with various emotions from apprehension to disappointment, to the scattering of happiness and muted glee. Xena wasn’t a fool, to think everyone in the room was glad she was back, and that some in fact had probably been in league with Bregos and his Persian invaders.

Just like old times. Xena sighed and pointed at Lastay, then at Brendan, Jens, and two other of her officers, and one or two nobles that appeared the happiest to see her and waved them up to the table, then she sat down and waited for all the shifting to finish. “Here we are.”

“Here we are.” Gabrielle agreed. “And boy I’m glad, cause I’m hungry.”

Xena chuckled, leaning back as the room began to settle, and her chosen guests joined her at the table. “Everything quiet?” She asked Brendan.

“As a tomb, Mistress.” Brendan sighed, as he relaxed in his seat. “Persians got sorted out, guards are with em.” He said. “Got rode hard, they did. I think they’s just glad of a dry spot to sleep in and a fire.”

“Mm.” The queen steepled her fingers and tapped them against her lips. “Lastay, do we know who Bregos was in with here?”

Her chief duke and heir rested his elbows on his chair arms. “Well, your Majesty, that’s an excellent question.” He said. “I have heard many who were sympathetic to his aims, and even some who felt he should have been taken back in the winter, but..”

“But?”

Lastay half shrugged. “No one looks to be taken over by Persians.” He said, succinctly. “The reputation of the princess preceded her.”

“Ah.” Xena, smiled, waving the anxious servers forward with their trays of nice smelling things. “Better then bitch you know than the puppy you don’t?”

Lastay held up his hands and half turned them over. “As you say, Majesty.” He agreed. “Was she as her reputation maintains?”

The queen chuckled softly. “Well, she’s dead.” She remarked. “By her own man’s hand, matter of fact.”

“Struth?”

“She was a jerk.” Gabrielle supplied, having captured a roll and a bit of cheese, and was busy munching it.

“Did she treat you poorly, you Grace?” Lastay asked, politely.

“Gabrielle bit her in the face and tore a chunk out of her.” Xena said. “But you’ll get to hear all about that later. Right Muskrat?” She picked up a bit of cheese from the platter being passed down the table and nibbled it, watching the crowd as she planned what she herself was going to say.

First things first. She turned to Brendan. “Got that bag?”

Brendan handed a soft, leather bag over to her, with a rakish grin.

Xena ran the edge of her thumb over the leather, then she stood up and drew a dagger from her sleeve, rapping it’s hilt against the table.

The room went silent, almost immediately. The nobles at their tables turned and faced her, and at the back of the room, the big doors opened and slowly, the men she’d led from the city filtered in and took up positions against the back wall.

“All right.” Xena faced her subjects. “Bet you’re all surprised to see me here, huh?”

Lastay half covered his eyes and sighed.

“After all, I said I was going to out to conquer more territory, shoulda taken me longer than this.” The queen went on. “But as it turned out, something else turned up to occupy my time.”

“Your Majesty.” One of the old dukes stood up. “Is it true that we were offered a great alliance with this Eastern empire?”

Xena had to give him a point for guts. “No.”

“But that is what they said.” The man insisted. “The envoy, who came here. He said that. Did he not?” The man turned to his tablemates. “Is that not what you told me?”

One of the other nobles hesitantly stood up. “Yes.” He bravely said. “That is what we were told. That this great empire wanted to join forces with us, and that... ah... “

“That I was dead?” Xena cocked her head to one side.

“No.” The first man turned around again. “That you had agreed, your Majesty, and were to go with this army.”

Xena rested her hands on the contents of the leather bag, which was resting on the table. An uneasy silence fell. The queen exhaled then she looked around the room. “There was no us involved.” She said, bluntly. “I was offered a place with the Persians. My army was offered a place with the Persians.”

A low murmur went up.

“They couldn’t give a rats ass about the rest of you.” Xena concluded. “You were just a provision stop for em.”

The old duke pondered that, then he looked back at Xena, apparently old enough to feel bold. “Then, your Majesty, why are you here?” He asked. “Is that not what you would have wished? To go and to conquer, and to make rivers run red with men’s blood?”

“Hm.” Xena hummed low in her throat. “Well...”

“Because Xena gives a rats ass about all of you.” Gabrielle stood up and put her hands behind her back, speaking clearly into the uneasy silence. “Even if the Persians didn’t. All they wanted was her. All she wanted was to keep them away from you all.”

Xena glanced away, and cleared her throat a little. “Do you have to make me sound so self sacrificing?” She muttered. “Sheesh.”

Gabrielle pretended not to hear. “I was there. I saw all of it.”

“Yeah.” Xena took back over the conversation. “In answer to your question, Radas, no. I wasn’t tempted.”

