

# A Queen for All Seasons

by Melissa Good

Late afternoon sunlight poured down on the golden stubble of newly reaped fields as the stalks wiggled and parted at the passage of some large beast.

Well. Not really a large beast. Patches the Pony thundered through the field, his shaggy coat ruffling in the wind as his rider urged him to go faster.

“C’mon, Patches!” Gabrielle squinted into the wind, leaning down over the pony’s neck and tightening her knees. “I know you can do it!”

Patches snorted, but amiably picked up speed, his small hooves kicking up wisps of forgotten grain as they bolted across the field.

“C’mon, c’mon.” Gabrielle glanced behind her as she heard the sounds of hoofbeats behind them. “Oh my gosh, Patches, hurry!” She put her hands on either side of Patches neck and urged him forward, hearing a wicked laugh behind her. “Hurry!!!”

Patches ears flicked backward, then forward as he stretched out and really began to run, covering the ground in a surprisingly short amount of time as the horse chasing them closed in.

This one was a really large beast, and his strides covered twice as much ground as the pony’s. In seconds he was catching up and his rider let out another wicked laugh as she wiggled the fingers on the hand closest to her quarry. “Gonna getcha!!!”

“Gerrrrr!” Gabrielle ducked, Patches swerved, and the chasing stallion hauled up with startling abruptness so as not to crash into him.

“Hey!” Xena let out a yell as she was almost unhorsed. “Cut that out you damn bastard!” She got the stallion straightened out and bolted after the charging pony. “Get back here!”

“Never count your fish before you’re eating them!” Gabrielle called back, as they gained the road and passed the outer gate a pony whisker ahead of Tiger’s frothing nose. “Ha!!! We won!”

“You little stinker! Wait till I get my hands on you!” Xena laughed. “Stop teaching that damn runt tricks!”

The two animals slowed to a canter, as they rode up the long approach to the city walls, now lined with market stalls and merchants, all of whom were goggling at them.

As well they might. The tall black warhorse and the short, sturdy pony were striking together all by themselves, but their riders drew the attention, since everyone watching surely recognized the queen of the realm, Xena the Merciless, and her consort on the animal’s backs.

Distinctively tall, dressed in well broken in leathers and with her dark hair caught back in a tail, Xena sat in her saddle with the complete comfort of a lifelong rider. Behind her right shoulder, the hilt of a longsword was visible and peeking over the tops of both riding boots were daggers whose handles were worn smooth with use.

Gabrielle, in comparison, was wearing a blue overshirt with a hood pushed back from her pale hair and darker blue leather leggings with nothing to defend herself with except for a big sack full of apples and a sling looped casually through her belt.

Merchants along the road hastily bowed to them, relieved at the relaxed wave of Xena’s hand as she passed.

“What a great day.” Gabrielle sighed happily. “I can’t believe we found so many of those apples still hanging, can you?” She straightened a little in the saddle, letting one hand rest on her thigh, one thumb lightly tapping the leather surface of her riding breeches.

“What? Oh. Right.” Xena glanced at her companion, giving up her examination of the gathering merchants. “You are, of course, going to make those honey and nut things of yours right?”

Gabrielle looked over at her. “Maybe.” Her green eyes twinkled.

“Maybe?” The queen affected an outraged tone. She dusted a bit of grain chaff off the sleek black leather armor she was wearing. “Maybe????”

Gabrielle produced a sweetly endearing grin. “Of course I am.” She said. “I know you like them. That’s why I was glad we found the apples.”

“Hah.”

“This is going to be a great Harvest festival, isn’t it?” Gabrielle reviewed the rows and rows of merchants now setting up just outside the stronghold’s gates. “Wow.. you see those carved wooden birds?”

“I can do better.” Xena observed. “How about I carve a miniature you complete with my bite marks on your..”

“Xena.” Gabrielle reached over and patted her calf. “How about you do one of Patches? That would be a lot cuter.”

Xena chuckled. She noted the heavy traffic of attendees at the festival with a sense of satisfaction, however. “Better than last year.” She commented. Word of her defeat of the Persians earlier in the year had spread far and wide, and she saw merchants in the lines from equally far and wide.

New stuff. Xena wasn’t a fan of shopping at any time, but there were strange scents rising in the air, hints of things from far away and places she hadn’t been to. The stretch of road in front of the gates was packed with wagons, and rows had started spreading out to either side, with campsites on the outside full of travelers.

They all turned, warned by the men closer to the road, to stare at her as she passed and she slowed Tiger to an amble to give them all a good look.

It had been a quiet summer. Her nobles had meekly retired to their lands to plant and harvest, peace had settled over her stronghold and from all the reports she’d gotten, it had turned out to be a productive year.

An envoy had gone off to deliver a message to the king of Persia, to see if he wanted his soldiers back. Those men had accepted their imprisonment – treated well enough for enemy soldiers and put to work by her own men in rebuilding some parts of the stronghold that had fallen into disrepair over the years.

They were fed as well as her slaves here, and they had a warm place to sleep and over the months much of their Persian pride had softened as they adjusted to their new condition. Xena’s men showed them the respect due honored enemies, and they were, to the extent they could be, content for now.

Would the Persian monarch send money or men to kill her? Xena pondered the question, not entirely sure which she would prefer. The money would be nice, but the challenge might be nicer, and she was, she knew, a bit twisted that way.

“I heard Duke Lastay’s wife had her baby.” Gabrielle said. “Are we sending them a present?”

“A present?” Xena turned her attention to her consort. “Why in Hades should I send them a present for successful screwing?”

“Xena.”

"I mean, c'mon, squirt. If I sent a present to every damn person who popped a kid out, I'd be living in the stable with Tiger here and you'd be busking for a living."

"But he's your heir." Gabrielle gently protested. "And after all, you saved his lady and all that."

Xena rolled her eyes.

"Well, you did."

"What do you think we should send them?" Xena humored her, as they approached the gates and the huge portals swung open as the guards noted her approach. "Dead pig?"

"Xena."

"Look, I'm not good at presents."

Gabrielle peered up at her. "You always give me lots of nice presents."

Xena took a breath, then released it, narrowing her eyes.

"How about something like that?" Gabrielle distracted her, pointing at a nearby stall just inside the gates. Here, the more prosperous merchants had been given stalls, and those who made the stronghold their home. "That cradle there."

Xena drew Tiger to an abrupt halt, and slid off his back, catching sight of one of her grooms bolting towards her to take the stallion's reins. "G'wan and clean him up and give him a feed." She told the groom. "And the runt."

Gabrielle had gotten off Patches back in a somewhat more decorous, though less agile manner. "Good boy, Patches." She gave him a hug. "I knew you could beat Tiger if you put your mind to it."

The pony shook his head, and Tiger arched his neck and nibbled a bit of Gabrielle's hair as the groom took possession of his reins. Gabrielle checked to see if Xena was watching, then she gave the big black horse a kiss on the nose. "You're a good boy too."

"Gggaaabrielle." The queen was standing nearby, her hands perched on her hips. "This was your idea, remember?"

"C... heading right over." Gabrielle ducked under Tiger's neck and trotted over to the queen, slinging her bag of apples over her shoulder.

They approached the merchant stall, as the owner nervously washed his hands together. "Your majesty, your grace." He bobbed his head in anxious obeisance. "What is your pleasure?"

"She is." Xena strolled around the stand, observing the wooden cradles, painstakingly carved. "You really think he wants one of these?" She asked Gabrielle in a skeptical tone. "Y'know, I'm pretty sure he's got one already." She rocked one of the items with a finger. "Wouldn't he?"

"Hm." Gabrielle studied the cradle. Would the Duke? "You're right." She finally admitted. "He probably thought of that, huh?"

"Can I help your majesties?" The merchant asked, timidly. "Perhaps I can suggest?" He looked from one to the other. "You seek something for an infant? Or for yours...." His voice trailed off as Xena pinned him with her ice blue eyes.

Gabrielle gently intervened. "The royal heir, Duke Lastay's wife just had a baby." She explained. "So Xena and I were looking for a present for her."

Xena snorted and wandered off. "I'll be over at that armor maker's tent." She pointed. "A dagger'll do him better."

The merchant anxiously watched her leave. "I did not mean to anger her Majesty." He whispered.

Gabrielle patted his arm. "Don't worry. She's not mad." She reviewed the cradles. "She just has no idea about this stuff and to be honest, neither do I." Her nose wrinkled up into a frank grin. "So what do you think? What would be good for a present for a new mother?"

The merchant relaxed a little, though he kept an eye on Xena's tall form nearby. "Well, m'lady." He said. "Surely a cradle would do, but as her majesty said, I would think the duke had gotten him one before now. What about.. " He peered down the row. "Ah, perhaps a blanket for the babe."

He turned. "Brachus, stay here and mind the stall." He ordered a young boy hovering behind him. "While I assist her grace here."

"Yes Da." The boy gave Gabrielle a shy smile.

Gabrielle followed the merchant towards the weaver's stall, taking a deep breath of the cool air filled with woodsmoke on its fringes. In the stronghold, she knew the big kitchen fires would be going, and the slaves would be busy getting ready to serve dinner.

The inner courtyard had taken on the appearance of a fair, as it was filled with both hometown vendors and visitors from all around the countryside. She could see exotic things tugging her attention already, a flash of silver jewelry here, the hint of sun on beautifully worked copper plate there.

She had dinars in her belt pouch. She also knew she really didn't have to use them, as anyone in the stronghold would hand over whatever it was she wished because of who she was.

Or more accurately, what she was.

They stopped at the weavers and the cradle merchant eagerly engaged the old, stoop backed craftsman as he indicated a beautiful woven blanket draped over the support of the stall.

Gabrielle touched it, finding it incredibly soft. It was a pretty color, a mix between red and blue and tightly woven. "This is really nice."

"Thank you, y'grace." The weaver said, gruffly. "Would be nice for a babe. Cold weather comin on." He glanced up at the ceiling. "Going to be a rough winter season."

Gabrielle felt the fabric between her thumb and fingers. "Sheep bearing heavy coats this year?" She met his eyes.

His eyebrows arched up in surprise. "Ay, y'grace." He said. "Y'heard then?"

"I remember." Gabrielle shook her head a little, but smiled. "How much?" She turned her attention to the bargaining at hand. "Let's not take too long though, I think Xena's getting impatient."

Xena examined a strip of leather, keeping one blue eyeball on her companion as she moved from one stall to the other and started dickering.

"May I gift that to you, your majesty?" The tanner bowed. "We had a fine year this year. Good hides."

The queen flipped the leather over and ran knowledgeable fingers over it. It was supple and there were no marks on it, and it was stained a rich, golden color. "Seems like everyone's had a good season." She glanced around.

The tanner nodded immediately. "Was a good year. Been hearing that a lot." He cleared his throat. "Plenty of outsiders showed up down t'road."

“Mm.” Xena glanced furtively over to where her consort was concluding her bargain. “Can you carve my crest in this, make a belt of it?” She asked. “All around, like this.” She traced a design on the leather.

“Surely.” The tanner took the end of it. “In black, your majesty? So’s it your colors?”

Xena nodded, edging over to block Gabrielle’s view. “Yeah. Here.” She handed over a gold coin. “just keep quiet about it, okay?”

“Your majesty?” The tanner’s eyes bulged out at the coin resting in his hand. “But .. this is far too..” He clamped his jaws shut as a dagger tickled his nose.

“Just shut up and do it.” Xena whispered. “Have someone bring it in to me. Right?”

He nodded cautiously.

“Right.” Xena straightened and turned, strolling off to meet Gabrielle as she came over. “Finished?”

“Yees.” Gabrielle tried to peer past her. “What was that all about?”

“Never mind. I’ve got an idea for a present for my jackass heir.” Xena put her arm around Gabrielle’s shoulder and steered her towards the wide, newly laid grand roadway that ended at the entrance to the palace. “How about I send him the whole winter’s worth of manure from the stables?”

Gabrielle made a face. “Xena.”

“You know how much that’s worth, sheep hugger?”

“I know, but gross!” Gabrielle slipped her arm around Xena’s waist and hugged her. “Why don’t you give them something pretty, like a coach.”

Xena rolled her eyes.

“Or maybe a nice bed. Im sure they could use that.”

“I’m sure they know how to use the one they have, Gabrielle. Where do you think the kid came from?”

“Well.” Gabrielle scratched her nose. “They didn’t have to use the bed.” She said. “After all..”

Xena covered her mouth with her free hand as they passed through the double line of guards into the palace. “Okay.” She said. “A bed. Why the Hades not.” She called over her shoulder. “Meridus? Get me the furniture maker up to my audience chamber before I get there or else!!”

“Majesty!” Footsteps went running off.

“Happy?” Xena removed her hand.

Gabrielle hugged her again. “You’re so wonderful.” She exhaled. “I can’t wait to tell that new story about you at the banquet.”

Xena grunted like a kicked pig.

“I promise I’ll leave the part about the flowers out.”

\*\*

Xena let her sword rest on her shoulder, taking a few deep breaths as she felt the sweat trickle down her back.

Despite the cool breeze coming in the windows, she’d worked herself up into a lather as the sun dipped below the horizon and the light inside her practice chamber changed from gold to

twilight purple as she wove her way in and out of it, going over the intricate moves that honed her skills.

The room was empty this time, missing her usual practice mate. It was just her, and her sword, and the stone floor, nothing to obstruct her from the precision drills and now she paused in them to carefully extend her arms, hands clasped on her hilt as she stretched out her body.

She was pleased to feel not even a twinge from her back. That had taken a lot of work when she'd gotten back from the war, long weeks when she'd been scared to go full out, afraid of putting herself flat in bed again.

Not to mention the pain.

But for once she'd taken it slow, and the result was that her strained spine knit itself back together and responded well to the regimen of cautious strengthening she'd applied to herself.

Definitely a relief. She released one hand and swept her arms outward, turning her sword as she did so it caught the torchlight that slid over the flex of muscle in her shoulders. She could see herself in the mirror against one wall, her eyes critically studying her form as she moved.

"Old goat." She pointed her sword at her reflection. Then she twirled the sword, and launched herself upward into the air, flipping over backwards and landing, then bouncing back into a forward flip as she maneuvered the blade around in a pattern around her.

Scary, and occasionally painful when she smacked herself in the leg. But this time she didn't, and she extended the drill out to the side, moving in a lazy circle in long steps that countered the rapid, much tighter circles of the sword work.

She liked that contrast, the gliding sensation and the frenetic twisting of her wrists, at once graceful and deadly as she traveled from one side of the practice chamber to the other, passing the mirror and catching sight of herself in motion.

The torches outlined her in red. The sky outside had darkened to black, and her sword was catching the flames in a weird, creepy outline.

And then Xena heard a sound behind her and she went from playful fascination to deadly serious in a breath, turning in a heartbeat and sweeping the blade in front of her as her eyes and other senses sought out whatever it was that made the noise.

She paused, going still, only her eyes flickering from one corner to the other. The room was empty. After a moment, she moved forward, searching the rock walls, and every corner, looking for what had made what had seemed to her ears to be a shifting body.

A boot, against stone, cloth against the wooden shutter. It echoed in her mind as she let her nostrils flare, catching the breeze and searching for a scent to match the sound.

But the wind only brought woodsmoke and the crisp smell of the stone itself to her, with no living tinge on it.

Had she imagined it? Xena relaxed, but walked the edge of the room, from the single door that led to the circular stair around the long side of the room, past the two thickly silled windows, past the short far end where her various training aids were laying, and along the front side, with it's mirror and two more wide windows.

Empty. Xena paused and let her sword rest on her shoulder again, as she stood in the center of the room and turned in a slow circle.

The mirror reflected her back to herself, a tall figure dressed in a sleeveless dark gray tunic and knee high boots, with summer tanned skin and a lithe, spare body. Intimidating, except for the distinct, perplexed expression on her face as she made one more circuit of the room.

“I can’t have imagined that.” Xena finally said aloud. “I don’t have an imagination.” She tapped her sword on her shoulder. She carefully stepped around the perimeter again, sucking in air deeply and cupping her ears.

A bit of dust made her nose wrinkle. She could hear the faint rasp of her own boots against the stone, and a soft rattle as some stones settled on the rooftops outside. The air had no taint of humanity, no telltale musk of skin or hide, there was no metallic tang of armor or even the scent of the rats that ran through the back ways or the cats that chased them.

Hm.

She went over to the window and peered cautiously out, looking up and down the wall to see if there were someone clinging outside.

Then she crossed over to the other set of windows and looked there. Unsurprisingly, since her practice chamber was at the very top of one of the guard towers, with nothing but hard rock and beaten earth to fall to there were no clinging assassins or anything else on the walls.

Unsatisfied, Xena circled the room again, this time bringing a torch with her and searching the floor.

Nothing.

Far off, a bell clanged.

After one more circuit, Xena gave up and went over to the shelf in one wall, picking up a heavy cloth and cleaning the sweat off her sword hilt and rubbing the blade down, keeping her eyes on her task and her other senses on razor’s edge, waiting.

But the only thing she heard was her own soft heartbeat and breathing, and the sounds of her stronghold getting ready for dinner far below.

Finally, with a sigh, she slid the blade home in the sheath on her back, wiping her hands with the cloth before she folded it and put it back in the niche. One last glance around the room, and she opened the door, pulling the heavy portal open and slipping through it to the empty tower stair landing.

Here only the torches guttered softly, put in sconces by her guard while she worked within the room. She made her way down the steps quickly, though with enough sound that the guard heard her and swung the lower door open as she reached the bottom of them.

“Your majesty.” The guards put their fists to their chests in a casual salute.

Xena gave them a casual wave, and continued through the antechamber, passing the doors to what had been, for a long time, her personal quarters. She ambled down the longer flight of steps that led into the central hall, then crossed the large, open space that was the formal grand entry.

It was much livelier these days, the queen noted. The forbidding, dark hangings had gone, replaced with bright, newly woven scenes that showed the lands around the stronghold, prosperous and well kept.

Gabrielle’s propaganda. Xena smiled to herself. Not that it wasn’t true, at least this year, but the hangings were meant to hammer home to the nobles entering that they were better off with her than without.

And that was pretty much true too. Xena glanced towards the entrance to the big banqueting hall, behind the closed doors of which she could hear the bang and clatter of the servants

setting up, and her ears also caught the murmur of voices in the lower Hall, no doubt her well dressed spongers waiting for their feedbag.

“Hmph.” Xena veered to the left and walked up the short flight of steps to her current abode, the guards sweeping over to open the big doors for her as she approached. “Thanks boys.”

“Your Majesty.” They answered together.

Xena strode through the doors and crossed her outer chamber, unbuckling the belt around her waist as she headed for the bathing room.

A knock made her pause. “Yeah?” She turned and addressed the now closed door.

It opened, and Stanislaus peered in. “Your majesty.” He said. “Do you have perhaps a moment for me?”

Xena made him wait for it. “A moment.” She eventually conceded, waving him inside. “But make it a fast one. There’s a bath calling my name.”

Stanislaus entered and approached her. “Thank you, your majesty. I just wanted to inform you of the festival plans, and get your approval on one small item.”

Xena removed her sword from its clips on her back and went over to the weapons chest with it. She put it down on top of the wooden surface. “Have you run the plans by the muskrat?”

Without turning to look, she had no problem imagining the sour look on her seneschal’s face. “Well?”

“They were just finalized, your majesty.”

Xena looked over her shoulder. “Get her okay on them, then we’ll talk.” She said. “Besides, she knows what I like better than I do.”

“But..”

Xena’s eyes narrowed. “I’m sweaty, sore and I’ve got a blade in my hands. You don’t really want to piss me off right now do you?”

Stanislaus sighed. “No, your majesty I don’t want to upset you at any time. I will go find your consort and consult with her.” He turned and headed for the door. “If she might spare me a moment from all her lessons.” He added in an undertone. “Especially from those Persians.”

Snark snark. Xena watched the door close and smiled, turning to replace her sword on the bench and start to unbuckle her tunic. Stanislaus never had gotten over Gabrielle and her scrappy, slave, peasant origins.

He of course refused to acknowledge that Xena’s origins were pretty much the same. The queen left her tunic half unbuckled and grabbed a wineskin, carrying it over to one of the comfortable swing chairs her consort had found and sitting down to relax for a half candlemark while waiting for Gabrielle to come back from...

Wait.

The queen cocked her head to one side. “Lessons from Persians?” She asked the empty room. “What in Hades is she learning from them?”

\*\*

Gabrielle carefully put the small lap harp she was holding back into its carry bag, and flexed her hand, her fingers a little sore from a candlemark of plucking. “Y’know, if I keep practicing this I might be able to play a song.” She glanced up at Jellaus. “By next summer.”

The minstrel chuckled at her. “Ah, Gabrielle. You’re not that bad, truly.”

“Yes I am.” Gabrielle sat down on the bench, a wooden plank worn down into hollows by all the students who'd sat there before her. “But thank you for putting up with my trying”

Jellaus sat down next to her. “I have had far worse to teach here.” He said. “Though you think I just say that to flatter you.” He smiled at her. “And no other student returns the lessons to me like you do.”

Gabrielle produced a brief grin in return. “Do you have some new songs for the harvest festival?” She changed the subject. “I'm looking forward to it. So many people are here. Did you see all the merchants?”

The minstrel hiked up one booted foot and circled his knee with both hands. “I do have a few new ditties, yes.” He said. “Two ballads, you know, and some shorter ones a bit funny. But I feel...” He glanced sideways at her. “In my bones I feel this will be a tough winter. I'm not sure why.”

“I heard that today from the vendors.” Gabrielle ran her fingers through her hair and pushed it back off her forehead. “Boy I have to get this trimmed.” She muttered. “I'm glad we had a good harvest.”

“Her Majesty was pleased.” Jellaus nodded. “Her nobles didn't stint this time, maybe they remembered the beginning of the warm season, when so many did.”

That was true. Gabrielle had seen the trains coming in, wagons stocked with produce and the fruits of the land's harvest being sent in tribute to the queen. Did the nobles have a guilty conscience? She studied Jellaus' angular profile. Or had they realized, in a very graphic way that their queen was in fact the one major thing standing between the land and its enemies?

Xena had defeated a larger, better armed, Persian army. Gabrielle knew that, after all, she'd been there right along with the queen during the war. Xena had lived up to her reputation, and now, she'd gotten the feeling that the nobles and the rest of the people living around them had realized that maybe they had something in her that really was special and worth bowing their knees to.

Other parts of the land, beyond their borders had sent envoys all summer, asking for trade, for advice.. and for protection. In return, they'd sent tributes, these new and strange wagons traveling through the lands closer to the stronghold marching proudly along, happy to be a part of Xena's realm.

Changed some attitudes, she reasoned. “I saw those barrels and barrels of salted fish from the port city.” She said. “Xena said if we didn't end up eating them she knew a way to turn it into fertilizer.”

Jellaus laughed. “It's good to see her majesty in fine humor.” He said. “I was hoping I could perhaps coax her into joining me for one of my little songs at the banquet two days hence.”

“Oh. I don't know.” Gabrielle made a face. “She really doesn't like singing in front of people. I can hardly get her to do it for me.”

The minstrel sighed.

“I'll ask her.” Gabrielle offered. “I think she thinks if she does stuff like that, people think she's .. I don't know. She gets embarrassed.”

“She rules with a clenched fist.” Jellaus said, in a quiet tone. “To sing, that shows an open hand and perhaps she is afraid she'll be thought weak because of it.” He sighed again. “And it is a pity she has such a fine voice.”

"She does." Gabrielle confirmed. "But you know, after all that I've seen here I get why she thinks that. People usually take what they can, Jellaus. They only hold back because they're scared of her. I get that."

"But you are not."

"Of her?" Gabrielle got up and slung her harp bag over her shoulder. "No. But I do get scared for her sometimes." Her face tensed a little. "She's so brave, and so honest... I wish all the people she rules would give as much of themselves to her and she does to them."

Jellaus studied her. "They don't see that side of her, Gabrielle. Even most of those of us who have served her these many years haven't."

"I know."

"Will you be telling a few tales?" Jellaus asked. "Maybe you can give them a little glimpse of what you see, though I know her majesty prefers you to speak of others."

Gabrielle sighed. Though Xena had furtively enjoyed her telling tales of the queen's bravery at first, of late she hadn't been that enthusiastic about it. "She thinks I make her sound like some fantasy character but I don't, Jellaus! I just tell the truth!"

"Well.."

"She says she thinks she has to live up to my crazy stories." Gabrielle said. "But they're not crazy. She really does do all that amazing stuff."

"Well you know, Gabrielle, she's spent many years honing her reputation as a very hard, very violent person." Jellaus said. "To now have you telling people of her saving this person and giving something to that person, it's hard. It's hard for her to let herself be seen that way, and it's hard for those who have experienced her fist to accept it."

Gabrielle sighed.

"It will just take some time." The minstrel patted her knee. "Be patient, little one. You had the advantage of them."

"I fell in love with her." Gabrielle agreed. "It kinda changes your outlook, you know? It's really hard to think bad things about someone when all you want to do is hug them."

Jellaus laughed softly. "In any case, it should be a very fine Harvest festival. I am looking forward to it. There are many minstrels coming, you know. Some have arrived already and are outside the gates. I myself will be heading out there after supper to meet with them, and have a jam."

"A jam?" Gabrielle's brows contracted. "Isn't that what you put on bread?"

"It is." Jellaus said, with a grin. "But it is also what we call it when we get together and just play music for the fun of it, all of us."

"Oh wow. That sounds like fun." Gabrielle said, in a wistful tone. "I hope you have a great time."

"Listen in the night." The minstrel cupped his ear. "From your walk up at the top of the tower you should hear us."

"I will." Gabrielle started for the door. "See you later, Jellaus... we can catch up again at dinner." She ducked out the door and let it close behind her, leaving the minstrel there, a smile still on his face.

\*\*

Xena slid into the warm water with a sigh, extending her long legs across the marble surface and stretching her arms out along the edges of the tub. The heat of the water had just

penetrated her skin and started to ease her muscles when she heard the door open in the outside hall and close again.

No one in her kingdom would have dared to enter without her permission except her consort so Xena was completely unsurprised to hear her name being called in that cute voice. "In here, muskrat."

She tipped her head back as the bathing room entrance was breached, and Gabrielle bounded inside, her face pink from the wind and her hair blown into disarray from it. "Where have you been?" The queen asked. "Did you go back out riding?"

"No, just crossing the courtyard. It's windy out there!" Gabrielle leaned on the edge of the tub. "But it's great. You can smell all the smoke from the fire, and the trees and everything!"

"And the horse manure." The queen agreed. "Did Stanislaus find you?"

Gabrielle made a face.

Xena chuckled wickedly. "I hope to Hades you gave him a hard time on every single boring idiot ass detail."

"He doesn't like me." Gabrielle dipped her hand in the water. "Hey, it's warm!"

"Course it is." Xena said. "Think I'd drag your scruffy ass into a cold tub?"

Gabrielle grinned. She took a step back and unbuckled her belt. "I stopped by the kitchen." She pulled her tunic over her head and draped it across the clothes stand nearby.

"And ate everything? Didn't bring me something back, you little punk?" Xena flicked a bit of water at her. "Being the queen doesn't count for much around here huh?"

Gabrielle dropped her boots and came over to the huge tub, leaning her bare arms on the edge. "You count for everything to me." She said. "Do you want me to go get you something?"

"Like that?" Xena leaned her head over to the side to observe her companion's naked body. "I'd rather starve."

The blond haired woman's face broke into an embarrassed smile. "I wanted to make sure they had all the stuff I wanted for our dinner tonight." She explained.

"I see all the stuff I want for dinner right here." Xena put a drop of water on her nose. "Get in."

Gabrielle made her way over to the steps up to the tub and climbed them, easing herself into the water and letting its warmth creep up her skin. The basin was large enough for a half dozen people to bathe, and it was made of marble in a free form state that had different little sections to sit in.

The one Xena was sitting in was just big enough for two people, and she waded over to take her place next to the queen. She leaned back against the sloping wall and exhaled, breathing in the faint steam with its hint of spice.

Xena studied her out of the corner of her eye. "So." She traced the subtly lengthening profile curiously. "How'd your classes go?"

Gabrielle scrunched her face up. "Xena, I'm never going to be able to make music." She sighed. "Like, maybe in years I might be able to play a really simple tune. I'm just not good at it."

"Why are you trying to be?" The queen asked, sliding one arm around her and pulling her close. "I hate music."

"No you don't."

“Sure I do.” Xena disagreed. “You don’t catch me trying to play any stupid instrument, do you?” She raised both eyebrows. “Just because you tell stories, doesn’t mean you can play that damn harp. “

Gabrielle sighed. “I know.” She said. “But I really want to.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to play you a pretty song.” Gabrielle glanced up, to find the expected droll expression on her queen’s face, one dark brow hiked, one slightly lowered, nostrils just a bit flared. The candles around the tub lit her skin with dusky highlights, and the faintest hint of a smile twitched those beautifully shaped lips. “Everything around you should be as pretty as you are.”

Even in the candlelight, she could see the blush darken Xena’s skin, and feel the warmth against her fingertips as she gently stroked the queen’s cheek.

“Shut up.” Xena pulled her off her seat and over the queen’s body, making it impossible for her to talk as she wrapped her hand around the back of Gabrielle’s neck and kissed her. “I don’t need any damn songs.”

Gabrielle wasn’t arguing. She settled her body against Xena’s and gently explored her queen’s body with knowing hands. Her skin was warmer than the water and as she brushed against her, and her knee slipped between the taller woman’s, it grew warmer still.

It never paid to argue with Xena when she was kissing you. Gabrielle felt her frustration over her harp playing ease, as Xena’s fingers tweaked her playfully. Or, really, any other time. She ducked her head and returned the kiss, savoring the breath catching jolt.

“They tell me.” Xena eased her lips over and nipped Gabrielle’s ear. “That you’ve been visiting the dungeons.”

Gabrielle paused, and took a quick breath. She lifted her head a little and watched Xena’s face, half hidden in shadows.

“True?” That dark brow lifted again, as the queen watched her back, eyes quietly thoughtful.

“Yes.”

Xena rested her hands on Gabrielle’s hips, her thumbs idly moving along the skin there. She didn’t appear angry, but there was a certain tension around her eyes that made Gabrielle’s throat go a little dry.

“What’s so interesting down there?” Xena finally asked, “I’m not sure I like you down in those cells.”

Gabrielle eased to one side and settled her head on the queen’s shoulder. “I was taking lessons.” She said, after a pause. “From some of the Persian guys.”

Xena’s eyebrow, the one closest to Gabrielle, immediately elevated. “What?”

Her companion nodded slightly. “I heard from the guards they were really good at certain things.. so I went down there and traded them for lessons.”

The queen reached over and clasped Gabrielle’s jaw, tilting her head up so their eyes met. “Lessons?”

Gabrielle nodded again. “You want me to show you what they taught me?”

Both of Xena’s eyebrows were now at her hairline and her blue eyes were rather wider and rounder than usual. “What did they teach you?” She asked, in a growl.

“Turn over.” Gabrielle eased up to her knees and moved away slightly. “I’ll show you.”

Xena's nostrils flared in earnest. "Turn over?" Her eyes narrowed. "What are you going to do to me?" She shifted, her muscular form rippling the water in the bath as she visibly struggled against reacting.

Gabrielle kept her sultry pose for a moment more, then she grinned. "C'mon, Xena. What do you think I'm going to do to you? Spank you?"

The queen eyed her narrowly for a moment, then she abruptly reversed her position, and presented her back to her companion. "G'wan." She sniffed. "Do your worst. I'll enjoy it." She rested her folded arms on the edge of the tub and waited, watching the breeze flutter the candle flames.

Gabrielle smiled affectionately at the beautiful back, reddish gold tinted in the firelight. She drifted over and settled behind the queen, slowly reaching out and touching her.

She felt the instant tension under her fingers, the coil and shift of the powerful form that, though apparently relaxed, was never really completely so.

Even asleep, Xena wasn't. Gabrielle eased her hands lower, at the base on her companion's spine and then, raising her self up a little out of the water, she gently pressed down, moving her fingers as the Persians had taught her.

Xena grunted softly.

Closing her eyes, Gabrielle could feel the bone under her hands, the tension in the muscles around it as she worked to ease, and loosen and realign, working her way very slowly up Xena's spine.

There were knots – she worked them carefully, remembering the pain the queen had been in not so very long ago. Though she knew Xena had taken up her drills again, she also knew they left their own aches behind and now, as she kneaded and probed, she could feel the stiffness in Xena's long torso relax.

When she reached Xena's shoulders, she could see the queen's eyes closed, a faint smile on her face and she smiled herself, glad she'd taken the time to persuade the Persians to teach her the intricate massage, after she'd seen one of them doing it to another through the rough hewn grate in the dungeon walls. "See? This isn't so bad, right?"

She felt the bones at the top of Xena's spine, where it met her neck click into place, and she heard the faint sound as the queen exhaled.

"Not bad at all." The queen muttered. "Damn, that feels good."

Gabrielle grinned, unseen, as she kept working. "I thought you'd like it. Who told you I was down there? Stanlislau, right?"

Xena grunted.

"He saw me coming up the steps the other day and got all crazy." Gabrielle got her thumbs above the points of Xena's shoulder blades and pressed gently.

Xena grunted again, a slightly lower sound with a different inflection.

"I mean, after all, I had two guards with me. And they were all behind those bars and stuff and it took me forever to get them to show me how they did this." She moved her hands up and kneaded her queen's neck. "All the grips and stuff."

Then one blue eye opened and peered at her. "They taught you to do this?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I traded them stories." She said. "And some cookies."

"Cookies?"

"Not the ones you like."

Another grunt. "You picked it up pretty quick."

"Well, yeah." Gabrielle rubbed her thumbs in gentle circles on either side of the queen's spine. "I got in some pretty good practice."

"You practiced this on some sweaty Persian hostage?" The blue eye watched her sharply. "Glad I sharpened my sword before I finished my drills."

"Well... not exactly." Gabrielle leaned forward and kissed her on the back of her neck.

"Not exactly?" Xena drummed the fingers of one hand on the edge of the tub.

"Well, Xena, really. I did have to practice." Gabrielle admitted. She kneaded the strong, arching muscles at the top of the queen's shoulders, pressing her thumbs in and twisting just a little as she'd been taught. "I mean you sort of have to."

"Yeeesss?" Xena said. "So who'd you practice on? C'mon, Gabrielle. Spill it. I'm in the mood to kick some ass today."

"Xena, that's mean."

"And your point is.. what exactly?"

"How do you think I'd feel if I knew someone was getting hurt because they taught me something?" Gabrielle protested, working her way down Xena's long arms. "You don't hit Jellaus because he shows me how to play the harp."

"Playing the harp doesn't require your fingers on someone else's body." Xena said, bluntly. "So cough up the details, muskrat. "

"Xena."

"Muskrat." Xena's voice rose, taking on a hint of her steely will as the tone deepened, and she started to shift restlessly as her consort's body pressed unexpectedly against hers. "I'm warning you..."

Her blond companion moved closer still, and got her lips up next to Xena's ear. "They made me practice on a pig."

The drumming stopped. Xena very slowly turned her head, coming almost nose to nose with Gabrielle and making both of them cross their eyes. "A pig?"

"A pig."

"A pig, as in..." The queen paused.

"Oink oink." Gabrielle made a snuffling noise. "Oink oink oink."

Xena started laughing, her shoulders shaking in silence.

Gabrielle kissed her on the cheek. "None of them wanted to lose their hands. " She gave Xena a hug, wrapping her arms around her from behind and squeezing. "Actually they were sorta scared to even talk to me."

"A pig." The queen was now laughing so hard she was making waves across the tub. "Bwahahahahahahahahaah"

"A big white and black pig." Gabrielle said. "With a pink nose."

"A pig." Xena chuckled, her laughter becoming a rare audible rumble. "You were sitting in my dungeon massaging a PIG?"

"Kneeling." Gabrielle flexed her hands. "You get a better grip that way." She kissed Xena's neck, and bit gently on her earlobe.

"So, how did I compare?"

“Compare?” Gabrielle looked up from her random nibbling. “Compare to what?”

“To the pig.” The queen rolled around in the water, taking hold of Gabrielle and sending them both plunging into the water, causing a wall of it to splash over the edge and cascade to the floor. “Oink!”

Gabrielle surfaced, spluttering. “Xena!” She ducked as the queen stuck her arm in the water and sent a wave of it her way. “You’re not at ALL like a pig!!!” She backedpedaled away from Xena’s uncoiling form but had a limited space to work with and found herself wrapped up in long, wet arms.

“I’m not?” Xena stood up, pulling her up alongside as they emerged into the cool breeze coming in the window.

“No.” Gabrielle gently licked a few droplets off her breast. “You’re beautiful.”

Ah. Xena felt her body relax, the sudden and disturbing anger washed out of her. She was possessive and she knew it – though she trusted Gabrielle more completely than anyone else in her life, still, she was who she was, and it was a good thing everyone apparently realized it.

Even her prisoners. Who apparently had some skills she hadn’t realized. “C’mon.” Xena sloshed her way out of the tub and stepped over the edge, leading the way down the marble steps and across the bathing room to where a pair of white, clean towels were waiting.

She took one and started to dry herself off, only to pause when Gabrielle wrapped her own towel around her neck and started to use both ends to do it for her. “What are you doing?”

“Drying you.” Gabrielle gently removed the water droplets, seeing a faint ripple of goosebumps go across Xena’s skin.

Xena amiably reciprocated, ruffling Gabrielle’s pale hair dry. Her back felt good, and the lingering stiffness from her drills was gone, and now that the question of someone else being the recipient of her bedmate’s attention was resolved, she was starting to look forward to the evening.

An evening of peace, before the Harvest festival started, when she’d have to don her royal gowns and preside over banquets in her big hall, and in general be bored senseless for a few days.

But tonight she only had the big, soft bed, Gabrielle’s attentions, and those roasted apples ahead of her. “So did you do any more shopping?”

Gabrielle wrapped the towel around both of them bringing their bodies into warm contact. “Maybe.” Her eyes twinkled.

“Didja get me presents?” Xena gave up on the towels and slid her hands over Gabrielle’s skin instead, feeling her guts ignite.

“Maybe.”

Xena draped her arms over Gabrielle’s shoulders and bent her head as they kissed, savoring the contrast of the fall cool air and the sensual heat as Gabrielle pressed against her. She removed the cloth Gabrielle was holding and tossed it over the edge of the tub.

They left the bathing room trading the cold marble for the warm, thick rugs that lined the floor in the sleeping chamber. The fire had been built up in the fireplace, and candles were lit at the four corners and on the headboard of the big bed, outlining everything in rich golds and reds.

Very inviting and homey. Xena wryly acknowledged. The once bare, almost cold space had been turned into kind of a nice place to spend time in, with the sheepskin rugs on the floor,

and the colorful bedding Gabrielle had found somewhere in her rummaging around the castle.

The windows that had once been sterile and stark were covered in drapes, so they could block out the sun if they wanted to – not that there was sleeping in allowed in her quarters.

Much.

Tucked in one corner was the small writing desk Gabrielle used, with its stack of parchments and quills, her latest project writing down the history of Xena's realm. At first, Xena had not been very sure at all she wanted that written down, but as details were coaxed out of her, she found herself warming to the subject.

Gabirelle took her hand and drew her down onto the bed, and they sprawled together over the soft surface. Xena stretched out as she felt familiar hands touch her, savoring the knowing familiarity. Her body reacted at once, her shoulders sinking into the feather down stuffed bedding as she abandoned herself to the attention.

A good way to end the afternoon. She tangled her fingers in her consort's hair and indulged in a kiss, feeling her breathing go irregular as Gabrielle slid a casual hand up the inside of her thigh. Or a good way to begin an evening full of hedonism.

A gentle nip at her breast, and she stopped thinking about it. She curled her hand around the edge of Gabirelle's ribcage, and let herself get lost in the pleasure.

An evening of hedonism indeed.

\*\*

Gabrielle went to the edge of the sentry wall and looked over into the big courtyard, where everything was bustling despite the relatively early hour. The big gates to the stronghold were thrown open, and the space inside the walls was already filling with people.

It was a beautiful day. The sun had come up into a clear blue sky, and the air was rich with the smell of canvas and people and animals. She could hear musicians tuning up in the distance, and she wondered if Jellaus had gotten his jam in.

She could almost sense joy in the air. That was new for Xena's stronghold, at least in her admittedly short experience. People were happy. Harvest had been good, the realm was at peace, they had a good husbandry season.. so different from the spring.

She heard footsteps behind her and she turned, to find Brendan approaching. He was dressed in his usual tunic with Xena's sigil on it, and he was smiling. "Good harvest!"

"Aye lass, and it is surely a good start to the harvest." Brendan greeted her. "All the better for me as I've gotten word today, my daughter gave birth to her first, a wee boy, and I'm a grandfather."

"Oh Brendan!" Gabrielle leaped forward and gave him a hug. "Congratulations!" She had known, in a vague sort of way, that Brendan had a daughter, but she'd thought she'd heard him say before they didn't have much contact.

"Aye." The old soldier looked pleased. "Been wanting a child a long time, she has. Feller she's joined with now seems a more likely father."

The door to the tower pushed open, and Xena appeared, wrapped in a deep blue dressing gown. She paused when she saw them, and put her hands on her hips. "What's going on out here?" She demanded.

"Xena!" Gabrielle half ran, half danced over to her. "Brendan's a grandpa!"

The queen suppressed a grin at her dancing muskrat. "Kid of yours finally popped one, huh?" She eyed her guard commander. "She finally forgive you enough to name it for ya?"

Brendan shrugged. “No knowing yet. They won’t name the lad till he’s seen a moon or so. Think its bad luck.” He said. “Surprised me, that they sent someone to let me know.” He turned to face Xena. “Men were wanting to know if it was all right to set up a sparring, to give a bit of show like.”

Xena leaned back against the wall, spreading her arms out along it. “Remind everyone who the ass kickers are?” She produced a wry smile. “Sure, why not? Always pays to remind these bastards not to screw around with us.”

“Been pretty good this season.” Brendan allowed. “Not as sour as the past.” He went on. “Course, winnin that fight and takin down the Persians din’t hurt any.”

“Me rooting out the last of Brego’s supporters and having them drawn and quartered didn’t hurt any either.” Xena remarked dryly. “I think we’re finally rid of that bastard’s stench.”

“Reputation got kilt but h’grace here.” The guard commander bowed his head in Gabrielle’s direction. “Once all of em heard of them people in the cookpot that did it.”

Gabrielle made a face. “That was gross.”

“Even my part?” Xena opened her eyes in mock hurt.

“Xena.”

The queen chuckled good humoredly. “You should tell that story at brunch.” She said. “We’d save on food.” She winked at Brendan. “Gwan and get the men ready. Maybe I’ll come out and spar with em and catch a break from the froofroo.”

Brendan nodded, and casually saluted, then headed for the door to north stairs, where Xena had appeared.

That left Xena and Gabrielle alone up on the walkway, and the queen sauntered over to the other side of the walk and peered over the wall. “Ooo.” She observed the busy courtyard. “Everyone’s coming to our party, muskrat.”

“They sure are.” Gabrielle nestled up next to her, leaning on the wall next to the queen. “Hey, Xena?”

“Hey muskrat?”

“Why is Brendan’s daughter mad at him?”

Xena studied the gates, which were now admitting two huge wagons with gaily painted sides. “Why?” She exhaled. “Me.”

“You?”

“Me. Xena leaned on the top of the wall. “He loves me more than he did her mother.” She glanced at Gabrielle. “I didn’t let my army bring their sluts along with them back in the day. Brendan left her in the village outside, she ended up working as a scut in the inn to make ends meet.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle murmured.

“So they kid has reason to be pissed.” The queen admitted. “I figured out a couple years later it was easier to keep men when they were getting service regularly and anyway.” She paused and shrugged. “I guess it was too late for them. Brendan’s had his others.”

Gabrielle thought about that. She watched Xena’s profile, the queen’s face relaxed and a touch remote, untroubled by this bit of her past. It was very much part of who Xena was – or – was it? “Wow.”

One dark eyebrow cocked. “I told you it was all about me. Remember? I didn’t have time for whining women and brats hanging around.”

Gabrielle watched her quietly.

“I still don’t.” The queen said.

“But?”

Xena turned. “But what?”

Gabrielle blinked. “It just sounded like there was a but there.” She said. “I can’t imagine people having to fight all the time keeping their families with them though. It would have been really scary if that’s what had happened when we were fighting the Persians.”

Xena studied her hands, resting on the top of the wall. “Scary. Yeah.” She pushed away from the wall. “Okay, enough of this stuff. Let’s go get dressed and get ready to party.” She held a hand out to Gabrielle. “Brunch with the sniveling bastards. You and I are invited.”

“Do they all snivel?” Gabrielle took the queen’s hand and joined her as they went to the south stairwell, that would lead down into their part of the stronghold. “I think the Duke’s okay, anyhow.”

Xena didn’t answer. She led the way down the steps and they entered the outer chamber of their rooms – where the royal clotheier was waiting for them.

“Your majesty, your grace.” The little man bowed respectfully. “I have beautiful garments for the festival as you asked.”

Xena strolled over to the ornate wooden rolling case he was standing next to. “Let me be the judge of that.” She flipped open the doors and took a step back, studying the contents with a very critical eye.

Gabrielle perched on a bench nearby, waiting. Unlike her queen, she had no real interest in the pretty fabrics, but had resigned herself to putting on whatever Xena had selected for her trusting far more in the queen’s taste than her own.

She knew it would look nice. Xena had a great eye for that kind of thing – despite her rowdy attitude and she herself loved dressing up though she’d never admit it.

Gabrielle smiled a little, watching the queen hold up a silk sleeve, in a pretty shade of blue, eyeing it speculatively. “That’s nice.”

“Think so?” Xena mused.

“I like that color.” Her consort said. “It reminds me of the ocean.”

The brunch Xena spoke of was the opening of the harvest festival. All of the nobles would meet in the big ballroom, and Xena would rule on several matters, as well as accept the tokens of the season from her subjects that represented the volume of materials they tendered to her that they owed.

There was a lot of that, coming in.

“C’mere.” Xena motioned her over. She waited for Gabrielle to approach, holding up a stunning bit of fabric against her body. “Now, I like that color.”

Gabrielle looked down at herself, and the soft, clinging dress. It was deep reds and almost purple, and it was cut to expose most of her shoulders. “Oo.” She managed a surprised sound. “I like it too.”

That got her a smile from Xena. “Atta girl.” She draped the dress over Gabrielle’s head. “Here, take this stuff, and go put something on. We’ve got people to terrorize and presents to accept.”

Gabrielle accepted her burden, and pushing aside a bit of fabric so she could see, she wound her way through the wardrobe cases through the inner chamber and into the spacious, well lit space she called her own.

It was the previous ruler's solar, and so, was full of sunlight and leaded glass that arched overhead. Gabrielle shrugged her pile of clothing off her head onto the garment press and sorted through it. Halfway through a noise interrupted her and she turned to see a slight, scruffy figure slipping through the rear, servants door "Hey Mali."

A new development. Stanislaus had talked Xena into letting him assign her a body servant, saying it was unthinkable that the queen's royal consort to be cleaning out her own rooms and bathing area. Gabrielle wasn't sure Xena really cared about that, but she seemed to get a kick out of the idea of someone waiting on Gabrielle hand and foot so she'd agreed.

Mali was the result. She was younger than Gabrielle by a year or so, short and thin with curly red hair that was in constant disarray and she was very happy about her new assignment.

"Oh your grace." The young servant pattered over. "Let me do that for you."

With a smile, Gabrielle did, retreating over to the big work desk in one corner. Having a servant was weird, and a little discomfiting, but, as Xena none too patiently had explained she was the royal consort, and servants were part of the deal so she better just learn to deal with it just like Xena had.

After all, she'd been Xena's body servant, hadn't she? Though that hadn't lasted long. Gabrielle pulled out the small box she kept her few pieces of jewelery in and opened it. They sparkled inside, resting on their folded bit of velvet.

All gifts, all from Xena. Gabrielle studied them, selecting the neatly made pearl earrings and setting them to one side. That was the latest of them, from the pearls Xena had given her made into cunningly wrought settings of silver that cupped the gems without holding them in place.

"Oh, this is so pretty." Mali said, lifting up the gown.