The old duke frowned.

“There’s not enough riches in Persia, or blood in the sea to buy me.” Xena finished quietly. “I don’t play well with others, and if you haven’t gotten that yet you never will so sit the Hades down and shut up.”

“Humph.” The duke did, however, sit down. “Well, then well done, I say.” He clapped his hands several times in the echoing tension. “Well done, your Majesty.”

“Thanks.” Xena only just kept from rolling her eyes. “Any other stupid comments or questions?” She asked, in a louder voice. “You can bet I’ll be scouring out those of you who decided to stay on Bregos side. I won’t be nice like I was last time.”

Fear rippled through the room, an energy she was well accustomed to, here in this place where her word was law, and men had a reason to fear it. Xena let them all stew for a minute, then she relaxed a little. “However, tonight is not the time for that.” She said. “Tonight’s the time to raise a mug to the men who stuck with me, and those who gave their lives standing at my side.” She looked across the room to the soldiers in the back, standing with straight backs, some her original soldiers, some the men from

the city, almost indistinguishable between them. “And to welcome new faces who proved themselves damn decent warriors.”

The city men, and the conscripts now were obvious from their reddened faces, and the looks they were giving each other.

Xena smiled at them. “Welcome.”

The nobles looked around the room to find the soldiers ringing them, and not a few of them looked decidedly nervous.

That made Xena smile even wider. “The other thing we’re celebrating tonight... “ She drew everyone’s attention back to her. “Is my wedding.”

If she’d turned into a small furry rodent and started tap dancing, she probably would have caused less of a rolling, thunderous shock across the room. Even Lastay twitched, looking up at her in true surprise.

“It was a very short ceremony, and I almost got shot in the ass doing it, but that’s pretty much how my life is, aint’ it?” Xena opened the bag and drew out a golden circlet, it’s front set in jewels and lacy filigree. “Sorry I didn’t invite any of you.”

“But, your Majesty...” The old duke, apparently elected sacrificial lamb by his peers again stood. “What is this? Did you not say you would never marry?”

Xena glanced at her consort, who was staring at the circlet with wide eyes. “I said I’d never marry someone you wanted me to. I never said I wouldn’t marry someone I wanted to.” She turned and gently, carefully set the circlet on Gabrielle’s pale hair, fitting it around her head where it settled into place as though it had been made for her.

Which, of course, it had.

For once, Gabrielle was struck dumb, her eyes saying more than words ever could.

For once, it was Xena who felt the need to speak. “So now you have two queens.” She let her fingertips brush Gabrielle’s cheek. “And she’s in charge of me.”

Gabrielle’s eyes went wide, and her nostrils flared as she kept her gaze glued on Xena, not daring to move it towards the rest of the room.

“Are you freaking out?” Xena asked, in a soft voice.

Gabrielle nodded.

“Good.” The queen leaned over and gave her a kiss on the lips. “Long live the queens.” She straightened and glared at the crowd. “I’m not hearing any cheers.”

Belatedly, the group burst into ragged ones, some of the nobles lifting their goblets so fast their wine spilled in every direction. IN the back of the room, the soldiers responded far more enthusiastically, whistling and shouting out Gabrielle’s name much to her consorts embarrassment.

Ah well. Xena let out a piercing whistle of her own, then she pointed to Jellaus, who was standing by with his lute. “Let’s get this damn party started before I die of boredom!”

The music started up and the servers started bringing the trays around and Xena settled back into her big chair, accepting the chaos she’d started with a benign smile as she reached over and scratched Gabrielle on the back.

You just never knew where life was going to lead you sometimes, did you? Xena chuckled softly and shook her head. You just never did.

**

The next day, it rained. Xena leaned her arms against the window sill and peered outside, listening to the rumble of thunder as she watched the heavy rain drench everything in sight.

She thought about being out there in the field in this kind of weather, and had to admit if only to herself that she was really a lot happier to be here, dry and comfortable in her castle with the prospect of breakfast to look forward to and a warm fire burning nearby.

The night's sleep had refreshed her somewhat, but the stiffness in her back hadn't eased, and she was glad she wasn't going to have to don her leathers and jump on the back of a horse, and even more glad the non stop fighting had stopped.

For now. Xena leaned her chin on her wrists, cautiously stretching her back out, then stopping in mid motion as a warm hand rested on her spine, just at the spot it was hurting. "You'd better be cute and blond or I'm gonna take that off with an ax."

Gabrielle chuckled softly, leaning up against her as she, too, looked out at the rain. "Boy, I'm glad we're not out in that."

"Me too." Xena admitted.

The blond woman sat down on the bench that curved in front of the window, her body wrapped in a light robe. "Having adventures was sort of fun though."