Gabrielle glanced up. "That's for tonight." She said. "For the big banquet. I think I'll wear the green one for brunch." She watched Mali carefully hang the garments up in the tall press, amidst a collection of clothes ranging from a few gowns to the more numerous tunics and leggings she usually wore.

Her hawk's head tabard was there, next to a well cared for set of armor, and resting in the back corner a broken ended spear, pock marked and splintered. She'd really rather have worn that to the festival, but she knew Xena had taken an unusual amount of time in picking their new clothes and she didn't want to disappoint her.

Gabrielle sat down at her worktable, picking up a quill and twirling it in her fingers as she glanced around, considering what story she'd tell at the banquet. Was there any she knew that were harvest related?

Maybe Jack the Giant Killer. That had beans in it anyway. Or maybe the tale she'd reworked about the farm horse who saved his village from the flood?

Xena liked that one. Maybe because it had the horse pooping everywhere. Gabrielle chuckled softly to herself. She'd steer away from stories about the queen during the luncheon, and save the one story she knew Xena would let her get away with for dinner.

She braced her hand on her head and scribed in a few words on the nearly finished parchment.

She liked writing here. It was quiet, and generally free of queenly distractions, the walls hung with silken tapestries full of bright colors and flowers, and the high ceiling giving a sense of space and air. To one side was a daybed, where she'd occasionally nap, and in the corner a fireplace complete with an iron hook she often had a small pot of mulled cider warming hanging on.

"There are so many people here for the festival." Mali said. "My brother said you can hardly move in the courtyard."

"It's true. I saw some huge wagons coming in just now." Gabrielle said. "Why don't you go with your brother to the market? Get the early bargains."

Mali looked at her, a little wide eyed. "Oh but who will help you dress?"

Gabrielle leaned her elbows on the worktable, wondering briefly if she sounded as goofy to Xena as this girl sounded to her. "I'll be okay." She said. "Remember, having someone to help me is a really new thing."

"I know." Mali looked abashed. "I just want to do a good job. It's a real honor for me to do this."

Her speech, Gabrielle mused, wasn't that of a low born peasant – a fact she knew well since she was one. But Stanislaus had assured Xena that the girl came from two loyal servants who had spent their lives serving the crown and had explained an irregularities away by saying the girl had a hunger for learning and spent much time around the scribes.

Maybe it was true. "Anyway. Go on and have a good time." Gabrielle said. "I'm just going to slip that on and go find Xena so we can go to the hall."

Mali glanced nervously at the door leading to the queen's chambers, then she bobbed her head and went to the door, disappearing behind it and heading down the stairs to the kitchens.

Gabrielle finished her scroll. She stood up and tucked the parchment away, and then she shed her robe and went over to the where her new gowns were waiting. She and Xena had shared a bath just after dawn, and now she riffled her fingers through her now dry hair as she stood before the wardrobe.

Her reflection in the mirror caught her eye, and she turned her head, studying her profile for a moment.

She was growing up a little, she thought. She felt like she'd even gotten just a little taller, and the neatly trimmed hair now outlined a face that seemed bit more mature. Gabrielle gave her reflection a tentative smile, bunching her hands into fists as she watched the muscles move under her skin.

Xena had told her the other day that she thought Gabrielle looked sexy. Gabrielle's brows contracted as she reviewed herself. "I'm not sure I think that." She sighed. Then she turned and took the first of her two new gowns down and slipped into it.

The fabric was cool, but it warmed to her skin quickly and she fastened the ties that snugged it against her body at her shoulder and hip.

"Muskrat!!!"

"C... on the way." Gabrielle slipped into a pair of soft indoor shoes, and cupped the pearl earrings in her hand, as she ducked around the wardrobe and scooted over to the door just as Xena appeared in the opening.

The queen was dressed in a gilded silk gown with brassy highlights, the fabric clinging to her body and the metallic hints reflected in the golden circlet nestling in her dark hair.

“Wow.” Gabrielle stared frankly at her. “You look great!”

A brief grin appeared on the queen’s face, true and disarming. Then she braced her hands in the doorway and posed. “Think so?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Good.” The queen reached over to tweak a bit of her bangs. “Let’s go.”

“Can you put these in for me?” Gabrielle asked, catching her hand and holding it. She held up the earrings “I can’t ever get them on right.”

Xena took the baubles and turned Gabrielle a little into the light before she inclined her head a little and fastened the first of them to the lobe of her right ear. “Where’s your little mouse?”

Gabrielle smiled briefly. “I told her she could go down and enjoy the festival.” She admitted. “I still feel a little weird about having her around.”

“I felt weird about having you around.” Xena fastened the other earring, then stepped back to regard her work. “But I got over it. There. Looks good.”

Gabrielle looked up at her and smiled happily . Xena felt her own face relax and she lifted her hand back up to cup her consort’s cheek, savoring the warmth of the skin under her touch. “Ah, muskrat.” She sighed. “Y’know, it’s too damn bad we have to spend the day screwing around with those nitwits when we could be screwing around with each other.”

“We’ll still be together.” Gabrielle took Xena’s hand, then she half turned her head and kissed the palm of it. “Besides, isn’t this where you get all those nice presents from everyone? That can’t be so bad.”

“Mugh.” Xena made a face. “C’mon.” She turned and led the way to the door, reaching up to tilt her coronet a little. “Maybe I’ll get drunk enough to play ring toss with this on some of those pinheads.”

The sun was pouring into the lower entrance chamber when they came down the stairs, as the front doors of the stronghold were propped wide open for the occasion. There were still guards around, a line of them to either side of the doors, and another before the entrance to the grand hall.

It never paid to be too careless, after all.

The lower hall was full of nobles, in their best clothes, all with servants clustered nearby bearing ornately wrapped packages.

“Ah.” Xena smiled, surveying the crowd who was just realizing her presence. “Looks like it’s going to be a pretty good day, muskrat.” She watched the crowd hastily bow low to her, the servants struggling to stay upright with their burdens. “I might even like being queen for a change.”

Gabrielle grinned.

“All right.” The queen lifted her voice. “Get your asses in the damn hall and let’s get this party started!”

Gabrielle closed her eyes.

“That was regal, huh?” Xena chuckled and chased everyone ahead of her into the room. “Let’s go have some fun.”

\*\*

Gabrielle stifled the urge, for the nth time, to pull her legs up crossed on the big chair she was sitting on next to Xena’s throne. The seat was more than large enough for her to do it,

but the dress she was wearing was form hugging enough that hiking it up to allow for the motion would definitely draw attention to her.

That wasn't necessarily bad, and she was pretty sure Xena would find it funny, but there were a lot of people in the room and she didn't want to distract the queen from accepting her presents. So, with a sigh, she tucked her feet under her chair and leaned one elbow on the arm nearest Xena.

Xena herself was seated in her big throne, her sword slung visibly on the back of it. She had her hands clasped together over her stomach as she surveyed the lines of nobles waiting to approach, while in the far corner, a quartet of musicians softly played.

Servants were circulating with trays of goodies and cups of wine and mead and the whole scene would have been very festive if it hadn't been for the imposing dais with its sharp eyed occupant, watching everything with a slightly amused expression.

"M'lady?"

Gabrielle turned her head to find one of the servers there, with a tray containing little late harvest fruit tarts. She scanned them and then selected two of the apple and two of the peach.

A loud throat clearing caught her attention. "Two are yours." Gabrielle smiled at the servant, and then she turned to hand over the loot to her now alertly watching seatmate.

"Two?" Xena's brows arched.

"Xena."

The queen chuckled as she lifted one of the peach tarts from Gabrielle's hand and popped it into her mouth. "Next!" She motioned the next noble forward. "C'mon Bresius. Get your ass up here."

Gabrielle nibbled an apple tart, holding the other two remaining in her hand as she watched one of Xena's border nobles approach. He was an older man, with a thick salt and pepper beard and moustache.

"Your majesty." He bowed gracefully. "We have seen a good harvest this year. Many fine hides we have sent, and cords of hardwood for your artisans." He had a small chest in his hands, and now he advanced, dropping to his knees before Xena's throne and extending it. "And this, a personal gift from my household."

Brendan deftly stepped forward from his place at Xena's side and took the chest, after the queen didn't stir a hair to take it. He opened the chest and studied the contents, and then he turned and brought it over to Xena for her to see.

"Oh." Gabrielle felt her eyes widen a little. "Xena that's so pretty!"

Inside the chest was a set of matched daggers, the hilts carved out of deer horn, and the blades patterned with a delicately engraved scene of battle.

"Since we were the closest to the fight, I had my metal craftsmen make a memento of it for you, your Majesty. We will never forget it."

Xena took one of the blades out and held it, nodding a little at the fine balance as she looked at the engraving. A faint smile appeared as she recognized a reasonable facsimile of herself on a horse, sword raised, with Gabrielle on Patches right behind her. "Look, muskrat." She indicated the figures.

Gabrielle's eyes lit with surprise and delight.

"Craftsman's got a good hand." Xena addressed the noble. "He did a fine job."

Bresius smiled, clasping his now empty hands in front of him. "My lands are tough and spare, but their bounties are yours, my liege." He said. "Bregos thought me so poor he didn't even bother to offer me protection." He indicated the box. "But we have value more than wheat fields."

Xena studied him quietly. "What did you think about Bregos being out there?" She asked, running a thumb against the blade.

Bresius looked a trifle embarrassed. "The truth, your majesty... we didn't know." He said. "Was a hard winter, as you know, and the passes were snowed most of the season. Had a merchant run up asking for shelter beginning of spring who brought the news to us, but my man who went heading up the road here said he saw the army coming the other way and so." He shrugged faintly. "We figured ... " He paused. "I figured you already knew."

Reasonable. Xena mused. Reasonable or was he lying, and was really one of Bregos supporters. She looked him in the eye and he didn't flinch, his heartbeat, clearly visible to her at his throat remained steady.

Honest, or a damned, damned good actor. Xena knew where his castle was though, and given the weather, it was possible it was true.

She glanced at the knife and brought it a little closer.

"They did Tiger really well." Gabrielle observed. "And look at Patches! They even got how one of his ears always goes down like that."

Xena studied her own likeness. "Bresius." She looked back at him. "Emissary from the port city came in yesterday. They've ceded all the land between the pass and the start of the road to me."

Bresius cocked his head a little. "Yes, your majesty?" He seemed a touch puzzled. "That is a fine thing and clever of them."

"Mm." Xena nodded. "Yeah, they figured out they don't have anyone with the guts to defend them so they figured if they're in my backyard I'll do it." She said. "But I'm not going to leave it all out there untilled so I'd like you to take possession of the lands on your side of the pass through the valley and hold them for me."

She could hear the stifled gasps from behind him, and she looked quickly up to see his retinue's eyes widening in shock.

"Your Majesty." Bresius murmured. "You do me honor past my worth."

"Yeah, I know." The queen agreed with him. "Deal with it. There's plenty of planting land there and the stench of all those dead bodies is probably gone by now too."

Caught in the act of picking up the other apple tart, Gabrielle paused, wrinkled her nose, and put it back down.

"I will stake and mark the land before the cold sets in." The noble held his head up a little higher. "We will make that profitable for you, my liege, I swear it."

A relative unknown in her circle of subjects. Xena waved him to stand up. His family had held the mountain lands for ... three? Or four generations. Kept to himself. Didn't join in all the intrigue most of the time.

Maybe that was good, maybe it was bad. Xena watched him bow, then retreat to his retinue, who clustered around him, giving her looks of wide-eyed excitement and pleasure. She put the carved knife back in the box and handed it back to Brendan.

"Nice piece, y'majesty." Brendan admired it before he closed the top. "Got your likeness right down."

"Mm." Xena grunted. "That's why I gave him the lands." She kept her voice very low. "He didn't make me look like a gorgon like those last idiots did."

Brendan chuckled softly, having removed the paintings in question quickly from Xena's outraged eyes. "Ah, they meant well."

"Ah, they all need their eyeballs poked out if they really think I look like that." Xena disagreed. "Next!" She lifted her voice again, and pointed at the next set of nobles, these from a house she knew were Brego's supporters, and who were visibly very, very nervous.

Xena smiled at them. "Speaking of poking out eyeballs."

Gabrielle settled back in her seat, debating on whether she could get her other apple tart down before something bad happened.

"So. What's it going to take for me to forget you held Brego's warchest, hmm?" Xena asked, in a mock wondering tone.

Regretfully, Gabrielle set the tart down and put her hands back in her lap.

"Now where did I leave my chakram."

\*\*

Gabrielle was glad enough to shed her fancy dress and grateful to Brendan and the troops for giving her an excuse to do so before they headed out to the festival. She would have to dress up again tonight for the big banquet, but until then she could revel in her boots and woolen leggings and the silk tunic Xena had given her just the other day along with it.

She could hear Xena talking in her outer chambers, the queen's voice taking on an edge and a low growl she could detect through the walls. "Now what?" She went to the mirror and ran a comb through her hair, tucking it behind her ears and twisting its length into a tail she tied with a bit of ribbon as it was windy outside, and she didn't want to struggle with it.

After a moments thought, she grabbed a few more ribbons, tucked them into her belt, then headed towards the door and the arguing outside. She crossed through their sleeping chamber, then the inner living space where the drapes had been pulled back, and a cozy fire started in the fireplace.

Past that was a set of double doors, and she pulled the left one open and ducked through as she heard Xena's hand hit something hard.

The queen was standing in the middle of the chamber, with a half dozen of the older nobles facing her. The object she'd just hit was the little table that usually held a pitcher and glasses, and Gabrielle was glad that had been cleared off while they'd been at the brunch.

"Gods be damned." Xena said. "You little twerps have a lotta gall standing here bitching about who I pick to give lands to."

"But your majesty." The nearest man held his hands out. "We are your loyal subjects! We have proven that!"

Ah. Gabrielle exhaled. She'd wondered about that. She'd heard mutterings in the hall as she'd walked through.

"And?" Xena had her hands on her hips now. "Are you saying Bresius isn't?"

The men shuffled uncomfortably. "Well, your Majesty." The nearest one spoke up again. "We know so little about him."

"Yes, your majesty." A second man stepped forward. "He keeps to himself up in those mountains. Who knows where his loyalties really lie? He could have been with Bregos. We have only his word to say he wasn't."

Xena's eyes narrowed. "You mean, that's different from the boatload of crap heads with points on their head like you lot who I know did support him?" She asked. "What guarantee do I have on you, Ales trio?"

The oldest of the group put his hand over his chest. "Your majesty." He said. "Is that fair? I have always been loyal to you. I defy anyone to say otherwise."

"Hm." Xena growled.

Gabrielle dragged a big chair over and set it down behind the queen. She tugged Xena's sleeve.

"What?" Xena half turned, then spotted the chair. "How decrepit do I look today?" She demanded.

"Not at all." Gabrielle held the ribbons up. "I can hear the soldiers getting ready outside."

The queen gave her an indulgent look, taking a seat so Gabrielle could reach her hair to braid it. "Where were we?" She addressed the nobles. "Got proof he's a stinker?" She asked them. "No? Then get the Hades out. None of you have lands that side of the mountains anyway."

"No, that's true your majesty." Alestrio said. "And I pray you do not think it is just envy that drives us here to speak with you."

Xena gave him a highly skeptical look.

"Your Majesty, these last moons we've had good harvests and things have been going well." Alestrio said. "We just wish to keep it that way. We .." He glanced at his companions then back at her. "We don't want to have things be the way they used to be."

Xena leaned back against the back of the chair, bracing her elbow on the arm of it and resting her chin on her fist. "Huh." She felt a gentle touch on her neck, and tilted her head a little, as Gabrielle's fingers sorted through her hair.

"Peace among us profits us all." Alestrio said. "It may be this man is all he seems. We just beg your majesty to be cautious of those she doesn't know."

Xena studied them. It was true none of them had ever actively moved against her. It was also true she didn't know much about Bresius. However, she also hadn't known much about Gabrielle when she'd decided to trust her. "I'll keep it in mind."

A soft knock at the door made all the nobles turn.

Xena sighed. "Yes?" She barked.

The door opened, and Stanislaus poked his head in. "Your majesty." He said. "Lord Bresius begs and audience with you."

"This should be interesting." The queen commented dryly. "The rest of you get out." She pointed. "The other door."

"But your majesty..."

"OUT!!!!"

Reluctantly, the six men retreated, disappearing out the door that led into the central hall and shutting it behind them.

Xena crossed her ankles and lifted her hand in Stanislaus' direction. "Bring the bastard in."

"As you wish, your majesty." Stanislaus closed the door, then opened it a moment later and stood back, allowing the border lord to enter. He waited for Bresius to enter and cross halfway, and then he retreated and shut the door.

Bresius stopped about two body lengths from the tall figure slumped in her chair and folded his hands in front of him. "Your Majesty, thank you for granting me your audience." He said, in a low tone. "I will be brief, as I know you have plans for today." He twisted his hands together with a touch of nervousness. "In the short time since this morning's events I have encountered some unexpected challenges."

"Everyone's jealous of you." Gabrielle spoke up for the first time. "They wanted those lands near the city." She resumed braiding Xena's hair, enjoying the silky, yet strong feel of it.

"Yes, your grace." Bresius agreed. "That is true. But it is not what I was referring to." He glanced at Xena. "Two of my men were found dead, not a quarter candle mark ago, with no witness as to how."

Xena straightened in her chair and put her hands on both arms of it in a precise and deliberate manner. "What'd they die of?"

"Your Majesty, I don't know." Bresius said. "Their faces were drawn into such a grimace, I can only think it was terribly painful. But there is no mark on them."

Xena turned her head towards her consort. "Go get Brendan. Don't let anyone know why."

Without a word, Gabrielle circled the chair and headed for the door at a trot. She got through it and past the crowd of people outside, evading Stanlslaus' attempt to intercept her.

She dodged past the crowd, aware in her peripheral vision that people were turning to look at her and watch her, but she kept her pace steady - not a run, but a rapid amble she'd learned as a child chasing sheep across the hills and it made short work of the steps up to the stronghold as she headed for the melee field.

Ahead of her, she could see Xena's troops milling around, in obvious high spirits. Two of the cavalry captains spotted her coming and in a moment, all the men were turning, focusing on her as she came within range and bodies were stiffening as hands went for weapons.

"Is Brendan here?" Gabrielle asked, as she arrived at the edge of the field.

"Near the stables. I'll get him." A horse soldier bolted off, as the rest of the men looked around, closing around Gabrielle protectively.

The army. The troops. The people Xena truly trusted. "Is there something wrong, your grace?" One of the foot soldiers asked. "Does the queen need us to do something?"

As the soldiers circled her, Gabrielle felt a sense of relief, as well as acknowledged the attention she was getting from them. She knew they viewed her - having nothing to do with her putative titles - as Xena's very trusted right hand and as such, they would take orders from her as readily as they did from the queen.

"Right now, Xena just needs to talk to Brendan." Gabrielle said. "After that she'll see what's going on."

A stir in the crowd, and then Brendan was at her side, hand on his sword hilt. "Ah, lass."

"Xena needs you." Gabrielle said simply. She turned and they moved through the troops, who parted to let them through.

"Keep settin up." Brendan called over his shoulder. "What is it, Gabrielle?" He asked his companion. "Bad stuff? Any of those useless gits get her mad?"

"It's kinda hard to say.. " Gabrielle paused, as they neared the road up to the stronghold and saw an ornate party, complete with soldiers and out riders making their way to the gates.

"Wow. Who's that?"

Brendan shaded his eyes, keeping a quick pace towards the stairs. Then he stopped abruptly. "Cow's balls."

Gabrielle nearly crashed into him. She hauled up short and put a hand on his back. "What's wrong?"

"That un is." He pointed at the column of horses. "Name's Philtop. Calls himself Prince of the Westlands."

At this distance, most of the group was just a cluster of bodies and horses. One horse was a fine bay stallion, though, and his rider was tall and dressed in a fur lined silk cape. "Ah."

"Land's t'other side of the mountains." Brendan took a last look, then started towards the castle. "Better give her some warning. He brought his army cross the hills and laid into us after we took this place."

"I guess he lost." Gabrielle trotted to keep up with him.

Brendan snorted a little. "He surely did, aye. Then he tried his wiles on her Maj and gave us a scare, I'll tell ya."

Gabrielle frowned. "She liked him?"

"We thought she did." Brendan crossed the outer courtyard and headed for the steps. "Turns out we didn't know her well as we thought.. she turned him inside out and sent him back to the Westlands short a few pieces."

Gabrielle decided she probably didn't want to know what pieces. She followed Brendan as they cleared the doors to the stronghold and headed for Xena's chambers. "Why is he here?" She finally asked, just as they were about to reach the doors.

"Good question, little one." Brendan motioned for the doors to be opened as they neared. "Maybe he's looking for a parley. Heard they didn't do so well out there this season."

Hm. Gabrielle followed him inside, where Xena and Bresius were waiting, and the border lord now seated on a padded stool near the queen's big chair. There was, she reckoned, such a thing as too much success.

"Thanks muskrat." Xena greeted her with a brief grin. "C'mere and finish with my tail."

Gabrielle blushed, a little, but then, so did Bresius. Brendan merely saluted the queen.

"Mistress." Brendan said. "Philtop's here."

Xena tipped her head back and rolled her eyes. "And today was starting out to be so good." She sighed. "Muskrat roll the sun back. Let's go back to bed." She covered her eyes with the fingers of one hand. "What did I do to deserve that, I wonder?"

"Heard about the Persians, maybe." Brendan grunted.

Bresius shifted a little. "Many heard." He said. "Every merchant train coming through from the harbor talked about it."

Xena sighed. "Brendan, go with him. He found two of his men dead. See what the deal is." She said. "And tell Stanislaus to find some place to put the Westlands jackass as far away from me as possible."

Gabrielle bit back a cheer. She sorted out the rest of Xena's hair, waiting for the door to close behind Brendan and Bresius before she leaned over and gave the queen a kiss on the back of her now bared neck.

Xena leaned her head against her consorts. "Know something, Gabrielle?"

"Not a whole lot, no." Gabrielle admitted. "I'm trying to learn stuff though."

The queen smiled, an unexpectedly warm expression on her face as she turned and looked at her bedmate. "One bright spot in Philtop showing up. I'm glad he'll get to meet you."

"Me?"

"Mm."

"Why?"

Xena smiled again. "I just am." She said. "What story were you going to tell at the banquet tonight?" She changed the subject. "The Persians?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Is that okay?"

The queen nodded. "Very okay." She said. "Why?" She turned and looked at Gabrielle, hooking a finger in her belt so she was forced to remain close. "Spill it, muskrat."

Gabrielle took a breath. "I just thought you were kinda not okay with that lately." She said, in a soft voice. "You yelled at me when I told that one about Duke Lastay's wife last moon."

Xena remained silent for a moment, her brows creasing and a furrow appearing above her eyes. "I was just in a bad mood." She said. "Gwan and tell em."

"Are you sure?" Gabrielle circled around and perched on the chair arm, putting her arms around the queen and gazing earnestly at her. "I don't want you to be mad."

Xena's expression shifted to one of slight embarrassment. "It's okay." She said. "I was just mad at myself that day. Didn't want to hear about some smart ass thing I did that I wasn't sure I..". She stopped speaking. "Anyway, it's all right now." She said. "So make sure you tell all the gory parts right."

Gabrielle studied her companion quietly. She wasn't really sure what all that was about, and as she watched, Xena's eyes briefly dropped and then lifted again, suddenly open and surprisingly vulnerable.

Now, what was that about? Gabrielle felt a flutter of worry in her gut, but she leaned forward and gave the queen a kiss on the lips. "I will." She promised. "Don't worry."

"Good." Xena recovered her attitude and stood up. "Let me go throw my armor on and we'll go watch the boys play. With any luck, old Phil will get in the way and get pin cushioned and give me a laugh."

Gabrielle followed her towards the inner chamber, halfway hoping it might happen just that way.

\*\*

Gabrielle paused, standing just to one side of the big double doors to the castle as the group from the Westlands rode into the forecourt. There were a round two dozen of them, on beautiful horses, dressed in rich fabrics and metal accompanied by another dozen servants leading pack animals.

Half of them were soldiers. They wore serviceable armor under their silver and blue tabards - well-kept and fitted, and carried weapons appropriate to an honor guard.

The rest of the party were nobles, two women in traveling robes over gowns riding sidesaddle accompanied by nine men, a mixture of young and old, and at their head the prince.

Gabrielle studied the prince. He was very tall, with broad shoulders and a fighter's lean, rangy body. His hair was a deep auburn, thickly curled and as he turned in her direction she saw an even, beautiful profile with high cheekbones and firm, squared jaw.

He was dressed in a pair of heavy riding leggings, and a form fitting blue over tunic that showed off his tapered body to good advantage and as he swung off his horse he was already

attracting interested looks from the passing noble ladies who were heading towards the tented stands to watch the events.

Okay so he really was good looking. Even to her. Gabrielle wasn't naive enough to think the queen hadn't had a lot of experience before they'd met, and it seemed to her that the prince was probably someone Xena would have liked and probably been attracted to.

The army had thought so, apparently. It was easy to imagine their alarm, after their long struggle to conquer the stronghold only to find their leader falling under the charms of what must have seemed to them like just another one of the same type they'd just fought against.

But she'd known Xena long enough now to read her most subtle body language and her reaction to the news of Philtop's visit had been straightforwardly unwelcome. She hadn't sensed any embarrassment there, or any sign of anticipation. Just a typical eye rolling exasperation that might have been focused on Stanislaus for all the emotional charge of it.

So.

"Ah, your grace."

Gabrielle had finally gotten used to being addressed by that title, and she turned to find the royal vintner behind her. "Oh, hello."

"I'm so glad to find you here." The man said. "I have something new, something I just created and I'm hoping the queen will approve of it."

Gabrielle cocked her head to one side. "I know her Majesty loves your wines." She said. "So unless you made one out of carrots, it'll probably be okay." From the corner of her eye, she watched Stanislaus and two other of the castle managers approach the Prince, greeting him with a brief bow.

"Oh no your grace. I would never use vegetables. Far too little sugar to make wines pleasing to her Majesty." The vintner looked scandalized. "She has very particular tastes, as your grace surely knows."

Her grace surely did. Possibly far better than the vintner. Gabrielle was aware of grooms from the royal stables coming to take the visitor's horses, and one of Brendan's lieutenants eased among the prince's guard and pointed towards the nearby barracks. "Okay, so then it should be fine, whatever it is."

"Could you possibly do me the great honor of tasting it?" The man asked. "It's really very different.. I don't want to upset her Majesty." He held a small tasting cup up hopefully.

"Sure." Gabrielle watched past his shoulder as Stanislaus led the Westland's servants inside, all heavily laden with trunks and parcels. The prince and his group were looking around, and for a moment, she saw the prince's eyes fall on her.

She ignored the attention, taking the tasting cup from the vintner and sipping from it, the bowl filled with a pale liquid that smelled of fruit.

"Oh!" She looked up at him in delighted surprise. "That's great!"

The vintner's face split into a huge smile. "Do you really think so?"

"Oh yeah!" Gabrielle nodded. "Xena's gonna love this." She held her hand out. "Give me that skin. I'll bring it over to her. I'm heading there now."

The vintner bowed, and handed over the wineskin he'd had slung over one shoulder. "I'm so glad you like it. I was hoping to serve it at the banquet tonight."

Gabrielle cradled the skin in one elbow. "After Xena tastes this, I bet she makes you keep it all for her." She assured him. "Good job!"

The vintner bowed again, then stepped away and headed back into the castle. Gabrielle turned, half expecting to find Philtop and his gang still staring, but the forecourt was empty, and she spotted the group crossing through the gates heading for the viewing stands.

Relieved, she angled her steps towards the merchant's booths, deciding she'd better pick up something to snack on if she was going to bring up the whole wineskin to Xena. Wouldn't end up good for anyone if the queen drank it all on an empty stomach then joined in the sparring.

The vendor stalls were already doing a brisk business. The best evidence of the good harvest was in the coin being spent, and there were many there spending, landholders and the townspeople mingling as they took in the wares - some from quite far away.

Gabrielle strolled along, her eyes flicking over the different booths. She pause to pick up a net full of late harvest fruits, and added a small wheel of cheese to that, along with a sack of nuts before she realized she'd picked up an escort.

The two soldiers, dressed in Xena's colors and with her hawk's head on their over tunics didn't bother or obstruct her, they merely trailed along after her, one of them stepping up briefly and asking her if he could carry her packages.

"No thanks, Gerard." Gabrielle smiled at him. "I'm almost done."

Had Xena sent them? She eyed the soldiers speculatively. Or had they just decided to shadow her, since the stronghold was full of strangers? The soldiers she'd spent two campaigns with now might do that, of their own volition.

"Pretty day." Gerard said. "Grand day for the festival, eh?"

"Sure is." Gabrielle felt the cool wind ruffle her hair. "Are you going to be in the show fights?"

"Not us, your grace." Gerard smiled at her, and put a hand on his chest. "We've been assigned the great honor of escorting you."

Ah. "Do I need an escort?"

"There are many in the stronghold unknown to us." Gerard's companion spoke up.

"Merchants and visitors from afar. It pays to be safe, rather than sorry."

Gabrielle smiled at them. "Thanks." She continued her stroll, followed by her two shadows. Gerard and his partner Brent, dressed now as soldiers, were two of Xena's most trusted men. They were both around the queen's age, solid and muscular, long time veterans of her army.

They were also, Xena had casually informed her, two of the best assassins the queen knew. She had sent them behind enemy lines to cut the throats of important commanders - they were utterly hers, and Gabrielle knew both had been in the group trapped in the tunnel with them and again, in the small party that had stuck with Xena when they walked into the hands of the Persian army.

"Lot of stock coming in." Brent commented, as two big wagons were pulled past by well fed oxen. "Going to be good cold season. Have time to gear up."

Gabrielle nodded in agreement. She was glad of the winter months coming up. She had a lot of writing to catch up on and she was hoping Xena would take the time to start showing her how to use a sword.

Or - at least - something other than a half cut off spear or a big stick.

\*\*

The sun was drenching the big open spaces inside the walls as Xena settled herself into her ruggedly built throne, under a green silk canopy on a platform built up against the inner wall.

She had a gold chased gown wrapped around her, but anyone with sharp eyes could spot the tough leather boots and leg armor on her long legs sticking out from the bottom of it, and she'd slung her sword in its sheath on one of the high, turned finials of the chair.

Despite her chivvying of Gabrielle, it felt damn good to be in her fighting gear and she took a deep breath, the constriction of the leather closing around her briefly before she released it. It felt good to have the weight of armor on her shoulders and the faint pressure of daggers at the tops of her boots.

Lately, she'd gotten more used to being in leather than silk, and the touch of the well cured hide against her own was oddly comforting, all the more so because the past candlemark or so had proved uncomfortable to say the least.

Brendan was busy investigating. Gabrielle had ducked off to find some parchment to bring with her, and, Xena suspected, to sneak over to the vendor stalls to do a little shopping. That left her alone up on her platform, watching the first set of entertainers get ready to start their show.

Horse trick riders. Xena adored them. These lot were from the eastern lands far past her borders, and it made her happy to see them, after an absence of several years. She studied the near dozen animals, sturdy and well cared for, that were trotting around in a circle while their riders tumbled and jumped around and over them, fearless of the big hooves.

For a moment, she imagined what it might be like to be one of them, traveling from city to city in a nomadic and sparse existence.

Would she like that? Xena watched as the group gathered in the center of the horses, most of them listening to the tall, auburn haired man who was apparently their leader.

What was their day like? She mused. Playing for the crowd, then what? Go back to their caravan; a tarp set over it to shelter them and seat themselves on worn cushions, to share whatever was in their common pot to eat.

They had themselves, and their horses. It reminded Xena, just a little, of traveling with her army in the field when a long day of traveling or fighting might end with a campsite at twilight, some fresh caught fish, and if they were lucky some music around the fire.

She remembered one such night. They had been under a crystal clear sky full of stars, and she'd had her back against a tall tree, her knees propped up over her fur covered saddle, a mug of rum in her fist and the satisfaction of victory warm in her gut.

Lyceus playing his sitar near the fire. Everyone in a good mood, even those nursing wounds from the day's fighting.

Raising their mugs to her.

"Xena?"

The queen jumped, and nearly lifted herself out of her chair, her hand going for her sword hilt before her brain kicked in and she thumped back into place with a grunt. "Don't do that."

"Sorry, mistress." Jellaus bowed, and stifled a smile. "You seemed a thousand leagues away."

Xena shifted and leaned an elbow on her chair arm, resting her chin on her fist. "Just remembering the old days." She admitted. "Hearing anything interesting?"

Jellaus plucked the strings on his instrument. "Grudging or no, all agree your majesty is in very fine form." He bowed again. "Even our old friends from the Westlands. I saw them arrive."

"Jackass." Xena muttered.

“Ah, mistress.” Jellaus strummed a low, wordless tune. “A prince of such beauty, he felt surely you couldn’t resist him.” He said. “And he was, indeed, beautiful.”

“He was.” Xena allowed. “But a bastard on the inside. Probably still is.” She glanced at Jellaus. “Go see if you can find out what his game is, Jellaus.”

“Mistress.” The musician bowed, then he turned and strolled off, strumming his sitar softly as he moved through the gathering crowd.

Philtop. Xena felt her face twisting into a grimace. “I shoulda made the damn party invite only.”

Dismissing the thought, she turned in her chair as she spotted the horse dancers moving into position to start their show. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Philtop and his retinue taking seats on a pavilion across from hers, amidst a throng of her own nobles.

She knew she was being watched. She could see Philtop standing there, and knew he was waiting for her to look over at him.

Xena crossed her ankles and kept her eyes on the horses, only shifting when she caught sight of Gabrielle approaching through the crowd and heading towards her. She settled back, watching the horses start up but also watching her consort.

Gabrielle had a wine sack slung over one shoulder, and a small bag next to it that looked like it had fruit in it. In her snug leggings and shirt, she looked cute and sexy, the sunlight glinting off her blond hair as she moved quickly through a crowd that parted before her with equal haste.

She had her head held high, and as her gaze crossed Xena’s, her face moved into a grin that lit her face right up.

Xena felt herself grinning back.

Damn they were a couple of nitwits sometimes. The queen gestured to the chair next to her as her consort arrived, focusing on her and leaving the horse troop to dance unseen for a few minutes. “Whatcha got?”

“Taste this Xena.” Gabrielle handed over the winesack. “It’s amazing.”

Obligingly, Xena uncapped it and took a swig, trusting that Gabrielle’s version of amazing wasn’t too far from her own to make her want to spit out whatever it was. “Mm.” Her brows went up in surprise. “Fizzy.”

“Bubbles.” Gabrielle set down her other sack on the small wooden table between their chairs. “And I got some really nice looking fruit from the garden.” She sat down. “The vintner just finished that bubbling stuff. It’s white wine but he did something to it. I really like it.”

“Me too.” Xena took another swig of the wine, the bubbles tickling her tongue. It was moderately sweet, and very refreshing. “Tell Fergus he better save some of this for me.”

Gabrielle smiled. “I did.” She confessed. “And I got you this!” She leaned over and offered Xena something in her hand. “It was so pretty. I thought you’d like it.”

Xena looked down to find a beautifully wrought metal horse head, hammered delicately into smoke black metal with the eyes of amber inset – an uncanny image of her favorite stallion. She felt her jaw drop a little and blinked.

Gabrielle watched the reaction, and went back to sorting out her acquisitions with a satisfied look on her face. “It’s got a clasp on the back. You can put it on your cloak to hold it shut, or a belt.”

“Ah.”

The cool wind, rich with the churned earth and grass from the performers areas brushed over Gabrielle and she took a deep breath of it, knowing a moment of content at the still slightly stunned expression on the queen's face.

Gotcha.

\*\*

"Oh, wow." Gabrielle was enthralled by the horse tricks. She watched one set of horses run towards each other, their riders standing on their backs, alert but relaxed and then as they came even with each other they changed places, leaping through the air to land on their feet on the horses backs in perfect synch. "That was amazing!"

Even Xena's eyes were a little wide. "Not bad." She admitted.

"Can you do that?" Gabrielle asked, as one of the men somersaulted in place - the horse still cantering in front of them. "I bet you can."

"Uh. Sure."

"But wow... look at that!"

Xena eyed her companion, hoping she wasn't going to ask for a demonstration there in front of her entire realm. She thought maybe, with a lot of practice, she might be able to try it without killing herself.

Maybe.

The horse rider stood up on his hands on the horses back, his body flexing easily as the animal ran. Then he pushed off and landed on his feet, holding his arms out with a flourish. The crowd yelled in appreciation.

Two more of the performers came out, seated in a conventional pose on their horses backs but carrying bundles of sticks, tied, and lit on both ends. They started to twirl the sticks, winding them in a figure eight around their horses necks and head.

"Tiger would have lost his mind." Xena commented. "Lost his mind, dumped my ass off him, crapped a load the size of an ox head and taken off."

"I think I would have set Patches mane on fire if I tried that." Gabrielle agreed mournfully. "It sure is pretty though isn't it?"

"Better at night." Xena mused. "Maybe we can have them do this again in the courtyard after dinner."

The riders finished their pass, tossing the brands up into the air and then catching them. They rode off, to be replaced by four more horses, riding backwards and forwards between each other in a complicated pattern.

It was like a dance. Gabrielle watched, enthralled, as the graceful animals and the ribbon bedecked riders increased their pace. She sat forward in her chair, almost holding her breath as the horses passed within whiskers of each other, so close to colliding she flinched a little.

After a moment, she glanced quickly to the side, to find her companion equally rapt, a grin twitching at her lips. "This is amazing, isn't it Xena?" She offered the queen a pear from her collection as the performers took a break, and a set of musicians took their places.

Blue eyes flicked to hers. "Yeah." Xena readily agreed, before looking back at the performers, turning the pear around her in fingers before she took a bite out of it. "Sure beats those damn puppets."

Gabrielle muffed a grin.

"Stupidest things I ever saw."

The puppet show had been a surprise for both of them, as the puppeteers had chosen to create figures that were evidently supposed to be her and Xena, and the show was a retelling of Xena's defense of the pass, complete with her own little puppet throwing soft wooden carved rocks.

"I thought that was pretty cool!" Gabrielle protested mildly. "I loved the way they made you jump around over those fake mountains. It was like you were flying!"

Xena rolled her eyes and then covered them with one hand, shaking her head. "I can't believe I didn't have them flogged."

"I thought those puppets were really cute." Gabrielle said. "I wonder if they could teach me how to do that?" She caught sight of Xena's eyes going wide. "Don't you think it would be great to be able to do some of my stories with puppets? I can practice this winter."

Xena put her pear down, and got up. She turned around and put both hands on the arms of Gabrielle's chair, staring intently at her.

"I'd have to do some work on your puppet though." Gabrielle savored the sunlight splashing over Xena's face, bringing her angular profile into sharp relief. "It shouldn't be cute."

Xena took a breath.

"It should be as beautiful as you are." Gabrielle finished, reaching up to stroke the queen's cheek.

Xena's shoulders moved as she released the breath, a look of wry exasperation taking over her face. Then she straightened up and turned back to the performers, putting her hands on her hips as she listened to the pipes and horns they were playing.

Gabrielle nibbled an apple, watching her. Then a motion caught her eye and she looked to her left, seeing Philtop standing up, his eyes also focused on Xena's tall form.

She couldn't really see the expression on his face, but after a moment, he started to move, several of his companions hastily rising to join him as they started across the pavilion to where the queen was standing.

"Xena." Gabrielle spoke up softly.

"I see em." The queen kept her attention on the stage. "Might as well get it over with before those damn horses come back." She said. "Anyway I'm gonna enjoy introducing you."

"Me?" Gabrielle's brows contracted. "Why?"

Xena merely smiled.

\*\*\*

She waited until Philtop's little group were near the steps that led up to her platform. There, she knew, soldiers would stop him unless she signaled them to let them pass and she wasn't in the mood yet to let them pass.

She was aware of Gabrielle behind her, knew her consort was watching the men openly, while she kept her back turned to them, ostensibly watching the entertainment and ignoring the approach.

There was no danger in that. Philtop wasn't stupid, for one thing, there were soldiers all over the place, for a second, and Gabrielle would promptly holler her name in that excessively cute way she had if any of the Westlanders took so much as a squirrel's step towards her.

Besides, her own peripheral vision was more than wide enough to keep the group of them in sight if not in focus, and she kept them waiting there at the bottom of the slope until she could see them start to fidget restlessly.

It always paid to remind people who was in charge. She wasn't really sure what Philtop's game was, or why he'd decided to visit after all these years and all that bad blood, but the last thing she wanted to do was make him think she was worried about it.

Or him.

So she slowly turned her head and studied them for a very long moment before she let out a lazy whistle, turning back then to watch a juggler as he worked with a handful of clubs.

She had her thumbs hooked through the belt of her robe, her body as relaxed as she could make it as her ears twitched, listening to them approach. She heard the slight sound as Gabrielle shifted in her chair, and then the rasp of leather and fabric as her consort stood up and moved.

She resisted the urge to turn around and see what the Hades Gabrielle was doing, hearing the wooden planks of the platform creak slightly under her weight as she came to a halt.

"Hello." Gabrielle's voice tickled her ears. "Please wait there until her Majesty's ready to speak to you."

Xena grinned, unseen to them. She knew from the sound now that Gabrielle had gotten between her and the visitors, and the thought of her adorable bedmate holding off the interlopers tickled her.

Gabrielle could actually be a little fierce. She'd proven her guts more than once in the last few moons and given a big stick and sufficient motive she could probably put a hurt on someone at least until they picked her up and spanked her.

Which of course Xena would not allow unless she was doing the spanking. So she turned and regarded the intruders finally, not wanting any of them to get any silly ideas.

Sure enough, standing squarely between her and Philtop, shoulders braced and legs spread a little was Gabrielle, providing an adorably bristling guard complete with a rolled up scroll in one hand you could maybe consider a weapon.

Cute as Hades.

Xena stepped forward and leaned an elbow on one of those shoulders. "What do you want?" She asked Philtop. "I don't recall an invitation going out in your direction." She met his eyes coolly.

He looked more or less the same. His hair was getting a touch grizzled, but he still had that Olympian god like face and a well kept body to go with it. He also still had that arrogant stance, though he hadn't been stupid enough to wear a sword at his belt where he customarily kept his hand, cocked in the manner of a natural swordsman.

Which he was, as much as she was.

"I thought it was just an oversight." He responded mildly. "As the rest of the surrounding lands were, and I see old Charstian over there, and all his get." He indicated a far section of the seating full of visitors. "So I came to pay my respects." He touched his chest briefly. "And to ask if we could let the past go. It's another day."

Gracious speech. Xena didn't much buy it, but she appreciated the dance. She studied his face, which he was trying hard to keep a humble expression on. "I hear you had a tough year."

He lifted a hand, and let it fall. "Sometimes the Fates are more capricious than other times. He admitted. "I felt it might be time for our lands to have friendlier relations."

Xena regarded him drolly. "You did, huh?"

He smiled slightly. "Perhaps your majesty will do me the great honor and favor of discussing it later, after the festivities." He bowed.

Must be killing him. Xena could see the discomfort in the motion, and the anxious looks from his attendants. "Maybe." She relented. "See my seneschal inside. I might have a few minutes before the banquet."

She saw the faint look of triumph, quickly masked, and wondered what exactly he was up to.

"Many thanks." He said. "Until later, your Majesty." He glanced at Gabrielle, who had been merely standing quietly and watching while they spoke.

Xena smiled. "My consort, Gabrielle." She supplied, watching his face react before he could stop it and getting a twitch of satisfaction from the twist in his shapely lips.

"So you finally picked someone." Philtop said, after a pause. Gabrielle's head lifted a little, and her back straightened as she glanced at Xena.

"She picked me." Xena, surprisingly, responded. "Damnably lack of judgment."

He nodded briefly, and then he turned and led his group away down the steps, past the guard who took up a position again blocking the way up.

"Hm." Gabrielle made a noise deep in her throat.

Xena laughed shortly, and pulled her around to face the field again. "Jackass." She draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders, glad when she felt her consort snuggle close, and put her own arm around Xena's waist. "Hasn't changed."

"Wonder what he wants?"

"Besides me?" The queen answered wryly. "He showed up here right after I won the crown. Thought he was a gift of the gods, and that I'd be grateful to have him in my bed and add these lands to his. Offered to let me keep my title if I gave him an heir."

Gabrielle made another noise, something like a cross between a cat hiss and a cough.

"Still waiting for an heir. I kicked him so hard in his man parts I think I broke them." Xena mused. "They had to carry him home on an oxcart. Couldn't sit his horse." She pointed at the juggler. "Now that I can do. Wanna see?"

Gabrielle could well imagine Xena kicking someone there. She'd seen her do it on more than one occasion, but usually the queen picked that spot because it was a weak point not for more personal reasons.

Philtop had been personal. The thought of him assuming Xena would come meekly to his bed was something she found sort of funny, but funny in a gut grinding, uncomfortable way.

She looked up at Xena's face, at this person who she loved in such a crazy and overwhelming completeness and wondered after such a previous rejection what Philtop was going to ask of her now.

She gave the queen a hug, happy when the long arm around her tightened in response, and she felt Xena's lips press briefly against her hair. It felt warm, and good, and she closed her eyes, savoring the moment.

"Y'know." Xena started speaking. "All those bastards, the ones around here were sure I'd screw up. That an ignorant warlord would never figure out how to be in charge of someplace like this."

"You're not ignorant."

"Oh, I was." Xena chuckled wryly. "I wasn't born knowing everything. y'know. I learned a lot the hard way. Most warlords just keep going. They don't stop once they conquer someplace, Gabrielle. Too boring."

Gabrielle looked up at her. "Or too challenging?"

A smile stretched Xena's lips. "Oo.. you are smart, you little muskrat." She said. "Yeah. It's easy to wreck everything. Not so easy to keep it going." She turned her head and slowly surveyed the festival. "Much more fun to kill and move on."

Gabrielle thought about the previous spring, when Xena had first started to talk about going out to conquer more lands. Though it was generally thought that she'd had some inner knowledge of the Persians, Gabrielle wasn't sure that was what had spurred her. "Do you think those guys were in on the whole Persian thing?"

Xena was silent for a time, as they watched two of the jugglers trade flaming torches, a whirl of fire and smoke and tanned hands. "Maybe." She finally said. "They might have been willing to toss dinars into the pot if they didn't have to risk anything personally. None of them had the guts to come at me directly."

"Oh."

"Sometimes." Xena looked down at her. "You gotta refresh the blood, know what I mean, muskrat"

Gabrielle blinked at her. "Um." She thought a moment. "You mean, they were afraid of you, and you had to remind them why?"

Xena patted her cheek affectionately. "Ats my girl." Then she pointed at the juggling. "C'mon. Let's go show them how to do that."

"Uh.. Xena I can't juggle."

"Have you tried?"

"No."

"Then how do you know?" Xena started guiding her down the slope towards the stage. "You gotta take chances in life, muskrat. We'll start with little fireballs."

\*\*

Gabrielle sunk into the warm water up to her nose, letting out a sigh of relief as the heat leeches the soreness out of her bones. Juggling had turned to horse riding, which had turned to sparring which had ended with an impromptu musical bedlam - all a bit wild, and a little out of control.

She was tired. Running around after Xena, ducking juggling clubs, grabbing a spear and defending the queen's behind in the sparring... and then there had been the mud battle.

She rubbed the back of her ear, the image of Xena shucking her robe and diving in gleefully flashing into her mind's eye.

The army had been utterly delighted. Gabrielle herself had had fun, but now she was glad she was soaking here in their huge marble tub. She extended her arms out and flexed her hands, a little stiff from several candlemarks of mock battle.

The sun was slanting to the western horizon outside, and already inside, she could hear the quiet sounds as candles were being lit and the soft snap of the newly laid fire. She could smell the wood, and the creamy scent of the wax, and at the edges of her hearing, Xena's voice in the outer room.

They had a few candle marks now to relax, before the big banquet tonight. Xena's official opening of the harvest season, and a time for the stronghold to reflect the richness of the year by stuffing everyone silly and giving them more to drink that was possibly a good idea.

Downstairs, the kitchens were all at full tilt, roasting and grilling a selection of the best beef, mutton, and fish from the offerings, with every type of vegetable and root being worked over in pots and skillets on every cook place.

A literal madhouse.

There would be fruits, and honey cakes for dessert and it was both strange and really like a festival for her since she hadn't had to have a hand in any of it. Gabrielle wiggled her toes in the water and felt a faint rumbling in her guts thinking of it all.

Usually she had some part to play in all of their joint meals. Either selecting things and bringing them, or cooking, or arranging, she felt this was part of her role as Xena's consort.

Not that she really knew what a consort was supposed to do – since neither Xena nor anyone else had told her, but Xena didn't tell her not to do it so she kept on with it as she had from the days when she'd been the queen's body slave.

Also, it was one of her few skills, and certainly one that Xena enjoyed as she'd found the queen appreciated her meals and was always looking for something to nibble on even between them.

So they had that in common too. Xena had once admitted she'd spent so much time at war with the army she'd never gotten over the irregular supply of food, drink or rest and she tended to indulge in all of them every chance she got – old habits apparently died very hard.

For very different reasons, Gabrielle understood that.

She often on most days, threw some of this and that into a pot for a soup or a stew and let it burble from the morning on, usually coming back to their quarters in the evening to find most of it gone, though enough would be left for her to get a bowl before dark fell.

Of course, now thinking that she'd wished she'd done the same this morning. Oh well. Gabrielle exhaled. Maybe there was some fruit left in her bag.

The door opened, and Xena entered, tossing her mud spattered robe over a wooden stand and starting to unbuckle her leathers. "Damn it."

"What's wrong?" Gabrielle asked.

The queen stripped out of her armor and laid it carefully across the stand, on top of the robe. The hide was stained a dark brown, almost black from the mud, and Xena's skin was similarly stained, along with long scrapes across her left bicep. "That was Brendan reporting. He can't figure out a damn thing with those guys who croaked."

She untucked her under wraps and removed them, regarding the mud stained fabric with a bemused look. Then she shrugged and tossed them in the corner, before she entered the tub, sending water sloshing over the sides a little as she dropped to a seat.

"Xena." Gabrielle got up and swam over, bringing a bit of sponge and some soap with her. She rubbed up lather and started working on Xena's mud stained skin, as the queen slid down into the water with a contented sigh. "Oh my gosh you look like one of the piglets."

Xena grinned, then sobered. "Two of the bastards, stone dead, not a mark on em just like he said." She arched her neck as Gabrielle scrubbed it. "Not a scratch. Nothing. Like they just sat down and croaked."

"That's strange huh?" Gabrielle ran the sponge down Xena's neck to her shoulders, scrubbing hard to get the dirt off the areas her armor didn't cover. "I remember sometimes that would happen. In the winter."

"To grown men a little older than you?"

Gabrielle frowned. "Well, no." She cleaned Xena's collarbone, her fingertips feeling the faint dent just above her left breast. "Mostly the olders."

"Exactly." Xena slid down under the water and shook her head vigorously, before surfacing with a faint splutter. "So what killed em?"

'Could they have gotten bitten by something? A snake? Or a scorpion?" Gabrielle was soaping her way down one long arm, careful to be careful of the scrapes. "I'd hate to think we had something like that near the stables, Xena."

"Me too." Xena studied her pensively. "That's a good thought. I'll have them check the hayloft. Who in the Hades knows what came in with that last wagonload."

Gabrielle smiled a little, proud that she'd come up with something to help. "That was amazing, what you did with those barrels today." She commented. "Juggling them with your feet like that. All the jugglers were really wowed."

Xena chuckled. "Yeah, but I'm going to feel it tomorrow." She flexed one leg. "Maybe you can try some more of that massage on me." She wagged an eyebrow at her consort.

"Sure."

Xena settled back in the water, her shoulder blades pressed against the marble as she waited for Gabrielle to finish her work. She could have done it herself, of course, and for all the long years between when she'd taken the realm and Gabrielle's arrival in it she had.

No one got that close to her. No one had been allowed to even be in her presence while she bathed - not out of any modesty because she didn't possess any, but because there were so many people so ready to knife her she just hadn't wanted to take the risk.

And now?

Now she was perfectly happy to sprawl at her leisure in this decadently warm water while a sponge removed all the marks of a good day's fighting from her skin. It was almost like being an actual queen, sometimes.

Which reminded her of something unfortunate. "Crap." She sighed. "I told Stanislaus to bring that jackass up here at dusk."

"Philtop?" Gabrielle kept her scrubbing up, since there was quite a bit of Xena to wash. Her legs, for instance, which seemed to take forever they were so long.

"Yeah."

Gabrielle kept her head down. "I'll go get us something from the kitchen. I think they had some new cheeses come in today, and some dark bread."

Xena studied the damp head in front of her, and the fine tension in the bare shoulders above the surface of the water. "We can send your little cat for that." She said. "I'd rather you be here. You make me remember why I shouldn't just randomly kill people when they annoy me."

Gabrielle looked up at that. "I do?"

"Mm." Xena reached over and tweaked her nose. "I want you here when he gets here."

"Okay." Gabrielle appeared puzzled, but pleased. "I thought maybe he wanted to talk to you alone."

"He does." The queen smiled. "But I didn't get where I am by giving people what they wanted. I got there by making people take me on my terms, Remember?"

Gabrielle took her hand and kissed it. "I remember."

Xena's face twisted into an expression of wry amusement, knowing inside just how much of a farce the exchange they'd just had was. "Good." She said. "Let's get outta here before we get wrinkled like winter plums."

They got out and quickly dried off, since the breeze now coming in the windows had more than a touch of fall in it. Xena toweled her hair dry and went to her wardrobe, studying its contents as she listened to Gabrielle in the next room.

She threw on a deep scarlet casual robe, belting it around her waist before she went to the mirror and ran a comb through her wet hair, watching her own face twitch a little as she made sense of the thick, dark mass that was already staring to dry.

She put on a pair of indoor boots and went into her outer chamber, where a servant was just setting down a tray with cups of mulled wine on it.

"Your Majesty." The servant bowed deeply. "Lord Stanislaus asked me to bring this here."

Xena flicked her fingers at the man. "Beat it." She said, waiting for the man to hastily leave before she went over and poured herself a cup of the wine, it's rich and spicy scent filling the room.

She took the cup and settled down on her elevated chair, taking a sip of the wine and feeling the burn as it traveled down to her stomach.

She suspected she knew what Philtop was going to ask, and she wasn't really sure why it was making her feel ...

"I'm not nervous." She spoke aloud. "He can kiss my ass."

The inner door opened, and Gabrielle appeared, dressed appealingly in a simple woolen over tunic, belted at the waist. She was carrying a tray and she set it down next to the mulled wine. "Did you say something?"

"Nothing intelligent." Xena muttered.

Gabrielle came over and handed her a piece of dark, nutty bread spread with cheese, and what looked like a slight drizzle of honey on it. "It really smells good downstairs." She commented, as the queen took it and nibbled an edge. "Everyone's in a really good mood too. Even the cooks were singing."

"Singing? I don't hire them to sing. I hire them to cook."

"Xena."

A soft knock at the door caused Xena to straighten a little in her chair, and Gabrielle to move towards the sound, She opened the door and exposed Stanislaus' form. "Hello."

"Your grace." Stanislaus bowed. "Her majesty requested I bring Prince Philtop for an audience at this time."

"Come in." Gabrielle pulled the door all the way open and stood to one side as they entered. Philtop was alone, though she caught a glimpse of what was probably his guard standing near the top of the steps. She closed the door after them and went to the tray, picking up a mug of wine as Stanislaus said his little speech.

"Your Majesty. As you requested, I have the honor of present his highness, the Prince of the Westlands."

"Thanks." Xena remarked. "Get him a seat then take off."

Stanislaus went quickly to the side wall and shuffled over with a low backed chair, then he bowed and backed out, forgetting Gabrielle had closed the door and slamming into it.

Xena swirled her wine and took a sip, watching with drolly sardonic eyes as he felt behind him and got the door open then escaped past it. Then she turned her attention to Philtop. "Sit." She indicated the seat. "You wanted a meeting. Here you are. Talk."

Philtop walked over and sat down, glancing at Gabrielle before he looked back at Xena. He was dressed in a woolen over tunic, but had left his weapons behind, and even the circlet he'd been wearing that afternoon. "I did ask." He said. "I didn't think you wanted your whole court to hear what I had to say."

Xena took a bite of her bread and chewed it. "And?"

"We had a bad year." Philtop said, looking away. "I'm sure you heard. Most of the crops failed, and summer storms flooded the river and took half the livestock."

"I heard." Xena replied.

"I have two choices." Philtop said. "Appeal to you, or offer my lands to the highest bidder." He paused. "Could be that bidder is someone you don't want as a neighbor."

Gabrielle stood quietly by the sideboard, watching them both. She could see and almost sense in visceral way, the tension in Xena's body, and looking at Philtop's aristocratic and exquisite profile she realized he wasn't afraid of her.

"So." Xena said, after a brief pause. "Either I save your sorry ass or you sell out to the Persians, that right?"

"Right." Philtop answered straightforwardly. "Sorry Xena. I never wanted to cross your borders again after the last time, but I have no choice. I can't let all those people die, and you're the only game this side of Persia. They've already sent an envoy."

"Have they."

Philtop shrugged his broad shoulders. "Why waste blood over something you can pay a little coin for? That is where I'm at. A cheap lay." He paused. "They'll buy anyone they can around here and surround you. Your reputation bought you that much at least. They don't want to come at you head on."

Gabrielle realized, suddenly, that this noble visitor wasn't quite so noble as he looked. He had the same bluntness Xena did, and she wondered.

Who was he, really?

Xena finished her bread and chased it down with a swallow of wine as the silence lengthened. "That all you had to say?"

"That's it."

The queen regarded him.

"Go on, Xena, tell me to get lost and you'll think about it." Philtop said, with a wry twist to his lips. "That's what I'd do." He added.

"I don't have to think about it." Xena answered. "I just have to decide what it's going to cost you. So yeah, go on and have some lamb on me and we'll talk tomorrow."

Philtop nodded, his shoulders relaxing slightly. He got up and ducked his head. Then he turned and hesitantly did the same to Gabrielle before he went to the door, drawing himself erect before he opened it and slipped out, closing it firmly behind him.

It was briefly silent. Then Xena sighed and took a swig of her wine. She looked over at Gabrielle, who was looking intently back at her. "Long story."

"Wow."

"Really, really long story."

\*\*

How to explain Philtop? Xena lay flat on her back on the big bed, arms outstretched as she listened to Gabrielle pattering around near the fireplace. How to explain this massive screw up of her younger years that almost... almost had cost her this realm she'd conquered.

"Damn it."

The scent of hot cider neared, and she turned her head just as Gabrielle sat down on the bed and offered her a cup. "Don't have a past, muskrat. It catches up with you and bites you in the ass when you least expect it to." She turned onto her side and hiked herself up on one elbow, taking the mug and feeling it warm her hand. "Thanks."

The pale green eyes studied her gravely. Then her consort lifted a hand and touched her cheek, stroking the skin there with a gentle thumb as Xena's eyes fluttered briefly closed. "He sounds like he was in your army. Was he?" Gabrielle asked quietly.

"No." Xena said, after a pause. "He was an obstacle. Westlands were the first territory I attacked when I got here." She swirled the liquid in the cup and took a sip. "I caught them by surprise. Came down out of the hills at night, and had the city walls half down before they knew what hit them."

"Oh."

"So then." Xena felt itchy, and embarrassed, to be admitting this. "I saw them raise a white flag over the tower. Gates opened, he came out."

Came out, on his gorgeous chestnut horse, in all his finery. Xena remembered reacting to the sight. To the raw, knowing sexiness of him before she really understood what was going on.

Hades. She was young. He was gorgeous. He'd played the noble self sacrificing card and she'd fallen for it, and him in a wash of sexual desire that caught her completely by surprise.

What a feckless moron she'd been. Xena sighed and took a sip of her cider. "Anyway."

"He surrendered?" Gabrielle ventured softly.

"Not exactly. He made me an offer. He'd surrender, if I let him keep his lands after I finished raping and pillaging so I could go on to greener pastures. He'd just stay out of my way."

"Oh." Gabrielle's tone changed completely.

"Mm. Yeah. His outside's prettier than his inside." The queen remarked. "Only thing I respected was that he was willing to do anything to protect those poor bastards who're stuck trying to farm that scrub."

"Sounds like he still is."

Xena laughed shortly. "So after I went the distance and fought everyone around here into the ground... after my army was tired to the point of dropping and we'd just won.. he comes through the valley with his army and makes that offer I mentioned before."

"That you could be queen if you gave him an heir?"

"Mm." Xena nodded. "He was looking to take it all. Figured he had me over a barrel – we were ragged. I don't think I could have put twenty men against him." Her eyes narrowed. "He thought he had me."

Gabrielle watched her, seeing the deep, burning anger still in those pretty blue eyes. She took Xena's hand and chafed it, as the muscles in the queen's face twitched, memories obviously flickering through her mind.

She could still picture it. Her standing in her leathers, covered in dirt and blood, and him in his sparkling, clean armor, smiling at her, reaching out to touch her face all ignorant of the building storm standing in front of him.

His words had washed past her, as he patted her cheek, touched her shoulder, then put his hand on her belly and told her he couldn't wait to fill that with what he knew would be big, beautiful boys.

"Xena?"

Xena took a breath, and released it, looking up into Gabrielle's concerned face." Doublecrossing jackass bastard. I should have killed him."

"Why didn't you?" Gabrielle asked.

One of the queen's dark eyebrows lifted sharply. "Aren't you supposed to be a sheep loving pacifist?"

Gabrielle blushed. "That's not what I meant.. I was just wondering."

"You were just wondering." Xena took a sip, then handed her the cup. "You were wondering maybe I didn't because I liked him?"

Gabrielle's blush deepened.

"Liked him, the way I like you?" Xena studied her intently, seeing the flutter at her pulse point.

Her consort took a breath, then raised her eyes. "I know there were other people." She said. "It's okay."

The queen chuckled very softly. "Well, you come by those green eyes honestly, don'cha?" She reached over and put her hand on Gabrielle's thigh, a little surprised to feel a faint tremor there. "So yeah, I was a young and stupid, and I wanted him in bed." She watched Gabrielle's eyes flicker, then lift to her own. "He screwed up by trying to screw me over. If the moron had just offered to join his army to mine, he'd probably be the king of this place right now."

Gabrielle studied her gravely.

"But he didn't. Instead." Xena looked away, down at the soft fabric covering the bed. "He ended up cracked in half, and I risked the first great bluff of my career and told his army I'd cut them all to pieces myself if they didn't take him and get out of my sight." She looked back up. "If any of them had any guts they'd have called me on it, but they didn't."

"Maybe they were bluffing too."

"Maybe they got the shit scared out of them by the fact their prince could only make squeaking noises and his face looked like the hind end of a warthog." Xena said. "But the bluffing... yeah, could be. They expected me to roll over same as he did."

"He really expected you to just..." Gabrielle made a face. "Just give up?"

"He really did." Xena said. "Moron."

Gabrielle took a sip and handed the cup back. "Do you think he's telling the truth?"

"Do you?" Xena took a swallow of the cider, and watched her consort over the rim of the cup.

"I think he wants to help his people." Gabrielle finally said, reluctantly. "But I don't trust him."

Xena smiled faintly. "My guess is, soon as the Persians were hammering at my gates, he'd be sneaking up and shooting us in back from the other direction."

"Do you think he was with Bregos?"

Xena shook her head. "He'd n ever treat with that bastard. But he knows when to take advantage of someone else's weakness." She looked down again, and felt Gabrielle's touch on her shoulder, the gentle clasp warming her skin.

She really didn't need the sympathy though. She'd wondered how she would feel facing him again and when she had, she' found him to be just an annoyance – to her relief. None of the attraction she'd felt way back when sparked up at all even though he was still, undeniably attractive.

Just not to her.

Right?

She wondered how it had been for him. "Glad I was old enough to know what the Hades I was doing before I met you." She looked up at her consort with wry honesty. "I thought I knew what love was. I had no clue."

"Me either." Gabrielle admitted. "But then I really didn't know anything, you know? I never really had anyone in my life who cared about me, except maybe Lila." She drew in an released a breath. "Until I met you."

"Ah yes." Xena smiled faintly. "Your friendly neighborhood homicidal maniac. You sure know how to pick em, muskrat."

Gabrielle smiled back. "Why did you say that?" She asked, after a pause. "That I picked you? I don't think I did." She said. "I thought you picked me." Her eyes shifted and met the blue ones steadily. "Didn't you?"

A brief shake of Xena's head. "Let's stop talking." She leaned over and nibbled Gabrielle's arm. "We've got time to scare the chickens before we have to get dressed."

\*\*

Xena sat quietly on the long, low couch at the back of her dressing room, her body encased in it's new finery, but her feet still bare. She was leaning against the wall, turning the horses head Gabrielle had given her over and over in her fingers.

She would wear it on the fur lined cloak she was going to put on over her gown, she decided. It would look good against the silver trim and it just made her happy to look at it in any case.

A soft sound made her look up, to see Gabrielle enter, looking shyly uncertain. "Xena?"

"Over here." The queen called out from her somewhat dim and cozy corner. "C'mere."

Also barefoot, her consort walked over, coming to stand next to the queen.

"Hm." Xena studied her. "Sexy." She admired the colorful, rich fabric wrapped around the smaller woman, showing off her compact curves and exposing her shoulders. "I like that."

That got a brief, embarrassed grin from Gabrielle. "You think so??"

"I think so." Xena "And since I'm in charge, what i think is all that matters, isn't it?"

Gabrielle chuckled a little. She looked up to find those very blue eyes watching her. "I like it."

"Do you?" Xena's brows lifted.

"Yeah." Her consort nodded. "I like the color and I think it looks good on me."

"Oo. Are you finally getting some fashion sense?" Xena laughed. "About damn time." She twitched a bit of the fabric straight. "Bet you were glad to have your little helper around putting this on, huh?"

Gabrielle nodded.

Xena held up the horse's head. "I really like this." She said, in a quiet tone.

Gabrielle sat down next to her, pressing her head against the queen's shoulder and looking at the pin. "I saw it, and it just... it jumped out at me. It looked so much like Tiger."

"It does." Xena gazed fondly at it. "The big bastard."

"So I asked the maker there if he did that on purpose, and you know what, Xena? It was Tiger, but he didn't know he was your horse."

Xena looked skeptical.

"Yeah, I thought that too." Gabrielle nodded. "But you know, why would he lie about that? He wasn't from around here, he said. He just got here a seven day ago, and the first thing he saw was Tiger in the outside field so he made this to look like him because he was so pretty."

"He is." Xena agreed. "Damn good breeding. I stole him from a farm way north of here." The queen turned the piece over in her fingers. "They were using him as a plow horse."

"Really?" Gabrielle's eyes widened.

"Really." Xena nodded. "He was barely a two year old. Wasn't grown yet. Wild as a weed." She sighed. "Just like I was."

Gabrielle studied her, and the pensive expression on her face. "Um." She cleared her throat. "Are you not wild now?" She asked. "Because I think your horse still is."

Xena blinked at her, then she started laughing. "Muskrat." She reached over and tickled Gabrielle's nose. "What would I do without you?" She straightened up. "Let's go enjoy our banquet. Tell a kickass story about me, and I'll make sure they bring three desserts for ya."

The queen hoisted herself up off the couch and held her hand out, hauling Gabrielle up next to her when her consort took it. She gave the smaller woman a pat on the butt, then went to the stand where her cloak was waiting, fastening the clasp to it.

Gabrielle watched her for a moment, idly admiring the shape of the queen's back, and it's elegant tapering to her hips. She could barely see the faint white scars that had brought them together and it was hard to resist the urge to go over and ..

Well, why should she resist? Gabrielle went over to where Xena was standing and ran her hands over the visible bare skin, leaning forward to give her a kiss in the center of her shoulder blades.

Xena peered back at her, one eye brow edging upwards.

Gabrielle put her arms around the queen and gave her a hug. Then she trotted back to her own room to put her sandals on, pausing to reflect on what she'd just heard, and consider what story she wanted to tell.

A bold and heroic one, for sure.

\*\*

The huge banquet hall was stuffed pretty much full. Xena leaned back in her big chair and regarded her guests, all packed into tables squeezed into every available inch as the servers sidled among them with their huge platters of food.

At her long table, besides herself and Gabrielle, were a dozen of her nobles that she disliked the least, including her heir, and his wife. The general rule was, the further away you were from her, the more Xena disliked you and those who were clustered against the back wall were correspondingly worried looking as a consequence.

Philtop and his group were off to one side. Not at the back, but not at the front either – Stanislaus had squeezed a table in for them in pretty much the most neutral place he could find.

She knew he was watching her. She could see him from the corner of her eye.

Casually, she reached over and captured Gabrielle's hand, bringing it up to her lips and kissing the back of it.

Gabrielle gave her a mutely delighted look. She picked up a carafe and refilled Xena's glass with it, the golden liquid sparkling in the candlelight. "Here comes the lamb."

Xena eyed the four men struggling to carry the platter heading their way. On top of it was a whole roasted lamb, mounded around with grains and roots. "So." She observed. "What's everyone else eating?"

Gabrielle looked at the lamb, then looked at her, eyed widening a trifle.

"Hey, I'm hungry." The queen spread her hands out.

"Can I have the tail?" Gabrielle asked, straight faced. "I'm hungry too."

Xena chuckled as they arrived, placing the huge platter down on sturdy wooden stands in front of her table. The smell was rich and almost intoxicating, and she could see the rest of the room shifting a little, peering up at them. Fancies had already been delivered to the tables, finger nibblements of the year's first hard cheese, and smoked venison sausages with loaves of bread, but everyone was waiting for this part of the feast – the best of the stock sent to the stronghold slaughtered for good luck in the coming season.

Xena stood up and circled the table, drawing her belt knife as she approached the platter and the servants who carried it shuffled back away from her. She studied the carcass and then lifted her eyes to regard the crowd.

For the first time, in her years of ruling them, she sensed a willingness out there to accept her leadership. The nobles would always all show up to feed, but now, she could see in the expressions and the body language and the way they were looking at her that she had, in fact, crossed some line with them.

Oh a lot of them still hated her. She wasn't a fool. She knew there were people in the room that if given the chance, might slip a knife into her ribs or put an arrow in her back... but for the first time, most of them were ready to accept her and figured maybe it could be worse.

Ironic.

Xena let the point of her dagger rest on the platter's surface. "Ordinarily I'd hack a chunk of this and toss it over my shoulder, then kick the rest of it into your faces." She said. "But y'know" She paused. "It's been a Hades of a year."

The room was utterly silent, waiting for her to continue. That was new too. Usually one or another of the older nobles would have stood up by now and been spouting off something at her. "So maybe we can stop kicking each other's ass so much." She touched the point of the knife to the platter. "Let's figure out how to get rich together, instead of you looking for ways to knock me off and me looking for ways to cut you to pieces in return."

She looked up to find that intent attention still focused on her. "Deal?"

Slowly, a few of them nodded, looking around at their seatmates – sometimes glaring – until they nodded too until the entire room looked like leaves fluttering in the fall breeze.

"Okay." Xena lifted the knife and cut into the carcass, releasing a gust of steam as she efficiently carved up the animal.

Her own tradition. She cut off some pretty chops and set them on one of the smaller platters, then she turned and extended her arm, placing the dish in front of Gabrielle. "Here ya go, muskrat."

Her consort smiled at her, but kept her hands folded and didn't touch the plate. Xena went down the table and served random portions to everyone seated at it, then she cut herself a pile of slices and retired to her seat. She lifted her cup, and looked both ways down the table. "Good Harvest."

"Good harvest!" Her table mates all answered in unison.

Xena extended her cup towards the room, and gestured to the servers. "Good harvest."

To her surprise, everyone stood and lifted their own cups and returned the greeting. Even Philtop, over in his corner, and the skeeves in the back of the room. She felt her eyes widen a little, and felt the gentle nudge as Gabrielle poked her, a big smile on her consorts face.

She lifted a hand and acknowledged the toast, then she sat down, and everyone else did too, as the servers started bringing overflowing silver platters to every table, and, slowly the sound of voices rose in a low buzz as glasses clinked and people dug in.

"That was cool." Gabrielle clasped her hand. "Wasn't it?"

Xena studied her plate, with a somewhat puzzled expression on her face. "Yeah." She finally said. "It was." She turned as Brendan stepped up behind her, and bowed. "Did you see that?"

"Aye, Mistress." Brendan's tone was affectionate. "Been a long time coming."

"Uh huh." Xena sat back and took a deep swallow of her wine. "Wonder how long it'll last?"

\*\*

Gabrielle curled up on her side on the bed, her parchment in front of her and a quill in one hand. She was stuffed full from dinner, and she was glad to be lying down quietly waiting for everything to start to digest. We just had the most amazing banquet. I didn't think there were that many good tasting things in the world much less on our table at one time.

I told the story about how Xena defeated the Persians. It took a long time, but Xena saved me some of all the stuff I missed while I was telling it so afterward I got all caught up.

Everyone really liked it! Even old Pussface clapped afterward and Jellaus came over to tell me how much he liked not just the story but how I told it.

I'm glad. I think Xena liked it too.

Gabrielle glanced over towards the fireplace, where the queen was sprawled in a chair, her eyes half closed and her hand resting on her stomach. "That was some banquet huh?"

Xena's head turned slightly and one blue eye opened all the way and peered at her. "Way too much." She said. "I shouldn't have had that last half a sheep."

Gabrielle chuckled. "I think it was really that last nutcake with honey."

"Mm." Xena wagged an eyebrow. "Good thing I shared that with you. I think I would have hurled and lost it all if I'd tried to finish it myself."

Gabrielle got up and went over to where her queen was sprawled, perching on the arm of the chair she was sitting in. "I thought it was a really nice banquet. Everyone was happy."

"Mmhm." Xena nodded. "Weird. First time that ever happened."

"You got a lot of really nice presents." Gabrielle smoothed Xena's hair back.

“You too.” Xena looked very pleased. “Those little bastards actually showed some taste for a change. Wonder who told em what you liked?”

Her consort continued playing with her hair, and scratching her gently behind the ears causing little contented grunts to emerge from the queen. “Well, I sort of thought that was probably you.” Gabrielle said. “Since I think you’re the only one who knows what I like.”

Xena chuckled under her breath. “Ain’t that the truth.” She settled her arm around Gabrielle and rested her head against her consort’s hip. “Yeah it was me.” She exhaled, her eyes on the flames, a look of quiet contentment coming over her face.

“Thank you.” Gabrielle leaned down and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. “I had a great time, and it was so wonderful to get all those things.” She whispered. “But the best part was seeing your face when I told your story.” She felt the motion as Xena smiled and she tipped her head forward a little to see it, the softly glinting blue eyes meeting hers. “You really liked it.”

The queen nodded.

“It’s a long story though.” Gabrielle cleared her throat, her voice sounding tired. “I’m going to have some tea. You want some?”

Xena nodded again.

Gabrielle kissed her on the top of her head again then she stood and walked over to the fire, moving the water pot over the gentle flames. She set up two ceramic cups, removing some dried tea leaves from a wooden box on the mantel and mixing them with fresh mint and a bit of rose petal.

The scent of the crushed herbs was intoxicating. Gabrielle pulled over the small pot of honey and waited for the water to heat fully, savoring the warmth of the fire against the front of her legs. It was raining outside, the patter of drops audible through the windows, and it felt very good to be inside, under a strong roof, with a good fire, and a friend to share a cup of tea with.

She poured the boiling water over the leaves and waited for them to steep, drizzling the honey in and smelling the steam change as it dissolved.

She’d learned to love honey living with Xena. At home, the rare treat had been reserved for her parents, and only very very occasionally were the children given a bit on their tongues to taste. It was hard to obtain, and expensive, unless you were willing to brave the stings and go find a hive on your own.

Gabrielle never had. It wasn’t until she’d come to the stronghold that she’d seen in any large quantity and experienced the surprise that the slaves were allowed to take as much as they wanted during their well cooked meals.

Xena liked it. In her tea, and also on biscuits, and especially in the roasted apples Gabrielle often made for her after dinner.

Also. Gabrielle picked up the mugs and carried them over, setting them down on the small table between the two big chairs in front of the fire. She took a seat next to Xena and leaned on the chair arm with a sigh of satisfaction. She picked up her cup and took a sip, and watched quietly as the queen did the same. “So. What happens tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.” Xena studied her cup. “All of the nobles tender their rolls to the bookkeepers.” She half shrugged. “Formality really. I do my end of year court.” She cradled the mug between her hands, her long fingers curling around it. “I’ll tell everyone what I’m going to do to help the Westlands.”

“What are you going to do?” Gabrielle asked.

Xena gazed at the fire. "Send someone to take a census, then send supplies for the winter." She said. "Legion of troops, and a captain who'll be in charge there through the cold."

"Oo." Gabrielle made a face. "I don't think Philtop's going to like that."

Xena smiled. "I don't think he is either." She agreed. "But if he thinks I'm just going to send wagonloads of food over there and let him do what he wants with it, he's nuts. That's the price he pays. He wants rescue? Okay." The queen lifted one hand off the mug and waved it. "But my men make sure the food goes to the people, and not to any Persians he's courting."

Gabrielle was nodding, since the thought made sense to her. "You don't trust him."

"No reason for me TO trust him." Xena said. "I'd go myself to see the damn place but the last couple times I dragged my ass out of this castle I nearly got it spanked." She took a swallow of the tea. "Besides, I'm not sure the Persians aren't out there just waiting for their chance."

"You think they'll try something now?" Gabrielle frowned in concern. "Come here, I mean?"

Xena shook her head. "I don't know." She gave Gabrielle a wry smile. "I didn't expect what they did the last time, showing up and taking the port city, now did I?"

"Didn't you?"

Xena swirled the tea in her cup. Then she shrugged. "I got lucky." She said. "I got lucky, and I had you with me. You did more to save my skin than I did, my friend."

Gabrielle looked at her in more than a little surprise. "I don't think so."

Xena rolled her head to one side and regarded her consort. "Let's go to bed." She said. "I've had too much to drink and I'm getting to be an asshole." She put the cup down and pushed herself to her feet. "C'mon muskrat."

"Right here." Gabrielle had gotten up and circled the chairs, coming up on Xena's other side and snuggling up to her as they walked across the room to the big bed in the center of it. Xena casually doused the candles as she passed them, then they both shucked their robes and climbed into bed together.

"Ungh." Xena stretched and rolled over onto her back. "Hey you know what's happening tomorrow?"

Gabrielle settled onto her side, reaching over to curl her arm around Xena's and relax into the soft surface. "What?"

"Stanislaus told me one of the traveling circuses showed up." Xena said. "With tumblers and all that. Haven't seen one of those in .. damn." She felt Gabrielle's fingers gently stroke her skin, and start a little massage down her side. "Years."

"I've never seen a circus." Gabrielle said.

"You'll love it." The queen promised her. "We'll go down and watch them set up in the morning."

Gabrielle smiled just hearing the eagerness in her queen's voice. "Is that something you wanted to do too?" She asked. "Like the horse acrobats?"

Xena snorted faintly.

"After all, you really can juggle."

Xena let her eyes close. At once, the sounds of the castle flooded in and she settled her shoulders into the soft mattress, listening to the soft evidence of ongoing cleanup in the hall and the setting of the guard in the grand entrance.

She could hear, further, the sounds of the many vendors camped out near the gates, her sharp ears picking up music, and laughter, and the sound of livestock moving.

The smell of woodsmoke entered the window, and she could feel the wind growing cooler, but before she could get under the covers Gabrielle forestalled her and settled the filled down layer over both of them.

She was happy. Even with Philtop's presence, and the possibility of Persians, still she was looking forward to the morning and what it would bring, even if it wasn't all good.

Gabrielle snuggled up against her, and they were both drifting off when Xena's ears caught the sound of boots on the steps leading to her chambers, moving at an urgent pace. She sighed.

"What's wrong?" Gabrielle asked.

"You'll know in a minute."

A soft but insistent knock sounded at the door pretty much a minute later.

"How do you do that?"

"Sorcerous magic." Xena hauled herself up out of bed and grabbed her robe. "Stay here. Chances are they need to talk to me."

Gabrielle debated for a minute, then she put her head back down on the pillow, and folded her hands over the covers and relaxed, listening to Xena crossing the outer living chamber on her way to the outside door.

Then she heard the faint, but distinct sound of metal scraping against leather and she scrambled out of bed, galloping over to throw her tunic over her head before she ran out after the queen. She got through the door into the outer chamber just as Xena opened the front door, the queen looking sexily intimidating in her silk robe and bare feet with her longsword clutched in her right hand.

"Oh it's you." Xena let the sword rest on her shoulder as she stepped back to let Brendan enter. "Damn. I was hoping it was someone I could beat the crap out of. Work off some of that dinner."

"Mistress." Brendan looked a little harried. "Two more men have been killed. Down in the stables. This time ours." He glanced at Gabrielle as she arrived at Xena's side. "Same as t'others. Not a mark on em."

"Oh my gosh." Gabrielle said. "That's terrible."

"Aye." Brendan agreed. "Two young lads. Joined up since the war."

"Two." Xena mused. "Why two at a time?" She exhaled. "Put your boots on muskrat. Let's go see what the Hades is going on here." She said. "Get everyone who was around in the stables, Brendan. I want to talk to them." She closed the door after her captain and headed back into the bedroom, shoving her sword back into its sheath and untying the tie on her robe.

Impatiently, she tossed the thin fabric over the door and pulled on a pair of leggings, then paused. After a moment's silent debate, she pulled out her house armor and quickly slipped into it, tightening the straps to fit it around her body.

She heard Gabrielle coming back and she grabbed her boots, sitting down to put them on as her consort arrived in a thick woolen overdress, belted at her waist. "Ready?"

"Almost." Gabrielle sat down and pulled her own boots on. "That's really terrible, isn't it Xena?"

“That you’ almost ready? Yes.” The queen stood up. “Tie faster.”

“No, I mean the guys.” Gabrielle finished her laces then she stood up. “Okay.”

“C’mon.” Xena picked up her sword and settled the belt around her shoulders and waist.

“Let’s go see and then I’ll tell ya if it’s terrible or not.” She ran her fingers through her hair to get it out of her eyes. “Remind me to have you cut my damn hair when we get back wilya?”

“Sure.” Gabrielle followed her out of the room and down the steps. “But don’t you think you’d like it better of someone who knew what they were doing did it?”

“No.” Xena turned her head right and left as she walked, scanning the hallway. “I’ve always done it myself.”

“Oh.”

The doors to the stronghold were propped open, and torches were planted in their sconces all the way down the steps to the courtyard. Xena could see walking figures in the semi light, most in worker’s clothing, most carrying things. She didn’t sense any panic, which meant the word likely hadn’t gotten out yet.

No one liked dead bodies popping up. Xena herself didn’t, unless she caused them. “I just hope it’s not some kind of sickness.” She muttered. “With all these damn visitors it could be.”

“A sickness?” Gabrielle was trotting to keep up with her queen’s long strides. “Oh. We had that in our village one winter. It was terrible. Everyone got sick and some people died.”

“Exactly.” Xena headed for the doors to the stables. She could see their outline in the dusk, and the shadows of two soldiers guarding them. Then she slowed. “Maybe I don’t want you around those bodies.”

Gabrielle hauled up so she didn’t crash into Xena’s butt. “Are you going to see them?”

The queen eyed her. “Yes.”

“So is it dangerous for you?”

“Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like the way this conversation comes out?” Xena surged into motion again. “C’mon.”

They approached the stables and as they came into the torchlight, the soldiers recognized them and hurried to open the big door. Inside, it was well lit with hanging lamps and there were several groups of people standing around, all of whom jerked to attention as Xena’s tall figure entered.

Gabrielle’s attention was drawn to the two still forms on the ground, though, covered in horse blankets. They seemed rather small, and she could see one boot sticking out bearing the stamp of Xena’s household on it.

Xena went over to the figures and knelt beside them, pulling the blanket off the first one and setting it to one side. She studied the pale, young face with dispassionate eyes, reaching out to touch the chin and turn the head first from one side, then the other. “Who found them?”

“I did, mistress.” One of the grooms spoke quietly. “They were in the hayloft.”

“In the hayloft.” Xena mused. She picked up one of the man’s hands and examined it. “What were they doing in the hayloft?”

There was a conspicuous silence after she stopped speaking. Xena turned the man’s hand over and examined the palm. “Well?” She looked around, seeing the reddened faces. “C’mon boys. I know what sex is. Just ask Gabrielle.”

“Mistress, we don’t really know.” Brendan spoke up. “But aye, we think they were making free with each other.” He walked over to where Xena was kneeling. “T’other lad’s got his britches undone.”

“I see.” Xena rested her elbow on her knee. “Were you going to tell me that before or after I whipped the other blanket off and freaked out Gabrielle?”

“Mistress.”

“That wouldn’t freak me out.” Gabrielle spoke up in her own defense. “I grew up on a sheep farm.”

A few of the men cleared their throats.

“I thought you told me you never kissed a sheep?” Xena undid the catch on the top of the first dead man’s uniform and peeled it back, examining his throat closely.

“I never did.” Gabrielle stressed the pronoun. “But I guess you probably don’t know that there’s not a whole lot of difference between women and sheep in some areas.”

Xena stopped, and turned her head to stare at her consort.

“Well, you asked.”

The queen shook her head rapidly, then she went back to her examination, stripping the man’s uniform completely off and baring his pale lifeless chest. “Ah.” She rolled the man’s body over onto it’s side. “Brendan. I thought you said there wasn’t a mark on them.”

Brendan knelt next to her and looked where she was pointing. “I don’t see anything mistress.” He motioned one of the grooms forward with a lamp. “Where?”

“There.” Xena touched the skin just under a tiny red pinpoint. “See that?”

Several of the grooms clustered around as the lamp was brought closer. “Tis nothing?” One said. “Just a bit of a spot.”

“Maybe a bedbug bite.” Another suggested.

“What is it, Xena?” Brendan asked. “Seems a bug bite to me as well.”

Xena tapped the skin with her forefinger. “That’s the mark a poison dart makes” She said. “See that small red ring around it? That’s how far the blood got before whatever was on it killed this guy.” She pointed at the other figure. “Search that one for a spot just like this.”

She released the body and let it roll back, while Brendan and two of the other soldiers uncovered the second man, who was in fact only half clad. “Check him everywhere.” She said, watching with dry amusement as the men flinched a little, and gave her sideways looks. “C’mon ya little kittens.”

“Tis not natural, mistress.” The nearer soldier protested. “Two men lying together.”

Xena looked at him. Then she looked at Gabrielle. Her eyes slowly shifted back and almost impaled him with their sharpness. “Are you calling me unnatural?”

Everyone went very still. The soldier was frozen, his eyes wide as he realized what he’d said. Even Brendan was stunned into silence, one hand on the second soldier’s arm, the other lifted towards the queen.

Xena rose to her full height. “I asked you a question.” She pointed at the man.

The soldier rocked back onto his heels, raising his hands. “Your majesty... I didn’t mean you.” He said. “Please forgive me.”

“Didn’t you?” Xena ignored the two bodies and moved forward, grabbing the man by his surcoat and lifting him to his feet. She slammed him against the barn wall and held him

there, her other hand drawing a dagger from her belt. "Listen, horsecrap for brains. I don't know who fed you that idea but whoever it was didn't know what they were talking about."

The man was sweating profusely, shaking so hard his boot heels were thumping against the wall.

"Your life might depend on some guy who has a boyfriend." Xena said. "Hades. Your life depended on me."

The man nodded his head rapidly.

"Mistress." Brendan spoke up softly. "He's from the backwoods."

"So was Gabrielle." The queen retorted. "She showed up with an open mind." She turned her attention back to the man. "Am I going to have to cut your head open to let crap like that out?"

"N...no, your majesty." The man whispered. "Im' sorry."

"Ain't that the truth." Xena dropped him and stepped back. "Brendan, make sure he cleans the middens for the next moon. Maybe next time he'll think before he opens his mouth."

"Aye, mistress." Brendan said. "Xena, here's the spot I think." He drew the queen's attention to the second man. "Here, on his hip?"

Xena knelt again and examined the spot. The man, hardly more than a boy in truth, in fact had an identical mark just on the edge of his pelvis. "Yeah, that's it." She said. "Damn it." She rolled the man over and brought the lamp close to his still face, pulling his lip up with one finger to expose his teeth.

"Least we know what it is now." Brendan said.

"Mm." Xena straightened and propped her elbow on her knee. "Yeah, better to know you've got some idiot killing people rather than the plague around, huh?" She glanced at Gabrielle, who was watching her with a serious expression. "Except I don't like competition in the homicidal maniac department."

Brendan sighed. "What shall we do with them, mistress?" He indicated the bodies.

Xena stood up, dusting her hands off. "Give them a pyre, with honors." She said. "They served in my army. Make sure their families are taken care of." She turned and regarded the small crowd still there, watching her with wide eyes. "Now let's see what information we can get out of you lot."

She crackled her knuckles. "C'mon muskrat." She motioned Gabrielle forward. "Someone had to see something. Last resort we can threaten them with you and your sheep."

\*\*

Xena perched on a full barrel of millet, her ankles crossed as she waited for her next subject to interrogate. Behind her, Gabrielle was seated at a makeshift table, a stack of parchment and a set of quills in front of her as she took notes.

It was very late. All the sounds of activities outside had faded to nothing, and now, all Xena could hear when she stopped talking was the occasional owl, or the faint thunk of a horse hoof further back in the stables. "All right. Next." She pointed at one of the men. "C'mere."

One of her own guards came forward, rubbing his eyes. He sat down on the stool in front of the queen and gazed up at her. "Mistress?"

"Zuke." Xena responded. "Where were you all night?"

“Third arch inside courtyard, Mistress.” Zuke said. “From sundown, until the dinner ended.” He shifted a little. “Got a meal bucket from the mess, an then I sat near the well there, eating it.”

Xena nodded, considering her questions carefully. “When you were eating, who did you see?”

Zuke pondered that. “T’grooms.” He said. “Bring out some of the horses like, for the dukes and so on.” He blinked a few times. “Some of the lot from the Westlands. Them was near the wall.”

“Uh huh. Anyone go in the stables?”

“Not past me, Mistress.” Zuke seemed disappointed. “Doors were shut after t’grooms came out. Then I went back to the archway, and stayed there till all the yelling started.”

Pretty much the same answer as everyone else. Xena felt a level of frustration building. It seemed impossible that two men could have been killed in her barn without anyone at all seeing something.

Anything.

But no one had. The two soldiers had been in the loft together alone, and had been attacked and killed alone, dying so quickly they hadn’t had time to react, and therefore, had died not only fast, but in silence.

Only the fact that they’d missed evening call had alerted anyone, and then, apparently as they were known to frequent the loft for some privacy someone had gone looking for them there.

Xena got up and went to the loft, stepping up onto the crossbeams and pulling herself up into the strawfilled space. They’d taken the bodies out, and now she carefully examined the depression that had held them without touching or disturbing the straw.

They hadn’t struggled. Xena looked at the edge of the loft, running her eyes along the wooden wall for the nth time, over the cracked and splintered edge, over the neatly fitted pegs that held the loft together, over the braced corners.

Nothing, nothing, nothing... wait. Xena stared intently at a crack in the wood not a handspan from where her arms were resting. “Hand me a candle.”

Several people scrambled, then halted. Xena heard a faint scrape, and a bemused sigh, and the next thing she knew Gabrielle’s pale head was at her elbow, handing the candle up. “Thanks muskrat.” She took it. “No one else have the guts to come up here?”

Gabrielle kept her voice low. “No one else wanted to get caught looking up your breeches. There’s a hole in them.”

Xena turned her head and looked at her consort. “Well then.” She edged aside and pointed at the bit of wood. “You get to see what I found.” She held the candle close. “See that?”

Gabrielle craned her neck and peered at the plank. “Where? Oh.. you mean that split piece there?”

Xena reached over and closed her fingertips around something, wiggling it loose and bringing it close to her nose. It was a bit of cloth, and she showed it to Gabrielle. “See?”

Gabrielle studied it. “Is it supposed to be special?” She whispered. “Because it looks like a piece of someone’s shirt to me.”

“It is someone’s piece of shirt.” Xena whispered back. “But it’s silk. From a long way away from here.” She ran her fingertips over it. “My grooms don’t wear silk.”

“Oh.”

“Most of my nobles don’t wear silk.” Xena continued. “Now, I wear silk, but I wasn’t in this barn peeping at two guys getting each other off today.”

“You don’t wear black silk.” Gabrielle noted. “Not like that. It’s really dull. The stuff you have that’s black silk is all shiny.”

“Oo.” Xena looked at her. “You’re starting to show some brains, muskrat.” She winked, then she got down off the loft supports, landing lightly on the ground and strolling back over to her barrel. The men in the barn all had their eyes fastened thoughtfully on the ground and she let the silence lengthen for a bit as she took her seat again.

“So.” She finally said. “Either my butt’s that ugly, or you all are craven cowards. Which is it?”

“Xena.” Gabrielle clucked her tongue as she got back behind the table, sitting down and scribbling a few words on the parchment. “They were just being polite.”

Xena rolled her head to one side and regarded her consort with a very droll expression. “You don’t know much about men, do you?” She sighed, then turned her attention back to the room. “All right. Everyone take off. Go get some sleep.”

The men wearily got up, not even reacting to her butt comment, and started filing out.

“Brendan.” Xena half turned to her captain, who was stolidly standing guard nearby. “Make sure everyone stays in groups till we find the bastard who did this. No one goes out alone.”

“Aye” Brendan nodded agreement. “Put a double guard on your quarters mistress. Don’t want anyone getting no ideas.”

Xena folded her arms. “Maybe the fastest way to catch him is put no guard on my quarters.” She suggested. “See if whoever this guy is can get past my hoary old reflexes.”

Brendan hesitated, his face twisting into a scowl.

“You’re screwed either way.” Xena smiled. “Agree with me, or disagree with me you lose.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle tapped the queen on the leg with her quill. “Be nice.”

“Why?” Xena gave her a mock hurt look. “Can’t I have fun too?”

“Ah, Xena.” The army captain chuckled. “Let me rest my own head tonight and know you guarded whether you need it or no.” He said. “Be a long day tomorrow.” He stretched his body out and flexed his hands. “Find something up there?”

Xena handed over the silk scrap without comment. “All right.” She said. “Put a guard in the hall, Brendan, but keep them in the rotunda. Last thing I want to do is give anyone the idea I’m scared of whoever this is.”

“Aye.” Brendan was peering at the scrap in the candlelight. “Isn’t local.” He looked briefly up at Xena, who nodded just as briefly. “Persian?”

“I don’t know.” Xena folded her arms. “That’s what bothers me.” She looked over at Gabrielle. “Gather your notes, muskrat. Let’s go back to bed.” She got up and strolled again around the barn while her consort got her things together.

Towards the back of the structure Xena stopped, her head dropping to one side a little as she went still and closed her eyes. She opened her mouth slightly and sucked air in through both it and her nose, detecting at the fringe of what she could smell something out of place.

Straw and wood and animals prevailed. She could also smell the faint crisp scent of the brazier with it’s coals, the brassy smell of water in the buckets and troughs and leather from the harness.

And yet there was something else. Xena slowly turned, breathing in. Something that wasn't Brendan, or the wool of his tunic, or Gabrielle's soft skin, wasn't the ink in the bottle she was stopping or the creamy smell of the parchment.

It wasn't silk, or a cat.

She moistened her tongue and sucked in, and then, just at the very back, she found it. She opened her eyes and regarded the two others in the room, who were watching her in fascination. "Huh."

"Something wrong, Mistress?" Brendan looked around with a worried expression.

"Funny thing." Xena scooped up the pile of parchment and wrapped her arm around Gabrielle. "Smell something once, and you always remember it, if that once kicks your ass hard enough. C'mon." She started for the barn door. "We need to find this guy, Brendan."

"Aye." Brendan agreed.

"We really do." Xena said, quietly. "Make sure everyone's on their toes."

"Aye."

\*\*

Gabrielle leaned back on her pillow, her eyes roaming around the inside of their bedroom as she listened to Xena sharpening her sword over in the corner. The queen was back in her dressing gown, sprawled in the chair with her bare feet extended across the rug.

She had her sharpening stone clasped in one hand, and she was carefully scraping it over the length of her longsword, a look of quiet introspection on her face.