"Uh huh." The queen blinked a little as lightning struck nearby.

"At least, until we started getting shot at." Gabrielle amended. "Then it kind of sucked."

Xena turned and sat down next to her on the bench. "It turned out all right though. You did a good job telling the story to everyone last night."

Gabrielle ducked her head a bit bashfully. "I didn't have to try hard. It's a pretty amazing story." She demurred. "I don't think I even realized it until I was telling people what happened and I kept sort of stopping in my head and going 'what?'"

The queen chuckled. "Especially when you were describing what you did?"

"Yeah."

"Did it make you realize we never would have done it without you?" Xena took her hand and held it, rubbing her thumb over Gabrielle's knuckles.

Gabrielle blushed. "I think I surprised myself."

Xena pondered that. Then she smiled. "I think I surprised myself too." She said, wryly. "Not always in a good way."

"Well." The blond woman reached over and clasped her hand. "It all worked out. We won."

"We won."

They were both quiet for a moment. Then Gabrielle squeezed Xena's hand. "So what are we going to do now?"

"Well." Xena stretched her legs out. "After my back stops killing me, we've got a lot of work to do around here. That valley has to be resettled." She ticked off items on her long fingers. "Treaty with the port city signed."

"It's so strange that you were going to attack them and we end up being friends." Gabrielle commented.

"Mm." The queen grunted. "Don't mention that when their envoy's here."

"I won't."

"I need to buy the army new stuff." Xena said. "They deserve it. New armor, new bows..."

"Xena?"

"Hm?" The queen turned to look at her.

"Thanks for my pretty hat." Gabrielle kicked her feet out a little, not looking at her companion. "I didn't get a chance to say that last night."

"Before we came back here and screwed like squirrels? True." Xena caught the blush from the corner of her eye, and she patted Gabrielle on the leg with a chuckle. "It was good. Freaked out those damn tin hat nobles and even made Lastay stop and think."

"Think about what?"

"Think about what might happen if I turn out stranger than they think and you end up bearing me an heir."

Gabrielle turned her head and looked up at Xena. She stared at her in silence for a long moment. "Can you do that?" She asked, finally in a hesitant voice. "I didn't think ... um... "

"Probably not." Xena let her head rest back against the granite wall. "But y'know something, Gabrielle? Listening to the story you told last night I'm pretty sure I couldn't do most of that either."

"Oh."

Xena peered at her. "That make you nervous?"

"Well.." Gabrielle murmured. "It's sort of unusual."

"Want to stop having sex?"

Silence. "No." The blond woman said. "I'll take the chance. I'm sure you were right the first time and we're just being silly."

Xena chuckled. They both turned their heads at a deferential knock on the door. "Little early for annoyances, isn't it?" She muttered. "Who?" She called out.

"It's Brendan, your Majesty." Stanislaus peeked in apprehensively. "He is very insistant to see you. I told him you and y..t.. b..."

"Shut up and let him in." Xena leaned back again, and waited as the door opened and her captain entered her inner chambers, crossing over to them and saluting. "Sit." Xena indicated a stool nearby.

"What's up?"

Brendan was dressed in fresh, well maintained armor, and he'd shaven and shorn the wild gray locks that had grown out during the campaign. "Your Majesty.."

"Cut that out." Xena interrupted him.

Brendan tilted his head, then grinned a little. "Sorry, Xena." He said. "Got some news for you."

"Uh oh." Xena folded her arms across her chest. "I can't wait to hear this."

Gabrielle got up and headed back across the room towards the big fire. "Be right back." She called over her shoulder. "Brendan would you like some cider?"

Caught in the middle of taking a breath, the soldier paused, and blinked. "Ah.. aye, surely." He answered in an awkward tone. "Bigods, I didn't mean to interrupt your breakfast, M.. Xena. I'll.. " He stopped, as Xena waved at him. "Ah."

"How are the Persians settling in?" Xena asked, to distract him.

"That's the news." Brendan said. "Leader of em, I guess he's the senior one left, says he wants to talk with ya, fore you send any news back home about them."

"Ah huh."

"Heard them talking, a bit, maybe about not wanting to go back."

"Ah HUH." Xena's brows lifted. "Where do they want to go?" She accepted the mug from Gabrielle and took a sip of it, as her consort passed a mug to Brendan and took one for herself.

"Want to stay here."

Xena spit her mouthful of cider across the room, narrowly missing her faithful captain's head. "What?"

Brendan shrugged. "Took a shine to you, I'm guessing." He said. "Be a nice big force, yeah? Fill in what that bastard took out from us."

The queen stared at him across the edge of her mug. "Brendan, you're suggesting we let them stay here, and join our army?"