Gabrielle didn't really want to bother her. She knew sometimes Xena just needed time to think, and usually then she'd go out on the sentry walk or down to the stables, and expect Gabrielle to understand she wanted to be left alone.

This time though, she had made a point of sticking almost at Gabrielle's heels, and had brought her sword into the bedroom to attend to it. Gabrielle squirmed around and settled onto her elbows, watching the queen's hands move in that quiet, rhythmic way. "Xena."

"Muskrat." Xena glanced up over the sword.

"Why would someone want to hurt people here?"

The queen half shrugged. "Piss me off?" She ventured. "Could just be someone who holds a grudge. Still people in here who sided with Bregos, remember."

"Hm."

"Could also be a nutcase." Xena said. "Happens sometimes. I remember I had a guy in my army... picked him up just west of Thrace. Seemed fine, good fighter, then one morning we woke up and six men were lying dead around the campfire, their man's part cut off and their throats slit."

"Oh gosh!"

"Turned out the guy was a known fruitcake." The queen shook her head. "I had to break his neck before he killed anyone else."

Gabrielle frowned. "But did you catch him doing it?"

Xena's lips twitched faintly. "No. I figured out who did it, and confronted him. He snapped and tried to attack me with his teeth."

"Oh."

“Said I was a demon from Hades and an oracle told him to kill me and destroy my army.” The queen said. “That almost made me think I was wrong since I was a demon from Hades and I could think of a dozen men who’d want my army destroyed but then one of the archers found his kit bag with the dead men’s parts in it and he started trying to eat them and then.. everyone was glad as hell I killed him.”

Gabrielle’s face rapidly went through a series of expressions ranging from puzzlement to weirded out disgust. “That’s crazy.”

“Exactly.” Xena said. “So maybe this guy is too, but if he is, he’ll slip up and we’ll catch him.” She put the finishing touch with the stone and stood, seating the sword into its sheath, and hanging the sheath on the post of the bed so the hilt was within easy reach of her hand. “But I’m not taking any chances.”

“You think who ever this is will come after you?” Gabrielle’s eyes widened.

Xena sat down on the bed and sprawled on her side, coming nose to nose with Gabrielle . “I’m not worried about anyone coming after me.” She said. “I’m more interested in making sure no one gets anywhere near you.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle leaned forward a little and kissed Xena on the lips. “Thanks.” She murmured. “But I always feel really safe when we’re together.”

“Silly muskrat.” But Xena smiled, and returned the kiss. “I guess the nutball you know is always better than the one you only suspect is skulking in the hallways. Eh?”

“You’re not crazy.” Gabrielle said, in an utterly positive tone.

“No, not now.” The queen swiveled around and put her head down on the pillow. She pinched the candle out and exhaled, as Gabrielle joined her, pulling the soft cover over both of them. “But I was.”

“I don’t believe that.” Gabrielle slid next to her and put an arm around Xena’s middle. “You’re the smartest person I know.”

Xena smiled into the darkness, and put a return arm around her, savoring the warmth as Gabrielle pressed up against her and gave her a hug. She tried to remember what she’d been like back then in what she referred to herself as her crazy days, certain she really had been off the wall.

Hadn’t she?

She’d felt crazy, in the sense that she hadn’t really cared where her actions had taken her, and she’d almost prided herself on constantly doing the unexpected, keeping her men, her enemies and what few friends she’d managed to have as offbalanced as possible.

She was still that crazy woman, wasn’t she? Xena certainly didn’t feel like a boring old stuck in the mud predictable despot. She still did the unexpected, right?

She resisted the urge to get up and check the perimeter of the room again, having already examined every inch of not only the bedroom, but the inside living room, and her outside audience chamber twice. She’d checked all the closets, checked under the bed and the furniture, made sure the windows were all fastened, and even cautiously poked her head up the chimney just to be sure.

Yes, as she’d told Gabrielle, she wasn’t worried about someone coming after her. But she was terrified that through some inattention or mistake that Gabrielle would come to some harm, since she knew that everyone else probably knew exactly how weak a spot of hers the little shepherd’s kid was.

The Persian bitch had known. Xena drew a breath and released it. But then, the Persian bitch had gotten her face bitten half off by her little shepherd’s kid so there was that.

“Xena.” Gabrielle murmured. “What are you thinking about? You’re twitching all over.”

The queen forced herself to relax. “Nothing really.” She said. “Just remembering the bad old days.” She rested her cheek against Gabrielle’s hair. “Tomorrow we’ll look around a few places. I think I might have gotten a whiff of something maybe we could find, you and me.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle murmured, rather indistinctly. “Whereever you go, I go.”

Xena smiled, hearing that. “Well, except for Tartarus.” She remarked. “You can’t follow me there.”

“I will.” The blond haired woman said. “I don’t care if it’s worse than Tartarus I’m going with you.”

Xena gave her a hug. “You have no idea what you’re saying, but I love ya for saying it anyway, muskrat.” She scratched Gabrielle on the back of her neck, feeling a deep sense of affection for her bedmate that she wasn’t really sure what to do with.

“I love you too.” Gabrielle said, gently nibbling the queen’s collarbone. “And you know what? If some old crazy guy tries to come in here and mess with you I’ll jump all over them and squash them flat.”

Xena chuckled softly.

“I promise.”

“Go to sleep.” Xena gathered her close and rocked her gently. “No one’s going to mess with me, and no one’s going to mess with you.” She closed her eyes and let her body relax, still keyed up, but determined to get some rest in what was left of the night.

Then she felt a gentle touch cupping her breast and that determination faded. Ah well. Xena grinned. She’d gone more than one night without sleep for far worse reasons.

\*\*

Gabrielle tucked a shawl around her body as she pattered around in front of the fire in the living room, arranging things on the platter that had been delivered from the kitchens. Xena was still sprawled in their big bed, and the room was dark since clouds were covering the recently risen sun.

So she had the candles lit, and she perked up the fire, setting a pot for hot water on and reviewing the options for breakfast.

The tray held about a half dozen dishes and plates, mostly covered with late season sliced fruits, and some new harvest cheese, along with a small loaf of dark grain bread and a flagon of spiced cider. Gabrielle was pleased with the selection, and she set two dishes on the table, picking and choosing from the platter.

A gust of wind rattled the window, and she looked up, hearing an unexpected patter against the leaded glass. “Hail?” She got up and went over to look out, seeing sure enough tiny white pellets bouncing on the outside patio stone floor. “Wow.”

The sky was slate gray, and ominous. She could see trees bending under the force of the wind outside the gates and as she peered out, a colorful piece of fabric flew by and plastered itself on the outer wall. “Ooo.”

“Looks like I’ll bringing the clowns inside.” A voice sounded behind her, almost making Gabrielle jump before a pair of hands settled on her shoulders and she recognized Xena’s low tones. “Brendan thought he felt a storm coming.”

“Can we fit everything inside?” Gabrielle asked. “I wanted to see those horses again.”

“Sure.” The queen was in her dressing gown, and she leaned against Gabrielle's back in a very nice, warm way. “I'll put em all in the dancing hall. Get Stanislaus all pissed off.”

That certainly would. Gabrielle herself had only been in the hall once, it's huge, vaulted ceilings and crystal candle holders hinting at a grand past Xena seemed to be uninterested in repeating.. It was the largest open room in the castle, though, and if the circus was going to fit anywhere, it would fit there. “Cool.”

Xena smiled. “Call the guard in so I can give him the note for that pompous ass.” She squeezed Gabrielle's shoulders then released them. “What do we have here?” She wandered over to the tray. “Light stuff. Good.”

“Yeah I'm still pretty full from yesterday.” Gabrielle said. “I told them to just send up a little.”

“Uh huh.” Xena poured herself a mug of cider, and picked up a slice of pear, walking back over to the window and perching on the sill to watch the weather as she nibbled it. “Good idea. I don't think I could look at an egg or those griddle cakes of yours right now.”

The pear was acceptable, however. She nibbled it more for the taste than anything else, enjoying the sweetness as she reviewed the ugly situation outside her window.

And it was, indeed, ugly. She could see the hail, and she hear the ping of sleet against the stone, a little surprised at the sudden onslaught of winter after their very mild fall. Though Brendan had forecasted the storm, he hadn't said it would be this kind of severe weather.

She was glad the harvest was in. However, she realized now that she would probably have to host all her nobles until the storm ended and put up with their pompous nonsense more days than she'd anticipated.

Ah well. Xena sipped her cider as she watched the rain fall.

Gabrielle went through the outer chamber and opened the door, startling the two soldiers standing guard there. “Good morning.”

“Your grace.” The nearer one recovered and bowed. “Tis foul weather outside.” The man warned, as if he had never noticed the windows that surrounded half of their quarters.

“Yes, it is.” Gabrielle agreed. “Would you come inside? Xena has a note she needs taken.” She stepped back and allowed the guard to enter. She spotted Brendan trotting up the steps and paused to wait for him.

“Morning, y'grace.” Brendan greeted her. “Mistress up yet?”

“Sure is.” Gabrielle closed the door after he entered and followed both men towards their living quarters. “Everything okay?”

“Aside the weather, so far aye.” Brendan said. “Good morning, Mistress.” He greeted Xena, who had turned at their entrance and was leaning casually against the window casement.

Gabrielle went over to the tray and got herself a mug of cider, sipping it and enjoying the cold, crisp apple taste. She took a piece of bread and cheese and went to the desk in the room, setting down her breakfast and removing her quill from it's case. “What do you want to tell him, Xena?”

“Can't have you write that muskrat. You'll bleed from those cute innocent ears.” The queen said. “So just tell him to let all the people here for the festival to bunk inside the walls, and to put all the performers in the dance hall.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle dipped the end of the quill in the ink and started scribing.

“Quiet rest of the night, Mistress.” Brendan was saying. “We got the pyre done for it started in raining. Jas took news to th'families, and we set em up on rations.”

“Thanks.” Xena had her legs up on the wide sill, her bare feet crossed at the ankles. “Get three different squads, four men each, and search this place. Top to bottom. I want to know about anything strange they find.” She considered. “I would have had them start last night, but most of those places are too damn dark at night.”

“Aye.”

“They're looking for any evidence at all of someone hiding or living in the corners or closets.” Xena went on. “Straw on the floor, scraps of food, dung, whatever.”

“Understood.” Brendan said. “Start up at t'top and work down to the dungeons.”

“You were right about the weather.” The queen commented. “Damn you.”

Brendan flexed his hands. “These old bones know it.” He admitted ruefully. “Felt it comin on.” He glanced outside, where another patter of hail was bouncing. “Glad we had a nice day yesterday at least.”

“Yeah.” Xena said. “I should have known better than to think my luck would hold longer than that.” She remarked dryly. “Now we have to feed this whole crowd until the damn storm stops. Even I can't kick them all out in it.” She added in a regretful tone.

“Got plenty of stock in.” Brendan said. “Merchants'll be happy t'get more coin.”

“True.” Xena said. “I should tax them on it.” She said. “Anyone bitches about anything, toss that idea at em.”

Brendan chuckled.

Gabrielle finished her note. She blew the letters dry, then she opened the pretty wooden box on one side of the table and removed Xena's signet ring. She picked up a candle and dripped a bit of wax on the parchment, then pressed the signet into it.

A measure of Xena's complete trust. The power of that impression could pretty much do anything she desired in the realm. Gabrielle put the ring back into its box and waved the parchment around waiting for the wax to cool.

Xena had told her she enjoyed having someone around to write all her stuff for her. Gabrielle wasn't sure if that was really true, or just something the queen wanted her to do just to give her something to do. It wasn't as if Xena had any problems writing – her handwriting was better and more legible than Gabrielle's was in fact.

Nevertheless, the queen insisted she do it, and so, Gabrielle was glad to humor her and did her best to make the notes she scribed understandable and neat. She rolled up the parchment and gave it to the guard. “Here you go.”

“Take that to Stanislaus.” Xena ordered. “Tell him don't bother whining about it. I want to see that circus.”

“Majesty.” The guard took the scroll and left, closing the outer door firmly behind him.

“Xena.” Brendan cleared his throat. “The Westlanders be making a bit of trouble.”

Xena's eyes narrowed. “What kind of trouble?”

“Quarters they were given for the guard not to their liking. The captain came found me this morning, they want to move into the stronghold next to where the prince is.”

Xena sighed.

“Said they heard as was a killer around, they needed to protect his nibs.” Brendan concluded. “Heard all the hubbub last night I guess.”

“Gag.” The queen grunted.

“Well, were four people killed, Mistress.” Brendan sounded almost apologetic. “Know I'd be tetchted ifn it was you in his castle and that was so.”

The queen glowered at him. “Tell them I said beggars can't be bitches.” She said. “If Philtop wants to sleep with his guards he can move him and his buttlickers to the barracks.”

“Aye mistress.” Brendan ducked his head. “I'll tell em.”

“Beat it.” Xena said. “So I can go outside and take my morning bath out on the porch.” She got up and strolled to the doors that opened out into the storm. “Gabrielle, get my soap.”

Brendan ducked his head ahead, then scooted over to the door and ducked through it, leaving them alone. Gabrielle looked at the closed door, then at her queen. “Um.”

“Yeeeessss?”

“You aren't actually going to take a bath out there, right?”

“Why not?” Xena turned and leaned her back against the window. “It's water, ain't it?” She cocked her head at Gabrielle. “Same as what's in our bathtub.”

“Our bathtub isn't icy cold and it doesn't have hard pieces of ice falling in it.” Gabrielle went over and peered out the glass. “I'd get sick to death if I tried it.” She sensed Xena moving, then she was surrounded by the queen's long arms. “I remember when we were out with the army and it was so cold. Brr.”

“And I wanted you to take a bath in the stream. Remember that?”

“It was a heated stream.” Gabrielle had to smile. “But I didn't know that.”

“Let me clue ya, muskrat.” Xena pointed outside at the rain. “If you go outside in that, you know how good it'll feel when you come back inside?”

Gabrielle frowned. “But why get all cold for no reason?”

Xena rested her chin on Gabrielle's head. “Cause you don't understand what warm is until you've been cold.”

Gabrielle thought about those words for a long moment as the silence lengthened. Then she turned in the circle of Xena's arms and let her hands rest on the queens hips. “Okay. Do you really want to do this?”

“No.” Xena grinned at her.

“Xena.”

The queen chuckled. “Let's go get cleaned up and dressed. I've got court to hold and jackasses to deal with.” She turned them both around and nudged Gabrielle in the direction of the bedroom. “You can tell everyone we took a hail shower. Be good for my image.”

“Xena that's kinda crazy.”

“Exactly.”

\*\*

Gabrielle was glad she had her new, warm cloak on as she trotted between the main hall and the wing of the castle that held the dancing hall. She pulled her hood up and felt the pelt of the rain against her shoulders, the sound of moving livestock barely audible over the roar of the storm.

The doors to the other hall were propped open despite the rain, the water dampening the stone and puddling a little at the entrance. Gabrielle went around the puddle, and trotted up the steps glad to trade the harsh weather for the firelit warmth inside.

The first person she saw was Stanislaus and boy, he sure looked pissed off. She could see the stiffness in his body, and the jerkiness of his gestures, as he directed the circus performers into the hall. "Stanislaus."

He turned and spotted her. "Your grace." He managed, through gritted teeth.

Gabrielle almost felt sorry for him. "Xena had them move all the market vendors into the big show stable." She said. "She wants you to have food and drink brought in there."

The seneschal looked exasperated. "Your grace." He said. "I am fully occupied here in this.. this.." he exhaled. "I will try to have something done as soon as I am done here."

"Great. Thanks." Gabrielle peered into the hall, her eyes widening when she saw the collection of people and animals inside it. The horse performers were there, laughing with some of the jugglers and a couple of men and women who were slim but very muscular and held themselves with unconscious pride.

The hall was almost unrecognizable. The floor had been covered in straw, and the walls hung with colorful, if wet, hangings. The circus workers were putting up some seats on one side and there were two wagons parked in the middle of the floor with oxen still attached to them.

It smelled.. well, it smelled like hay, and animals, and wet sheep actually. Gabrielle edged inside to watch, fascinated by all the strange things.

There were poles being set up, a framework she couldn't imagine the use for, and as she watched, two lithe young girls started to stretch themselves out, twisting into exotic, pretzel shapes. "Wow."

"Hello."

Gabrielle turned to find a woman about her age standing next to her, with short, curly black hair and a spattering of freckles. "Oh, hello." She returned the greeting. "Are you part of the circus?"

"I am." The newcomer agreed. "My name's Cellius. My father runs the circus."

"Wow." Gabrielle extended her arm. "It's great to meet you. My name's Gabrielle."

Cellius returned the clasp. "Nice to meet you too, Gabrielle. Do you live here? In the castle?" She watched Gabrielle nod. "It was nice they let us come inside. We were so disappointed when it started to rain."

"We were too." Gabrielle said. "Everyone was excited to see you. Can you show me around your stuff?" She asked. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Sure." Cellius waved her forward. "This is a great space for us to perform in. I've never seen a room this big before." She walked over to the posts. "This is our trapeze rig. We hang ropes from it and do flying tricks."

"Really?" Gabrielle peered upward. "Wow."

"Yeah, it's scarylicious." Her new friend said. "I've never done it. I just ride the horses in the ring." She said. "My father won't let me do the flying... he says it's too dangerous."

"I bet." Gabrielle said. "What's that there?" She pointed.

"Oh that's the balancing boxes." Cellius said. "Borus, there, he and Jac can balance on them all piled up on each other. It's crazy. Wait till you see it."

"You mean they put the boxes on each other?" Gabrielle stared in fascination. "Oh, wait, I see." She watched the two men as they started to practice. One put a ball down, then put a

plank on top of it, jumping on the plank and keeping his balance as the ball rolled around.  
“Oh my gosh.”

“Wait, it gets a lot better. They get up higher than the cart there.” The woman said. “So.. what do you do here?”

“Me?” Gabrielle tore her eyes away from the performers. “Oh. I’m a storyteller.” She said, honestly.

“You are? That’s great!” Came the surprising answer. “Boy, we haven’t heard too many stories this summer at all – we were hoping we’d get to hear some new ones here at the festival.”

Well then. Gabrielle grinned. “This is going to be a lot of fun.” She said. “I really liked watching the horses yesterday.. are they friends of yours? The riders I mean?”

Cellius was already nodding. “They usually go a day or two ahead of us, since there’s a lot of them and it’s hard to fit all of us in the same place.. but this place is great.” She turned and spread her arms out. “Look at how high the ceiling is! Its like it was made for us.”

Two of the slim, muscular men came over. “Hey Celli.. who’s your friend?” One of the asked, giving Gabrielle a smile. “She’s cute.”

Gabrielle felt the tips of her ears redden. “Hi.” She stuck her hand out. “I’m Gabrielle.”

“Boots.” The man clasped her hand and released it.

“She’s a storyteller, Boots.” Cellius said.

“Yeah?” The man said. “Sweet.. Right bruddah?” He bumped the other man with his hip. “We like stories.”

“So what is it you do?” Gabrielle asked. Both men were super muscular, and they had tough, calloused hands. They were both good looking, with dark hair and brown eyes, and they weren’t too much taller than she was. “Are you the acrobats?”

“We are!” Boots said. “We fly on the ropes and bars up there.” He pointed at the frame that was inching it’s way up to the ceiling. “Boy it’s gonna be great not having to worry about getting wet tonight doing it.”

“You got that right.” The other acrobat said. “Bad enough you slipped out of my grip the last town, Boots. Coulda broke your neck.” He edged closer to Gabrielle. “Hi there, pretty girl. My name’s Zev.”

“Hi.” Gabrielle still had her eyes focused upward. “That’s really high.” She looked at the two acrobats. “I bet it’s going to be a great show.”

“Have you ever seen a circus?” Cellius said.

“No.” Gabrielle shook her head. “I’m from a little village in the hills. I never saw anything like this. We just got some jugglers sometimes at harvest where I’m from.” She said. “Once some guy came through who could shoot apples off people’s heads with a crossbow. That was kind of exciting.”

The performers all laughed.

“I’ll show you.” Boots went over to the half assembled structure and leaped up, catching one of the wooden struts with both hands. He paused, then he pulled himself up and then flipped up side down, leaning his weight on his thighs on the bar and releasing his hands, spreading his arms out in perfect balance.

“Wow.” Gabrielle said.

Then he rolled over and started to fall, catching himself with one arm and swinging around in a circle, catching the bar with his free hand and bringing his legs up between his arms and

the bar, then hooking them over the bar and releasing his grip again to dangle head downwards.

He swung back and forth a few times, then suddenly flipped himself off the bar, tumbling in a somersault and then twisting to land on his feet, spreading his arms up and over his head in a triumphant gesture.

Gabrielle clapped. "That was cool!"

Boots grinned. "Now it's your turn. Tell us a story." He said. "You know any good ones?"

Gabrielle felt it was a fair enough deal. She knew she had a candlemark or so before Xena expected her at court so she found a seat on a barrel and pushed her cloak back, revealing her hawk's head tabard and the dark leggings that went with them. "Okay, sure."

"Hey, is that the queen's mark?" Zev asked. "Saw it on the guards outside."

Gabrielle looked down at her chest, then back up. "Yes, it is." She agreed. "So I'll tell you a story about how the hawk came to be Xena's mark, and how she came to be queen here."

"Hey, local history." Boots took a seat on a crate and extended his muscular legs out, crossing them at the ankles. "Go for it, Gabrielle."

"Always good to know who you're playing to." Zev agreed. "Hey you seen her close up?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Yes."

"Think you could get us an introduction?" Boots wiggled his feet at her.

Gabrielle scratched her nose. "How about you listen to the story first, then we talk about it?" She temporized. "So once upon a time there was a young, fearless warlord..."

\*\*

Xena prowled through the hall, her eyes flicking right and left as she moved among the now crowded space filled with merchants and their servants trying to find space to spread out their wares.

The storm had worsened outside, and she'd ordered the big firepits lit. Now the huge hall was starting to warm, and around her people were rubbing their hands together and looking more cheerful, oblivious of the tall figure in its common cloak in their midst.

"Ah."

Xena recognized the voice even from the partial word and she paused, turning to find Stanislaus at her elbow, looking both harassed and anxious. "Now what?" She stepped aside out of the crowd, into a small alcove where they could hear each other and not impede traffic.

"Your majesty." Stanislaus said, rubbing his hands together but not from the cold. "His royal highness Duke Lastay wishes to see you."

Xena tilted her dark head slightly. "So he has you asking?" She queried. "Someone cut his balls off? Figured he didn't need them anymore since he got his heir?"

"Ah no.. ah.... No, mistress." The seneschal took on a hint of color. "The good duke merely asked me to inform you if I should see you. He went to your audience chamber, and your suite, and did not find you there."

"Because I wasn't." Xena agreed. "Okay, where's the little bastard now?" She asked. "He in his bedroom making more kids?"

Stanislaus' facial color deepened. "Your majesty I hardly know what he is doing in his privacy." He said. "I believe his lady, in fact, was going to attend the market. Perhaps his lordship is taking his lunch."

"Perhaps his lordship is taking his pleasure with a stable goat." Xena chuckled. "You never know. ..." She eyed her seneschal. "You never do know, do ya? You have any kids?"

Stanislaus' face went still. For a long moment Xena thought her longtime lackey was going to actually do something unexpected like yell at her. The look of mixed embarrassment and suppressed rage was fascinating. "Well?"

Stanislaus looked up at her. "Your predecessor took that choice from me, your majesty. I have no ability to do that." He said, stiffly. "My focus has always been service to the crown."

Xena paused, and blinked, feeling a sense of honest shock at this revelation. She belatedly remembered now that she'd inherited the seneschal among a handful of others who hadn't died in the overthrow. "The stupid bastard made you a eunuch?" She finally said. "Really?" She knew her voice sounded as surprised as she felt.

Stanislaus looked horribly embarrassed. He shifted his eyes to the far wall and half turned away from her. "I had assumed your majesty knew."

Had she known? Xena stood quietly studying her servant. Stanislaus was an unremarkable looking man, of mid height and indifferent coloring. He had never seemed effeminate to her, but he had never seemed overly masculine either, merely world wearied with a tendency to fussiness.

She had known he wasn't married, but she had assumed he had his dalliances – apparently incorrectly. "I didn't know." She said, quietly, now far more serious. "Why?"

He glanced up at her, catching the change in mood. "He was very jealous of his women." Stanislaus said. "Those of us who were close in the household, he wanted no chance of temptation."

"What an asshole." Xena said, succinctly.

The seneschal shifted a little, his body straightening. "It was his way." He said. "There were those who thought perhaps your majesty would do the same, when you took your consort."

Both of the queen's eyebrows lifted. "As if them knowing I would not only cut their parts off but disembowel anyone looking crosswise at Gabrielle wasn't enough?"

Stanislaus lifted his hands slightly, then let them drop. "Your predecessor was not so accomplished at arms." He explained. "He was not a warrior, in truth. He relied on his generals to carry his banner in the field – unlike yourself."

"He was an idiot and he deserved to be spitted on Brendan's lance as he lay cowering under an oxcart." Xena replied. "But I am sorry he damaged you, Stanislaus. You didn't deserve that."

Startled, the man's head lifted and he looked Xena unexpectedly right in the eye. "Mistress." He murmured after a pause. "I... thank you."

"Mm." Xena peered out across the room. "All right, let me go find Lastay and see what he wants." She looked back at him. "Those circus people settled in?"

His face twitched a little. "Her Grace is entertaining them last I just saw." He said. "I believe they have what they require."

"Entertaining?" Xena allowed herself to be sidetracked. "They're supposed to be entertaining her."

"She is telling them a story." The seneschal clarified.

A story? Why would Gabrielle be telling a bunch of players a story? “Ah huh.” Xena mused. “What kind of story?”

“I didn’t stop to listen, majesty.” Stanislaus said. “The young men were, however, quite interested so perhaps it was about you.”

Xena stopped in the middle of taking a breath to answer and cocked her head, wondering if her seneschal was flattering her or trying to piss her off.

Could go either way really. Stanislaus had always been funny about Gabrielle, ever since the beginning when she’d started treating her body slave as something more.

Since he’d tried to get rid of her, risking Xena’s wrath in a misguided attempt at what he thought was protecting her, lucky that she’d come to know him well enough to know that.

His own kind of twisted, skewed bravery. “Thanks.” Xena said. “Hope I’m naked in it in that case.” She dusted her hands off and eased past him, heading down the steps and towards the door to the stronghold.

“Mistress!” Stanislaus called after her. “The Duke’s quarters are in the tower?”

Xena lifted a hand and kept going, trotting down the steps and crossing the inner courtyard. She could hear the buzz of many voices inside the walls, and it made her twitch a little, the smells of so many people and animals drumming against her senses in a not altogether pleasant way.

“Xena.”

Speaking of not altogether pleasant. Xena glanced to her left but kept walking. Philtop angled in and met her, matching her strides. “Need something?”

“You said you’d give me details this morning.” Philtop had on a cloth of gold tunic, and looked casually elegant in it. “My men are waiting.”

Xena stopped and turned to look at him.

“Weather’s coming in. They’re desperate.” Philtop said, in brief clipped tones. “Not to mention nervous as Hades hearing there’s some crazy killer loose in here.”

“You mean another crazy killer loose.” Xena said. “They already knew about me before they showed up here.”

Philtop’s face twisted into wry grimace. “You were a known risk.”

Xena pointed at a stone bench against the wall. She went over and dropped down onto it, and he followed, sitting down next to her. She extended one booted foot out, and rested her elbow on her thigh, the dusty leather she was wearing seeming out of place in the silk draped courtyard.

“Now you look like the Xena I remember.” Philtop said, unexpectedly. “You wore well, Xena. I think you’re better looking now than you were back then.” He studied the angular profile, and the pale eyes full of glittering intelligence watching him.

That’s what he’d screwed up on the last time. He’d seen the pretty face, and the strong body and the wildness and figured he could tame all that with a good roll in the hay – after all she was a good looking woman, and he was a very good looking man, and that’s all it had taken with all the others.

Hadn’t figured on that crafty razor brain that seemed to have only gotten sharper over the years, or the fact that this new queen had pretty much literally been raised by wolves and had the morals and manners of one.

By the gods, he'd paid for that mistake. At the time he'd never really believed Xena was the power behind her own throne, never really believed she was the war leader of the army that had taken over the largest kingdom in the land.

Never really believed a woman could be a warrior until he was being gripped by the neck and held against a stone wall with his feet dangling, powerless against her very unexpectedly much greater strength.

He still bore the scars of that encounter. He felt like he was playing with fire now again but this time he understood what the risk was. Looking at Xena now, he could see past the beautiful face, and the raw sensuality of her, and see the powerful, rangy body in it's worn leathers and the thick, corded wrists that told their own story.

This woman was still a finely honed weapon. He was now attracted to her for a completely different reason.

"Give me numbers." Xena replied in a crisp tone, ignoring the backhanded compliment. "I need to know how many people you have there, and what the level of supply is. I'm not turning over cartloads of supplies on spec."

"You don't trust me, Xena?" Philtop asked, wryly. "Aw, c'mon now. You don't still hold a grudge do you?"

"I trust myself. That's about it." The queen answered. "You give me numbers, my supply people will give you enough to last the cold months but nothing fancy. You'll get what my servants do."

Philtop leaned back against the wall and studied her profile. "Rumor has it your slaves do well." He said. "We wont starve, anyway."

"No." Xena turned her head to watch as the outer gates opened, and two wagons started rolling in, allowing a burst of weather in with them. "You won't starve." She pointed at the doors. "And tell your people just to be glad they're here eating off my table instead of being packed out of here into that."

Philtop chuckled, then sobered. "What about the deaths I heard about?"

The queen half shrugged. "Four guys. Fighters. Looks like they were poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Philtop sounded surprised. "Really?"

"Mm."

"Someone you piss... no, no point in asking that." He said. "You piss everyone off."

Now it was Xena's turn to chuckle. "I do my damned best to." She agreed. "Anything else you want? I've got things to do, people to threaten, and my consort to find."

"Ah yes. Your consort." Philtop seemed amused. "Did you really have to pick a little shitkicker like that to take to be.."

Xena had him up against the wall, her hand twisted in his collar to choke his air off in a flicker of an eye, between one breath and the next, before Philtop could even summon a jerk of his arms or a move towards the long dirk at his belt.

"Morons who are here on my sufferance, begging for scraps should learn to keep their mouths shut." Xena said, in a low, even voice. "Especially about things that mean a whole lot more to me than their worthless lives."

Philtop hesitated, then he slowly put his hands back against the wall, knuckles against the stone, as the ice blue eyes even with his glittered with raw, violent intent. "Okay Xena." He rasped. "I get the message."

“Do you?”

“Hey, you’re drawing a crowd here.” Philtop said. “Might look bad for you to be choking a guest.”

“They’re used to it.” Xena turned and hauled him away from the wall, using her body weight to swing them both around and releasing him at the top of her arc of motion, sending him sprawling across the stone floor and away from her. “They take bets when I draw my sword which wall I’m gonna hit with the entrails.”

She brushed her hands off on her leggings. “Stay away from me, Philtop. Get me your figures, and get out before you tick me off enough to forget you’re a guest.”

“Guess I hit a nerve, huh?” Philtop got to his feet. “Truth hurt, Xena? You hear everyone laughing about your little ragamuffin?”

Xena studied him, her face impassive. “Ask my army what they think about her.” She said. “I never did give a damn what the rest of these frills thought or I certainly wouldn’t have slept with you.”

She walked past him and headed towards her original destination, the dancing hall. Her ears told her when he got up, and they told her when he started after her, then stopped, then turned, and walked away.

“Smart jackass.” She muttered, feeling the tingle of rage slowly fading, the twitching easing from her hands as her breathing returned to normal. “I’ll shitkicker him right into the gods be damned moat the next time he opens his damn mouth.”

“Majesty?”

Xena turned to find a short, well dressed man at her elbow. “What?”

“Pardon me, your majesty, but I am Duke Lastay’s valet.” The man said. “His grace is looking for you.”

Xena suddenly felt a strong desire for Gabrielle’s presence. “Tell him to come to the dancing hall.” She instructed. “I’ll be glad to talk to him there. I’ve got some business I have to take care of.”

“Your majesty.” The man bowed. “I will inform him at once.”

The man scuttled off, finally leaving Xena in peace to head to the hall, where the doors were open and she could hear the faint sounds of animals, and the hammering of wooden pegs, and in the fringes of that a familiar voice.

With a sense of relief, she bounced up the steps and paused in the open doorway, reviewing the interior.

They’d made a mess of the hall. Straw had been hauled in and laid down over the marble and boxes and seats were being constructed around the open center. There were wagons and animals staked around, the scent of manure and wet straw rising in the air.

A frame had been erected, and she could see ropes crisscrossing the top of it, with men working at the bottom to brace it for, she supposed the acrobats.

And the acrobats themselves, along with what appeared to be other performers were all gathered in one corner, near a supply wagon, where there was a barrel of something there with a short, adorable woman seated wearing Xena’s colors and her heart on one sturdy linen sleeve.

Ragamuffin? Xena studied her consort. Gabrielle was dressed in her hawkhead tabard and warm cloth leggings, with sturdy black leather boots on. Her pale hair was caught at her neck

in a clasp and the hands which were gesturing to the crowd were well formed, one wrist graced with a twined silver bracelet Xena had given her.

A courtesan she wasn't, but neither was she scruffy or ill favored even to Xena's admittedly biased eyes and she decided Philtop was just trying to get under her skin. Maybe because she'd willingly joined with Gabrielle and spurned his interest?

Maybe.

Maybe he'd heard she'd named Lastay as her heir, and figured to reignite their relationship? Seeing an angle to get more of the power he craved?

Maybe.

Or maybe he was just an asshole.

Probably.

She edged a little further into the hall and leaned against the doorframe, waiting. After a few heartbeats, Gabrielle's eyes shifted as if she sensed the queen's presence, and her face broke into a welcoming grin, changing the tenor of her voice and making her audience turn around to see what she was looking at.

No one, Xena acknowledged, had ever smiled at her like that. Even her troops, loyal to a man, and the officers she'd fought with always knew her presence could be a dangerous thing to them, if they went cross of her temper, or had failed her in some way.

Gabrielle, on the other hand, was just simply always glad to see her, no matter what the circumstance. No matter what crappy thing was happening to them, or how hard life was being, Xena knew she could look into those eyes, and see that love shining back at her.

Just like it was now.

"Xena!" Gabrielle called out. "I was just getting to the good part! Come listen and meet my new friends!"

She could see the rounded, awed eyes of the circus performers turn her way as she pushed off from the frame and started towards the group, soaking in the notoriety of whatever tale her consort was spinning.

Shitkicker? Xena settled herself on a box, propping one boot up on a second. "G'wan, muskrat. I can't wait to hear what crazy story about me you're telling now."

"Zev." Gabrielle addressed one of the muscular little boys seated next to her. "Remember that thing you did on the bar? Xena can do that."

Uh oh. Xena managed a confident smile as the boy looked around at her in wary skepticism. Careful what you ask for, Xena. She spared a brief glance at the frame contraption rising over her head.

"Really, she can."

\*\*

Xena draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders as they made their way back to the main part of the castle, the queen putting herself between the howling wind and her companion to make sure she didn't get blown away. "Wow." She eyed the clouds overhead. "Winter showed up ahead of schedule."

"Wow is right." Gabrielle was glad of her anchor. "That's some wind!"

They half ran up the steps and ducked through the hastily opened doors as the guards spotted them and then just as quickly shut the big wooden portals after their passing.

“That was fun though.” Xena remarked, as she raked her fingers through her hair, scattering droplets of ice and water on the floor. “More fun than having court.”

“Will you have to do that now?” Gabrielle asked.

“Nah.” Xena shook her head. “I talked to the jackass. That’s really all that was on the agenda that was slightly important.”

“Oh.”

“I gotta go find Lastay though.” Xena admitted, with a sigh. “Find out what he needed.” She looked around. “I’m surprised he didn’t come find me.” She changed her direction. “C’mon. Let’s go roust him out.”

Gabrielle willingly fell into stride next to her, and they went up the big half circle stairs and turned right, heading down a long, high corridor that led to the one of the six towers lived in by Xena’s most important nobles when they were at court.

A left turn, and several winding corridors in the opposite direction would have taken them to the tallest tower, the guard tower that Xena had once inhabited, and where her sparring chamber still was. The rooms she’d used were cleaned and set aside, the tower still empty since she and Gabrielle had moved to the former ruler’s palatial quarters in the center of the stronghold.

Gabrielle, in truth secretly missed those upper chambers sometimes. She loved their new digs, but there had been a solitude about the tower that she’d come to appreciate. Watching the sun rise over the upper battlements, sipping some hot tea as the world came alive around her was something they really couldn’t do now, since the balcony of their rooms overlooked the central courtyard in full view of pretty much everyone.

Not the same thing. She’d gotten to understand the value of those quiet moments, between the crazy wars and battles they’d gotten themselves into.

They approached Lastay’s rooms, and his guard drew themselves up when they recognized Xena, ducking their heads in respect as the queen arrived. “Open up.” Xena said, briefly.

“Majesty.” The nearer guard quickly worked the latch, rapping his knuckles against the wood surface in a clumsy attempt at warning.

Xena gave him a tolerant look, then shoved past him and bumped the door open with her shoulder, stalking inside the room with Gabrielle at her heels. “Lastay!”

Silence.

“Majesty, his servant told us not to disturb him.” The guard had his head poked in the door and he spoke apologetically.

Xena felt a prickle up her spine. “Yeah.” She said, moving slowly towards the inner doors. “But chances are he isn’t too involved to ignore my sweet melodious voice.” She drew a dagger almost without thought, turning it in her hand so the blade pointed backwards laying along her forearm. “Muskrat, stay here.”

Gabrielle slowed, but didn’t entirely halt, her body edging after Xenas as though bound to her with a string.

Xena went to the doors and put her hand on them, then she rapped on them sharply. “Lastay!”

The guard came inside, along with his mate, standing inside the door uncertainly.

Xena cocked her ears, tilting her head to listen. She heard nothing behind the doors, not the merest rustle of bedclothes, or whisper of a voice. With a short intake of breath, she

worked the latch and shoved the door open, pushing it hard against the wall with a solid crack.

It was dim inside, only the pallid light from the window outlining the interior with dusty gray. But that was more than enough for Xena's eyes to take in everything. The overturned chairs, the bed with a single figure in it, the second figure on the floor.

All still.

A candle flared behind her and she almost knocked it out of the air before she recognized the presence at her back and Gabrielle was easing up next to her, holding the candle up high and lighting the room.

"Oh Xena." Gabrielle said, after a long pause, her voice soft and aching.

Xena released her breath, uttering a curse on it's issuing. She sheathed her dagger and took the candle, taking a step toward the half naked body on the floor and kneeling next to it. "Ah." She took the shoulder and turned it over, the light from the candle reflecting on a slack, dead face.

Eyes open and staring.

"What's going on here?" A voice sounded behind them. Gabrielle jerked in surprise and turned, as the doorway was filled with the concerned form of Duke Lastay.

"M.. your Majesty!" He spluttered, obviously very surprised to find the queen in his bedroom.

"C'mon in Lastay." Xena examined the body. "You know this guy?"

The duke circled around his kneeling liege. "By the gods! That's my man Chilres." He turned and looked at the bed. "And my ... " He picked up the head on the bed by the hair and lifted it. "My good wife's ladservant."

Gabrielle had been standing, astounded, looking from one to the other. "Gosh. I thought.."

"Yeah me too." Xena said, her shoulders straightening as she recovered her composure. "Your people in the habit of sleeping in your bed, Lastay?" She eyed the Duke. "Kinky." She turned the body over again and examined the exposed bare skin along his back and shoulders.

The duke drew himself up. "Certainly not!" He said. "We had only just left... my lady wife went to brunch with some of her friends, and I.. well, I went to find you, your majesty! " He looked at the woman on the bed. "What happened to them?"

Xena rested her forearm on her knee. "What was supposed to happen to you, I guess." She looked more than troubled. "Poison again."

Lastay abruptly sat down on the edge of the bed, enough of a soldier to ignore the dead woman lying across it.

"Gabrielle, close the door." Xena said.

"Do you want me to go get Brendan?" Her consort asked.

"No." The queen shook her head. "I don't want you out of my sight."

Gabrielle pondered that in silence, as she went over and closed the door. She could see the guards on the outside, watching her in nervous silence, but she put them out of her mind as she turned and put her back to the solid wood.

Xena got up and went around the room lightning the candles, and then the brazier. She put the candle she'd been holding down, then she went to the corner and slowly started moving along the wall, her head tilted slightly.

“What is this, mistress?” Lastay murmured. “I had heard of the deaths, but... surely not really poison?”

“Really poison.” Xena muttered. “Look at the guy’s neck. In the back. Along the spine. Red mark. Slightly swollen. He got hit by a dart made from a hard wood thorn with the underfeathers of a bird tacked around it, shot from a bamboo blowgun.”

Gabrielle and Lastay exchanged glances. Then Gabrielle gingerly knelt, parting the hair on the back of the dead man’s neck and peering at it. “There it is.” She said softly, as Lastay came to kneel next to her. “Just like Xena said.”

‘Aye.’ The Duke murmured. “But the feathers?”

Gabrielle looked up at her patiently circling friend, then she faintly shrugged. “Xena, how did you know that?”

“Smell it.” The queen said, briefly. “I can smell the bamboo.” She added. “And the feathers.”

Gabrielle looked around the room. She could smell a lot of things, the bedding, the rushes on the floor, the candle wax that was now perfuming the space.

But smelling bamboo and feathers? “Wow.”

“Bigods.” Lastay muttered, under his breath.

Gabrielle got up and cautiously approached her. She could see Xena was taking careful steps, her eyes fixed on the ground. “What does bamboo smell like?” She asked finally.

Xena held her hand up, then she knelt on the ground. “Bring that candle over here.” She waited, then took the scone her bedmate quickly retrieved for her and lowered it close to the ground. Her eyes focused on the dust and the corners of them crinkled a little.

She looked up at the wall. She was almost in a corner of the room, and it was full of shadows here though otherwise the area was empty. Xena looked back down at the faint footprints she could see in the disturbance of the dust.

Had the attacker stood here, in the darkness? With the candles out, it would have been very dark indeed – even Xena had mistaken the bodies before she’d looked closely at them. But the thought of the two servants taking this guilty pleasure all unknowing while cold, killers eyes watched them...

Xena’s face twitched, as close to a shiver as she’d allow herself. She stood and continued her prowl aware of Gabrielle’s quiet form at her heels.

She could see the scuffs, reflecting a little silver in her eyesight as she followed the tracks across the room near the wall, and behind a tall dressing screen. Here, she could see a thick carpet lying along the wall and then, just the other corner.

No way for the man to escape. The room had only one door. The outer chamber had two other corridors, but the complex itself had only the front door, or one back door that she knew led down to the kitchens.

Much like she’d had, up in the tower. “Lastay, did you have anyone in the outer chamber?”

Lastay shook his head. “These two.” He indicated the bodies. “Would have been arranging the rooms, and seeing to lunch.” He studied the man on the floor. “Poor things. Wanted to get married. They asked my lady wife about it just this morning.”

“And the guards outside.” Xena murmured.

“As you say, mistress.” Lastay agreed. “Suppose they came in here to..ah..”

“Screw.” The queen supplied succinctly. “Yeah. Well, there’s a bed here. Probably more comfortable than the stone floor outside.”

Lastay sighed.

“Hey Xena?” Gabrielle had leaned against the wall behind where the queen had wandered. “This is moving.”

Instantly, Xena whirled and almost pounced on her. “What?” She grabbed Gabrielle’s shoulders and moved her aside. “Get away from that.” She got in front of her and yanked her dagger out again, backing up a few steps as the heavy carpet stirred, and the hard outline of the surface beneath it poked through the draping.

Gabrielle put her hands on Xena’s hips and peered past her elbow. “What is it?”

“Mistress, shall I call the guard?” Lastay had stood up, moving around the body on the floor and drawing his sword uncertainly.

“Put that away.” Xena stabbed the carpet on the wall with her dagger, and yanked it towards her viciously. It ripped off the wall and fell in a tumbling heap, forcing her to hop backwards to avoid it. Behind the carpet, on the now bare wall was a partially open door.

“Bigods!” Lastay edged up next to them. “I never knew that was there!”

“Candle.” Xena held her hand out, grasping the sconce and handing it back to Gabrielle. “Hold that, while I get ready to maybe kill something.”

“Sure.” Gabrielle held the candle away from Xena’s clothing, as the queen reached one booted foot out and kicked the door open, the dagger in her hand out and ready, cocked slightly to one side. She could see Xena’s shoulder muscles tense and felt her heart skip a beat.

The door revealed only a dark opening, though, no rush of assassins. Xena waited, then she advanced cautiously, her free hand held just in front of her thigh, fingers crooked.

A puff of air came from the darkness, and she opened her mouth a little, tasting it on the back of her tongue. Damp stone was the prominent scent, but underneath...

Xena went into the opening, the candle’s flicker lighting the space in front of her as Gabrielle followed. It occurred to her that maybe she should send her bedmate somewhere safe, but then she acknowledged the safest place for her was right where she was.

No one, Xena was utterly convinced, could protect Gabrielle as well as she could. “All right.” She eased forward, sweeping her senses to her right and her left as she found herself in a very narrow space, a slim corridor between the stone of the outer walls and the stone of the inner. To her right, the corridor ended abruptly. But to the left, it continued on.

Xena could feel a faint draft against her face. “Let’s see where this goes.” She started down the narrow corridor turned sideways, since the width wouldn’t allow her shoulders to pass. “Gabrielle, stay close.”

“Like a tick.” Gabrielle agreed, holding the candle up high so the light would cast ahead of the queen. She kept her free hand on Xena’s back, tucking her thumb under the harness her sword was attached to, aware of Lastay tentatively coming in after her.

“I’m coming too, your majesty.” Lastay said. “Want a piece of whoever was after me and my lady, I do.”

Unseen, since she was in the lead, Xena grimaced, then rolled her eyes. She felt Gabrielle gently tap her spine, and wondered if the little muskrat knew what she was thinking.

“I sure feel better having you back there.” Gabrielle commented mildly.

“Why thank you, your grace.” Lastay answered gallantly. “It’s my great pleasure to guard your ...ah. Yes. Back.”

Xena took a nerve steadying breath and continued down the corridor. She couldn't sense anyone near, though the hint of bamboo and the slight smell of silk were on the air and she could see in the faint light from the candle footsteps in the dust of the stone floor that had brought itself into the room in the fainter scuffs she'd seen.

So. Hidden passages.

"Did you know about this, Xena?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena pondered the question. Had she? She remembered scouring the castle when she'd first taken over, security demanded that of course. She and Lyseus had searched all the corners, looking for loot as well as learning the ins and outs of their new home.

But had she searched for secret passages in the towers? "No." The queen admitted reluctantly. "I knew there were some tunnels. From the dungeons to the crypts, and then a long one out to the stables. "

"Really?" Lastay asked. "You know, I think I heard about that one a long time ago. One of the king's ancestors was supposed to have abdicated out that way, with a serving wench."

"My kinda guy." Xena commented. She got to the end of the curve of the tower wall, and found a set of very narrow steps going downwards. "Well, we know how the bastard got in and out, anyway." She muttered, starting down them dagger first.

"Mistress." Lastay spoke up after they'd gone down a few steps. "Why us?"

Xena exhaled. "Why you." She swept her eyes over the steps as she walked down them. Now that she was moving forward, the faint draft was getting a little stronger and she could smell a dank scent of decay.

It occurred to her that going pretty much alone down a hidden stairwell with who knew what at the end of it wasn't the smartest thing she ever done. But really, that's how her damn life had been going lately hadn't it?

So why Lastay? "Probably you because you're my heir." Xena stated. "And before you ask me the most obvious question - "

"Why not you yourself majesty?" Lastay obediently submitted.

"Why not me?" Xena repeated. "Well, that's a damn good question you know that, Lastay? I could think it was because I'm a damn tough kill." She mused. "Or maybe they're scared of the muskrat."

Gabrielle made a small, snorting noise.

"Or maybe they wish to make your life a difficult thing, your majesty." Lastay offered. "To destroy things that you have.. ah... "

Xena paused on the steps and looked over her shoulder at him in silence for a long moment. "First two who died were in service to a loyal man of mine. Second two were my own men, now you." Her face hardened and tightened into sharper planes. "Could be, Lastay."

"What made you think about the bamboo, Xena?" Gabrielle asked, after an awkward silence. "How did you know about that?"

"About the blowguns?" Xena turned and continued walking down the steps. "I've used them." She craned her head around the curving wall, seeing some light at the end of it. She figured they were about or just below ground level, and as she thought it she felt like the walls were compressing in on either side of her.

"Ugh." Gabrielle conveniently articulated her feelings for her.

“Mm.” Xena slowed her pace, as she came around the final curve. The stairwell ended in a small cove, and there were two doors a right angles to each other. One seemed to go right under the tower, the other. Xena pictured the structure of the stronghold. The other would go under the banquet hall.

She turned and got the candle from Gabrielle, holding it close to the nearer door, then looking at the leather strap hinges. She then checked the door going to the banquet hall and grunted. “This way.”

Gabrielle looked at the hinges herself, seeing nothing more than some hairline cracks in the surface. She watched Xena put her hand out, then she stopped for no apparent reason and took a step back. “What’s wrong?”

Xena knelt and examined the door latch, extending her head forward a little and inhaling. Her eyes shifted to one side, and she half closed them, going completely still.

Behind her, Gabrielle and Lastay watched in fascination.

Then Xena exhaled and stood, backing away from the door. “I am the target, Lastay.” She said, quietly. “That latch has a pin on it. If I’d opened the door it’d have stuck me.” The queen’s eyes narrowed. “There’s poison on it. I can smell it.”

“More poison!” Gabrielle inhaled. “Xena, what the heck’s going on here? Where’s this all coming from?”

“But.. Mistress, how would anyone know you would be here? You said yourself you have never been in this passage.” The Duke protested.

“Let’s just say I’ve got a feeling.” Xena said, after a long silence. “Let’s go back upstairs. Whoever did this is long gone anyway.” She indicated them forward. “I need to figure out what’s going on here before more people start dropping dead. “

“Ugh.” Gabrielle said again. “I thought things were going too good.”

“You ain’t kidding muskrat.”

\*\*

Xena stood in the window opening, her arms crossed over her chest as she watched the icy rain come down outside. Behind her, she could hear Gabrielle working near the fireplace in their quarters, the soft clank of a wooden stirrer against an iron pot sounding oddly loud in the room.

“Are we going to go back down that tunnel, Xena?” Gabrielle asked. “I wonder how many more of them there are.”

“Too many, probably.” Xena said, still watching the rain. “I’m betting I could go chasing down those damn things until spring and not find what I’m looking for.”

“What are you looking for?” Gabrielle came over with a bowl, and offered it to her.

Xena took it, turning and sitting down on the window sill and almost immediately regretting it since the stone was cold enough to immediately chill her ass. She stood back up and bumped Gabrielle back towards the fireplace. “I don’t know what I’m looking for.” She admitted, as she sat down on one of the two backless padded benches on either side of the fire. “I think someone wanted me to go chasing down that hallway today though.”

Gabrielle took her own bowl and sat down across from the queen. “Someone who’s trying to hurt you?”

Xena nodded, spooning up a bit of stewed duck and putting it into her mouth. “Someone who knows me well enough to know I’d head down that thing by myself and not send my army down in front of me.”

“We were with you.”

Xena looked at her drolly.

“Well, we were.” Gabrielle said. “But... why not send the army down there now, Xena? Have them go down and like lock up those tunnels. I don't like the idea of them maybe being under here” She looked around the room. “That whole thing was creepy.”

“Uhng.” Xena poked in her bowl.

“I think the Duke was freaked out.” Gabrielle dunked a bit of bread into her stew and bit the end off of it. “I heard him telling his guys to bring up some wood and seal that door up in his bedroom.”

“I'm sure it originally was there so they could escape from rampaging slaves.” Xena remarked. “The door I mean. Bet that door I stopped at goes under the banquet hall, then meets up with the big tunnel I knew about leading to the stables.”

“Were they all scared of that before?” Gabrielle asked.

“Bregos got ours to nearly overthrow the damn castle, so sure.” Xena said. “Remember?”

Gabrielle did remember. “But.. I never heard about those tunnels.” She said. “When I first came here. I would have figured people would have known about them to get out.”

“You didn't spend that long downstairs.” The queen stated. “Anyway, no. This after noon we're gonna go to the show and pretend nothing's wrong.”

“Oh.”

“The last thing I need is for everyone here to lose their minds.” Xena said. “So you and I will be enjoying our new friends in the circus and then hosting a big dinner tonight.”

Gabrielle studied her bowl. “Are you worried about that?” She looked up at the queen. “Something could happen to the food.”

Xena licked her lips. “Yeah, I thought of that.” She said. “I'm going to gamble on the fact that whoever this is has an exact target. They're not looking to poison an entire banquet hall just to croak me.”

“I could stay in the kitchen and watch.”

“No.” The queens' response was immediate and sharp. “You stick by me.”

“Xena.”

“I mean it.” The pale blue eyes fixed on her “If they went after Lastay to hurt me, what do you think something happening to you would do?”

Gabrielle got caught with her spoon halfway to her lips. She set it back down in the bowl as she watched the shifting expressions on Xena's face. There was a haunting fear there that surprised her, and she was at a loss to know what to say.

Xena's eyes dropped. “Anyway.” She said. “You stick by me. Hear?”

“Okay.” Gabrielle put her bowl down. “Its not like I don't like doing that anyway. Staying near you, I mean.” To illustrate the fact she got up and went over to Xena's bench, claiming a corner of it and sitting back down next to the queen, pressing up against her. “See?”

The queen smiled briefly.

Gabrielle went back to her lunch. “In that case you know, Xena, I'm going to make sure that we both have the same stuff.” She ate a carrot. “Because I want whatever happens to you, to happen to me too.”

Xena stopped chewing. She turned her head and looked at her bedmate, a bit of scallion sticking out of her mouth. Hastily she sucked it in and swallowed it. "What?"

"What what?" Gabrielle kept her eyes on her duck.

"What in the Hades was that supposed to mean?" Xena asked. "Did you really mean to say you'd eat poison codfish and die an agonizing death right alongside me? Cause that's sure what it sounded like."

Gabrielle blinked mildly at her. "Yes." She watched the queen stare at her. "Xena." She put a hand on her friend's arm. "C'mon. You're everything to me. You know that." She studied the queen's expression. "I love you. What do you think life would be for me without you?"

Xena scowled. "A lot less dangerous and scary."

"Xena."

The queen dropped her head, then tilted it back up, looking at Gabrielle from between her disheveled bangs in an oddly adolescent way. "Sorry muskrat. I'm not used to people declaring eternal devotion to me and actually meaning it. Takes some getting used to."

"I really mean it."

The blue eyes softened and gentled. "I know you do." Xena sighed. "I don't want anything happening to either of us, Gabrielle. I want to live a long, hedonistic life with you." She shifted a little. "I never had to worry about that before."

Gabrielle merely leaned against her, resting her head on Xena's shoulder.

"I always figured one of these days one of those damn nobles would get me." Xena said. "Before you showed up I think I was getting to the point of not caring if they did."

The quiet words worked a small kind of magic on her heart. "I know how that feels." Gabrielle said, after a pause. "The sevenday before the slavers took us I over heard my father telling my mother he'd given me in marriage to a neighbor of ours." She watched the flames in the fireplace. "He was a big man, drunk most of the time, who used to beat his kids and his animals. His wife had died a few moons back having a child... the midwife said he strangled her when he found out it was a girl, not a boy."

Xena remained quiet, her head cocked slightly in a listening attitude.

"I felt like that, you know, Xena?" Gabrielle murmured. "I thought about what that would be like.. and how I wished and wished something would happen to change my life and then..."

"And then a couple days later it did."

"I wondered if the gods heard me." Her bedmate nodded. "And the raiders were their way of answering me.. like they were saying 'that's what you get for asking for things you don't deserve.'"

"Ah."

Gabrielle was silent for a few moments. "And then I met you."

Xena exhaled. "And then you met me." She repeated. "That should have sealed that idea for ya." She let her head rest against her consorts. "Were you really going to sit there and let that bastard marry you?"

Gabrielle sat there and thought about that. On the surface of it she'd started to say that she hadn't a choice in it, but something made her wonder, knowing herself now a little better, whether that was really true or not.

She remembered being angry. She remembered telling Lila she'd rather be dead than married to him.

But would she have done anything about it?

“I didn’t want to.” She finally said. “I just don’t know what I would have done that wouldn’t have made my life worse.” She looked at her hands, curled around the bowl. “I didn’t think I had any choices, really.”

Xena put her bowl down and put her arm around Gabrielle. “Those bastards did you a favor.” She remarked. “Did me a favor.” She added. “Still glad I killed em.” She pondered a while. “I think you’d have ended up offing the swine.”

“Our neighbor?”

“Mm.” The queen nodded. “You’re a fighter, Gabrielle. It’s in ya, or else you’d never have survived meeting me.”

And that, Gabrielle knew, was true if nothing else was. A meek lamb would never have lived through the crucible that was the love they’d built between them. Would never have survived the trials they’d been through in the relatively short time they’d been together.

Would never have ripped the cheek out of a Persian princess, or stood on a burning platform fighting to save a friend.

Courage was such a funny thing. “I’m glad.” Gabrielle sighed. “I think we’re both pretty good at fighting. So we’ll get through this whole scary thing and find the guy who’s doing it, right?”

“One way or another, we will.” Xena gave her a hug. “Got more of that duck? At least I can eat my fill of that and not worry about keeling over.”

Gabrielle got up to fill their bowls, glad they had a few candlemarks together before the show and intent on making the most of them.

\*\*

Xena studied the two gowns in the casement, evaluating the stiff, silk fabric. “I want a watch on Lastay’s quarters.” She said, to the patiently waiting Brendan standing behind her. “But don’t make it obvious. Put the men in his colors.”

“Aye.” Brendan agreed. “Walled up that entrance, he did. We went over the tower like, t’see if we could find more, but nothing.”

“Do me a favor? While we’re at the show do the same in here.” Xena said. “I’ve looked, but it never hurts to have two sets of eyes.”

“Aye.” Her captain said.

“I’ve got the muskrat putting her chainmail on.” Xena turned, putting her hand son her hips. She was already in her house armor, waiting to slip the ornate robes over it. “One less chance to take.”

Brendan thumped his chest, a faint slithering clink sounding beneath his hawkshead tabard. “Got mine on, as to the rest of the men, mistress. Those darts were aimed pretty good though.”

“Mm.” Xena had to agree. Between head and hands, they had enough exposed for someone with that kind of skill to get them. “After the show tonight, when the castle quiets down, I want every man we’ve got doing a sweep front to back of this place. Dungeons, cellars, the whole thing.”

Brendan nodded in emphatic agreement. “We keep it quiet now.”

“Yes.” The queen said. “Let them relax. Think we’re not looking.”

“Xena, can you help me tie this?” Gabrielle came in, her body covered in her armor. She came over and let Xena straighten the links across her shoulders. “Hi Brendan.”

“Your grace.” Brendan inclined his head. “Mistress, I can see the bit about letting them stew, but ... by the gods. If whoever it is hits again... “

“I know.” Xena settled the metal across her bedmate’s skin, pulling the back of the collar up and tucking it around her neck. “But I figure they’re stashed away right now and if we go after them, people are gonna get croaked anyway.”

“Mmph.” Brendan grunted. “Basterd.”

“Or bastards.” The queen pondered making her beloved muskrat wear a leather hood and gauntlets to the show. Would she be forgiven for that?

Gabrielle reached up and touched the queen’s armor, admiring the supple hide and the fit, which was snug enough to show off Xena’s body without being overly obvious about it.

“You like my old rags, muskrat?” Xena asked, with a smile.

“I do.” Her consort nodded. “I think you look really good in this.”

The queen’s smile broadened. She turned and snagged the smaller of the two gowns from the cabinet and draped it over Gabrielle’s shoulders, pulling it around her. “Well, unfortunately these sexy duds have to be covered in frills tonight.

“Buh.” Gabrielle fluffed the arms out. “Glad it’s cold outside.”

“Me too.” Xena agreed. She turned to find Brendan watching her, an indescribable expression on his face. “What?”

“Mistress?” He started.

“What was that puss for? Am I growing a horn?” The queen tapped her forehead. She lifted her own overlay up and swung it around her body.

“No mistress.” Brendan said. “Any other orders? I’m goin out to gather the men and give em the word. Most of the scouts, eh, they’re already roaming with their ears out.”

Xena finished tying the front of her robe. She glanced in the mirror to check the effect, watching the fabric drape over her leathers with less than natural curves. “Nah. Let’s just meet up after the party ends,” She glanced at her captain. “Round up some of the grooms, and the cooks. They know more nooks and crannies than you will.”

“Mistress!”

Xena cocked an eyebrow at him and pointed at the door, waiting for him to leave before she returned her attention to her reflection.

Well, wouldn’t be the first time she wore armor to the dinner table. She had, in fact, for the first two years after she’d begun her reign, never been seen without her arms and armor, until the worst of the rebellions were quelled and she felt comfortable walking across the dining room knowing there was only a decent chance of getting a knife in her back rather than an absolute one.

And if it got hot in the hall, she could take the damn gown off. Xena smiled, cheered up at the thought. “You ready to dance with me tonight?” She asked Gabrielle, who had seated herself on the dressing trunk and was pulling on her soft, indoor slippers.

Gabrielle glanced up at her, with a brief grin. “Well, I’ll try.” She said. “I’m still pretty bad at it.”

Xena went over and sat down next to her, bracing her hands on the bench behind her and extending her legs out across the floor. “I’m ticked off, muskrat.”

Gabrielle finished putting her shoes on and leaned her hands on the benches surface. "Why?" She asked. "I mean... I guess because of the killings, right?" She looked at her companion's profile, which was somber.

"Not really." Xena answered. "Oh, I'm not happy about that, but I'm ticked off for a lot more selfish reason." She studied her bare feet.

Gabrielle waited. She'd learned enough about Xena by now that she knew there were times when prompting wasn't needed from her. Just letting Xena find the words and find the time to speak was enough.

"Anyway." The queen shook her head after a minute of silence. "I think I just need a drink." She remained sitting there though, as the wind rattled against the windows.

Gabrielle got up and fetched the queen's slippers, lined and padded indoor shoes that she loosened the laces of before she knelt at Xena's feet and put them on. "You have such pretty feet." She commented, rubbing one of the her powerful ankles.

"You really think so?" Xena mused.

"I do." Her consort confirmed. "They have such a pretty shape." She touched the arched instep. "And you have cute toes."

"Maybe I should get them to paint my toenails pink."

Gabrielle looked sharply up at her, eyed widening.

"Blue?"

The blond woman made a face.

Xena chuckled wryly. "C'mon, my friend." She got up and offered Gabrielle a hand to her feet. "Let's go get as much enjoyment as we can out of this show. I have a feeling it'll be our last fun for a while."

They walked together to the door, detouring only to let Xena pick up her sword in it's sheath. The queen settled the blade against her shoulder, and kicked the door open, heading for the noise of the hall.

\*\*

The dancing hall was stuffed full. Gabrielle was very glad she was with Xena, content to tag along behind the queen's tall form as she swept through the hastily opened path in front of her towards the prominently mounted high back chairs that had been put there for them to sit in.

She got her fingers tangled in the belt Xena was wearing, feeling the faint pressure against the back of her knuckles as the queen took a breath and pulled the fabric tight. She rubbed her thumb against the surface, aware of the resistance of the leather armor under the silk.

She was glad of it. Glad of her own armor under the pretty fabric. She knew Xena could fight like crazy, but to her mind, when you had creepy people around shooting little darts, the more stuff between that and your skin the better.

"Hang on, muskrat." Xena continued plowing through the crowd.

"Hanging."

There were benches built on the stepped platforms where all of the nobles were seated, a veritable cornucopia of rich fall colored silk and gilt. Below that, all the visitors and merchants were in standing stalls, and among them were servants passing trays of ale and bread around.

Opposite them was the show area, with its wooden framework for the acrobats and the cleared space underneath filled with straw and sand for the horses and other animals that were part of the circus.

The walls of the dancing hall rose around them, and the tall, vaulted ceiling echoed back voices and the sounds of the performers getting ready, soft clacks and booms, and the whisper of hands dusting themselves off.

The performers themselves had retired to several of the chambers just inside the door of the hall, where in its other life nobles would be leaving cloaks and weapons before surrendering themselves to a night of dancing and where the formal musicians would have stayed, ready to provide the music for them.

The high, narrow windows were open despite the weather, bringing in a draft of cold, wet air that stirred the straw and brushed away the worst of the smells, drawing even the rich pungent smoke of the oil lamps up and out into the courtyard.

Despite the storm, spirits seemed high. It wasn't often this kind of entertainment came to Xena's stronghold, and certainly even rarer that the queen would allow the taking over of the grandest hall in the realm for a performance.

Ale and wine were flowing, there were buskers and musicians wandering through the crowd strumming sitars and blowing on pipes, and the result was cheerful cacophony and an air of expectation.

Gabrielle almost felt like she could forget the troubles they were having, as she and Xena climbed up to the royal platform and approached their seats.

Lastay and his wife were there, seated in regular sized chairs to one side of Xena's throne.

They were smiling, but Gabrielle noticed how they watched the crowd carefully, and that Lastay had two men at arms standing just behind them.

They brightened as Xena arrived and slung her sword over the back of her chair, settling into it and leaning her elbows on the arms. Gabrielle took the next seat over, and then Brendan arrived, coming to stand quietly behind the queen's right shoulder.

"Mistress." Lastay greeted her.

"Your majesty, your grace." His wife stood, and curtsied, then resumed her seat.

Xena eyed her, then glanced at Gabrielle. "Did we.."

"Yes." Gabrielle smiled, correctly interpreting the question. She got up and knelt, taking a package out from under her chair and straightening. "Here you go." She offered it to the queen, who merely hiked a dark eyebrow at her.

Gabrielle pulled the package back to her then she turned and went over to where Lastay and his wife were sitting. "Xena and I." She looked back at the queen who was studying ceiling in apparent fascination. "Thought we would get you a little gift for your new baby." She offered the neatly wrapped packet.

"Oh!" The woman took the package. "Thank you your grace!" She looked at the queen.

"Thank you your Majesty!"

Xena rolled her head to one side and gave her a wry grin.

Lastay's expression relaxed, and he patted the wrapping. "Open it, my dear. I am sure it must be wonderful."

Gabrielle knew, having been in the castle for some time now, and having not quite been born yesterday, that even if the packet had held a folded moldy goatskin that hadn't been cured that both her lover's heir and his wife would declaim it wonderful.

It's just how that worked. But as the duke's wife opened the gift and unfolded it, she could see by the shifts in both expressions and the soft indrawn breath of hers, that in fact, it was something they actually liked.

"We had them put your arms on it." Gabrielle said, with a touch of diffidence. "I thought the colors were pretty."

Xena was craning her neck to look at it, the queen's own brows edging up.

"Tis beautiful." Lastay said, touching the soft fabric. "I'm sure our son will thrive, wrapped in it" He gave Gabrielle a genuine smile. "My great thanks, your grace." He left just enough pause in to show that he knew who the gift really came from before he turned and ducked his head in Xena's direction. "Your majesty."

Xena was resting her chin on her hand, watching them. "She knows how to pick em, huh?" She acknowledged the obvious.

"And so do you, your Majesty." Lastay inclined his head gracefully.

Xena's face twisted into a rakish grin. She shifted in her chair and turned to regard the crowd again, her eyes raking over it and then the motion stalling as she caught sight of Philtop entering with his retinue.

They seemed in high spirits as well, which seemed a little strange to her. She hadn't thought her terms to Philtop were something he'd celebrate. She watched the prince lead his people to a narrow bench and stood as they arranged themselves, regarding the hall with a bemused expression.

Xena studied his profile. It had gotten a little squarer, and harder over the years, not the pretty boy she remembered but a man grown into his full maturity.

He was still compellingly good looking. Xena spent a moment wondering why in the Hades he hadn't married anyone. Surely there hadn't been any lack of willing women.

She certainly didn't flatter herself thinking he'd pined for her more than a candlemark – at least more than a candlemark after he'd been able to piss without screaming given what she'd done to him. Certainly he liked women, since he'd come after her with clear intent.

"Mistress." Brendan came around the chair. "Just got the signal. Men'r ready."

"Good." Xena turned her attention back to the cleared space ahead of her. "Let's get this show on the road." She said. "Tell them to get going."

"Aye." Brendan slipped behind Gabrielle and trotted down the platform, heading for the back chambers.

"Would you like some wine?" Gabrielle had returned to her seat and climbed into it, settling the folds of her gown around her knees. "I think they have some of that one you like over there."

Xena caught sight of Philtop making his way across the hall towards her and she sighed. "Yeah, get me a damn pitcher. It's gonna be one of those nights I think."

There was no need for her consort to move, the wine master had made his way over to the royal platform and was climbing up onto it, carrying three wineskins strapped across his body like a moving tavern.

He reached them and bowed. "Your Majesty, I am at your service on this festival day. What can I provide to you? I have three of my best vintages here." He stood aside as an alert server came up and placed a silver tray down with two of Xena's crystal goblets on them.

They were pretty. Silver rimmed with bases stained with a rare and rich purple and Xena's hawkshead chiseled into the glass to complete the work they had been given to her as a gift just after she'd returned from defeating the Persians from the port city she'd ended up saving.

Gorgeous. "Surprise me." Xena indicated the glasses. "How's business?"

"oh, Majesty." The vintner expertly poured a rich red wine into the cups, the color of blood and even a little of the consistency of it as he swirled the cup and offered it to her. "Business is very well indeed. Many casks of this year's pressings are already purchased, and taken.

"You're saving some for me for the winter, right?" Xena took a sip of the wine, her eyes widening a little as it's faintly spicy, rich taste filled her mouth. "That's good."

"The best is always saved for you, Majesty." He smiled. "This will get better as it ages over the winter, shall I have some sent for you for your table?"

Xena extended the glass over and held it as Gabrielle took a sip. "Like that, muskrat?"

Gabrielle licked her lips, blinking a little. "Wow."

"That'd be yes." Xena returned her attention to the vintner. "And pour a cup for my adorable friend here."

He bowed and complied, filling the other goblet up and then moving on to serve Lastay and his lady. Xena took another swallow of the wine, and wished she could just take the whole skin of it. She felt like making it a night of indulgence, enjoying all the fruits of everyone else's labors but she knew she wasn't going to end the night in a drunken stumble to her rooms.

She had things to take care of. Xena glanced at Gabrielle, who was drinking the wine with visible delight. And anyway, Gabrielle probably wouldn't like her much, drunk. She wasn't fun. She was mean, and rowdy unlike her consort who got silly and amorous when she was tipsy.

Last time, in fact, Gabrielle had written a poem to Xena's navel when she'd had a cup too many.

That had been a unique experience. Xena swirled her wine and sipped it, content to keep her consumption low.

"Xena."

"Ah. Into every life a little horse crap must fall." Xena turned her head to see Philtop at the bottom of the platform, being prevented from coming any further by her guard. "Now what?"

He looked at the guards, than at her, lifting both hands slightly.

"Let him up." The queen sighed.

Philtop climbed up to her level and approached. He was wearing a thick, lined cloak and had changed into a snug black velvet tunic with equally snug leggings and leather boots with the tops folded over.

He was wearing a sword, and a dagger at his belt. Xena didn't feel threatened, but she was glad she had her own blade at her back because the fact was, you just never knew. "What's your problem?" She asked. "Don't like your seats?"

Gabrielle leaned on the chair arm closest to her, but remained quiet.

"The'yre fine." Philtop said. "I told my vassals of your offer, and they are satisfied with it."

Xena was surprised. "Really."

“I guess they heard your gally sluts ate all right.” Philtop shrugged. “In any case, the only question they had was..”

Just then, a loud noise made them both look up, turning to the show floor to see a huge copper colored horse come exploding out of the holding area in the back, and plunge across the floor kicking it's legs out viciously.

Xena didn't even stop to think. In a heartbeat she was up and out of her seat and vaulting over the stalls to land on the straw, powering past the scrambling merchants who were bolting away from the space as the animal struck out wildly.

She was faster than the grooms, faster than the circus people who came flying out of their staging room, fast enough that she was able to get to the horse before the horse reached the crowd and leap up to grab his headstall, hanging on with both hands as she pulled his head down with her body weight.

She was jerked around like a rag doll. The horse was huge, bigger even than her stallion Tiger and he was out of his mind with anger as he bared his teeth and tried to bite her.

She bashed her head into his nose. “Cut that out ya bastard!” She yelled over his scream, hanging on as he reared and took her with him, his hooves missing her legs by a cat's whisker. “Everybody stay the Hades back! That means you, Gabrielle!”

She lifted her legs up and got them around his neck, hanging on under his head as he landed on all four hooves and hopped, unable to buck again since her weight was pulling his head down.

Spittle flew and splattered her face, but Xena grimly hung on, releasing her legs and landing back on the straw. “Easy.” She commanded, in a low, firm voice.

The horse shied back, but she hung on, and was swung through the air again.

“She's out of her mind.” Philtop started to head down to the straw, only to find himself hauled to a stop from behind. “Hey!” He twisted around, to see the Xena's little blond right behind him, grabbing his cloak. “Stop that!”

Gabrielle dug in her heels. “Don't go down there.” She warned, yanking him back wards with all her strength. “You'll just get in the way.” She added. “She knows horses.”

“Let me go you..” Philtop reached for his sword, only to find three in his face, as Brendan and the guard grabbed him. “Okay.” He dropped his hand to his side. “Sorry. Didn't know you all felt so strongly about the little scut.”

Unlike Xena, Brendan didn't hold back. He slapped Philtop across the face with his sword and then cocked his fist to strike him. “Pig.”

Philtop grabbed his face. “You dare hit me.”

Brendan stared him down. “Think that silver toke means aught to me? Ye're all worthless frills fer my eyes. Only one hand owns me and it's surely isn't yours.”

“Listen” Gabrielle stepped forward. “I don't know what your problem is, but you'd better leave. You're going to piss Xena off.”

Philtop glared at her. “I'm not afraid of her.”

“Then you really are dumb.” Gabrielle responded mildly. “Or you just don't care if you get hurt or dead.”

“Do you?” Philtop asked her, addressing her directly.

“Care if I get hurt or killed?” Gabrielle repeated. “Not if it's in her service.”

Whatever Philtop had expected, apparently it wasn't that. He looked uncertainly at the pale green eyes in the rounded face of Xena's little dog and suddenly realized he'd misjudged her.

Xena caught sight of something going on up on her platform, but she had her hands full and one quick glance showed Gabrielle standing to one side, unharmed so she returned her attention to the horse. "Now." She looked him in the eye. "Wanna be dinner?"

The horse snorted, then his nostrils flared out as he sucked in her scent.

The circus people had reached them by now. The first one to arrive held his hands up. "Are you all right, m'lady?"

Xena turned her horse spittle covered face towards him and gave him a wry look. "Peachy. You?" She turned back and released one hand off the horse's headstall, patting him on the cheek instead. "Easy now, big boy. Don't make me get rough with you. Ya won't like it."

Behind her, she heard a sharp sound, then a rattle. She fought the desire to turn around again. "What happened to this horse?" She asked sharply.

"Don't know." The circus handler had just come up, breathing hard. "Was just getting his harness ready and the next thing I knew he was going crazy."

Xena turned the horse's head, walking around in a circle so she could see what was going on behind her. Philtop was gone, she could see his cloak disappearing as he headed towards the rest of his group. Brendan was standing in front of her throne, and Gabrielle was standing next to him.

The rattling had been Philtop going down the stairs, apparently.

"I've got him, m'lady." The circus man came forward, extending his hand towards the horse. "Many thanks.. your quick action saved many a bruise I'm thinking."

Xena pretended she didn't hear the sibilant whisper behind him revealing her identity. She scratched the horse on the nose and stroked his neck, flicking her eyes over his body to see if he'd been hurt. He was in good condition, but she saw suddenly a bit of blood against the bright hair.

She handed the headstall off to the circus man and moved down the horse's side. He had a huge body and a very broad back but at the point of his left rear hip was a long, wicked slice half hidden in thick hair. "He's cut."

The circus man hurried around to look. "Cut? What? He doesn't even have his hair.. by the gods, look at that!"

Xena studied the wound. "Dagger." She said. "With a blood channel." She looked around. "Someone did that on purpose."

The horse stamped its hind foot, sending a tiny spray of blood flying. Xena turned, and scanned the crowd, finding three of her men nearby, hands on weapons. She jerked her chin at them, and they came forward. "Search the stock area." She said. "Someone knifed that animal. People could have died."

"Majesty."

"I'll check." The man carefully turned the horse. "Hey, maybe it was an accident. Some of our riggers have blades like that. Common boy."

A page came forward, offering Xena a towel. She took it, standing in the middle of the show area, feeling suddenly as though time had been turned back to the day she'd taken the castle.

When everyone in the room was an enemy.

\*\*

“What happened?” Xena snapped, as she got back up onto the platform. “What did that bastard do?” She swept her eyes over the area, then refocused them on Gabrielle. “Well?” She looked at Brendan. “Go see what they found in that stall. I want to know who stabbed that horse.”

“Mistress.” Brendan touched his chest and headed off down the steps.

Xena turned to her consort. “What happened?” She repeated. “I saw him up here making trouble.”

Gabrielle took her arm and patted it. “It’s okay, Xena.” She said. “He was just going to run down there when he saw you wrestling with the horse, and I stopped him.”

“Yeah?” Xena carefully examined both seats, before she plopped down in hers, and glared out at the hall. After a second, she turned her head and looked at her consort. “You did what?”

Gabrielle sat down next to her. “I stopped him from running down to where you were. When you were wrestling with the horse.”

“I wasn’t wrestling with the damn horse.” Xena said. “I was trying to control him and keep him from killing himself or hurting someone out there.”

“I know. That was so cool and brave of you.”

Xena eyed her. “It was idiotic and stupid of me. That thing could have crushed me to death.” She informed her consort. “You should have hauled **me** back on my ass when I took off. Don’t let me do things like that, muskrat. It would be embarrassing as Hades to croak under a pile of horsecrap, you know?”

“But it was so cool and brave.” Gabrielle disagreed. “Everyone thought so, Xena. They were all saying that in the next row. Anyway.” She put a hand on the queen’s arm, feeling the tension under the skin. “Philtop was going to run down there and I grabbed him by the cloak and stopped him.”

Xena shifted in her seat, giving the impression of a large, discontented cat. “Why’d you do that, muskrat?”

“Stopped him? I figured he was going to just get in the way. Or get hurt.”

A faint twinkle appeared in the queen’s eye. “Why’d you stop him?” She repeated. “That might have been as entertaining as those damn jugglers.”

“Xena.”

“Gabrielle.” Xena accepted the towel on of the servers hurried over with, and wiped her hands with it. “You did the right thing.” She said, after a moment. “Stupid bastard probably would have distracted me and scared the damn horse and we’d both have ended up hurt.”

Her consort looked pleased at the words. “He didn’t like it.”

“Screw him.” The queen tossed the towel at the servant. “Mindless jackass.”

“So then he said something mean and Brendan hit him.”

The queen’s motions stopped, and she turned to look at her consort. “Something mean about you?” Her voice changed, all the banter leaving it, and the tone altering to soft, almost breathless seriousness. “What did he say?”

Gabrielle felt herself captured in that suddenly intense look. “Yes. Just some silly stuff, like the other servants used to say when I first got here.” She answered, unable to do anything but be honest. “But it’s okay, Xena. I think he’s just really jealous of me or something.”

“I don’t really give a crap what the reason is. I’m gonna kill him for it.” The queen answered, still in that soft, dangerous tone. “He has no right to come in here and live off my good will and spout out bullshit about you.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle’s voice dropped to a gentle murmur, seeing the clean, hard rage in those pale blue eyes. She realized that Xena was truly angry, not just blowing off steam like she sometimes did, and talking loud.

The queens’ body had tensed, and her fingers were slowly closing and unclosing.

Really, truly angry, like she’d been the night she’d killed Toris. Gabrielle remembered seeing that same, cold look on her face, and she felt a shiver go down her own spine. She closed her fingers around the queen’s arm, squeezing it gently.

“Maybe he’s behind the poisoner.” Xena said. “Maybe this is a power play. Undermining me, undermining you...”

“Is he smart enough for that?” Gabrielle wondered. “He seems kind of dumb to me.”

Xena’s lashes fluttered closed, then back open, and the rage faded a little. “He’s not stupid.” She answered briefly. “What he does, he does for his own reasons.”

“Well, really, Xena.” Gabrielle watched the tall body shift a little, and relax, and she followed suit. “Then he’s sort of just a jerk, you know? Its like he thinks I’m a joke or something.”

Xena grimaced at the truth in the statement. “I think he thinks I just named you my consort while I waited for a real man to come along.” She answered honestly. “Me not wanting a man is outside his mental reach.”

Gabrielle fell uncomfortably silent.

Xena’s eyes took on a slightly faraway look. “My picking a consort for love rather than political expediency wasn’t something anyone expected either.” She mused. “They never really did get me.”

Gabrielle just quietly watched her, unsure of what to say to that.

The queen leaned to the side and unexpectedly bit Gabrielle’s knuckle, where it was tensed around her arm. “Yeah.” She traded the nibble for a lick, then looked up from between her disordered bangs. “He is a jerk.” She acknowledged. “And knowing I fell for him embarrasses the Hades out of me so I really just want to kill him on general principals, yknow?”

“Oh.” Gabrielle turned her hand over, and cupped the queen’s chin with it, unable to look away from those compelling eyes. “Well he’ll be gone soon, right?” She could feel the muscles in Xena’s throat moving, and it belatedly occurred to her that everyone in the room was probably staring at them.

“I sure hope so.” Xena responded mildly, winking at her and then straightening up and turning back to the show. “For his sake.” She gave a signal to the guard standing next to the show floor. “Let’s get this moving!”

Gabrielle leaned on the arm of her chair, savoring the little tingles still running up and down her spine. Her chair, and Xenas were right up next to each other, and she could, if she wanted to, reach over and tuck her hand inside the queen’s elbow.

She wanted to. The feel of Xena’s warm skin under it’s covering of silk settled her, and she was able to focus on the performers, who were now somewhat timidly coming out into the room and starting to get ready.

For all her bravado, Philtop bothered her. It bothered her that he felt he could say mean things about her, and his obvious disdain made her uncomfortable.

It bothered her that Xena admitted to liking him, in a way Gabrielle felt there hadn’t been many the queen had felt like that about. That she’d wanted him. That he was still very good looking.

It bothered her that the thought of Xena killing Philtop just because he annoyed her wasn't nearly as troublesome to her as it should have been. Gabrielle studied the end of the chair arm a moment, tracing a whorl on it with one fingertip.

She felt silly, thinking of stuff like that. Xena had been pretty clear about how she felt, both about Philtop and about Gabrielle herself.

Pretty clear. She looked up to watch Xena's profile, only to find those blue eyes watching her, a look of surprisingly gentle affection in them. She smiled a little in reflex. "What's wrong?"

"I'm thinking about you hauling that jackass down by his cloak." Xena said. "Damn I'm sorry I missed that."

"Mistress." Brendan arrived back on the platform.

"Didja find him?" The queen looked sharply at him.

For an answer, Brendan extended his arm, which had a dagger lined up on the inside of it., the hilts cupped in his hand. "Found this." He said. "And this." He offered his other hand which had a ripped piece of cloth in it.

Xena took the weapon first and studied it closely. She glanced to one side as Lastay came over to see what was going on. "This crest familiar to you?" She asked the Duke.

Lastay knelt beside the throne and looked at it, his head cocked slightly to one side. "Ah huh." He frowned. "To be sure, your Majesty, I would have to look back in the scrolls. It does remind me a bit of the old seal of the Westlanders."

"Oh really?" Both Xena and Gabrielle spoke at the same time.

"Aye." The duke sniffed reflectively. "Not the current Prince." He looked past them to where Philtop's group was seated. "One before him. Was in power when my father had the title and lands. Used to come and make a fuss about the border."

"I see." Xena slipped the dagger into her belt. "Thanks." She took the cloth next, but it wasn't nearly as interesting. Just a piece of sacking, coarse and unremarkable. She turned over the bit of cloth in her fingers and paused, leaning her head a bit closer to examine it. "Merchant mark."

"Aye." Brendan agreed. "Didn't know it." He added. "Asked the boys, no one's seen it before."

Lastay took the cloth when Xena offered it. After a moment, he shook his head. "Strange to my eyes, but then, mistress, it's not my habit to examine the baskets and casks brought into my castle."

No, Xena supposed not. It wasn't her habit either, really. "Take it and have one of the men bring it around in the merchant hall. See if anyone knows it." She leaned back as Brendan took the cloth back, and headed off. "Damn it."

"Mistress, why would someone go and harm that horse." Lastay took a seat on one of the padded benches next to her throne, extending his legs out and crossing them at the ankles. "It seems senseless to me."

Xena had been thinking about that too. It had seemed senseless. Why stab a circus horse? She could almost have understood it, fitted it in as a piece of the puzzle if it had been Tiger, or a horse she knew – but she'd never seen this animal before, nor the circus performers who owned him.

No reason for her to care. So it wasn't the horse, itself. Then what? "Maybe someone wanted to set that beast off and hurt people. Cause a panic." She mused. "Would have. Thing would have crashed right into that whole front row there."

Lastay slowly nodded. "Would have." He said. "Those are favored seats, your majesty. Some of the youngsters of the royal council as well. Could have done some bad mischief."

A bunch of kids splatted under those big hooves, there under her eyes, in her hall while their parents watched?

Mischief? Yeah. Xena felt a chill run down her spine. She'd just gotten the majority turned in her favor, finally. What would that have done?

Was that what this was all about?

"Maybe whoever it is knew you'd jump right down there, Xena. Maybe they were trying to hurt you." Gabrielle spoke up. "That sure was a big horse."

"Now that's a thought, m'lady." Lastay said. "Drawing her majesty into danger, as it were?"

"Yeah. Maybe they did it hoping the horse would run over her." Gabrielle nodded. "You know? Like that ox did one of the grooms the other day. He got really banged up."

"C'mon, people." Xena gave them both a droll look. "Don't tell me some whacko expected me to risk my hoary old ass saving a bunch of noble brats."

Both her duke and her bedmate looked back at her. "Xena." Gabrielle gave her bicep a squeeze. "That's exactly what you did."

"I know that." The queen looked a trifle exasperated. "But given my reputation, who in Hades would expect it." She paused, looking from one to the other. "Besides maybe you." She put her fingertip on Gabrielle's nose. "My crazy little storytelling love muskrat?"

Gabrielle blushed appealingly.

"Ah." Lastay scrunched his face up. "Well, now, your majesty. That's a point, certainly. Though in these past few seasons it seems to me word has gotten about a bit about differently."

Xena shook her head. "I don't buy it. More likely they were trying to cause a bloodbath and ruin my party." She decided. "Ah, here we go." She indicated the show floor, where the circus performers were getting ready to start. "Let's watch and see what happens."

"Do you think they'll try something again?" Gabrielle asked. "To hurt people?"

Xena steepled her fingers. "I think they'll try something else." She said. "They've struck out the last two rounds. I just wish I knew what angle they'll take.. I think after this we're gonna start pushing their hand. I can't risk giving them all the time in the world for them to plot with."

"Go try and hunt them down?" Lastay hazarded a guess. "It's a big stronghold, your majesty. Lots of places to hide."

"Yeah, but." Xena pointed at the door. "With that weather outside, fewer places they can run." She settled back in her chair as the acrobats came out. "Ah there's your little friends, muskrat." She watched them climb up the wooden structure with spiderlike agility.

They were engaging kids, the queen admitted to herself. Very well built and cute as buttons the pair of them, alike in size with beautifully defined muscles and obvious pride in their skills.

She'd seen them looking at Gabrielle, that morning, finding her consort apparently very attractive. She gave them a point for good taste, but had also made sure it was quite clear who Gabrielle belonged to.

No sense in giving anyone any ideas.

One hopped on a swinging bar and hung upside down, letting his hands dangle as he swung back and forth. The other grabbed a second bar and launched himself into the air, swinging back and forth in a timed pattern as he hung from his arms.

She could hear the creak of the ropes, as a quiet fell over the crowd, unsure of what they were going to see.

The first man held his hands out, and the second released his hold and flew through the air, catching the outstretched hands and being held by them, then on the back swing, he released his hold, and turned in mid air to catch his original swing and land back on the wooden structure, throwing his arm out in a theatrical gesture.

The crowd clapped appreciatively. Xena turned her head and looked at Gabrielle with a steady, intent stare. "Gabrielle?"

"Wasn't that great?" Gabrielle looked at her, eyes alight.

"If you tell anyone I can do that I will spank you until your butt falls off." The queen told her, in an undertone. "Got me?"

"Can you?" Her consort whispered back.

"Not going to find out."

"It sort of looks.."

"No."

"But.."

"NO."

\*\*

The circus was a fantastic success. Gabrielle's hands felt raw from clapping, and the buzz of conversation around her was happy and excited, as the crowd started to filter out and head towards the banquet hall.

They'd seen so much. The horses, of course, doing some amazing things in the relatively small interior space, and then acrobats, and the jugglers... and then they had brought out some strange animals that did tricks, she hadn't known what any of them were.

Xena had, of course. But even she had leaned forward when they'd brought out a huge striped cat and one of the circus performers had commenced to wrestle with it. The animal was huge, as long as a horse with a head the size of a barrel top.

It had big, visible teeth that the man pried open its jaws to show them, and huge paws with raking claws at the end of them that dug into the floor as the performer struggled with him and scraped up huge chunks of the straw and sand padding.

It roared. Gabrielle had never in her life heard a sound like that, and she sat enthralled as it raced around in a tight circle around the man, both of them surrounded by other circus workers holding horsewhips.

Xena, however, had frowned. "Poor damned animal." She said, once they had taken the animal away, herding him down a tunnel made from bodies holding half shields, through a door into a half hidden cage.

Gabrielle had been a little surprised at that, at first, but then she thought about how Xena loved her horse, Tiger, and was always so concerned about the stronghold's creatures, even the castle cat who loved to hide under their bed.

So maybe it wasn't that surprising. Xena had once told her she trusted animals over humans because they never lied to you and Gabrielle supposed that was true, since they didn't talk at all, after all.

"Xena, can we go see that big cat?" Gabrielle asked, as the queen returned from talking to two of her higher ranking nobles, both of whom looked very pleased with themselves. "Do you think they'd let us get a closer look? It was so pretty."

“Let us?” Xena rested her wrist against the top of her throne. “Did you forget who’s the queen around here?”

“Never.”

“C’mon.” Xena motioned towards the steps. “I want to see all those critters they dragged in here before they start charging a dinar to all these nitwits to look.” She lifted her sword in its sheath off the back of the throne and tucked it into the crook of her arm.

“I don’t think they’d charge you, Xena.” Gabrielle hurried to follow her long strides down the wooden platform. “After all, you saved their horse.”

Xena gave her an amused look.

“And you are the queen.”

“Oh yeah, that too.” Xena drawled, as they reached the floor and walked across the scattered hay to where the circus performers were gathered, accepting coins from the crowd and chatting with them.

“That was great.” Gabrielle greeted them with a smile.

The performers all peeked past her to where Xena was hovering. “Thanks.” Zev bravely spoke up. “I’m glad you liked it.” He eyed the queen. “You did like it right?”

“I did.” Xena responded candidly. “Want to give me and the muskrat here the half dinar tour of your creatures? Gabrielle wants to see your kitty cat.”

“Sure!” Zev looked pleased to be asked. He half bowed and indicated they should precede him as he herded them gently to the back of the hall, where a makeshift canvas wall had been erected to give them a backstage of sorts.

Behind that, Xena could already hear the animals. The stomp of horses hooves, and the rattle of chains assailed her senses, along with a mixture of manure and musk that made her nose twitch.

She kept near Gabrielle’s shoulder as they were ushered past the canvas and were suddenly in a different world. The wagons and carts of the circus were parked neatly in a square, with seats and a small brazier set in the center of them. Beyond the wagons were roped off areas for the horses and oxen, and then another section was blocked off by canvas walls was behind that.

“This is a great place to do our show.” Zev was chatting, as he lead them through the cozy campsite and back to the other canvas wall. “It’s perfect, really.”

“Yeah?” Xena pushed the canvas aside and entered the animal enclosure. ‘Glad you like it.’ She spotted the big cat and made sure she was within grabbing distance of Gabrielle as her consort was immediately attracted to it. “Want to stick around for the winter?”

“It really was a great place so nice and dry and... what?” Zev turned and faced her. “Excuse me, your majesty, but what did you just say?”

Xena moved past him to examine the cat. It was a massive beast, a burnished orange color with black stripes, with a head as big as an ale barrel.

It was lying in the open, with a chain and collar around its neck, which was securely coupled to the largest wagon’s axle. As it watched Xena’s approach, it opened its mouth exposing huge white teeth, and licked its lips.

Wow. Even Xena’s jaded sensibilities were jolted by the animal on seeing it up close. Its fur was thick and vivid and looked healthy and as she watched the animal stretched its feet out, displaying tufted white toes that had claws unexpectedly revealed in them.

“Your majesty?” Zev repeated, making a frantic come hither gesture with his hand, apparently to his lagging colleagues. “Did you say something?”

“I did.” Xena circled the big cat, fascinated by it. “I said, you want to stay here and do your show all winter? “ She glanced at him, and at the older man and woman who were rapidly approaching. “Stick around, keep me entertained?”

Gabrielle almost held her breath, watching the circus performer’s faces. She’d come to quickly like them, finding more in common with the younger ones than she did with most anyone else in the stronghold. The thought of having them around to talk to and trade stories with over the cold months made her very happy.

“That okay with you, muskrat?” Xena nudged her, having circled back around to where she was standing.

“Sure.” Gabrielle answered immediately. “That would be great!”

Cellius looked at the older man. “Father, this is..”

“I know well who it is, my girl.” The older man bowed from the waist in Xena’s direction. “Your most magnificent majesty.”

Gabrielle held her breath for another reason, but Xena merely chuckled low and deep in her throat, a sexy sound that tickled the eardrums. She relaxed, a smile appearing on her face.

“Good start.” Xena told the man.

“May I suppose I heard correctly, and that your Majesty wishes us to remain here through the cold, and perform for your subjects?”

“For me and Gabrielle. But the rest of them can watch too.” Xena agreed. “You can do a deal with the merchants I figure will be hanging around for a while. People show up, they make money, cut you in a little.”

The man had been staring at the queen, and now he exhaled and clasped his hands together.

“You can eat from my kitchens.” Xena added. “What do you think?”

Gabrielle was watching them all. She caught surprise and relief in their eyes, and Cellius had a suspicious hint of tears. She patted the girl on the shoulder.

“Your majesty – it has been long years for us, out on the road.” The older man said. “We have not stopped travelling since we left our home village, three cold seasons and more ago. Though we found ways to suffer through the weather and keep ourselves whole... the thought of being still and protected for a time nearly brings me to tears.”

“Gods.” Cellius breathed. “To sleep in a bed for a week.”

Gabrielle remembered the weeks out on campaign and how much she’d loved getting back to the castle. She could only imagine what it had been like for these people, who had been traveling much longer.

“So is that yes?” Xena had been waiting with commendable patience, which had just come to its limits. “You have no idea how much fun I’m gonna get out of having you lot in here instead of the overstuffed poms and their dancing.”

The older man bowed again, this time with true, deep reverence. “Your majesty, it would be my great honor.” He straightened. “I am Stevanus, and I am at your service. We would love to stay and entertain your beautiful self, and your subjects through the winter.”

“Oh, yay!” Cellius whispered. “Oh Zev! Can you believe it?”

The young acrobat was almost bouncing in place, he was so excited.

“Great.” Xena seemed oblivious to the drama at her elbow. “Where’d you get the cat?” Having settled the matter to her own satisfaction, she returned to her original interest. “I’ve seen one like it, but far off south from here.”

“Oh. Ah. Well.” Stevanus visibly wrenched his own focus to the animal. “You know, we were in a portside town on the coast almost.. let’s see.. yes, a year gone now. And there was a man there who had a commission to deliver this big boy and some other animals but his purchaser never showed up.”

“Ah.” Xena cautiously approached the cat, and knelt, to get a better look at it.