Brendan shrugged again. "Most can fight." He stated the obvious. "Not horrible bad fellers. Heard em talking about all that poison and stuff making them mad, like they weren't good enough to fight the right way."

"Well, we did beat them." Gabrielle said.

"Aye." Brendan agreed. "That's why they want to join up, yeah? Called us true warriors."

True warriors. Gabrielle thought about that, and decided it was probably pretty true. Certainly, Xena hadn't resorted to any fancy tricks because... well, because really she hadn't had any tricks to work with other than her own prowess and a remarkable talent for doing the right thing at the right time.

"Hey Xena?"

"Hey, muskrat?"

"If you had that poison stuff, would you have used it?"

Xena cocked her head and regarded the ceiling. "Hm..."

"Nah." Brendan shook his head. "Had her chance once, tossed it off. I remember."

Xena glared at him from slitted eyes. "Squealer." She growled. "Remind me to blindfold you the next time I do something that stupid." Then she turned to Gabrielle. "I think.." She said, in a more serious tone. "That as a warrior, you have grab every advantage you can in order to win."

"But?" Gabrielle was watching her face, a faint smile playing around her lips.

The queen sighed. "But, I also find a value in winning because you're..." She paused, her brows creasing.

"Because you're the best." Gabrielle supplied. "Not because you're the trickiest."

"Something like that." Xena smiled. "Though it's not bad being tricky sometimes."

"That's what the Persians said." Brendan spoke up. "That one of theirs, was all tricks, and some of them were against it. They said you had a mind, and a fist, yeah?"

"And a heart." Gabrielle smiled impishly.

"No I don't." Xena squirmed, since the discussion was diving headlong into a mush bog. She leaned over and kissed Gabrielle on the lips, then put her own lips near her lover's ear. "You stole it." She whispered, straightening up and putting her hands on her knees. "So."

"So." Brendan nodded. "We letting them in? Got folks asking me if they're staying."

Xena closed her eyes and muttered a curse under her breath. A good part of the Persian army? Under her command? Living in her stronghold? "Word'll get out." She said.

"Aye." Her captain agreed.

"That Persian bastard will probably come after our asses with every other soldier in his damn kingdom."

"Aye. Probably."

Just when things looked like they were going to be boring again. Xena took a sip of her cider, her eyes twinkling. "Ah, why not." She said. "Tell them they can stay, if they swear fealty." She paused. "To me and the muskrat here."

Gabrielle blushed, but Brendan grinned. "Not a worry, Mistress." He said. "That lot's big on the little one here. Think she's tops."

"Well.. as a matter of fact she's...mpgh." Xena found her mouth completely covered by Gabrielle's hand, hastily clapped over it. She peered over at her surprisingly aggressive consort, who had that murderously adorable look on her face that Xena adored.

"I'll go tell em." Brendan got up and sidled away before the rumbling started. "Oh, yeah, Xena, that skunk from the city turned up."

Gabrielle released Xena's mouth, and they both turned to face the soldier. "Perdicus?" Gabrielle asked, with a wince.

Brendan shrugged. "That's his name, I think. One what was bothering with you I hear. Guess he got caught in with the Persians and just burped up. Scummy fellow."

"Damn. Thought he'd croak for sure." Xena sighed.

Gabrielle made a face. "Oh boy."

"Shall I toss him out of the place, your Grace?" Brendan asked, with a hopeful look. "Didn't say much, but had a mean look on him."

Xena kept quiet, wanting to hear what her consort might say to that. She leaned back and laced her fingers around her knee, easing it up to relieve the strain on her back. Would Gabrielle just want to rid herself of the problem?

No blame to her if she did.

“You know.” Gabrielle finally answered, after a long moment of silence. “I don’t think kicking him out will help. I think he’ll come back.”

Brendan shrugged, but nodded. “Like as.”

“Want me to kill him?” Xena asked, helpfully. “It could be a wedding present. I don’t think I gave you anything, did I?”

Gabrielle looked up at her. “Didn’t you?”

They looked at each other, but it was Xena who looked away first, tilting her head and blushing visibly in the stormy light.

Brendan blinked, and looked down at his boots.

“Okay, enough of that.” Xena got up. “Let’s go. I’m gonna shoot the bastard just to goose my reputation back up.”

“In your robe?”

“In the buff.”

“Xena!”

“You want to get naked and help?”

“Xena!!!!”

“Brendan, get the crossbow ready.”

“Ah.. before or after you get undressed, Mistress?”

Silence. “I’m gonna spank the lot of you.”

“Wow. That’ll be some way to welcome the Persians. Wait till they spread **that** story.”

**

The End.