“Ah your Majesty.. please have caution.” Zev squeaked. “He bites.”

Xena chuckled, shifting the sword in her arm. “So do I.” She studied the cat, who was just as intently studying her. “Beautiful.”

The cat yawned, exposing it’s teeth again and a tongue Gabrielle swore was the size of a man’s shoe. She was just behind Xena, but had no urge to get any closer. “Wow. “ She murmured. “Is it hard to travel with him? If he bites and all, I mean?”

“Oh, we feed him.” Stevanus said. “And three of our handlers have become quite fond of him. He lets them put the chain on and walk him about, and they have trained him to do the things you saw him to do tonight. I was given to understand from the boatsman he was raised from youth by men so he’s not as wild as he might be.”

“Ah.” Xena nodded. “That makes sense.” She extended her hand towards the animal, watching it cock it’s head and observe her with tawny, glistening eyes. She heard a sound behind her, and amused herself mentally imagineing her beloved bedmate going quietly nuts trying to keep from jerking her backwards away from the cat.

“Majesty, please be careful.” Stevanus said, unhappily. “We have only just begun a wonderful relationship I wouldn’t like it damaged by my creature’s teeth.”

Xena chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’m a big girl.” She watched the cat shift, and lean it’ shead forward, it’s big nostrils twitching as it sniffed her fingers. “Big enough to not blame anyone for my getting myself into a mess.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle murmured, from right behind her.

“No problem, muskrat.” The queen was delighted with the tickling sensation from the whiskers against her fingertips. “I’ve got two hands.” She heard her consort sigh, and felt a feather light touch against her back.

The cat opened it’s mouth. Xena kept her hand right where it was, knowing better than to make any sudden moves. The big tongue protruded though, and licked her fingers and she recalled handling sweet cakes not to much earlier. “Like that, huh?”

“Gods.” Gabrielle muttered.

Xena touched the cat on the face, finding it’s fur softer than she’d expected. She didn’t push her luck any further though, after a quick scratch under it’s jaw, she withdrew her arm and stood back up. “Nice.”

She turned to find the handlers, and the circus people pale as new linen sheets behind her.

“Relax.” She told them. “Smart cat. Recognizes one of his own kind.” She winked at them, and then slung her arm over Gabrielle. “Get yourselves settled. I’ll tell the servants to get you what you need.” Her voice turned businesslike.

Stevanos recovered his composure and bowed. “We are most grateful to you, majesty.” He said. “My deepest thanks for your patronage.”

“Don’t thank me so soon.” The queen glanced around. “But you’re welcome.” She steered Gabrielle around the circle surrounded by the wagons, examining the other creatures who were in smaller cages mounted on them.

“By the gods, Stevanos.” Zev muttered. “You were right to bring us here. To think of even a sevenday’s loose from the weather.”

One of the handlers cleared his throat a little. “By the gods is right. She’s got the magic in her. Did you see that cat? Would have bit my hand off I’d tried it.”

Stevanos put his arm around his daughter. “Sometimes my friends you just get lucky. “ He looked around, watching the queen’s tall form make her slow circle, with her friend alongside her. “Not only safe shelter, but a chance to gather us some dinars as we’ll have board here. It’s good. By the gods, it’s good.”

“What’s that Xena?” Gabrielle inspected the last cage in the circle. It held a pair of small animals, with short legs, and long bodies. They had wiggly noses and seemed as curious about them as they were about the creatures.

“Those are minks.” Xena responded. “Or stoats. I’m not sure which.” She added. “Nice fur.”

Gabrielle studied the little animals. They had cute faces, and long whiskers, and agile paws. “Oh.” She made a little face. “I think Duke Lastay’s cloak is lined with them.”

“Mmhm.” The queen agreed. “Don’t get too teary eyed, muskrat. I know how much you like rabbit stew and lambchops.”

“No, I know.”

Xena looked around. “Okay.” She said, in a very quiet tone. “Let’s go out this way, and meet the troops.” She shifted and as though idly wandering, moved past the wagons towards one of the back entrances to the hall.

They slipped between two methodically chewing oxen and through a passageway into the back servants hall, now empty of people but filled with pieces of gear from the circuit. Xena went down the hallway a couple of bodylengths and then thorough a nondescript wooden door.

“Where does this go?” Gabrielle asked, feeling the temperature drop considerably. She rubbed her arms in reflex.

“Tunnel. We’re gonna meet the troops near the stables.” Xena went through another door and then pushed open a third, which revealed a long, dim stairway leading down. She drew her sword from it’s sheath and handed the covering back to Gabrielle. “Hold this.”

Gabrielle tucked it under one arm and kept close to the queen’s heels as they descended. “I’m really glad you asked them to stay, Xena. I like them.”

The queen smiled. “Yeah, I know you do.” She said. “Be good to give you people to talk to other than me who aren’t soldiers or stuck up nobles.”

“I always have you to talk to.” Gabrielle commented.

“Hm.” Xena shifted her sword as they reached the bottom of the stairs, pausing to listen before she entered the chill, damp space under the hall. Ahead of her was a big iron gate, that covered the entrance to a tunnel whose depths disappeared into the shadows.

Xena withdrew a key from the pouch at her waist, and fitted it into the lock, turning it with a bit of effort and a grinding squeak that made her ears hurt. It took a lot more hand strength than she’d figured, but that fact itself reassured her as it meant the lock had been locked for a good long time.

She booted the gate open with her foot and passed inside, waiting for Gabrielle to follow her before she closed it, and locked it from the other side. She then pocketed the key and started down the tunnel, feeling it get colder and colder as they walked along.

“Brr.” Gabrielle exhaled, her breath just visible in the faint glow from ahead of them. “Have you been in this one before?”

“From the other side.” Xena swept the tunnel ahead of them, her eyes easily picking out the stones that made out the walls, and the ground that had small holes and rocks in it, making it a little treacherous to walk through. “I told you I knew where the one in the stables is. I never bothered to look at this one.”

“It’s creepy.”

Xena could hear the rock settling all around them, and soft whispers of wind, and a dank chill seeping into her bones. “It’s a tunnel.” She said. “It’s not supposed to be cheerful.” She suddenly felt a prickle down her spine and she slowed, then halted, holding an arm out to stop Gabrielle. “Psst.”

Gabrielle stopped and took a step back, just behind Xena’s left elbow. She could hardly see a thing, just the faint light from the stable end of the tunnel, but she knew something had to have made Xena react.

Something had. Unfortunately, Xena didn’t know what the something was. She knew her instincts were bristling and in reaction she brought her sword forward in front of her, her hand gripping the hilts as she strained to detect what disturbed her senses.

Sound? Smell? Xena concentrated on both. She could clearly hear the sound of her men gathering in the stables, and the soft drip of water behind her. She could smell the mold and moss around her, the stone of the walls, the dirt of the floor, and Gabrielle.

Her eyes told her the tunnel was empty. Even with the dim shadows, she could see every inch of it.

So what, then?

Cautiously she moved forward, sweeping the air in front of her with her sword in a controlled pattern. It swept through the gloom, a flicker of metal that caught the dim torchlight from the far end as the tip wove back and forth.

She felt Gabrielle touch her back, and then fingers curled around the belt holding her robe closed. “Stay close.”

“I will.” Gabrielle promised. “I can’t see a thing.”

Xena continued to slowly advance, sweeping the darkness in front of them. She had just started to relax, and figure her nerves were just shot when the light reflecting off her sword reflected off something else.

She stopped, bringing her sword up and angling it towards the torchlight. Ahead of her, at neck level, she saw the light shine back towards her off a thin string going from one side of the tunnel to the other. “See that?”

Gabrielle tried. She screwed her eyes up, but all she could see was the outline of the exit to the tunnel far ahead. “No.”

Xena paused. Should she trigger whatever it was? “Brendan!” She let out a bellow.

There was a long pause, then a body appeared in the entrance, blocking the light. “Majesty?”

“Trap!” Xena called out. “Light this damn thing!”

Brendan disappeared. Xena remained still, her sword held out in front of her.

Then she saw the string suddenly release.

\*\*

Instinct was funny. Xena had always assumed her instincts were good and they were totally focused on keeping her head on her neck and her skin in one piece. So finding herself primarily concerned with making sure Gabrielle was safe and exposing her own ass to whatever was coming at them came as something of a surprise.

Nevertheless, she half turned, putting her back to the danger and grabbed Gabrielle around the waist, pulling her down and sideways as her senses warned her something was coming at them.

“Oof!” Gabrielle landed with a grunt. “Xena!”

Speaking of instincts. Xena twisted as she landed and got her sword up just in time to deflect something off into the shadows, then a second, then a third, and she felt Gabrielle grab her from behind, steadying her balance as she lunged up from the floor and snatched a fourth something out of the air.

Then light was coming down the corridor along with a thunder of footsteps. “Be careful!” Xena let out a bellow. “Light it up first!”

She dropped the arrow she’d caught, tossing it away from her back down the corridor. “You okay, Muskrat?”

“Um. Yes.” Gabrielle said, out of the darkness. “Except I bumped my elbow on a rock.”

The troops reached them at that moment and the hallway erupted into bright torchlight, sending splintered shadows against the walls.

“Got them here, majesty.” A male voice echoed from a little ways up the corridor. “Crossbows.”

“Yeah.” Xena turned and helped Gabrielle to her feet, frowning when she saw her bedmate cradling her arm. “Let me see that.”

Gabrielle willingly extended her arm and glanced down. “Yeah, I think I... oh. Xena, look. It wasn’t a rock.”

“Bigods.”

Brendan held the torch close and they all stared down at the ground, where a wooden chest was positioned, the top of it knocked askew. Inside, a crossbow mechanism was visible.

“Clear out from in front of that.” Xena ordered. She waited until they obeyed, then she took the tip of her sword and eased the box open, so she could get a better look at the inside.

The box was long enough to hold four crossbows and that’s what was in there. The trigger mechanisms were all tied to each other, and the cord was running out of the box, and crossing the ground just ahead of where Xena’s boots were, just about the height of her ankles.

Xena reached out and kicked the cord, and the box snapped back as all the crossbows fired down the corridor, rattling hard against the stone walls past the group of soldiers clustered tightly to one side of her. “Look around carefully. Make sure there aren’t any more of these damn things.”

With a casual swipe she cut the cord, watching it drop to the ground and slither away. Then she went back to examining Gabrielle’s elbow, which now had a knot on it the size of a hens egg.

“That’s gonna ache, muskrat.”

“It already does.” Her consort made a face.

“No more of those, Xena.” Brendan came over to them. “Damn bastards... coulda lost a good couple men in here.”

“Could have lost your friendly homicidal maniac in here too.” Xena remarked. “A set of those damn things came from the other direction. Looks like someone didn’t want anyone using this tunnel and getting away with it.”

Now the tunnel was brightly lit, torches shoved into sconces spaced a bodylength apart down both sides of the hall. Xena looked around, blinking a little at the harsh smoke from the brands, and giving her self a moment for the nerves to settle.

There hadn't been anyone in the hallway. Just the traps. Her senses hadn't picked up anything living or moving in the darkness, and she knew they would have. If not before the triggering of the arrows, then after as whoever it was would slink away and escape.

She knelt beside the long, low chest and examined it. The wood was ordinary, and as she lifted the top and turned it over, she could see it was relatively hastily cut, chopped with a common ax in fact and roughly fitted.

She ran her thumb over an edge, finding a fine layer of dust on the surface. Damn it. How long had whoever this was been here? She'd taken for granted she knew where this shadowy killer was from, but now... now she wasn't really that sure.

She set the top aside and peered into the box, careful to keep her hands clear of the sides just in case someone had left a surprise sticking out of one of them. The crossbow mechanisms had been fastened securely to the bottom plank with horseshoe nails.

Horseshoe nails. Xena reached in and touched one with her fingertip. Then she pulled her dagger out and unbent the nail, getting hold of it with her thumb and forefinger and yanking it out of the wood with a cranky creaking sound.

"What is it?" Gabrielle was still cradling her arm.

Xena stood, juggling the nail in her hand. "Just something I want a better look at in better light." She said. "Brendan, we need to find this guy. This is getting too dangerous."

"Getting?" Brendan eyed her. "Bigods, Xena. "

"Yeah." The queen sighed. "I know. I should have taken this more seriously before now. Problem is, whoever this is got two hits in, and then his luck turned. He's gonna start taking more chances."

"Y'think he knew we'd be down here?" Brendan asked.

Xena half shrugged. "Stands to reason we would be." She looked around, cocking her ears. "But this wasn't set today."

"No?"

"No." Xena put her hands on her hips. "Everyone fan out and search this tunnel end to end. I want anything that's in here, dropped buttons, rat bones, whatever you find." She ordered. "We start here, and then we move on to the next tunnel."

"Aye."

Xena swiveled around and regarded her consort. Gabrielle was back against the wall, atypically quiet, just watching what was going on. Her body language was tense, though, and she had a furrow over her forehead.

Arm must be killing her. Xena pondered her dilemma. She could order Gabrielle go back to their quarters, but that meant she'd be there alone, and the queen wasn't about to permit that.

But she didn't trust anyone to watch over her except herself.

But if she went with her, that meant she'd have to trust her men to search the stronghold.

But she suspected they had a very clever assassin inside the stronghold, who so far had eluded their grasp, and seemed to have every inclination to keep trying to kill people.

She didn't trust the men to find the killer.

Ah crap. "Okay, listen."

"Could we go down there, Xena?" Gabrielle spoke up, pointing to the far end of the tunnel. "This place is kinda creepy."

Well, it would postpone her decision at any rate. "Okay" Xena agreed. "Let's set up a command area at the end where it meets the other tunnels." She put her hand on Gabrielle's back. "C'mon." She sheathed her sword and plucked a torch from its sconce, lighting their way as they walked across the uneven floor.

Behind her, the men were spreading out to search. Ahead Xena could hear a number of voices, and see motion across the entrance to the tunnel. "How's the arm?"

"Ow." Gabrielle admitted. "It really hurts."

"Hm." Xena swept the torch back and forth, her eyes focusing on the edge of the tunnel. She paused when they reached the other crossbow box, edging around and kicking it open with a swift motion of her boot.

Like the first one, the box was angled upward on a slant, focusing the crossbow bolts at about gut level and the bows were angled a little to provide a nice range of coverage. Whoever had set it up, knew their business.

In fact, Xena admitted, she couldn't have done better herself. "Nasty."

"Burr." Gabrielle concurred. "Glad I was with you."

Xena stared at the box. "Yeah." She said. "Me too."

Her eyes fell on one of the spent bolts from the box she'd triggered and she picked it up, examining the head and sniffing delicately at it. To her surprise, only the standard smell of worked iron came back to her, and a quick examination of it in the torchlight showed no stain on the metal. "Huh."

"No poison?" Gabrielle guessed. "Maybe they thought the arrows were enough?"

Xena's shoulderblades twitched. "Could be." The queen agreed. "Almost was for me once, right?"

Gabrielle shivered, remembering the blood, and the injury, and her shaking hands cutting the arrow out of Xena's flesh. In her mind's eye she could smell the tang of copper, and feel the softness of Xena's skin under her fingertips.

She remembered Xena looking back at her over her shoulder, when she'd finished, having trusted her with a bare blade at her back, more trust than anyone had ever given her in her life until that moment.

Xena had been convinced then, she'd later told Gabrielle, that anyone else would have taken the opportunity to simply grab the arrow, and shove it on through her.

So how had she known Gabrielle wouldn't?

She'd just known. There had been an understanding between them even then. Gabrielle smiled a little, following Xena into the brightly lit circular chamber that sat beneath. "But...Xena, didn't you think there'd been something on those.. on that one that hit you?"

Xena paused, frowning. "Did I?"

"You said.. when you had to go through that fight with Bregos and he hurt you?" Gabrielle lowered her voice, as the men in the chamber realized the queen had entered. "You said that broke something open, remember?"

It seemed so far in the past now. Xena pondered the memory. She remembered the fight, and yeah, Bregos that bastard smacking her in the back, obviously knowing of her injury from that bastard Alaran, and then... "Oh yeah." She nodded. "Might have been. Might just have gotten some dirt in it." She dismissed the affair. "All right, people. Listen up."

Gabrielle went over to one of the stone benches lining the wall and sat down on it. Her elbow was still shooting jolts of pain up her arm, and she was careful to keep from banging into anything else, holding it close to her body.

Wow that hurt. She reached up and wiped a few cooled tears from her eyes from it. She didn't regret it though – for sure she'd rather have a sore elbow than an arrow in her. No question about it. And really, it probably worked out better for her to fall on top of that box, than on the stone floor, right?

She turned her attention away from her arm and onto Xena, who was pacing back and forth, a little like the big cat, matter of fact. She had her sword sheath shoved under the belt holding her gown closed and it really...

Well, it looked a little ridiculous. She had that, plus a dagger stuck in there, and the front of the gown she was wearing had mud on it from her tussle with the horse. Her hair was in rough disarray and as she watched, Xena impatiently pushed her sleeves up and exposed her muscular forearms.

"Xena." She called out softly.

"Yes?" The queen whirled and paced over to her. "Arm falling off?"

"No." Gabrielle gently fingered one of the queen's drooping sleeves. "This looks um..." She fished for a word.

"Idiotic." The queen acknowledged belatedly, glancing down at herself. "I should take it off." She started untying the belt that held the gown around her, after shrugging off her cloak and laying it down on the bench. "Wish I had my damn boots."

"Want me to go get them?"

"No." The queen said, in a positive tone. "Stay put." She turned. "Aegos!"

One of the soldiers, a troop leader Gabrielle recognized from the war came trotting over.

"Mistress?" He stopped short as his queen apparently was stripping in front of him and bit his tongue, making a weird face.

"Send a man to my quarters." Xena ignored that. "I need my pair of riding boots and Gabrielle's, and her sling and rocks."

"Majesty." The man mouthed, nodding and turning to do her bidding.

Xena spared a chuckle, and folded her silk gown, laying it down on the bench. She straightened out her leather armor, giving her body a little shake to settle it and reached around to clip her sword sheath to its holders. "That look better?"

Gabrielle nodded, appreciating the way the well fitted armor outlined her lover's form. She got up and started untying her own belt, then yelped as she jostled her arm.

Xena paused in the act of tying her dark hair back. "Stop that." She eased her consort's fingers off her belt and untied it herself, laying it over her shoulder and gently easing the gown off Gabrielle's shoulders. "Okay, we'll set this search in motion then we have to make an appearance in the banquet hall."

Gabrielle nodded, glad to be free of the gown.

"Better for us to be dressed like this anyway. Everyone knows something's going on." Xena remarked. "Got your pigsticker?"

Her consort drew her belt knife from its sheath in the small of her back and displayed it. It was supposed to be just a table knife, for cutting her bread or the occasional tough chop served, but a closer look revealed a razor sharp double sided blade, with an indented channel in the center.

She occasionally used it to cut slices of apple up and really hoped she was never called on to use it for anything more martial since she knew the chances were she'd cut her own thumb off with it before she'd hurt anyone else.

"Good." Xena adjusted a strap on her own armor. Then she turned and headed for the wooden workspace the soldiers had set up, which was now covered in age darkened scraped cowskin, which had inked lines running all over it.

A rough outline of the stronghold. Xena put her hands on the workspace and leaned over it, studying the tracings. To either side of the table, men were armoring up, donning well worn leathers and half armor, and seating swords and maces into holders.

Everyone had leather pants on, and high collared jerkins, and they were wearing light helms that protected the back of their heads.

Xena went back to the diagram. It wasn't that detailed, but it showed the outline of the buildings, and thin, dark tracings that were the tunnels underneath and the dungeons she tried very hard to keep empty.

There were pits down there, and cages, all lying in dusty disuse since she'd taken control. Even the Persian soldiers were being held not in the dungeons themselves, but in the guard barracks that had once been used to keep control from, warm and comfortable billets that befit their status as honorable hostages.

They'd asked to join her army, after the war. Xena had seriously considered it, but something in her gut had kept her from trusting them and she'd settled on a compromise. She'd told them if their king never answered her offer, she'd eventually give them a choice.

In the meantime, they trained with the army, sparring with wooden weapons and keeping themselves fit and suddenly, Xena wondered if they had seen or heard anything unusual and if they would tell her?

Brendan came over. "All secure, Mistress." He said, quietly. "N'more of them traps anywhere. I had the gates locked at t'other end."

"Brendan, go get me that Persian captain." She said. "Bring him here." She indicated a set of lines on the diagram. "Their quarters are here... see where all these underground passages are? Where the old dungeons are?"

Brendan nodded. "Aye."

"Let's see if they heard anything." Xena glanced up at him. "Let's see if their mood's changed any recently."

Her captain nodded in understanding. "Were disappointed, when you kept em under lock." He commented. "Could maybe protect this brigand, whoever it is."

"Could." Xena agreed. "Could be I'm an idiot keeping an enemy inside my gates." She studied the lines as Gabrielle came up next to her. "Maybe it's even one of them."

"One of what?" Gabrielle asked.

"The Persians." Xena glanced at her. "Though they've had the opportunity to put a knife in my heart for a month apparently and haven't."

Gabrielle looked up at her, seeing the furrowed crease in Xena's brow.

"Damn." The queen sighed. "I wish I could be sure about any gods be damned thing at all." She paused. "Other than you."

Gabrielle felt a chill travel up her spine.

The man she'd sent for their boots came back, holding those items under one arm, but carefully carrying a box with both hands. "Mistress." He came over and set it down. "Found this in your rooms. Looked a bit like the ones we saw in there." He indicated the tunnel. "Didn't look in it."

Xena regarded the box. "Definitely wasn't there when we left." She said. "Wonder what little surprise it has in it."

In their rooms. Gabrielle felt another chill. How had they gotten there? Wasn't there a guard? Was there a hidden entrance there, too?

Was there more than one bad guy?

\*\*

Xena poked her head out the wooden door that opened up into the stable yard. She blinked, as snowflakes impacted her eyes, and she was more than surprised to see a dusting of the weather on the ground. "Snow?"

"Aye" Brendan edged up next to her. "Just started a bit ago. Strange, this time of season eh?"

"Freak storm I guess." The queen emerged into the stableyard, the box cradled carefully in her hands. She walked across to the center of the open space and set it down, then backed away, until she rejoined Brendan at the steps. "Gimme that crossbow."

Brendan handed it to her, and she checked the bolt, then lifted it to her cheek and sighted along the shaft to her target. She exhaled and went still, then squeezed the mechanism, glad of the grip she had on it when the string released and the crossbow bucked.

The bolt struck the box, knocking the top off as she'd intended. For a moment, she and Brendan stood there looking at it, then Brendan started forward, carrying a shield.

Xena pulled a crossbow bolt from the carrier strapped to her thigh and reset the crossbow, settling it into the crook of her arm as she covered her captain's advance.

The stableyard was empty – not surprising given the weather, but she wasn't taking any chances. She lifted her head and scanned the walls, her eyes flicking momentarily to the upper walkway, where she'd once stood and ordered Gabrielle's sister killed.

Brendan reached the box, and looked down into it. Then he turned and looked at Xena. The queen interpreted his body language and started forward, letting the crossbow rest on her shoulder with its point skyward.

"Bit of a false warning." Brendan commented, indicating the box.

Xena glanced down into it, finding a beautiful silver pin resting inside, shaped into three intertwined roses of different shades made from glittering stones. "Ah."

Brendan knelt and retrieved the box, standing up with it in his hands. "Pretty thing."

There was a small piece of parchment in the box. Xena removed it and opened it, half turning to let the torchlight shine on it. "Huh." She murmured. "Go find Stanislaus, wouldja? Bring him down to where we're set up."

"Aye." Brendan handed her the box and turned to do her bidding. "Figure he knows who put that in your place?"

"Something like that." Xena put the pin back in the box and tucked it into her hand. She followed Brendan across the yard, and went back down the steps as he turned to the right to cross over to the upper corridor.

Gabrielle was waiting at the bottom of the steps. "Everything okay?" She asked, as Xena reappeared.

"Yeah." Xena pulled her closer to one of the torches and showed her the box. "See?"

“Oh!” Gabrielle tilted the container to the light. “Oh, Xena! That’s so pretty!” She looked up. “That was in that box? That was in our room?”

“Uh huh.” Xena handed over the parchment. “Not the dangerous poisoned trap I’d imagined.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle put the box down on the worktable and opened the parchment. She read the contents twice, before she looked up at the queen, who had resumed her leaning perch studying the layout of the dungeons. “Wow.”

“Mm.”

Gabrielle looked back down at the parchment.

*Your majesty – please take this token as a small indication of the great esteem which I hold for your royal person in my heart. Though we have at times been at odds, I have never regretted turning my back on exile when your predecessor perished and I made my decision to stay and serve you.*

*I appreciate your words to me earlier more than you could ever know.*

*Your obedient servant, Stanislaus.*

“What did you say to him?” She looked up at the queen.

Xena glanced sideways at her. “More than I imagined, apparently.” She replied. “I just told him it was a damn shame the moron I usurped cut his man’s parts off.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle made a face.

“Yeah, and I got a pretty bauble out of it.” The queen sighed. “What is it with me? I do mean things, and people send me presents. I have unwanted slaves killed, their relatives fall in love with me. “ She turned and spread her hands out in patent entreaty. “I don’t get it.”

Gabrielle put the parchment down. She walked over and put her arms around Xena’s body, and gave her a hug.

Xena folded her arms around her consort and returned the hug. She kept doing it, even when the door shoved open and Brendan came back in, a deep frown on his face. “What?”

“Majesty, I can’t find him.” Brendan said. “Servants say he’s been gone a candlemark or more.”

The queen went very still. “I’m not happy to hear that.” She said. “Put a squad on it. Find him.”

Brendan nodded. “Want me to send a man t’get that Persian you asked for?”

Xena shook her head. “I’ll go there myself, with the muskrat.” She said. “You find Stanislaus. Turn this place up side down if you have to.”

Brendan nodded and left.

“Do you think something happened to him?” Gabrielle asked, looking unhappily at the box. “Oh, Xena, I hope not. Not after he gave you such a nice present.”

“I hope not too.” Xena said. “Bastard annoys the crap out of me but his heart’s in the right place. Not many are.” She released Gabrielle. “C’mon. Let’s go have us a talk with your massage buddies. Maybe they can give me a few pointers.”

“Xena, I don’t think they meant any harm.” Gabrielle tucked her hand inside the queen’s elbow as they walked up the steps from the chamber into the central hall. “And anyway, I asked them to teach me.”

“I know.” Xena angled her steps towards the gated stairway across the hall that lead down into the dungeons. There were no passageways that she knew of that connected the dungeon level to the tunnel she’d just been in danger in, but then, apparently she didn’t know as much about the

underground parts of her realm than she thought she did. "It's okay. I'm not gonna stick em. I want to see if I can get them to cough up anything they might have heard down there."

"Oh."

Xena unlatched the gate and opened it, and they started down. The steps here were wide, but rough, and the ceiling rapidly lowered until it was almost brushing Xena's head. The queen ducked a little, and they went down the last set of steeper stairs into the lower chamber.

This was not that different from the one they'd just been in. However it was darker, and wetter, and there were fewer torches. There were hallways leading off in three directions, but one was stoutly barred.

Xena looked at it. "Remind me to take you in there sometime, Gabrielle." She said, quietly.

Gabrielle looked at the hammered crest affixed to the iron gates. "Is that where your brother is?" She guessed, in a soft voice.

"Yeah." Xena turned and headed down the central hallway, which was in better repair, and had obviously seen recent use.

Then she stopped, and turned. "Matter of fact, now's as good a time as any." She reversed her steps and went back to the chamber, going over to the gates and resting her hands on them. She studied the latch intently, then she removed her dagger, and triggered the mechanism.

It opened without any complaint. Xena eased the gate open all the way, and stepped inside, grabbing a torch from a wall sconce at the entrance. She led the way down the narrow passage, going slowly enough to let her eyes scour every inch.

Gabrielle walked quietly behind her, and a silence settled around them that made her skin prickle a little. She put a hand on Xena's back as they turned a corner, and then were entering a larger chamber.

She could see two crypts there, and her heartbeat rattled in her chest and she realized one was occupied, and the other was not.

The room was plain, just chiseled rock walls, and on one side, a stone bench to sit on. There was no other decoration.

It smelled quiet, and dusty, and just a little damp, not nearly as wet as it did in the outer corridor. Gabrielle bypassed the empty crypt and went to the other one, laying her hands quietly on the top of it.

Xena's crest was carved into the stone, and she touched it with light fingertips, trying to imagine what her lover's younger brother would have been like. He'd been shorter than Xena, she remembered the queen saying, and fair haired as Gabrielle herself was.

A little boy, who had suffered, and lived, and grown up with his sister, fighting all his life to achieve this place and then to lose it just from spite.

It was terrible, she thought. Terrible that he'd had to die the way he had. Terrible for Xena to have found him, and worse, known that the only reason they'd killed him was their hatred of her.

Terrible.

Xena was prowling around the room, checking every inch of it. She patiently examined the empty crypt, then went along the edges of the room.

"Y'know." The queen said, as she peered at the dust on the floor. "I'm gonna have to find another place for all this stuff."

"Why?" Gabrielle turned her head. "It's sort of nice here. It's quiet."

“It’s too small.” Xena said, kneeling to examine a smudge on the stone near the door. She glanced up. “I never figured I’d have any more family besides him. Now I do.”

It was offhand and ordinary, and hit Gabrielle hard in an unexpected place. She felt her throat close, and she looked away, and then down, blinking her eyes and seeing the dark droplets fall onto the stone.

“What’s the matter, muskrat?” Xena came over to her, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, didn’t mean to get you all upset. You don’t have to be laid next to me if you don’t want to. We can have ya put in the stable next to Patches stall.”

That brought a faint smile to Gabrielle’s face. “No.. I mean.. of course Xena. I want to go wherever you go, and stay with you forever.” She said. “I just... I remembered that night after Lila died, and how I felt like... I realized how alone I was in the world. I didn’t have anyone.”

Xena nodded somberly. “That’s exactly how I felt when Ly died.” She remarked. “It was just us.” She put her hand on the stone. “And then it was just me.”

Gabrielle reached over and took her hand. “I only had to wait a day though.” She said. “Because that next day.. even though I didn’t realize it then, I wasn’t alone anymore.”

Xena smiled, and tilted her head to regard her consort.

Gabrielle studied the empty crypt. “You think we could just fit in here together?”

The queen encircled her with her arms and hugged her, rocking them both together for a quiet moment. “That’s why this whole thing’s making me crazy, Gabrielle.” She said, softly. “It feels like someone’s trying to take everything away from me again. “

“I won’t let them do that.” Gabrielle said. “Nobody’s going to separate us, Xena. I don’t care what kind of creepy scary spook thing they are.”

It made Xena smile, that gentle, yet inflexible tone coming from this scrappy little woman wrapped around her. Whatever else Gabrielle brought to their relationship, there was no doubt of her devotion.

It had been so long since she’d known that. “Maybe we should go get Tiger and your runt and just run off together somewhere.”

Gabrielle tilted her head up to look at her. “Just us?”

Xena nodded. “Just us.” She said. “Whoever’s here doing this – they want me. If I’m not here.. maybe everyone else will catch a break and be left alone.”

Gabrielle thought about that. “I’ll go wherever you go.” She said. “Maybe we can go find that boat!”

The queen smiled. “Maybe.” She sighed. “But you know, I’m not ready to run away yet. “ She said. “Keep that thought in your head, muskrat. That may be my backup plan.”

Hm. Gabrielle actually felt a sense of excitement thinking about that plan. She’d never forgotten the feeling she’d had when they were on the ship in the port city harbor, and for a little while it had looked like they were going to know it better. “Okay I will.” She said. “But what are we doing to do now?”

Xena rested her chin against the top of Gabrielle’s head. “Well, they didn’t come in here.” She said. “I’m glad of that. I wanted to make sure. Damned if I’m going to have some skank hiding his bamboo pipes in my own crypt. “So now we keep hunting.”

They separated, and Xena led the way to the exit. “Let’s go find out what the Persians have to say.” She waited for Gabrielle to exit the crypt and then she closed and locked the gates, putting the torch back in the sconce before they went up the short flight of steps leading back to the lower chamber.

They could hear voices coming down the center hallway and they walked quickly up it, towards the big wooden doors that led to the guard barracks.

Here the floor was sanded, and as they passed through the open portal, the activity inside went awkwardly still.

“Your majesty.” One of the senior Persians came over and knelt in front of her. It was a surprisingly natural gesture. “It honors us that you visit.”

Xena gestured towards the table. “Siddown.” She crossed the room and took a seat at the end of the broad wooden trestle.

The barracks weren’t fancy, but they were secure and with the fire lit in the big fireplace whose exhaust was angled up to join the bigger one in the kitchens above. There was a main room, where they were now, and six bunkrooms that split off from it.

The Persians had made the space their own, there were curved scimitars lying around and the round shields, and neatly painted hangings draped the walls full of the symbolism of their kind.

Xena rather liked it. It was well kept and orderly, and there was a camaradery of the sword here that reminded her of her own army and past.

The Persians approached warily and sat down, their eyes flicking in concern to Gabrielle, who had taken a seat next to the queen.

Xena folded her hands and rested them on the table. “Lakmas.” She glanced at their senior captain. “Have you been provided with everything you need?” She watched the man’s face. He had a square jaw and heavy, angular profile with a neatly trimmed dark beard.

The Persian nodded, even before she stopped speaking. “More than, your majesty.” He answered, his deep voice calm. “Today in fact, we were brought good thick clothes, for the cold season.” He glanced to the door. “Which has come with much surprise, I think.”

“Started early.” Xena agreed. “I haven’t heard back from your people.. As yet.”

The men watched her intently. It was hard to say from their expressions though whether they were glad or sad to hear that. Then Lakmas clarified the situation. “Majesty, we would as well they didn’t.” He said.

Xena nodded thoughtfully. “I see.”

“We understand why you keep us so, in honorable bondage.” Lakmas went on. “We only hope a time will come, when you can accept our swords in your service.”

Xena studied them all. There were twelve men here, representative of the two score she’d captured in the battle, all of which were scattered through the guards barracks belowground. They had shown no evidence at all of any treachery since.

“I hope, your majesty.” Lakmas spoke up again, a little timidly. “You do not bear grudge against us for teaching your noble consort some of our homier skills.”

The queen smiled. “No.” She said. “In fact, your doing that might have gone in your favor” She said. “I have reason to believe there’s one or more enemy agents inside the stronghold. I’d like your help in finding them.”

The unspoken response was amazing. The Persian soldiers were all tough looking men, with big, muscular bodies, dark skinned and dark eyed and at the words they all straightened up in their seats like children promised iced cake for dessert, their expressions lighting up.

Would have been funny, really. Xena stifled a grin. “Firstly, I’d like to know if any of you, or any of your brothers have noticed anything at all strange, in the last seven day. Sounds. Smells.” She lifted a hand. “Anything.”

Lakmas turned his head. "Gibron, go get Bitras and Alain. Remember what they were saying this morning? About the leaves?"

Bitras, the Persian second in command got up and hopped over the bench, heading off into the barracks, calling loudly for the men he'd mentioned.

Then he turned back to the queen. "Your majesty, with this uncertainty, it overwhelms me that you would turn to us to assist you."

The queen smiled grimly. "Trust's a relative thing." She said. "So let's see if I guessed right this time." She leaned forward. "Let me tell you what I've found so far."

One of the Persians got up and went to the fireplace. "Tea, your majesty?"

Lakmas smiled and rested his elbows on the table. "Perhaps the weather has changed indeed."

\*\*

"It's Harvest." Xena said, her hands cupped around the mug of tea. "Every merchant and toady for leagues around is in this stronghold."

"So, it's not to look for strangers then." Lakmas mused. "Would do you no service."

"No." The queen agreed. "I think the timing's tied to that."

The Persians nodded. The room was much more crowded now, as many of the soldiers she'd captured as could fit in the space were there, and those that couldn't were peeking in the door at them.

"The bastard seems to be sneaking around in these tunnels." Xena pointed at a sheet of well worn parchment, which had new coal streak lines drawn on it. "The ones that go around your quarters here."

"Bitras?" Lakmas said. "Tell what you saw."

"More heard, my brother." The man called Bitras shifted a little in his seat self consciously as Xena's eyes turned on him. "I was shaving by the trough near the back wall there." He pointed to the back of the big chamber. "And I heard what I thought were cats, or rats, scratching."

Xena cocked her head slightly. "We have both here." She conceded. "One of the damn things sleeps under my bed." She paused. "Our bed." She corrected herself, with a smile.

The Persians all looked a bit embarrassed.

"So I put down my blade and went to find the creatures." Bitras bravely soldiered on. "I looked all around, in the stores, and under the fireplace mantel but not a one could I find, only these." He held up his hand and turned it over, releasing a small cloud of brown, light object onto the table. "As you know, your majesty, we have no trees here in the barracks."

Xena reached out and took one of the leaves, bringing it up to her eyes and studying it. It was curled and dead, with faint veins in it and it smelled of smoke. The type of leaf, though, was strange to her eyes.

And that, in fact was very strange. She looked up at Bitras. "Seen this kind before?"

The Persian shook his head. "Twas why it seemed so strange to me, noble one." He said. "We have been out and about in the courtyard these months, and thought we knew the trees about. These are none of them, nor from our homeland neither."

"No, they aren't." Xena experimentally crushed one, and brought it to her nose cautiously. It faintly smelled of spice. "Now where have I smelled that before?"

Gabrielle got up and leaned close, sniffing it. She sat back down, a faint frown on her face.

"Remind you of anything, muskrat?"

"It does." Gabrielle said. "But I can't think of...oh." She stopped. "I remember now. Every cold season we used to get a merchant in my village, who brought candles. When we burned them, it smelled like that."

"Candles." Xena repeated thoughtfully. "But only in the cold season?"

Gabrielle nodded. "In the summer, they scented them with flowers. But there aren't any flowers in the winter, so they used whatever that was." She pointed at the leaves. "To make it smell nice. Because otherwise the wax smells sort of rank sometimes."

Xena smelled the leaves again. "So maybe you'd put this in... "

"A clothes press, your majesty?" Lakmas suggested. "To freshen it. My mother did, upon a time, but with scents more familiar to me from home."

“Or bedding.” Bitras added. “I put pine needles in my furs as we were passing through the woods.”

All the other Persians looked at him.

“I love the smell of pine.” Gabrielle ventured. “We had pine trees all around our village, and in the winter, the snow looked so pretty on them.”

Xena looked at her, then at the Persians. “You all done trading homebody advice?” She asked. “I better not find any pine needles in my sheets, Gabrielle.”

“Oh no.” Gabrielle reassured her. “That would be really poky.”

“Show me where you found these.” Xena got up. “Anyone else hear anything? See anything? Shadows? People you don’t know wandering around? Assassins in cloaks and masks?”

They all looked a little chagrined that no one else seemed to have. “May we search this level for you, majesty?” Lakmas offered, hopefully. “We do know some of the tunnels, though we have not ventured far as we know you hold our honor as bond.”

Xena studied him. “You can.” She said. “But go in groups, and be careful. Last thing I want is some jackass gunning for me sticking any of you.” She said. “He’s into poison, and hitting people from behind.”

“Proof he’s no Persian.” Lakmas said, then frowned. “Sholeh was a aberration among us, you must realize. None of us approved of her use of it in battle. It was the mark of a coward.”

“No, but she had to learn that from someone.” Xena said, in a quiet tone. “She wasn’t smart enough to think it up on her own. So maybe you Persians aren’t poisoners, but I wouldn’t bet my ass there aren’t others who might be.”

Lakmas frowned. “Not soldiers.” He said. “We fight our enemies honorably. With a sword or mace, or fists, or teeth. Not by a prick in the behind.”

Xena snorted, and then covered her mouth hastily, turning and gesturing the Persian soldier forward. “C’mon.” She muttered. “Gabrielle? Let’s go. Lakmas, get your search parties out and make sure they watch out for pricks.”

The Persians looked a little puzzled, and so did Gabrielle, but she joined Xena at the door and they followed Bitras down the narrow, dark corridor to where he’d found the leaves. “Xena?”

“Uh huh.”

“Are you okay? You sounded weird just then.”

“Tell you later.” Xena scrubbed her face and let the silent chuckles wind down. “I crack myself up sometimes.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle was happy to tag along in silence. She’d learned over the months that sometimes, not always, but sometimes it was better not to know what Xena thought was hilariously funny. Especially when it wasn’t very obvious because sometimes it meant you had a hole in your leggings or something stuck to your back you didn’t know about.

“It was here, noble one.” The Persian stopped, and pointed.

They were in a cul de sac in the underground passages where three of them came together, in a square space that had well trodden rushes across it save in the back corner that had no hallway near it.

That, was in shadows. Xena blinked to focus her eyes and cautiously approached the back wall, sweeping the ground intently. The area near the corner was free of rushes, just bare stone that was dark and dull. She pulled a torch from the wall and stepped closer. “That what’s left?” She pointed.

“Yes.” Bitras said. “I took a handful, but you see – there is quite a lot there.”

The queen knelt carefully and studied the scattering of leaves. Even from where she was she could smell them, there was enough to have stuffed a small bag.

She considered that. “Look around for a piece of cloth.” She told them. “A couple of squares sewed together.”

Bitras obligingly started down one of the corridors and Gabrielle began searching the corners of the space Xena was in.

“What kind of cloth?” Gabrielle asked. “Would it be like a.. oh!”

Xena spun at the exclamation, coming to her feet and drawing her sword as she lunged across the small space and landed in front of her consort. “What?”

Gabrielle eyed her, and put a cautious hand on the queen’s hip. “Um.” She pointed at a crumpled ball in the rushes, half buried. “Is that what you’re looking for?” She watched the tension in Xena’s body relax, the muscles in her neck dropping as she let her sword down and half turned to look at her.

“Don’t do that.” Xena told her. “I’m gonna end up smacking myself in the head at this rate.” She walked over and nudged the fabric with the tip of her sword, opening it up and spreading it out over the floor.

“What is it?”

Xena picked up the item on her sword and lifted it up into the light from the torch. “I think, my little muskratty friend, that this was someone’s pillow.”

“A pillow?” Gabrielle blinked at it. “Really?”

“Mm.”

“Xena.” Brendan’s voice echoed softly.

“Here.” The queen felt herself tense, hearing the tension in her captain’s voice. “Brendan?”

A dark figure resolved into the old soldier, as he moved into the torchlight and came to face Xena. There was blood on his surcoat, and dusting his hands, and his face bore a set of tense creases “Found him, Xena.” He said “You’d better come.”

Gabrielle inhaled sharply.

“Needs your hands.” Brendan clarified. “He was gutted pretty bad.”

Xena sheathed her sword with a powerful, angry motion and pointed back the way he came. She followed at his heels, and Gabrielle followed at hers.

“Keep looking.” Xena told the Persians as they passed through the barracks and headed for the steps up to the courtyard. “I’ll be back.”

They half ran up the steps and across the inner courtyard. The doors to the main keep were open, spilling torchlight out and they bolted up into it, Brendan leading the way to the right and into the big banqueting hall.

Inside was chaos. Servants were milling around, and soldiers were pouring in from all sides, the big room half cleared from dinner with empty trays and cups scattered around. The draft from the open door fluttered the candles in their big overhead cradles and the torches on the wall and the noise inside dulled, then sharpened as Xena’s tall figure was recognized.

“It’s her.”

“She’s come. Look right!”

“Best move over, give her room.”

Xena ignored it all, plowing through the crowd and passing Brendan as she spotted a knot of people around the high table she would have been sitting at. Her guts clenched and she dodged past two of the soldiers, taking a step and leaping up onto the table rather than taking the long way around. “Move!”

Thus warned, the crowd scattered as she jumped down and then went to one knee besides the crumpled, blood soaked figure behind the table.

Poor bastard. Xena could see the faint, labored breathing as she pulled aside a thick pad of linen someone had pressed against him and revealed a cut nearly from armpit to navel spilling blood everywhere.

As she touched him, his eyes flickered open as though sensing her presence, and she looked him in the eye.

He knew.

Gabrielle appeared on the other side of his body, and took his hand in hers, giving Xena a quick, anxious glance. “I sent two of the soldiers for your case.”

Xena put the linen pad back down “Hold that there, Gabrielle.” She said, in quiet voice. “Press, but not hard.”

She waited for her consort to comply, then she turned her attention to the glazed, watching eyes and her mind briefly flashed back to her past, and the battlefield, and the many many times she’d knelt like this and seen that look.

She put a hand on his cheek, feeling the chill against her fingertips. “Thanks for the pretty.” She said. “What happened here?” She could hear running boots behind her, but kept her eyes on his. With all the soldiers around her and Gabrielle kneeling there she figured someone would warn her if she was in danger of getting a spear in the back.

“Was talking to.. “He closed his eyes. “Cook about breakfast. They were moving tables, then something hit me.”

“Here, in the hall?”

He nodded.

“Right in the middle of everyone?” Gabrielle sounded as shocked as Xena felt. “Sheeps!”

“Majesty.” One of her troops arrived, breathless, and knelt carefully at her side, the leather bag she kept her healing supplies in resting in his hands.

Xena was aware in her peripheral senses, that she was being watched. She looked quickly around, seeing servants and soldiers, and guests who had come in hearing the chaos standing in groups wide eyed as they observed the drama going on around the high table.

Philtop was there, she suddenly realized. Standing near one wall, arms crossed on his well built chest, eyes on her.

‘Xena.’ Stanislaus whispered.

She turned back to him. “Hang in there.” She said. “I’m going to make you wish you were dead in a minute, I promise.” She opened the kit in the soldiers hands and pulled out clenser, rags, gut and a bone needle, along with a packet of ground herbs.

He stared intently at her. “Honor to be in your service.” He managed to get out, then his eyes shifted to Gabrielle. “Sorry I misjudged you, Gabrielle.”

“Me too.” Gabrielle smiled at him. “But it’s okay. It all worked out.” She edged slightly to one side to give the soldier more room. “I know this will too. Xena’s an amazing healer, you know.”

Xena made a mental note to properly thank her beloved consort for the additional pressure on her, as she lifted the linen pad off and wet the clothes from her kit with the cleanser. The blood flow had slowed, to her relief, and she cleaned off the long, ugly wound with liberal amounts of the mixture.

It was a very bad wound. Xena knew there was a good chance that even if she sewed it up, he'd probably die of infection anyway. Most did. Even she'd sickened, when the arrow had pierced her body and she was more resistant than many.

Was it possible someone had knifed him right in the middle of the hall? Xena resisted the urge to look around. Was the knifer there, watching her?

She sensed motion to her right and saw Brendan move to stand between her and whatever it was. "Did you see who hit you?" She asked, watching him faintly shake his head. "No stranger around you? C'mon Stanislaus. You know everyone who belongs here."

Again, he shook his head. "Pain." He muttered. "Then I was pushed down."

Xena flushed the wound out again and then quickly threaded the bone needle with a good length of gut. She squeezed the cut closed up near his heart and bent over it, carefully stitching the gap closed.

"So, Xena. It seems you can't even keep your own servants safe much less us."

Xena kept her focus. She could hear the faint rattle in Stanislaus's breathing and she moved a little faster, pressing her fingers into the gap to try and stop the flow of blood.

"Xena." Her patient whispered.

"Mm?" The queen grunted. "Busy."

"Xena!" Philtop called her name. "You going to admit you're not in control here? There's a killer loose! He's laughing at you!"

"What a jerk." Gabrielle growled, making the queen's lips twitch a little.

"Ignore him." Xena shifted a little. "Barac, bring that light closer so I can see what the Hades I'm doing."

The soldier did.

"Xena!" Philtop bellowed. "You owe these people an answer!"

"Mistress. He undermines you." Stanislaus ground out, between clenched teeth. "Attend him."

"Sorry" Xena continued her work, finding a big vein nicked. She quickly tied it off and continued sewing. "I don't turn away from helping a soldier just to answer an asshole no matter if the whole damn realm depended on it."

"If you can't control things, I will." Philtop called out. "Men, to me!"

Xena made a quick half hitch, then she looked up at the soldier. "Watch my back, willya?"

"Majesty." The soldier handed the torch to Gabrielle then stood, pulling his sword from his belt and letting out a yell of his own as the room burst into motion around them.

\*\*

Gabrielle stood with her legs braced, holding the torch up to give Xena light to work by as she watched the pushing and shoving going on around them. Men were yelling, and Philtop had gathered a bunch of his guys around them and he was shouting at people to stand up and be counted.

Why? She wondered. The last thing she'd think anyone would want was to be counted a part of an insurrection with Xena there to witness it. "Xena, he's coming this way."

“Busy.” Xena had her head bent over Stanislaus’ still form. “I need to get this closed or he’s going to bleed to death Gabrielle. If that stupid bastard comes too close throw rocks at him.”

“Xena.”

“Or pull my sword out and gut him, whatever makes you happy” The queen replied. “I can’t take my hands off him right now.” She glanced up at her consort. “Stick that torch in the holder there.”

Gabrielle obeyed, then turned and watched Philtop and his crowd shove closer, trying to push aside the few soldiers from Xena’s troops that were surrounding them. They weren’t fighting, really, no weapons were drawn but she could feel the threat in them.

Posturing, mostly. She edged to one side, getting between Xena and the oncoming crowd. She had her sling, and she pulled it out from her belt with one hand.

“Xena!” Philtop yelled. “Explain to these people, YOUR people, why you let killers loose in this place and aren’t protecting them!”

“Xena’s busy.” Gabrielle answered him. “She’s saving someone’s life.”

“Oh please.”

The crowd did turn, hearing her voice.

“So are you just stupid?” Gabrielle asked. “Or are you blind? Anyone can see there’s a man here who’s injured.” She indicated Stanislaus. “So why don’t you just clear out of here and let her work?”

She was up on the raised platform that Xena’s table inhabited in the hall, and that put her high enough so that everyone could see her. She put her hands on her hips and watched the crowd move around, unsure of what was really going on.

“Guards have died, servants have died... your royal heir almost died. Everyone knows it.” Philtop said. “What are you doing about it, Xena? We’re all trapped here.”

Xena’s soldiers gathered into a wall, between her and the rest of the room. There were only a dozen of them, but they drew their weapons and glared at Philtop.

“I told you she’s busy.” Gabrielle tapped one of the men on the shoulder. “Go get Brendan, and the house guard.” She said. “We need this room cleared.”

“Your grace.” The man touched his breast, and took off towards the door. He had a sword in his hand, and the people between him and the entrance quickly scattered out of the way.

Philtop’s eyes narrowed as he watched her, and the soldiers reaction. The other nobles in the hall, started edging away from him and he noticed that too. He opened his mouth to say something, then shut it again.

“Look.” Gabrielle addressed the now uneasily milling crowd. “We know people have gotten hurt. Xena has the army searching for the person or people responsible for that. No one wants anyone else to be harmed but it’s a big place and there are a lot of strangers here.” At this, she looked pointedly at Philtop.

“Do you accuse me?” He asked, in the sudden silence.

“Well.’ Gabrielle watched him. “The attacks did start as soon as you got here.” She remarked. “So you know, if I were you, I might not want to run around yelling about what Xena’s doing about it because she might figure it is you, and you probably won’t like what she’ll do if she does.”

Philtop stared at her. “People have died.” He said. “And I..”

Gabrielle cut him off. “People die here all the time.” She said. “I’ve seen them. Right here in this room, as a matter of fact.” She gestured around. “So it’s probably a good idea for everyone to clear out, and go get some rest. “

Philtop looked at the surrounding nobles, who were starting to drift towards the door. "You run, at the words of a peasant?"

"Sure they do." Gabrielle said. "None of them are dumb. They understand how things work here."

Philtop took a step towards her, leaping up onto the platform. Gabrielle reached behind her and put her hand on the hilt of Xena's sword.

"Keep going, muskrat. Almost done here." Xena's voice sounded more than amused.

"Do you understand how things work here?" Gabrielle gamely went on, addressing Philtop. "I don't think you do."

Philtop walked forward, and as he did, Gabrielle drew the long, heavy sword out of Xena's scabbard, grateful that all her pushing bales around in Xena's practice chamber let her lift it and bring it around in front of her without dropping it or stabbing herself in the foot.

So there she was, sling in one hand, sword in the other. It felt very strange. But Gabrielle gripped them firmly and kept her eyes on Philtop, who had stopped when she'd pointed the blade at him. "Don't do something stupid." She said. "I won't let you hurt her but if you try to, I bet you end up regretting it."

Philtop looked around. The other nobles were just watching him now, with noncommittal expressions. Xena's soldiers were all grouped on the floor in front of Gabrielle and their mistress, and his own troops were back where he left them.

He had little doubt he could easily defeat the short, young woman between him and the kneeling figure of the queen but he also knew one further step towards her would probably bring Xena up on her feet to protect her little scruffy peasant.

And he didn't want to square off against Xena. He had a lot of confidence in his own martial skills but he'd felt the strength in her body in their earlier tussle, and realized the one time marauder hadn't lost much of her ability to fight in the intervening years.

He could see her leather covered body just behind Gabrielle, her bare arms burnished copper in the torchlight as she crouched over her stupid lackey and her well shaped shoulders exposed with no softness evident.

Sexy as ever, damn her.

His moment had passed. Damn the little runt. He glared at Gabrielle's rounded, common face. That one pointed question, spoken in that stupid little voice had made everyone stop, and take a step back, and he'd lost his momentum.

He lifted both hands. "I'm not here to harm anyone." He changed his tactics. "I'm trying to get your queen to realize she's going to lose it all if she doesn't wake up."

"I don't think she's sleeping." Gabrielle responded. "But I think you're going to lose something if you don't stop messing with her." She paused, aware of all the eyes and ears focused on her. "If there's anything left, I mean."

Xena's soldiers started laughing, as Philtop turned a dark shade of red. Then the door was suddenly full of Brendan and a dozen guard, and the people inside started filing out as soon as the soldiers cleared the way, some chuckling and giving Gabrielle a look as they left.

"Yer Grace." Brendan joined them on the platform, his sword out as he came to her side. "Problem here?" He looked at Philtop. "You'er bound to make trouble, eh? Strange for a beggar."

Xena finished her last stitch, and regarded her handiwork. Stanislaus' eyes were now closed, and he had a long bloody line up his side. "Brendan." Xena said. "Forget that fool. Get me four men, with a pallet, and take him to his quarters. I want them to stay with him."

‘Aye, mistress.’ Brendan stepped back a step, but kept his eyes on Philtop. ‘You four. Alic, get a stretcher, yah? Quick now.’

Wiping her hands off, Xena stood up, feeling the blood rush back into her legs after her prolonged crouch. She turned and regarded Philtop over the head of her adorably bristling and surprisingly sword wielding bedmate. ‘What’s wrong with you?’ She asked bluntly. ‘You stay out in the cold too long?’

‘You’re not listening to your people, Xena.’ Philtop said. ‘I don’t want to see you lose that throne of yours.’

‘What people, the pointy hats?’ Xena indicated the last of them, trailing out the door.

‘The backbone of your realm, yeah.’ Philtop said. ‘Your tax base.’

‘I never did listen to them.’ The queen moved out of the way as the soldiers came back with a stretcher. ‘Be careful with him.’ She told them. ‘He’s got more to tell me. I think he saw the bastard.’

‘Aye.’ Brendan nodded. ‘We’ll take care of him, mistress.’ He spared a dour look for Philtop. ‘Be back to clean up the place after.’

Xena opened her hand and extended it, and Gabrielle gladly put the hilt of her sword into it. ‘Thanks, muskrat. Glad you had my back.’ She resheathed the sword, then she draped her arm over Gabrielle’s shoulders and returned her attention to Philtop. ‘Do yourself a favor. Soon as the weather breaks, get out of here before I kill you.’ She said, in a conversational tone. ‘Because I’m going to, and I’ve got good reason. You don’t get a free pass to walk in here and stir up trouble.’

‘Xena, I want to help you.’ He ignored the warning and walked closer, now that the blade was covered. ‘I’m not being an ass for no reason. These people want someone they can trust to lead them.’ He was now close enough for her to touch, and he’d lowered his voice, as the room emptied leaving them alone up on the platform.

‘I don’t care.’ Xena said. ‘That’s what you don’t get. You want me to give a damn about what these people think about me, about what I do, and who I sleep with. I don’t.’ She gave him a mild look. ‘I’ll be queen here for as long as I want to, then me and the muskrat’ll go off and be pirates.’

‘Oo.’ Gabrielle looked up at her profile. ‘That sounds fun.’ She muttered under her breath.

Philtop stared at her. ‘You’ve lost your mind.’

‘No, I found it.’ The queen told him. ‘Somewhere between all the assassination attempts and the drink and the killing for pleasure I realized all that matters to me in the long run is living the minute. There is no future for me. Just now. And right now, I want you out of my sight or I’m going to spit you like a dog for trying to turn people against me.’

‘If you don’t want this realm, give it to someone who does.’ He said, point blank. ‘I’m tired of grubbing for worms in the Westlands. Let me take this place. I’ll make something of it.’

‘No.’ Xena said. ‘It’s mine. You had a chance, way back when. Now I know better.’

‘Don’t you want more than this, Xena?’ Philtop asked. ‘There’s a lot of land out there for the taking. I could help you.’

Xena chuckled. ‘I have what I want.’ She glanced down at the soberly watching Gabrielle. ‘Get lost, Philtop.’ She lifted her eyes back to his face. ‘And you better hope you really aren’t the one behind the attacks. Because I’ll cut bits of you off your body over the length of a moon and pin them to my front door if you are.’

‘You don’t really think I’m involved in that, do you, Xena?’

‘Why not?’ Gabrielle answered ‘You’re sleezy and all you’ve done here is insult us while you beg for scraps from our kitchen. Why not you?’

Philtop gave her a dour glare. "Too bad whoever it is missed you." He said. "It would amuse me to see you.. lpluf."

Xena had him by the throat. She hadn't even removed her other arm from around Gabrielle, merely dragged her consort with her as she took a long step forward and fastened her powerful fingers on Philtop's voicebox.

"I warned you." Xena said.

He reached up and grabbed her arm, yanking at it to little or no avail. Then he swung on her, but the queen released her hold on Gabrielle and grabbed his arm, leaning forward and cocking one knee. "You really want to go this round with me again?"

He stopped moving. The eyes meeting his were simple blue ice, colder than the weather outside, and there wasn't even a flash of the sultry attraction he remembered from the old days. He felt his breathing shorten as her fingers tensed and slowly he relaxed his arm, opening his hand in surrender.

He remembered, now, that strength. He remembered seducing her in her chambers, and bedding her, sure of his prowess, sure that he'd ensnared her in wanting him only to have those hands fasten on his hips and move him up and aside as though he'd been a child.

He hadn't realized in time that he'd taken her on her terms. He'd convinced himself that Xena would submit to him as so many women had before, and taken her rightful place at his side on the throne.

Very wrong. Almost a fatal mistake. But he could so clearly see his future taking over the realm that it was almost impossible to resist pushing at her and collecting adherents here who had never quite accepted their wild chieftain.

Didn't she really still want what he had? There was no way she could be satisfied with that little runt, not with the appetites he remembered.

Xena's fingers tightened sharply on his throat, and he felt something move that shouldn't have. Then she released him, and released his arm, and stepped back, getting between him and the little peasant. "Escort him to his quarters." She directed the guard. "Make sure he stays in them until the weather clears."

"Majesty." The guard captain touched his chest, then he advanced on Philtop.

Philtop rubbed his throat and started to speak, but stopped when Xena held a hand up and shook her head. Gathering his shredded dignity around him, he walked off the platform and motioned his guard to follow, as he headed for the door with Xena's men ranging around him.

Gabrielle waited until he'd disappeared, then she turned and faced Xena. "I really don't like that guy."

"No, really?" Xena rested her hands on her consort's shoulders. "You did good, Gabrielle. You handled that just right. Well done."

Gabrielle blushed.

"I really liked when you accused him of being the killer. Nice." The queen went on. "Exactly the right thing to stop his little mediocre rebellion right in it's tracks." She leaned down and touched her head to Gabrielle's. "Love ya."

Gabrielle exhaled, moving closer and putting her arms around Xena's body. They were almost alone now in the hall, and the sounds around them were settling. "I wanted to kick him." She admitted. "Xena he got me so mad. He was trying to hurt you."

"He got me mad too, because he was making fun of you." The queen agreed. "I really should just kill him. But he's an actual prince, and he's got a lot of support in the area. I don't really care

what they think about me, but if people know I kill men just because they annoy me it's hard to make deals with them."

"if he's got so much support." Gabrielle was enjoying the closeness. "How come he's here begging from you?"

"Ah." Xena turned her around and draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders. "Let's go back to our love nest and I'll fill ya in on that."

"I thought we were going to go look for the bad guy?"

"We are." Xena said. "We're just going to do it in a little different way." She guided Gabrielle out of the room and they crossed from the banquet hall over to their chambers.

"Xena." Brendan caught up to them. "We've got him resting. Justin is with im." He looked harried, and upset. "Damned thing. How in the Hades did they do that middle of the hall? Middle of all the cleaning up?"

"Good question." Xena said. "We've got two options, Brendan. Either whoever this is – or they are – are part of our staff in the stronghold.."

"Bigods."

"Mm." The queen assented. "Or they're a guest that was in that hall. There's no way someone stabbed Stanislaus, then walked out of there with no one seeing them."

Brendan shook his head. "We'll find im."

"Probably not." Xena said. "We haven't so far, and if he's hiding in plain site, what's to look for? So we've got to change our tactics." She walked along with them, mounting the steps to their rooms. There was a guard there, and she gestured to him to open the door. "C'mon in a minute."

Brendan followed them. They entered the outer chambers, and Xena paused, slowly sweeping the area with her senses. After a minute, she turned. "Put a guard on Stanislaus. People you trust."

"Aye."

"Keep searching the cellars. Make a lot of noise. Make it sound like the whole damn army is down there, and bring those hunting dogs in too."

"Mistress." Brendan started to smile a bit. "And you?"

"Me?" Xena rested a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "I'm going to bed." She grinned briefly. "After all, I'm a hedonist who could give a crap about this place, remember?"

Gabrielle gave her a bewildered look. "Huh?"

"Go with it, Gabrielle." The queen told her. "Get moving, Brendan. I'm gonna take a bath, and get naked with the muskrat here. Maybe have a bottle or two of grog."

"Will do, Mistress." Brendan touched his chest. "I'll be sure to let the boys know you're not to be interrupted."

"You do that." Xena clapped him on the shoulder. Then she steered Gabrielle towards the inner chamber. "C'mon, you sexy thing you. Time for us to party."

"Xena..?"

"Sh. Just go." The queen uttered, in a very soft voice. "Follow my lead."

Gabrielle turned and walked backwards, reaching out to undo the catches on the queen's armor. "Whatever you say."

The queen smiled at her.

"I'll start the bubbles."

\*\*

“One of the few times we moved down here that I wish we’d stayed up in that damn tower.” Xena got up from the stone floor, and dusted her hands off. “At least I knew every inch of that place.”

Gabrielle was sitting on the big bed, her legs pulled up crossed under her, watching. “I’d like to help you if I knew what we were looking for.”

“I’d tell you if I knew what we were looking for.” The queen was now going along the wall, tapping gently with her knuckles on it, her ear cocked to listen. “But the plan is, the men stir up enough crap downstairs that it filters up here, and whoever this asshole is he decides to cut his losses and just go for me.”

“But what if he finds you?” Gabrielle said, in a worried tone.

“Then I’ll catch him and kill him extremely slowly.” Xena responded. “First cut all his fingers and toes off, then maybe skin him, then maybe if I’m bored and he’s lucky cut his head off.”

“Oh.”

“What’s the matter, muskrat?” Xena glanced over at the bed. “Don’t trust me to keep us safe?” She chuckled a little at the expression on her consorts face. “I want this over with. It’s pissing me off.”

Gabrielle agreed with that. It was pissing her off too. She wanted to enjoy the harvest festival and look forward to the coming cold season and the sneaky guy hurting and killing people was ruining that not only for her, but for everyone else.

It was just a little uncomfortable for her to know Xena was deliberately going to leave the outer door unfastened, and tell the guard to go get a meal and wait to see if someone was going to try and kill them.

“By the way.” Xena finally was satisfied there were no hidden panels or planted asps in her quarters. She came back over and sat down on the bed next to Gabrielle. “You asked me about Philtop and his supporters.”

“Ugh. That guy.” Gabrielle got up and went over to the fireplace, where she had a pot of mulled wine warming. She poured herself and the queen a cup and brought them back over to the bed. They were both in their shifts, Xena had a light fur lined cape thrown over her broad shoulders and they had soft boots on their feet against the chill of the stone floor.

“Mm yes.” Xena scooted back and relaxed against the big padded headboard, extending her long legs out and crossing them at the ankles. “Well, thing is his lands are the furthest out in that direction. He’s on the border.”

“Good.” Gabrielle sipped the mulled wine.

Xena chuckled. “So we have a signed agreement with him that he protects the edge of the realm.” She said. “It was done way back in the day before I showed up here, and we held him to it.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle murmured. “So you kind of have to help him?”

“Kind of.”

“Hm.”

“The people in that area, the smaller cots and towns, they contract with him for protection because he’s a lot closer to them than we are. So yeah, he’s got a lot of local support, and I wouldn’t like them all to change sides.” Xena explained. “But they can’t help him right now cause they’re in the same crappy situation as he is.”

“Bummer.”

Xena chuckled again. “He really got your goat, huh?” She studied her lover’s adorable face. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, Gabrielle. “ She said. “This realm might be rid of me one day but you never will be.”

Gabrielle smiled, her nose wrinkling up as she produced a somewhat wry expression. “Same for me.” She said. “I wasn’t really worried about that, Xena. I’m just mad because he was trying to cause trouble for you on purpose.”

“He was trying to stir up a situation where I’d have to work out a partnership with him, bring him here as my consort to replace you.” Xena clarified. “I was mad too. “

“That’s scummy.”

“Oh yes, my friend. It’s scummy. But totally expected from him. He has a very simplistic view of the world, Gabrielle. He thinks he’s irresistible, and that all a woman wants is to be pleased by him.” She swirled her wine in her cup and took a swallow of it. “He can’t even imagine us.”

Gabrielle wriggled a little closer. “So we’re just going to hang out and wait for the bad guys?” She changed the subject. “You really think they’ll try to sneak in here and do something to you? They won’t be scared?”

The queen stifled a yawn. “If they think I’m both half drunk and focused on being ravished by you, they might chance it. “

“That’s why you had the vintner deliver those four bottles of wine?”

Xena gave her a sexy smile, and raised her mug. “Far as anyone knows, we’re having our own harvest festival in here together.” She patted the bed by her side. “C’mere.”

Gabrielle gladly scooted over and settled next to her, leaning against the queen’s side and exhaling in contentment. “Is Stanislaus going to be okay? “

For a moment, Xena didn’t answer. Then she sighed. “Maybe.”

The queen didn’t sound very sure. Gabrielle felt sort of bad about that. Stanislaus hadn’t ever been one of her favorite people but he also hadn’t been one of the bad guys either. “Wow.”

“Yeah. I’m really not happy about that.” Her companion admitted. “What pisses me off is this bastard only hits people who can’t hit back. There’s nothing brave or noble about shiving servants doing their job or people making love. “

Gabrielle nodded somberly.

“Not something I’d do.” Xena said. “Even if it served my goals. It offends me. It offends my... “ She paused, and frowned.

“It offends your sense of honor.” Gabrielle finished quietly.

“Something like that.”

“So why are they doing it?” Her consort asked. “Is it... could they be working with that guy?” She looked at Xena. “It sort of seems like the whole thing is to mess you up with people. Like he’s trying to do.”

Xena leaned back and propped her elbow up on the arm she had laying across her stomach, sipping slowly at the mulled wine in her cup. “Huh.” She finally said, after a few silent minutes. “We were joshing about that, but you know....”

The victims. Unwary visitors, men who thought they were safe in their own stable, servant in lieu of a man and woman making love in their bed, and finally, her major domo, doing his job in the banquet hall.

What was it supposed to mean to her? Was it supposed to say, see, Xena? You can't protect anything or anyone, you're a fraud? And yet, the queen knew that wasn't the case if nothing else her recent history had proven she was personally capable of pretty much anything.

Or, as Gabrielle suggested, was it meant to sow discontent and fear amongst all the people who had traveled here for the festival, in celebration of, and hopes of gaining her protection?

She thought about the attacks. Working up from a stranger's men, to her own, to her heir.... Yes, taking Stanislaus and Lastay from her would serve Philtop's aims, wouldn't it? He would, she was sure, offer one of his own people to help them through the festival to take Stanislaus' place, and it was obvious who he thought should be her heir.

Ruthless and bold, she had to admit. Worthy, maybe, of the position he was driving for, because after all, Xena too was ruthless and bold and in all truth, the realm probably wouldn't have objected to her naming him such.

The realm wouldn't have, no. Xena smiled briefly. But she would certainly object and as for forcing Gabrielle to suffer the asshole's presence....

Forget it. Not even a poke in her horse's ass. Without question just based on what he'd said to her beloved.. Xena stopped and re-sounded that word in her head a few times, then pinched the bridge of her nose.

Anyway. She almost hoped he'd try something else because then, having been provoked past her patience, she would happily gut the stupid bastard. She'd show enough tolerance in public to his antics that even the most jaded of his followers would have to admit he'd pushed his luck too far.

Maybe tomorrow, after she caught the moron who was skipping about shooting people, she'd have Philtop for breakfast out in the courtyard and have her men stick bits of him around the stronghold walls. Cold as it was, it would even seem a little decorative.

"Okay." She put her cup down and got up. "Time to waste some good wine." She went over and selected one of the bottles, breaking the wax seal and opening it. Walking randomly around the room she spilled a bit of it as she walked, until the room held the distinct scent of fermented fruit at it's edges.

It wasn't unpleasant. She could remember, if she tried, having her quarters up in the tower smell like that a time or two when she'd retreat up there and lose herself in a few bottles or skins. She went back and put the rest of the wine into the mulling pot, leaving it just close enough to the fire to keep it warm and add it's smell to the room.

Then she retrieved her sword and brought it back over to the bed with her, wedging the sheath between the frame and the mattress so the hilt was right about at the level with the top. Then she went around the room, snuffing the candles out with her fingers before she collected a couple daggers and ended up right back at the bed.

It was now dark, just the glow from the fire providing any light in the room. The windows were shut tight and had their heavy drapes drawn to keep the winter cold out and now that the candles were doused Xena felt her other senses heightening to take up the slack.

She settled into the bed and tucked the daggers into the headboard's corners. It would have been safer, of course, for her to wear her armor and leathers to bed but there was something about being dressed pretty much in her underwear waiting for an assassin that perked Xena's sometimes very black sense of humor.

She'd left the robes, and in fact, the leathers and boots in the outer chamber, scattered around with Gabrielle's as though the two of them had experienced a frenzy of mutual, half drunken undressing when they'd gotten back to their quarters.

Sometimes they did, after all, and the servants certainly knew and spoke of it. She was counting on that, because she was getting a sense that this killer, whoever he was, had ears in the places he needed them to in order to find out what was going on.

But not too close, as his miss with Lastay showed. He knew the duke liked to have an afternoon snog with his wife, but hadn't gotten the news that Lastay had changed his plans, had gone looking for Xena instead and his servants had taken the chance to hop in the sack with each other.

Close but not intimate. Aware, and yet, having expectations that were not one hundred percent accurate, as the traps in the corridor had shown. If anyone except for Xena had come down that hallway they'd have been gutted so her presence in the hunt hadn't been circulated.

Maybe it would have been Brendan. Maybe he'd been the target, that time.

Xena slid under the covers and put her head on the pillow, as she felt Gabrielle slide closer, not wrapping herself around the queen but reaching out to hold hands with her in the gathering body warmth between the two of them.

In the dim light, she could see Gabrielle's profile, half turned to face her, the faintest hint of firelight on her pale eyelashes. Xena exhaled. She'd announced, as clear as a bell in that room tonight exactly what was important to her.

Would they take the bait?

Would they think she was lying?

Could anyone really believe the most important thing in her life was this scruffy ex slave tucked into her bed? Really? Her? Xena the Merciless?

Really?

Hah. Xena wriggled into a more comfortable position to wait out the night, as she felt Gabrielle lift their joined hands up clear of the covers and plant a kiss on her knuckles. She turned her head slightly to look at her consort, who was looking right back at her. "Hey."

"Could we really go be pirates?" Gabrielle asked "And if we did, could you show me how to sail a boat?"

Xena smiled at her. "You really want to do that?"

"I'd love to see new places. Like that volcano." Gabrielle responded. "That was so amazing."

"And give up all this plush luxury?" The queen asked, indicating the bed with her free hand. "You don't get this on boats. You spend your time chasing and killing people and eating a lot of fish."

"That captain's cabin wasn't so bad." Her consort reminded her. "And I like fish."

Hm. "You never know, muskrat." Xena mused. "King of Persia could send a couple thousand men over here to squash us."

"That wouldn't squash you." Gabrielle said. "Xena you already beat a Persian army."

The queen chuckled wryly. "Yeah, I'm running out of things to do for you to make stories about here huh? Be easier on ya if we were pirates." She admitted. "And that cabin wasn't really too bad. Need a longer bed though whoever that guy was he was shorter than I am."

Gabrielle kissed her knuckles again and settled down on her side, closing her eyes and exhaling. "That would be so cool."

Would it? Xena studied the canopy over the bed. Hm. Wouldn't it be fun to be responsible for just herself and Gabrielle and boat's crew? Sailing around and fighting when they wanted, plundering what they could, seeing new things every day?

Of course, she'd have to give up her horse. The queen frowned. And a ship could get very small very fast when you wanted to get some good sparring in.

After a moment, she put the thought aside and concentrated on her task at hand. Here in her chambers she was in the middle of the stronghold, and she could hear activity around her outside the walls.

Slowly she let the sounds filter through her consciousness, ignoring the further out ones of the watch on the walls, the thumps and bangs of the servants clearing the halls, a brief burst of music and laughter.

She felt her breathing slow and her body still.

Now she filtered out the closer sounds she knew. The soft tread of the inside guard. The shifts of the men on duty in the central hall and the soft sounds of their spears rasping against the stone floor. The sound of the now thickly falling snow outside, thumping against the leaded windows on the other side of the drapes.

She narrowed her focus to the rooms she was in. The soft pop of the logs in the fireplace. Gabrielle's gentle breathing next to her.

Faint creaks overhead, as the roof took the weight of the falling snow.

A very soft rasping sound of the cat she knew was under the bed cleaning it's fur.

She took in a deep breath of the air, opening her mouth a little to taste it. She could smell the wine, the fire, the cat, Gabrielle, herself, the fur rugs on the floor in their mustiness.

What else?

C'mon, you bastard. Xena urged the assassin. Come in here so I can smell you, and taste you on the air. Walk across the stones in your bare feet, completely silent to everyone but me. Break the flow of the air in the room so I can feel you.

Come close.

Fire your darts at me. I'll stop them. Xena closed her eyes, enhancing her other senses. Fire your arrows at me I'll catch them. You know it. Come close. You know the only way to be sure is to walk over here, see me lying in the bed. Watch me breathe.

You don't dare come in to fight me. You don't dare face me eye to eye.

Xena let the quiet of the room beat against her ears. She let her body relax completely, muscles slack in the drunken oblivion she was supposed to be in.

Her breathing slowed, and she sharpened her focus, listening for that first pressure of skin against stone, of a hand against the door outside, for the stir in the air or the smell of human flesh.

She felt her skin prickle.

Come get me.

\*\*

It felt like the night lasted for ever. Xena had run through pretty much every single mental trick in her book to stay awake and sensed the coming of dawn before she finally.. finally! Heard a faint sound in the outer chamber.

Exhaling a little in relief, she refocused her hearing and caught the sound of the door to the outside hallway opening, the hinges issuing just the faintest of squeaks.

About damn time. She listened as the hinge squeaked again, then she clearly heard the very soft scuff of bare feet against the marble tile.

Moron, for letting it wait for so long. By this time if she had been soused, she'd have slept most of it off already and it was coming close enough to morning for her to be waking up.

She heard a few more soft footfalls, then they halted. She figured they were standing on the other side of the inner door, listening for any motion inside the bedroom.

Now, with the fire almost out, there was no sound for them to hear. Xena reached up and removed one of her daggers from its sheath in the headboard and wrapped her fingers around the hilt, gently moving her arm out from under the covers to give her a clear shot.

She listened hard for the pressure against the door, and the push that would open it, her eyes fixed on the doorframe, waiting to see the wood panel move inward. Though it was very dark inside her quarters, Xena could see the door clearly, something she suspected her attacker might not share or expect.

She heard a faint sound of motion, flesh against stone. Then her ears caught the sound of an inhale.

Didn't sound right.

Xena slipped soundlessly out of bed, standing up and drawing her sword from its sheath. She stepped around the bed and headed for the entrance, the sword in one hand and her dagger in the other.

Stopping inside the door she paused to listen. For a long moment she stayed absolutely still, wondering if her assassin was standing on the other side, in exactly the same attitude. The idea put a brief, wry grin on her face, but after another moment it faded, and she gently put the edge of the dagger against the latch and worked it.

It slid down silently, and she stepped back and out of the way as she eased the door open. Unlike the outer one, there was no sound at all from the hinges.

Xena let the air puff in against her face and she breathed it in, her body stiffening as she caught the scent of blood on it. She snaked around the edge of the door and surged into the room, her senses flaring.

She could feel her skin prickle, all her defenses coming up as she waited for an expected attack. Her back stiffened and she swept her sword up, bringing it crosswise to her body as her eyes searched every corner.

Nothing.

There was nothing alive in the room. Xena knew it absolutely. "Gabrielle!" She let out a shout. "Hey! Muskrat!"

"Here!" Gabrielle's sleep husky voice answered. "Are you okay?"

"Bring a damn candle in here." Xena ordered, her searching eyes finding a rolled, lumped form near the big desk to one side of the room. "Hurry!"

A moment later, light flared behind her and Gabrielle was at her side, still blinking sleep from her eyes. "Wh... what's going on?"

"Hold it forward." Xena said. "I've got sharp things in both hands."

Gabrielle stepped cautiously around her and held the candle higher, bringing a measure of visibility to the nearly pitch black room. "Oh." She yelped in surprise. "There's someone on the floor!"

"Keep by me." Xena stalked forward, with Gabrielle close by her hip. They walked across the floor and stopped by the lump, and stood there, looking down. "Ah." The queen softly exclaimed, reaching out with one bare foot to roll the body over and expose it to the candle light.

“Oh my gosh.” Gabrielle whispered. “Xena.”

“Yeah.” Xena murmured. “Sure as Hades wasn’t expecting this.” She studied the glassy eyed, staring face, robbed of all its attractiveness. “You bastard, Philtop. What were you doing here?”

“Is he..”

“Oh yes.” The queen exhaled. “Can’t you smell the blood?”

There was a moment’s silence, then Gabrielle let out a small surprised breath. “Yes I can.”

“Light the rest of the candles in here.” Xena said. “Don’t touch him.”

“Don’t worry I sure won’t.” Gabrielle tiptoed carefully around the big room and lit the candles on the mantel, the desk, and in the wall sconces. In a moment, a deep golden glow illuminated everything.

Xena walked around the slumped body on the floor and examined the rest of the space, turning cautiously, her blades shimmering in the flickering candle light.

The rest of the room didn’t give up a clue to her, so she went back to Philtop’s body. She put her dagger down on the table and dropped into a crouch, inspecting him intently. He was wearing a black tunic and leggings and black boots, with a half cloak thrown over his shoulders that also had a hood.

“Well.” The queen said. “I seriously doubt he was here to dance with me.”

Gabrielle returned to her side. “You want some tea?” She asked. “I think I kinda need some. My whole body’s shaking.”

“I’d love some tea.” Xena glanced up at her. “Wake you up too fast?”

Gabrielle had her arms wrapped around her, and she was avoiding looking at Philtop’s body. “I couldn’t go to sleep for along time, then I finally did and then I heard you yelling for me. My head hurts.”

“Go make some tea.” Xena patted her leg. “I’m gonna have to look him over and you probably don’t want to see that anyway.”

Her consort didn’t even give a token protest. She retreated back into the bedroom, and in a moment Xena could hear the sound of the fire being built up, and the rattle of a water pot.

She listened for a bit, then she returned her attention to the dead body. Aside from the odd dress, Philtop was also wearing gauntlets, thin leather gloves that extended up his arms halfway to his elbows.

His throat had been slit. Xena put the tip of her sword against his chin and pushed his head up, observing the cut with professional approval. It went right from ear to ear, and had sliced through his adams apple as well as his jugular vein.

The marble floor was covered in blood, producing the copper tint that had warned her in side the bedroom but giving nothing to her in terms of who or why. Just a neatly done job by a practiced hand – and yet...

Xena leaned a little closer, examining the slice. Now that did tell her something. Whoever had cut Philtop’s throat had been his height or taller. Xena stood up, stretching the kinks out of her knees from crouching.

Philtop had been her height. Xena let her blade rest on her shoulder. They had both been unusual that way, he’d been one of the few people she could look right in the eye – that had added to his attraction for her.

But not many people in the realm measured up to her inches.

She studied the body on the floor, searching inside her to see what emotion it drew out. After a brief pause, she shrugged, a physical manifestation of her ambivalence. She wouldn't miss Philtop. He'd been nothing but a pain in her ass.

She circled the body, observing the hands splayed out as though thrown out in warning. The fingers were empty, though he was wearing his sword strapped to his back and she could see at least one dagger at his waist, and one tucked into the top of his boot.

Pretty much the same as she'd have if she had chose to dress like a thug and sneak into someone's rooms at night, matter of fact. She lowered the tip of her sword and sliced through his tunic, flicking the fabric aside and exposing his chest.

Then she had to stifle a laugh.

Gabrielle came in with two cups. "What's so funny?" She spared a glance at the body, as she put Xena's cup down on the desk. "What's that he's wearing?"

"That, my delicious little bed warmer, is a corset." Xena said. "Never seen one on a guy before." She said. "it's meant to squeeze your body into shape if it isn't that way naturally."

Gabrielle stared at it, then she looked up at Xena in deep puzzlement.

Xena flipped the fabric back into place. "I don't wanna know." She picked up her cup and sipped the tea. "So, muskrat, tell me. Didja kill him?"

Gabrielle touched her own chest in reflex. "Me?"

Xena looked around. "No one's in this room." She said. "No one left, I'd have heard them." She added. "I heard someone come in, come to the door, stop, and then gasp." She looked at her bedmate. "I didn't hear whoever it was disappear." She pointed around the room. "They're not here. There's no other exit, here or in our bedroom."

Gabrielle frowned at her. "Xena I didn't kill anyone."

"Didja want to?"

Xena watched with interest, as those green eyes slowly lifted and met hers.

In the candlelight, Gabrielle's eyes were almost ochre but their clear depths were evident regardless. "No." She said. "But I'm not sorry he's dead." She replied honestly. "I didn't like him at all." She paused, watching Xena's face. "Did you really think I did?"

Xena chuckled. "I know you didn't." She said. "You were in bed right next to me when I heard him get offed." She said. "You're little, and quiet footed, my love, but you had your paws wrapped around my arm before I got up."

"Oh." Her consort smiled.

"And besides." The queen exhaled. "Whoever did it had my height."

"Oh." Gabrielle's tone changed.

"Yeah." Xena leaned back against the big desk, sipping her tea. "Feel better?" She observed her lover nodding. "Good." She walked around the desk and sat down at it. "What the Hades should I do about this, Gabrielle? I'm stumped." She put her sword down on the surface.

"You are?"

Xena leaned her forearms on the desk. "I thought I could draw this guy in here. Now... I'm not sure what happened here." She pointed at Philtop. "What was he after?"

"Um." Gabrielle came around to the other side of the queen and leaned on the table, the body now out of her line of sight. "I think maybe he was after you."

The queen gave her a droll look. "At night? Trying to sneak into our bedroom?" She said. "Look at him. He's dressed like... like..."

"An assassin?" Gabrielle asked.

Xena stared at the body. "He wouldn't have been stupid enough to try and kill me." She said, slowly, turning her head to look at her consort. "But he might have been stupid enough to try and kill you."

Even in the candle light she could see Gabrielle's face go pale. "Maybe putting that story around about me being drunk wasn't so smart." Xena said. "Because I know he wouldn't have tried getting within an arms length of you if I wasn't."

Gabrielle sat down on the stool near the desk.

"Maybe he figured he'd sneak in there, and off you right in the bed next to me." Xena's voice went on, a distant, cold note entering it. "So I'd wake up from my drunken stupor and find you dead." She tensed her fingers around the edge of the desk. "Probably wanted me to think I'd done it."

An explosive crack suddenly sounded, making Gabrielle surge to her feet in alarm.

Xena looked down at the wooden surface now broken off in her hands. "He owes whoever did it a big thank you." She said in a very quiet voice. "Maybe I do too."

Gabrielle gently put a hand on her shoulder.

Xena let the wood chunk drop on the table, and reached up to cover her hand with her own. "You know something?"

Her consort leaned against her back, and kissed her along the top of her spine. "I know I love you."

The queen's eyes closed.

"I know I don't understand what's going on, really or why this person's trying to hurt you." Gabrielle went on, resting her cheek against Xena's shoulder blade. "But I have all the faith in my heart that you'll find out who it is, and make them stop."

Xena managed a slight smile. "What I was going to say." She rubbed her thumb over Gabrielle's knuckles. "Is that my old friend Philtop there could have done us all a very, very big favor while he was busy getting croaked in my outchamber."

Gabrielle came around and knelt at her side, letting her cheek rest against Xena's shoulder. "Really?"

"Mm." Xena tapped her thumb on the table. "It all comes down to this – why was he killed, Gabrielle?" She mused. "The jerk who offed him had to have a reason. Was it just that he found him in here while he was doing his own thing, or did he kill him thinking it would bother me, or did he kill him because Philtop found HIM in here and was going to expose him?"

"Huh." Gabrielle grunted softly.

"Or did the guy kill him because he was trying to make it look like I killed him, thinking that would mess with all the politics?" The queen mused. "If that's the case, boy did he have his queens crossed."

"Maybe it was a mix." Gabrielle suggested. "Maybe Philtop was coming in here to mess.. I guess, to hurt me." She said, pausing briefly. "Boy that makes me mad."

Xena rolled her head to one side and regarded her adorable bedmate drolly.

"Anyway." Her consort went on. "And maybe this other guy followed him in here, and he killed him, to make you look bad."

Xena nodded a little. "Keep going."

"So now he's probably going to make those guys who came with Philtop run in here and see him, and make them think you did that to mess them all up."

"Hmm....." Xena rumbled. "Except that he was obviously sneaking into my bedroom dressed like a thief so my killing him would be expected."

"Maybe the bad guy didn't really see what he was wearing?"

"If he followed him, he did."

"Hm." Gabrielle frowned. "This isn't making a good story, Xena."

"No, it isn't, is it." The queen stood up. "Well, I can't just sit here and watch maggots grow on him. Gotta make a move in some direction or other." She put her fingers between her teeth and let out a very loud, long whistle. "Get me a robe, muskrat. I make a better bloodthirsty lunatic when I'm not yelling in my underwear."

"Okay." Gabrielle was glad enough to duck back into the bedroom as she heard boots starting to pound outside, heading for the door. "I'll get your booties too."

Xena walked over to the body and leaned over, taking her dagger off the table and inserting it into the gaping wound on the dead man's neck, darkening the blade with blood and standing back up as the outer door swung open and the guard, lead by Brendan, rushed in.

"Hello, boys." Xena leaned back against the desk, twirling the blade as they all skidded to a halt. "Looks like I found a rat in my chambers. Tch tch tch." She turned as Gabrielle appeared from the other room with a thick, fur lined gown in her hands. "Thanks, muskrat."

"Xena." Brendan was staring the body. "By the gods!"

"No." The queen shrugged into her gown and tied it snugly around her waist. "By the queen." She held up the blade. "Go get his entire damn retinue and drag their slimy, hoary asses in here right now." She glanced down as Gabrielle knelt, and started slipping her indoor boots on. "Thank you, my love."

Gabrielle looked up in faint surprise, then smiled and went back to her task.

"Go." Brendan ordered three of the guard that were with him. "You lot, outside and guard the door. No one gets in until they get back."

The men rushed out, and Brendan turned to face Xena. "He went for you then? Xena, by all that's holy I never expected it."

"Me either." The queen cheerfully agreed with him. "But he did, and he paid for it." She glanced down at the body. "You all find anything last night?"

Brendan nodded. "We did." He said. "I was just waiting for light to come get you."

Xena cocked her head. "And?"

"Where the bugger was hiding out. Found his cache." Brendan looked pleased. "Damndest place for it, but you'll see for y'self." He looked down at Philtop's body. "Bastard was looking to do a dirty deed and blame it on what we're chasing."

"Probably." Xena agreed. "Actually I figured he was going for Gabrielle."

Brendan looked up and then at Gabrielle. He returned his gaze to Xena's face. "Xena." He exhaled. "Could he have been that base a coward?"

The queen shrugged. "More an opportunist." She examined the blood soaked blade. "Get the archivist here. I'm going to recind the agreement with the Westlands"

"Ah." Brendan nodded.

“In fact, I’m going to annex them.” Xena decided. “They just lost their autonomy. I’ll take that crown of his and give it to someone more worthy like the damn cat under my bed.”

Brendan smiled grimly. He turned as the sound of a crowd seeped in the door, loud footsteps and angry voices erupting. “Ah, here they come the bastards.”

Xena crossed her arms over her chest, her dagger clasped firmly in one hand, and her sword resting on her shoulder. “Open the door.” She smiled. “Lets get this party started.”

\*\*

“Look at the evidence of your own eyes, you moron.” Xena was seated behind the big desk, her booties planted on it, ankles crossed. “You tell me what you think the stupid bastard was doing in my chambers, dressed like a thief, carrying steel, in the dark, Morden?”

Philtop’s senior noble stared at the body. “Majesty, it’s not credible!” He said, again, for the nth time. “His Grace had no reason, no inclination to do you harm!”

Xena leaned over to look at the body, then raised both her eyebrows in exaggerated question, lifting both hands and spreading them palms up.

The noble mopped his sweating brow. “I have no answer for you, Majesty.” He mumbled, turning in question to the six men behind him. “Balderos? Tregel?”

Tregel, the younger man stepped forward. He looked carefully at the body, then looked over at Xena. “There was word he and your Majesty had a disagreement.” He said, in a low, husky voice.

“The stupid idiot was trying to raise in insurrection in my dining hall.” Xena replied. “I should, by rights, have just gutted him right there and then, but I had other things to do.”

Balderos and Tregel exchanged looks. Then the younger man cleared his throat. “Majesty, you can believe this or no – but I ..” He paused. “His highness was concerned that you might be in danger. Perhaps he was here to prevent harm from coming to you.”

Xena rolled her head to one side and gave him an extremely droll look. “Really?”

“Truly, Majesty.” Tregel said, in an earnest tone.

“Did it not occur to him that sneaking into my bedroom armed and hooded might be more dangerous for him than for me?” Xena asked.

“Majesty, the word was spread that you were retiring and in a...” Morden paused. “His Highness felt perhaps you needed some extra guarding, as you might be distracted.”

Xena regarded him with a look of impatient intolerance. “Anyone guess that maybe I spread that word?”

“Majesty?”

“Never occur to him that I was setting a trap? One that he blundered into?” Xena persisted. “Always did think he knew more than anyone else. Actually had the brain of a housecat.”

“Majesty!”

“He did!” Xena put her boots down with a thump.

“Majesty he thought you were indisposed.” Tregel said.

“He thought I was drunk off my ass and screwing Gabrielle.” Xena restated the idea. “Which is exactly what I wanted everyone to think.”

The men all looked at her, faces reddening.

“She wasn’t.” Gabrielle spoke up quiet. “Xena was putting herself on the line, hoping that the bad guy, whoever he is, would make a try at her. “ She put a hand on the queen’s shoulder. “It was a crazy brave thing to do and he ruined it.”

“He meant well!” Morden insisted, stubbornly.

“Well, but now he’s dead.” Gabrielle said. “And the bad guy didn’t get caught and maybe more people will get hurt now. It’s not a good idea to try and second guess the queen.”

Xena looked up at her consort, and smiled. “You sweet talker you.”

Gabrielle smiled back at her.

“Yes.” Morden sighed. “He is gone. Our leader, our prince. He has been taken from us.” He gave Xena an oblique resentful look. “We came here in good faith.”

“Spare me the horsecrap.” Xena said, tersely. “I didn’t ask him here, or you for that matter. I didn’t ask him to come sneaking into my quarters. I didn’t ask him to stir up trouble for the last few days. But the bastard showed up here and went crosswise of me and I don’t regret that.”

The men looked at their boots.

“And despite your crying and whining about what a great guy he was, I think I might have caught my castle killer anyway.”

“Majesty!” Morden protested. “He would never have!”

“No?” The queen eyed him. “As my lovely muskrat here said last night, the attacks started when you got her.” She ticked off a finger. “They’re aimed at the stability of my realm.” She ticked off another finger. “And he made it very plain he wanted my crown.”

“Majesty! Who said so!” Tregel protested.

“He told me himself.” Xena said. “No tale carrying.” She spread her hands out. “Didn’t you hear him?” Her eyes widened in mock astonishment. “Didn’t get that whole ‘give me your crown Xena since you can’t hold on to it?’”

Morden turned away, a silent curse on his lips very visible.

“Get out.” The queen’s voice rose. “Get back to your rooms and hope I don’t install my horse as your new overlord.” She gestured to Brandon. “Out.”

Three of her soldiers came forward and herded the Westlanders out.

Xena waited for the door to close behind them. “Let them start to talk.” She said to Brandon. “Now. What shall I do with this decomposing lump?” She indicated the body. “What do you think? Toss him out in the snow, or bury him, or burn him?”

Gabrielle made a face.

“Can’t leave him in here.” Xena caught it. “If I knew for sure what he was up to, I’d just give him a traitor’s treatment and put bits of him on all the gates.” She eyed the body. “But I don’t.” She said. “I don’t know why he was here.”

Brandon studied the body. “Think you should give em a pyre, Mistress. Fool he was, but his lot are useful, sometimes, out on the edge.” He concluded. “Do ye no good to give him to the wolves.”

Xena pondered that for a minute. Then she sighed. “All right.” She gave the guards a nod. “Give him honors, and burn him.” She decided. “Muskrat, let’s get your little servant out of bed and get some breakfast up here. Killing people always makes me hungry.”

Brendan chuckled. He motioned the rest of the guard forward. “Let’s go boys. Take out the rubbish so her Majesty can eat in peace.”

“And have breakfast.” Xena purred, now slumped sideways with her head resting on her fist.

Then the body was gone, and the room was quiet. Xena sat up and rested her forearms on the desk, her face serious. “So. Let’s see what this lure brings in.” She said. “And I’ve got to go see that cache they found.”

Gabrielle came over and put her hands on Xena’s shoulders. “What do you think’s going to happen?”

Xena gazed quietly across the room, now being lit by a wan dawn outside filtering through the storm. “I don’t know.” She admitted. “We’re adrift on the winds right now, Gabrielle.”

“You made them think you killed Philtop.”

The queen nodded. "I sure did."

"And you made them think you thought Philtop was the bad guy." Gabrielle said. "Do you really think he was?"

Xena turned her head and regarded her consort. "In my gut? No." She said. "He was a rat, and I think he was glad to take the opportunity to advance his goals, and I have no doubt he would have taken a shot at you if he could have but there's a subtlety to this he wasn't capable of."

Gabrielle leaned against the queen's back. She was glad the body was gone, and uncomfortably aware of how glad she was that it had been Philtop. There had been a kind of sleazy danger about him that had really worried her and even though she knew there was still probably a bad guy out there, still, she felt better that he was dead.

And, that made her feel bad.

She pressed her cheek against Xena's shoulder.

"Hades of a way to start the day, huh?" Xena mused. "Damn I feel like going back to bed." She rubbed her eyes with the fingers of one hand. "I'm getting too old for this staying up all night crap."

Gabrielle gave her a kiss on the back of her neck. "We stayed up that other night."

"Not the same thing." Xena managed a grin, as she half turned to look at her consort. "Hungry?" She watched Gabrielle shake her head, and that made Xena turn right around in her seat and study her closely. "What's wrong with you?"

Gabrielle shrugged faintly.

"You upset about him getting whacked in here? We can pick new rooms." The queen ventured.

"No, it's not that."

"No?" Xena reached up and smoothed the pale hair back off Gabrielle's forehead, then rested her palm on the skin there. "You don't feel like you have a fever."

"I don't think so either." Gabrielle said. "I just feel bad because I don't feel bad because he's dead."

Xena sorted through the statement. "You didn't like him."

"I didn't."

"So.. why would you feel bad if he died?" Xena's voice rose in puzzled question. "You lost me there, muskrat."

Gabrielle shrugged again. "You shouldn't feel happy about people dying, should you Xena?"

Xena's dark head tilted every so slightly to one side.

"Are you glad he's dead?" Her consort asked.

"Sure. Saved me the trouble of killing him myself."

Gabrielle sighed. "I think I'm just being silly." She admitted. "I didn't like him and he made me really mad. So I probably should be glad he's dead but you know Xena... it makes me sad to think I would be glad about it."

Xena rapidly shook her head from side to side, then reached up and tapped her ear. "Can we please start kissing or something? Let's go back into bed. I can't handle so much deep thought so early in the damn morning."

That, finally, made Gabrielle smile. "Sorry about that." She leaned forward and kissed Xena on the lips. "Let me go see about breakfast. "

Xena caught her before she could back away, and pulled her closer. She looked steadily into those pale green eyes and smiled back. "It's okay for you to be glad, Gabrielle." The queen said. "He did things that should make you feel that way."

"Are you glad?"

Oooh. Xena had to think about that. "Well." She finally said. "It had been a lot of fun for me to frustrate the Hades out of him and watch him chew himself into a froth."

"Really?"

"Sure." The queen agreed cheerfully. "Gabrielle, it may not have occurred to you but it makes me feel really good to be in love with you, and to let people, especially people like him, see it."

Gabrielle blinked at her.

"It drives everyone out of their minds. I like that." Xena chuckled her under the chin. "But yeah, I am glad he's gone, the stupid bastard. I only wish I'd done it myself." She sighed, her lips twisting into a regretful smile. "Ah well."

Her smile grew broader, as Gabrielle squeezed her with all her surprising strength, almost making the queen cough as the breath was taken out of her. "Let's go get dressed, muskrat. I have a feeling it's gonna be a bitch of a day."

Gabrielle released her. "I'm glad too." She admitted. "I just hope it doesn't cause you even more trouble with all those guys."

Hm. Xena got up and they went into the bedroom, which was now lit by the dull gray from outside as the curtains had been pulled back from the leaded bay windows and a servant was kneeling by the fire, building it up.

Gabrielle went past the bed and through the door into her own room beyond it, glancing around to see that the curtains had been pulled back there as well. She went past the wardrobe that held her clothes and into the small bathing room behind it, seeing a basin of gently steaming water ready for her.

It felt wonderful to dip her hands into that. The warmth went up her arms and made her shoulders relax, and she dipped a handful of it up to wash her face. She turned as she heard footsteps behind her to find her servant there. "Good morning."

"My lady." Mali bowed slightly. "Is it all to your liking? I was about to bring up a tray from the kitchens."

"That would be great." Gabrielle agreed. "I know Xena's hungry too."

The girl looked nervous. "Your grace, there is something I heard below. Is it true the prince of the Westlands was killed here, last night?"

"Yes." Gabrielle answered straightforwardly.

"Why?" Mali asked. "We heard the prince's servants crying out. They said his only wish was to protect her majesty."

"Well." Gabrielle sorted out the facts at her command, which weren't really that factual once she thought about it. What, really would serve Xena's purpose to be known? "You know, that might have been what the prince told everyone, but then he got dressed up in all black clothing, and a hood, and snuck into our chambers in the dark. "

"Oh." Mali murmured. "That wasn't really wise of him!"

"No." Gabrielle agreed. "So I don't really know for sure what his ideas were, you know? Because doing that could mean a lot of things, and no matter what he meant to do, it was a stupid and dangerous thing."

“Oh yes, your grace, it was.” Mali nodded positively. “I don’t think his servants knew that. They were saying he had been called to the queen’s audience, and then...”

She paused.

“And then Xena just killed him?” Gabrielle said. “No. That’s not what happened. Xena didn’t call anyone into our quarters last night, and anyway, why would someone dress up like a sneak if he was called?”

Mali nodded again. “That doesn’t make sense. They didn’t say anything about the clothing. They were just saying...” She paused again, and blushed. “I beg my lady’s pardon.”

Gabrielle could imagine what they’d been saying. “You might want to tell them it wouldn’t be a good idea to let Xena hear them say that. I think it would make her pretty mad.”

“My lady.”

“Matter of fact, it makes me pretty mad.” Gabrielle said.

“I’m so sorry, m’lady.” Mali gasped.

“In fact, lets go down to the kitchen together.” Gabrielle steered her out towards the door that led to the narrow back steps. “So I can make sure that message gets around.”

\*\*

Xena poked her head around the doorframe, searching the small solar intently. “Hey!”

There was no answer.

The queen’s body followed her head, and she moved across Gabrielle’s room, aware that her consort wasn’t in it. “Damn it.” Since she hadn’t come out through the bedroom, the only conclusion Xena could come to was that she’d gone down the steps to the lower levels.

Not really unusual, Gabrielle did tend to go up and down to the kitchens using those, rather than the main staircase outside. But with things happening like they were... she didn’t like it.

Purposefully, she opened the door and started down the steps herself, taking them two at a time as she dropped quickly towards the lower door.

The thought of Gabrielle down there, even in the kitchens she reasonably expected were friendly chilled her to the very core. The intruder had gotten into the damned banqueting hall so she was sure he could get into the lower rooms just as easily.

Damn it. Damn it.

Xena got to the bottom of the steps and stiffarmed the door into the lower levels, passing through the set of storerooms that were between the steps and the kitchen entrance. Her ears cocked, listening for her consorts voice, but she could only hear the rattle and clatter of the staff getting ready to serve the morning meal to the rest of the stronghold.

She clamped her jaw shut to keep herself from yelling Gabrielle’s name.

The kitchen was busy but it threw itself into a stutter when the queen’s tall, distinctive figure cleared the door and bodies started to turn to face her. Xena drew in a deep breath to let out a bellow, but just as she was about to start, she spotted Gabrielle in the back, near the cook pots.

“Mmph.” She let the breath out with a slight grunt. Giving the staff a dour look she angled towards the fire, watching her consort’s body language as she stood surrounded by strange servants. Gabrielle didn’t look scared, but she had her fists planted very cutely on her hips and it was obvious she was ticked off about something.

As she approached, Gabrielle turned her head and spotted her, almost as though she felt her presence. Xena slowed her pace, seeing a smile appear on her consort's face, and she reached out to take the now extended hand thrust in her direction. "Muskrat."

The servants all looked properly terrified. Xena was pleased.

"Hi. I was going to bring your breakfast right back up." Gabrielle told her. "I was just straightening out a few people... I mean things.. down here."

"Now were you?" Xena eyed the servants. "You all belong to that halfwit cockbrain I offed in my salon this morning?"

"Xena." Gabrielle squeezed her fingers.

"Do you?" The queen asked, glaring at the men.

"Your majesty, we do have that honor." One of the men said, in a soft voice. "We loved our prince very much."

"How charming" Xena said. "So why does my consort need to be here dealing with you?" She eyed Gabrielle. "What did they do, piss in the morning ale?"

"Xena." Gabrielle came closer and tangled their fingers together. "They just didn't know what really happened so I told them."

Really? Xena flicked a glance at the servants. Which real story had Gabrielle told them, she wondered The real, real story, or the real story she'd told Brendan, or the real fabrication she wanted everyone else to know? "I see."

"Your majesty, I'm sure the prince meant you no harm."

"I'm sure too." Xena said. "He wasn't suicidal just stupid." She circled the servants, making them even more nervous. Her own people crept back, disappearing from the area and withdrawing to the other part of the kitchen. "So tell me. Any of you see him leave last night?"

Gabrielle released her, and edged to one side, picking up a tray and getting busy getting them some grub., leaving Xena to her questioning.

That alone, drew her offcourse. She watched Gabrielle move, studying her posture and trying to decide if she was upset at her badgering the staff or just hungry.

"We all did, your majesty." The man who had spoken before spoke again. "That's how we know the prince meant you no harm. He told everyone he was going to guard your quarters against the assassin."

"What?" Xena half turned, dragging her attention back.

"Yes." The man nodded eagerly. "That's what he told us. He was going to catch the assassin, and he was sure that would bring him your favor." He said. "Especially since he told us you called for him."

"I called for him?" Xena pointed at her own chest. "I didn't call for him."

"That's what your... ah, the lady Gabrielle told us." The man admitted. "But the prince assured us you had sent for him and we were all glad."

"I didn't send for him." Xena repeated.

"He had your note, majesty." The man said, in a meek tone. "We saw it." He turned towards Gabrielle. "We showed her. She has it.."

Xena digested that silently. "Gabrielle." She said quietly. "Hand it here."

Her consort did, leaving the tray for a minute and crossing back over to her, pulling a bit of parchment from her belt and extending it. Xena took it, and opened it, meeting Gabrielle's eyes before she looked down.

She could see a look of faint uncertainty there, and it enraged her. She looked down at the parchment, her own eyes opening wide as she recognized what was, without a doubt, her own handwriting on it.

*Come find me. We need to talk. X*

The shock sent chills down her spine, until she blinked, and recalled the words she'd written, and when. "Clever." She said. "I wrote this all right." She saw the twitch work through Gabrielle's lips. "Just not to him." She handed the note back to Gabrielle "That's the note I sent to Lastay to have him come find me."

Gabrielle exhaled a little, obviously trying not to look obviously relieved.

"Mm. Saved the bastard's life. Probably that's why they used it to fool Philtop." Xena shook her head briefly. "Picked it up in Lastay's rooms." She looked up at the servants. "I didn't summon him. If I'd wanted to off him, I'd have just done it. No need to trick him into coming to my rooms for it."

"Majesty." The servant bowed his head, but Xena could hear the doubt in his voice and it made her angry.

"Get out of here." She pointed at the door. "All of you."

The servants hastily left, and she turned to her quietly watching companion. "What are you doing down here?"

Gabrielle turned and went back to assembling their tray. "Well, Mali told me that those guys were down here saying you told Philtop to come to your bed and then killed him so I wanted to set them straight."

Xena studied the slim figure. "Note freak you out?"

Gabrielle silently nodded.

"Me too, before I remembered when I wrote it." The queen said, coming over to put her hands on Gabrielle's shoulders. "Muskrat, I'm running out of ways to tell you I'm not the unfaithful whore you apparently think I am."

Gabrielle turned abruptly and stared up at her. "What?" She said. "I don't think that!"

The horror rang true. Xena gazed quietly into the stormy green eyes facing her. "They do." She glanced around the kitchen. "Half the damn stronghold probably does. Hades, I'm capable of that, y'know?"

"I don't want to think that." Gabrielle whispered. "It's not you I doubt, Xena, It's me."

Xena sighed, resting her forearms on her consort's shoulders, wanting very much to pick up her sword and run through the stronghold butchering everything in her path. Better that, than having a sensitive chat, anyway.

Gabrielle looked away, and her skin turned a dull pink. "Everyone says I'm just an embarrassment to you. That everyone laughs at me."

"Who?" Xena gently asked. "Who says that? Give me a name, sweetheart, so I can find them and kill them." She added, in a warmly affectionate though bloodthirsty tone. "Before we have breakfast."

That made Gabrielle look up at her again. "I love you so much I think it makes me a little nutty." She said. "I'm so scared I'll lose you."

The simple admission touched Xena's heart unexpectedly, the rawness in it bringing a very surprising sting of tears to her eyes.

Right there, in the kitchen. And damn it, Gabrielle saw them. The queen exhaled. She looked quickly to either side, finding them isolated in the kitchen, with no sign of anyone else around. "Gabrielle." She paused. "Having you think I'd throw you away for some pretty boy or anyone else really hurts me." She studied the now grave eyes looking up at her. "Please don't do that. Life's painful enough without you adding that to mine."

Now there were tears in Gabrielle's eyes.

"Don't be afraid." The queen's voice dropped to a whisper. "I will never leave you." She watched Gabrielle's expression closely, seeing the faint narrowing of her eyes and the equally faint tilt to her head before she lifted their joined hands up and kissed Xena's fingers.

That seemed a good sign. Xena tilted her own head, and waited, as Gabrielle took a breath and her expression cleared, becoming open and loving, as a faint smile worked its way onto her lips. "So." She said. "You so hungry it's made you mute?"

The smile intensified. Gabrielle just nodded.

"I'll have to remember that." Xena leaned forward and kissed her on the head. "Don't go south on me, love. I need you." She whispered. "No matter what else that bastard does here if he screws us up he's won."

"Never." Gabrielle stated, finally finding her tongue. "Xena, even if you would toss me out for some other person I'd spend the rest of my life outside your door because there's no where else for my heart to go."

Xena heard her heart beat suddenly in her ears, as the words rang in them. She kissed Gabrielle's head again, and gave her a hug. "All right. So now that we've dripped mushy goo all over the floor and left a mess the damn skullerys will need to clean up let's get a biscuit before we both start crying like teething babes."

"Okay." Gabrielle returned the hug. "I'm sorry, Xena. That's an awful way to start the day out."

"Yeah, it sure was." The queen sighed. "You better get me something really good for that. I'm starving." She draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulder as they turned back towards the hearth. "Then we'll go see what Brendan found last night, and visit the Persians."

"Can we get dressed first?"

Xena chuckled wryly. "Spoilsport."

\*\*

Gabrielle was more than glad to be fastening the buckles on her boots once they'd eaten their fill from the tray and gotten cleaned up from breakfast. She stood up and tugged her tabard straight, adjusting the belt on it and relived to feel the leather around her.

She stuck her little knife in its sheath in her boot top, and picked up her parchment case, heading back into the bedroom where Xena was just fastening the catches on her house armor. The black leather was one of her favorite outfits to see the queen in and she gently patted her hip as she went by and sat down on the bench to wait.

Gabrielle had taken a minute to write down what they'd said to each other, and stuck it away in her case to look at later. She still felt a little giddy from it. "Those were pretty good eggs, huh?"

"Pretty good everything." Xena was attaching her sword in its sheath to her back. "Okay, let's go." She picked up her long dagger and slid it into its catch just above the base of her spine and checked the layer of leather and brass armor over her shoulders.

A knock at the door made her look around. "Come."

The door opened, and Brendan entered. "Ready, Xena?"

"Let's go." The queen answered, motioning Gabrielle to join her. "What's the word?" She asked, as they headed out the door and went down the steps into the grand entrance hall.

"Well." Brendan led the way down towards the lower corridors. "Them's what came with him are tearing their clothes up over it." He said. "Sure he's wronged, and all."

"Uh huh"

"Others I heard say twas a wonder you waited so long." Brendan smiled grimly. "Didn't care for his games yesterday."

"Huh." Xena handed him the folded parchment. "If you believe it, the bastard was tricked to death." She said. "His people said he got that, thought it was me asking for him."

Brendan studied the note, then looked at Xena.

"It is my handwriting." The queen said. "That's the note I sent to Lastay when I wanted to talk to him, the day we had the show in the dancing hall."

"Huh!"

"Yeah." Xena said. "Must have picked it up when he tried to off my good Duke."

Brendan sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Feel like an ass, Xena." He said. "Man goes about killing people at will and not one of us can find him."

"Imagine how I feel?" Xena trotted down the steps, her sword bouncing a little on her back. "So where is this.. ah." She spotted a brace of guards at the very end of the corridor and headed towards them. "Morning, boys."

"Majesty." The two guards touched their chest. "Heard we're one less pointy this morning." The one of the left added, one of her older men, a veteran who had earned the right to ask her things.

"We are." Xena knelt beside the pile they'd found. There was a leather bag, very worn and on one end, tattered. She slipped her gauntlets from under her belt and put them on, then picked up the bag and examined it.

Gabrielle circled around and took a seat on the small bench against the wall, watching her.

"What's in there?"

Xena fished out the contents. "Looks like our man's a man." She put down a shaving kit, a long, thin blade and knob of soap with a scattering of thick, short hairs in it. "Or a kinky woman."

Gabrielle frowned, studying the item, then she looked at Xena with a puzzled expression.

Next, the queen drew out a handful of darts. "Ah."

The soldiers were watching her and they nodded. "Stickers." The older one said. "Likely what they hit them two boys with."

"Yep." Xena brought the handful up to her face and sniffed the tips, jerking her head back a little at the acrid scent. It was more pungent than she'd expected, and she could almost taste the bitterness on the back of her tongue.

She put them back down and then turned the bag over, shaking it to remove any further contents since even leather gauntlets could be punctured by a sharp enough point. A bundled rag fell out, and a folded piece of linen, and then, in a rapid tumble, two black shirts and a pair of slippers.

Xena paused, studying the ground.

Slippers? She reached out and picked one up. It was thin and soft, made to conform snugly to the foot. The sole was thin and flexible, and seemed a bit tacky when she pressed it with her gloved fingertip.

“What’s that there, mistress?” Brendan came to look over her shoulder.

“I’m not sure.” Xena admitted. “Shoes, but.. “

Brendan reached over and touched the sole “Sticky.”

“Yeah.” Xena agreed. “But why?”

Gabrielle cleared her throat. “In my village.” She said. “The boys who had to collect walnuts used shoes with honey smeared on the bottom to climb with. They got better grip with them.”

Xena and Brendan looked at her, then looked at each other.

“Wow.” Xena murmured. “Who knew?”

She gave the bag one more shake, but it was empty. She sorted through the debris, but aside from confirming the sex of the intruder, it really didn’t tell her much at all. The shirts and the rest of the items were common, and local.

The shoes though. She picked up one of the slippers and studied it again. Then she looked up at Gabrielle. “Take your boots off, muskrat. Let’s see what this gets us.”

Amiably, her consort put her parchment case down and started to unbuckle one of her boots. “I don’t think I can climb trees no matter how sticky those are.”

“I don’t think he was climbing trees.” Xena said, tapping the toe of the shoe against her knee. “Maybe this is why we haven’t been able to catch him.” She tipped her head back and studied the ceiling. “And I think now we know how big he is. “ She held up the shoe. “Because this sure isn’t going to fit any of the rest of us.”

\*\*

Gabrielle carefully placed her feet on the wall, her hands wrapped firmly around a bell pull attached to a hook high over her head. “Um.”

“Your’e doing great, muskrat.” Xena called up. “Don’t worry. If you fall, I’ll let ya fall on top of me.”

Somehow, Gabrielle wasn’t entirely comforted. Her arms ached, and she felt like she might have to let the rope go at any minute. But she was halfway up the wall, and the shoes seemed to stick to the surface like a bee’s.

It was amazing, if scary. “Isn’t this high enough?” Gabrielle asked, glancing down and then wishing she hadn’t. “My feet stick, see?”

“They sure do.” Xena agreed. “How does that feel? You think you could make it up to the ceiling?”

Gabrielle looked up. “I think someone else could.” She admitted. “I think I’d fall down before I got much further.”

“See anything up there?”

See anything? Gabrielle felt her arms start to shake. She took a breath, and managed to haul herself up another step, wrapping her hands around the rope and squeezing it as hard as she could. All she could see is the wall, and some cobwebs. “Nothing much, just a lot of dust.” She called down.

“Dust.”

“Yeah.” She leaned forward a little. “Just that and some places where the... “ She paused. “Just these little holes, sort of.”

“Holes?”

Gabrielle peered at them. They were, really, just holes. The only thing that was a little funny about them was how many there were. “Yeah, sort of..” She looked up. “Kinda going up the roof there.. like little black.. whoa!”

The rope she was holding onto jerked taut abruptly, and the next thing she knew she was swinging back away from the wall and she yelped in shock and terror, her legs dropping and the rope burning her hands just long enough to make her cry out before a strong arm grabbed her and she was being held in place. “Sheeps!”

“No, just me.” Xena had her legs wrapped around the rope and was holding them both up. “Show me those holes.”

Gabrielle pointed.

“Ahhh.” The queen swung them both closer to the wall. “Grab that sconce, muskrat. Haul us over there.”

Gabrielle, her arms now free, complied. She pulled them both close to the rock surface, and Xena inclined her head forward, peering at them. “Huh.”

“I thought they were just cracks but see? They’re almost square.” Gabrielle commented. “Sort of like.. I could make a picture in my head of pegs or something going in there.”

“Hah.” Without any warning, Xena released the rope and they were plummeting to the ground a second later. She bent her knees and took the shock of the double weight, then straightened and let Gabrielle down. “Good job, cute stuff.”

Gabrielle cautiously opened her eyes, and then she looked down, slightly surprised to find the ground under her feet. “Thanks.”

Xena tilted her head back, and put her fists on her hips. “What’s that up there, Brendan?” She pointed. “Up near the edge of the ceiling. See it?”

Brendan shaded his eyes, and then gave his queen a wry look. “Nothing but shadows, Xena.” He admitted. “Not to these old eyes, anyway. Kebbin?” He motioned one of the younger soldiers forward. “See anything up there, son?”

Kebbin, a man of middling height and thick, curly brown hair stepped forward and peered up. “Tis a grate, sir.” He said. “Isn’t it”

“It is.” The queen confirmed. “It’s an iron grate, with some kind of imprint in it.” She started looking around the floor. “And I want to see it better. Brendan, open those windows.” She ordered, crisply. “One of you go get a shield, and it better be clean.”

Brendan scrambled to do her bidding., and one of the other soldiers left at a run.

“Y’majesty.” Kebbin stepped forward. “Would ya like me to climb up to the top there, and look better?” He pointed at the rope. “I kin make it up there. My da was a sailor and I grew up climbing the lines.”

Xena studied him for a long moment, then she gestured to the rope. “Have it it, kid.”

Kebbin spat on his hands and then he jumped up and grabbed the rope, swarming up it much as Xena just had. He moved past where Gabrielle had stopped before, and pulled himself up close to the ceiling.

“Here you are, your majesty.” A soldier came in with a shield, offering it to Xena.

“Thanks.” Xena took it, and moved around, positioning herself behind the rope facing the window that now let in some filtered, gray light.

“Can’t see too much, your majesty.” Kebbin grunted. “Just a grate.”

Xena tilted the shield, reflecting the light from the window in a skittering flash of gray that travelled up the wall and focused at last on the grate. "How's that?"

Kebbin blinked. "Zeus!" He blurted. "There's a ... your majesty! Was something there! Eyes lookin at me!" He swung back and forth on the rope. "It's gone!"

Gabrielle had come up behind Xena, and now she touched the queen's back, drawing in a breath.

"Hmmm." Xena rumbled softly, deep in her throat. "Brendan, get ropes and poles. I want a scaffolding in here in less than a candlemark. Move it!"

Soldiers bolted in all directions.

"What else do you see up there, kid?" Xena asked. "Tell me about the grate. What's it look like?"

Kebbin wrapped his legs around the rope and peered at the grate, as the light flickered over it. "Gots a thing of arms here." He said. "Round thing, I think."

"One half dark, one half light, with a cat's head on top?" Xena asked.

Kebbin looked down at her. "Bigods, Majesty, can you see it from there?"

"No." Xena shook her head. "It's my predecessor's coat of arms." She said. "All right, c'mon down. We'll get a better look when we build a bunch of ladders to go up there."

"What was that up there?" Gabrielle whispered.

Kibbin slid down and dusted his hands off. "Whop." He glanced at Xena. "Give me a turn, that did. Dind't like them eyes peeking out at me." He said. "Took off when that light came up, majesty."

"What kind of eyes were they?" Xena asked "Was it a cat? A rat? A person?"

"Didn't get much look at it." Kibbin looked "Didn't look like no cat though. Big round eyes, they were." He glanced up at the grate. "Didn't spect the light, ran then."

"Stick around." Xena said. "In fact, someone get me all the men your size or smaller." She studied the grate. "Because my shoulders aren't going to fit in there, that's for sure, and the muskrat's not crawling in there either."

"Phew." Gabrielle let out a breath.

Xena glanced at her. "Tell me you didn't really think I was gonna shove your adorable ass in that hole."

"Well." Her consort edged a bit closer to her. "I'm sorta the right size."

"Gabrielle." Xena planted her hands on her hips. "Gimme a break." She glowered until Gabrielle pressed herself against her body, giving her an apologetic hug. She draped her arm over the shorter woman's shoulders and savored the warmth, her eyes lifting again to the grate.

At last, she felt like she was going somewhere with this. Searching the dungeons had got her nothing but some scraps and attempts at pincushioning. She knew she could be chasing the bastard around in the lower halls all winter and not really have a chance to catch him, there were so many passages, and so many places to hide.

But that grate, now. Xena smiled, as she heard the soldiers start to return, with the construction materials she'd ordered. That grate went somewhere, and it went somewhere she had no personal knowledge of.

"Y'know something, muskrat." She gently rubbed the edge of her thumb against Gabrielle's arm. "I got real lazy real fast in this place."

Gabrielle looked up at her. "Huh?"

“Why didn’t I know that grate was there?” Xena asked. “Why didn’t I scope out all the tunnels, and do something with em?”

“I’m sure you were busy. With all the soldiers and stuff.” Gabrielle said.

“I’m sure I was a complacent post adolescent jackass who was too busy wiping my ass with velvet robes to really get a handle on this place.” Xena sighed. “Damn it, why do I have to learn everything the hard way?”

The soldiers were assembling the ladders, and Brendan was pointing up at the grate, and ordering a hook to yank it out of the wall. Xena was content to step back and keep Gabrielle safe from any flying debris as they watched.

“How could you learn everything the hard way, Xena? You know everything.” Gabrielle objected. “WOuldn’t it have taken you a whole lot longer if you learned it the hard way?”

Xena looked down and found those open, honest eyes watching her. “I don’t know everything.” She whispered. “But don’t you tell anyone that. “

Gabrielle hugged her seemingly content to stay nestled against Xena’s side as they watched the men work. She lifted one hand up and examined it, grimacing a little as she flexed her fingers.

Xena caught the motion. She took hold of her consort’s hand and examined it, making her own face at the raw, scuffed skin. “That from the rope?”

Gabrielle nodded. “Yeah.”

“Sorry, muskrat.” The queen lifted her hand higher and kissed the palm. “See? Dumbass thing for me to ask you to do.”

That was charming. Gabrielle leaned closer and gave the queen a kiss on the shoulder. “It’s okay.” She said. “I’ve never climbed up a rope before. It was harder than I thought it would be, and then you made it look like it was nothing.”

The queen chuckled softly. “Kibbin’s not the only one who hauled their ass up and down the sheets on a ship.” She admitted. “I did my share of that.”

Gabrielle tried to imagine her lover climbing up the mast and found it quite easy to do. Xena had a way of making you believe she could do and be anything and suddenly, she wished she’d been there in that earlier time in the queen’s life.

It would have been so much fun. She could picture herself as a scruffy ragamuffin, maybe helping the ship’s cook while Xena steered them to their next adventure. After a moment, she let out a sigh.

“Hand still hurt?” Xena examined it more closely. “Ah.” She turned Gabrielle’s hand toward the light, and bent her head over it. “Splinter.”

Gabrielle had a very close view of Xena’s profile, as she concentrated on extracting the tiny sliver from her palm. As always, she was serious and intent, totally focused on what she was doing with a look of fierce attention so typical of her.

Gently, she reached up with her free hand and pushed a bit of hair obscuring the queens’ eyes back behind her ear rewarded when those beautiful eyes shifted and Xena’s lips eased into a smile.

She could get lost in those eyes, and for a moment as the world faded out and she did, almost sure she could hear both of their heartbeats thumping in the same rhythm.

It was a sweet and magical moment. She didn’t know why they were having it, but as it lengthened, she could see the growing amusement in Xena’s eyes and leaned forward to kiss her before she started laughing.

They parted a little, and Xena gently squeezed her hand, then released it. "All better?" The queen asked.

Gabrielle gazed dreamily at her. "What was the question?"

"Heh." Xena patted her lightly on the cheek. "You're cute." She ruffled Gabrielle's hair, and turned to watch the soldiers build the scaffold, already halfway up to the grate. She could feel the tingle of Gabrielle's lips on hers still, and the warmth pressed against her side was leeching comfort into her in a surprisingly nice way.

Xena let the building and movement moved past her, as she examined the feeling in her gut. Gabrielle's head was leaning on her shoulder as her consort watched the men work too, and her hand had come to rest casually on Xena's thigh, fingertips gently tracing a pattern there.

This was love. Xena felt a little humbled by it. It was a very stupid place for her to be having an internal revelation, but she admitted to herself right there, in the hall, surrounded by soldiers that what she felt at that moment was something she never wanted to live without again.

Scary as crap.

For a minute, Xena let herself imagine what it would have been like if she had, when Philtop had asked, just handed over her throne and took off. Just left, with her sword, and her horse, and her adorable muskrat just to find out what life had to offer her.

"Xena?"

"Hmm?" Xena held the image in her head, feeling the crunch of snow under her boots and the sting of the cold air in her lungs, on a long road, with miles to go before shelter.

"Where do you think that tunnel goes?" Gabrielle asked, as the soldiers reached the top, and two of them gripped the metal and started yanking it back out of the wall. "Why would they put it up near the roof?"

She could hear the slow, rhythmic thunk of horse hooves, and at the edge of her awareness, the sound of a voice at her side as she walked along.

"Xena?"

She let the image fade, but didn't forget it. "I don't know, muskrat." Xena tilted her head back. "Are there more of these? You think you've seen them?" She shook herself out of her lovestruck mooning and approached the scaffolding. "let's go look."

They climbed up, ending up behind the soldiers who were working the grate out of the stone. Brendan had brought torches up onto the platform and he had one near the opening, and was peering inside.

"What's in there old man?" Xena asked. She got up onto the top platform and squeezed between the men, pausing to examine the grate that was now resting sideways on the wood surface. The metal was old, and it was almost a burned shade of black.

She touched it, and found it very cold. "Huh." She moved over to the opening and felt cold air against her face, full of dust and the smell of moss. The gap was large enough for someone Gabrielle's size to crawl into it, and someone Kebbin's size to squeeze into it, but as she suspected there was no way she was going in there herself.

With a grunt of disappointment, she cleared space. "Okay, let's go hunting, boys."

Kebbin squirmed past her without hesitation, putting his dagger between his teeth as he eased into the shaft, holding a cup mounted candle in his left hand. He paused, then squirmed forward, his heels moving out of view after a moment as he moved forward.

Another man immediately climbed in after him, similarly equipped.

“Boys.” Xena leaned on the wall. “If you find someone in there, kill em. Don’t wait for advice, m’kay?”

“Yes, mistress.” Kebbin called back. “So far, nought but cobwebs and a spider.”

Xena made a face. “Better you than me, kid.” She stepped back and examined the grate again. “Brendan, I want everyone to scour the damn place, find me more of these things.”

“Aye.” Brendan said. “Xena, men just told me the snow’s so bad outside, it’s heavy on the roofs.” He said. “Don’t want to risk any collapsing – especially the stables.”

“No way” Xena scrambled for the edge of the platform. “C’mon muskrat, let’s go check.” She was halfway down the scaffolding in a breath. “Brendan, I want to know what those guys find.”

“Aye, mistress.” Brendan agreed.

“I’ll stop and pick up the Persians. They can move snow for me it’ll be a novel experience for them.” Xena got to the bottom, hopped down, turned, and plucked Gabrielle off the next platform up and lifted her to the ground.

“I hope Patches is okay.” Gabrielle said, with a worried frown. “Boy, so many things are going weird right now.”

“What do you mean weird?” Xena asked, as they quickly moved up the steps and into the main hall.

“Well, the weather.” Gabrielle said, “All this snow? It’s just turned fall, Xena.” She hurried to catch up to the queen. “And then the whole thing with the bad guy, and Philtop, and people getting hurt, and people getting killed, and then the circus and all that.”

“Huh.” Xena muttered.

“And now you find these little tunnels? All of a sudden?” Gabrielle went on. “It’s all just so weird!”

It was weird. Xena remained silent as they headed for the lower barracks, aware that things were starting to swirl along out of her control, as whoever her enemies were here stepped up their attacks. It had started off with a little mystery, and a man dead.

Now?

She thought she saw a shadow out of the corner of her eye. But when she turned her head to look, there was nothing. She could hear the sound of the Persians ahead of her, and she could see them moving in her direction, excitement sharpening their voices. “Need your help.” She told them. “Let’s get over to the stables, we could have a problem.”

In an instant, she was surrounded by big, bearded men, and they were all heading down the passage that would come up into the central courtyard where the stables were, and the main storehouses. Xena could feel the cold increasing, and in reflex, she reached back to make sure her sword was in place, just as they got to the end of the hall and one of the Persians eased in front of her to unlatch the hatch leading up into the open air.

Xena heard a crack, and the sound of something very heavy thundering down on top of the wooden surface, and instinctively she half turned and went to shove Gabrielle out of the way only to find her arm grabbed, and jerked powerfully, knocking her offbalance and making her stumble to the side just as the roof crashed down with a thundering roar.

She spun and lunged, only to see Gabrielle and the Persian disappear under a cascade of debris, and snow, a half sounded cry cutting off as though by a knife. “Gabrielle!”

Terror thundered through her as she thought she heard a laugh to one side and a split second before she dove on the pile of ice she turned and pulled her sword, aiming for the sound in a moment of utter furious rage.

A wash of hot blood erupted, laying down with a hiss on the snow as she plunged after it, letting out a wordless howl as she dug.

\*\*

“Get me hot water.” Xena didn’t turn her attention from the still, pale figure on the bed. “And heat some sheets up, by the fire.”

People scurried to do her bidding, but her focus was on that quiet face, and the just barely moving chest her hand was resting on.

Barely a mark on her, except that big, swelling lump on her head, and the trickle of dried blood standing out in stark relief below her right ear.

Xena very gently lifted up one of her lover’s eyelids, feeling her heart sink when she saw the unresponsive glassiness to the eye beneath it, and the open, unchanging pupil in the center. She let the lid close, and started to shake inside.

Problem with being an amoral killer was, you knew, intimately, what death looked like when it came creeping up to settle it’s feathers around your victim.

So Xena knew, seeing that uneven movement of Gabrielle’s chest, and the dull eye that the sound she could just barely hear over the shattering of her heart were those feathers, fluttering.

She could feel her own breath coming short, as the soldiers behind her gently offered her the warmed linen, carefully helped to tuck it around Gabrielle’s still body, silent and reverent. Only Brendan touched her, putting a hand on Xena’s shoulder and squeezing it without any permission asked or needed.

The hot water was placed on the bedside table and she took the offered piece of cloth, dipping it in and then gently cleaning the blood off Gabrielle’s face and her ear, wiping off the debris from the avalanche as she watched that uneven motion of her breathing become even more so.

Someone entered the room, and her peripheral vision caught a quick flash of Jellaus’ somber face, as he came around behind her, touched her back gently, and then settled down on his knees, not there to do anything but be present.

They all knew. Xena felt like yelling at them, screaming that they were wrong, but she couldn’t, her heart bound up so tightly in painful constriction that she could only barely breathe herself, silently accepting the unspoken devotion surrounding her.

Strange that now, in this moment of utter disaster, that they’d choose to express it.

No one spoke. In the corner, Lakmas the Persian knelt with his hands clasped, his head bowed. He had been the one who had helped Xena clear the wood and the ice off Gabrielle, and had carried her here to their rooms, since Xena’s knees had been shaking so badly for her to do it.

Xena rested her hands on the bed, feeling as helpless as she ever had in her life. Outside she could hear the patter of sleet against the window, and the chill in the room shook her to her very core. “Stir the fire up.” She ordered, softly.

A soldier went to do that.

Xena folded her hands around Gabrielle’s still one, feeling the chill in it, despite the warm sheets she was now wrapped up in. She touched the inside of her consort’s wrist, her heart stopping until she felt the flutter against her fingertips, the beats so unsteady they almost seemed random.

Gabrielle was dying.

Xena felt tears sting her eyes, and she closed them, the wet droplets hitting her hands, and the hand she squeezed with no response. Here was something all her skill at arms, and all the force of her will couldn’t stop and she opened her eyes again to look at that quiet, still face, all the pain of what this meant to her coming home.

Leaning forward she gathered Gabrielle's body into her arms and hugged her, holding her gently as her head came to rest on Xena's shoulder. "Don't leave me." Xena whispered into the ear so near to her cheek. "Please don't leave me."

She really didn't care who heard her, or who was in the room, or what was going to happen next.

All she cared about was the soul slipping through her grasp, the breath growing fainter, the flutter of a heartbeat becoming indistinct.

No.

\*\*

Pain.

Gabrielle was chiefly aware of a great deal of pain. She didn't really know where she was, or what had happened to her, but breathing hurt, and she felt like she was just floating in darkness.

Then it all faded and she could see a gentle glow of light. It surrounded her and buoyed her up, and she imagined she could feel the brush of clouds against her skin. She opened her eyes, or thought she did, and saw a brighter light approaching her, bringing a welcome warmth.

It was a relief. She'd been so cold. The warmth soaked through the ache in her bones and lightened in, and she found her breath coming easier, as the light surrounded her.

She could hear whispers around her now. Voices off in the light that she could hear, but not understand. The light seemed to concentrate and she looked at it, reaching out to touch it but finding herself unable to move.

So strange.

"Gabrielle." A gentle, quiet voice spoke.

"Yes." She whispered back.

"It's time for you to rest. Come with me."

"What happened?" She tried to turn her head, and couldn't.

"It's your time." The voice answered. "I will take you to your family, they're waiting for you."

Gabrielle floated there for a time, thinking. "My family?"

"Your mother, and your father, and your sister, and a baby brother you never knew you had." The voice said. "They all want to see you. They're waiting. Come with me."

Baby brother? Gabrielle wondered. "What's happening to me?" She asked. "Am I ... did I die?"

"Yes."

Oh no. Gabrielle became aware of an overwhelming sorrow that hit her right in the gut, the pain so intense it made the light fade, and started a roaring in her ears. "Oh no it's not true" She got out. "Please tell me it's not true. I can't... I don't want to...."

"Gabrielle."

"Noo!!!" She started to struggle against the paralysis holding her still.

"Gabrielle, you must come with me. Your family is waiting for you." The voice insisted. "You can't fight it. It's time."

*Don't leave me.* Gabrielle suddenly heard another voice. "Xena!"

*Please don't leave me.* The voice came again, so full of aching sadness it blocked out the sound of the voice near her, and the whispers. *I don't want to live without you. Please don't go.* Every

word rang like a bell in her head, the rawness, and the anguish coming through so clearly it made her start crying.

It was Xena. She knew it. Begging her, simply and openly and Gabrielle started to fight her inability to move, wrenching at the unseen bonds with everything she had. "Let me go!" She told the voice. "I don't want to go with you."

"Your family wants you."

"I don't want them!" Gabrielle growled. "I want to stay with Xena! Let me go!" She could feel a strong pull drawing her towards the light, yanking against something she could feel holding her back, a thin, delicate line growing thinner and thinner even as she felt it, unraveling as the light pulled her faster ahead.

She heard a cry in her mind, a gasp of grief that broke her heart and it was too much. It was too much, and her will suddenly exploded in a flurry of clouds and darkness, and she turned against the pull and reached back to grab the fading line, clutching it in her hands that were suddenly able to move.

*Gabrielle.* Her name, in a whisper so soft, and so pitieous it was like a knife cutting through her. She tightened her grip and kicked out behind her, against the insistent pull. "NO!"

*Don't leave me. Please.*

The voice came back. "Go back now, and you will never come here again, Gabrielle."

"Let me go!"

"You will go into the darkness, stay in the darkness, and suffer with her."

Gabrielle felt her arms giving out, as she held against the pull. "That's what I want." She managed to gasp. "If her soul burns in Tartarus for eternity, I want mine to burn next to it."

The pull stopped. Stopped so abruptly that she was flung in a rush from the light back into the darkness, and her body collapsed back into a wave of pain.

"So be it. May the fires take you."

The darkness became blackness, and there was noise, and the sound of flames and then it felt like her head was exploding and breathing hurt and...

\*\*

Brendan walked stiffly across the inner courtyard, his face a mask. There was no healer he could get, no magic potion he could buy, nothing he could do to bring comfort to the suffering he'd left behind him in Xena's quarters.

It was shattering to him to see Xena reduced to helpless tears. He'd seen her fight through pain that would kill any three other people, seen her stand tall against a hundred enemies, suffer cuts and wounds, and the devastation of her brother's death and in all that nothing had ever brought her to her knees.

Now this had. Brendan felt helpless. He headed back to where the accident had happened, intent on finding some clue, getting some report, that would let him come back to Xena and give her the thing that had caused her such pain spitted on his sword.

"Hey."

Brendan turned his head, to see one of Philtop's guard coming towards him. "No time for you." He said, brushing past.

"Yah? Hear the little pig whelp got kilt. True?"

Brendan felt the rage take him. He turned and drew his sword, jamming it two handed up into the man's ribcage, feeling the blade grate against his backbone as it came out the other side.

"Gurk." The man gasped, his eyes bugging out.

Brendan yanked his blade back in, then hacked the man's face, splitting it in half and sending splinters of bone across the front of the stable.

"Wa..!" One of the man's fellow guards rushed out. "Hold! What are you doing!"

"Killing." Brendan snarled, chopping the man's head off, then hacking his hand from his wrist. "Want to be next?" He kicked the man's body over and turned to face the newcomer, blood dripping on the ground and splattered over his armor.

Two of his own men bolted out., drawing their swords.

"Say a word about either of em." Brendan yelled. "And I'll cut your hearts out!"

"You've got no right to..." The man backed up rapidly as he just missed being cut. "You're crazy!" He turned and ran, colliding with the rest of Philtops guard pouring out of the barracks. "That bastard killed Guron!"

A horn rang out, and the sound of running footsteps thundered closer as Xena's men responded. "That's the bastard's scum!" Brendan pointed at t the guard. "Proably brought the one that's killed our little one with em! Let's get em!"

Swords came out, and men yelled in rage on both sides, and the barracks became a tangle of bodies and blood.

\*\*

It was done. Xena felt the last motion still beneath her fingers, and the spot on her neck Gabrielle's faint breaths had been warming became, and stayed cold.

The body she was holding grew heavy and she started crying helplessly, her entire body shaking from it out of her control. The grief was overwhelming and she surrendered to it, feeling a touch on her back and gentle hands holding her.

It didn't touch the pain, a knife wound to the gut she suddenly, vividly wished was real. Dying herself would be far less agonizing

And then Xena felt the cool, still body clasped her arms jerk and she gasped as she felt the faintest, softest breath of air against her neck again, and the uneven patter against her fingertips got over it's terrifying stutter and settled.

By the gods. Xena shivered with the shock of it, her mind blurring into a mixture of fear and relief that made her sick to her stomach.

She hiccupped softly, and hugged Gabrielle just a little tighter to her, feeling the tears run down her cheeks as she felt the body in her arms take on, finally, a precious little warmth.

She cradled her lover's head, savoring that faint, warm breath against the skin of her neck, every breath a moment's more postponement of the death of her soul.

It was as stark a moment as she'd ever known, understanding in that moment just how far she'd gone down the path of no return with Gabrielle and finding it very surprising that she didn't regret a step.

Not even right now. Xena closed her eyes and lived fully in that moment. She rubbed Gabrielle's arm with her hand, not sure if she was imagining feeling the faintest return of tension to the slack form slumped against her.

Was she imagining it?

A stronger breath against her skin, and she knew she wasn't. She felt her muscles turn to water, and it was hard to keep hold of Gabrielle, afraid to either let her go, or try to move away for fear she'd simply collapse.

"Xena." Jellaus' voice was soft, and gentle on her ears. "Would you like to sit on the bed and hold her?"

Xena closed her eyes. "I don't think I can stand up." She admitted, her voice so hoarse she hardly recognized it.

"We'll help you." Jellaus very carefully unhooked the sword from her back and set it to one side of the bed. "Lakmas, come."

Xena felt hands very cautiously take hold of her, and lift her up and she was lowered onto the bed with Gabrielle still clasped to her. She kept her eyes shut and felt her lover shift against her, and she heard a low murmur as fingers tightened against hers and they saw it.

She forced her eyelids open to find Jellaus kneeling at the bedside, with the Persian next to him, with reddened eyes and tear stained cheeks. Jellaus reached over and touched her arm, his lips tensing into a faint, but encouraging smile.

Xena glanced down, studying Gabrielle's face. The ugly misshapen lump above her ear was no less evident, but her chest was moving with a touch more regularity, and her lover's fingers were clutched around her armor with definite intent.

What had happened? Xena knew what she'd felt, knew that she'd seen the life go out of her lover's body. She knew that wringing grief hadn't been false.

Was this just the false part? To raise her hopes and ease her fears, only to end again in agony?

Did it matter?

Did she care?

Xena felt completely exhausted. "Jellaus."

"I'm here." Jellaus eased closer. "What do you need, Xena?"

"Someone check the horses?"

"They're fine, Xena." The minstrel reassured her. "It was the front of the barn that collapsed, where the hayrick is. Just too much snow."

"Random?" The queen murmured, with a half shake of her head. "Should have been me. She pulled me out of the way."

Jellaus sighed. "She has a true, brave heart."

"She does." Xena let her eyes close again, the exhaustion overcoming her. "I hope .. I pray to the gods it keeps beating."

"Rest, Xena." Jellaus clasped her arm. "We'll keep watch."

"No creature or evil thing will enter this place." Lakmas spoke for the first time. "I swear it."

Xena let a breath out, finally feeling the shaking inside her ease. "Thanks." She let her cheek rest against Gabrielle's hair, holding the pain at bay at least for now.

\*\*

Xena had no idea what time of the day it was. The curtains were pulled and she'd lost track of everything except the unconscious figure resting in her arms.

Had it been a candlemark? Two? Xena wasn't sure. She kept her eyes fixed on the slight motion of Gabrielle's chest, saying a soundless prayer between each one of them as she kept one hand touching her neck to feel the flutter of her heartbeat.

She had never felt a fear so intense as this one. It clenched her guts and kept her on the edge of tears and her stomach was so upset she couldn't even drink the water in the mug left at her elbow.

The lump on Gabrielle's head was hot and swollen and horrifically frustrating to Xena since there wasn't anything she could do about it. The damage was on the inside, and she had no way of easing it, or using her healing skills to help her stricken lover.

All she could do was sit here, and wait, holding Gabrielle gently against her, giving her nothing but her body warmth and the focus of her thoughts.

It was very quiet in the room. Her men, Jellaus, and the Persian sat a silent vigil with her, the soldiers seated against the door with their legs crossed under them, their elbows resting on their knees.

Their understated devotion touched her. No one moved, save to occasionally lift their heads and look at the two of them on the bed, then return their gaze to the floor.

But every minute she sat there, every minute they watched in silence, every minute Gabrielle's chest kept moving was a minute in the right direction.

Xena gently rubbed her hand over Gabrielle's arm, shifting her carefully a little closer into her embrace and against her body. A motion caught her eye and she looked up, to find Jellaus nearing her side, a soft woven blanket in his hands.

She gave him a grateful look as he settled it over them. "Thanks." She murmured.

"Xena." The minstrel adjusted the edge of the blanket. "You do us all honor by admitting us here, to be with you. "

"Doesn't feel like that." Xena said.

"I know, my queen." Jellaus responded in a gentle tone. "They have brought my harp outside, may I bring in and play some music for you both?"

Music. Xena nodded. "She loves music." She had to stop talking, as her chest clenched, and an echo of Gabrielle's mournful complaint of not being able to play any herself sounded in her ears and she wondered bleakly if she'd ever hear a repeat of it.

Jellaus touched her shoulder, then eased over to the door into the outer chamber and slipped through it.

"Hear that muskrat?" Xena whispered into the ear near her chin. "He's going to serenade ya." She slid back just a little, and curled her arms around Gabrielle more securely. "C'mon, You know you want to hear it."

She took Gabrielle's hand in hers and twined their fingers together as Jellaus came back in with his harp, and settled himself on a small stool near the bed, his fingers brushing the strings and bringing a comforting sound into the air.

The minstrel launched into a pretty melody, without any words but light and gentle, stirring the stillness of the air and drawing the eyes of the rest of the men.

It lightened Xena's heart, a little, and she felt the muscles in the back of her neck loosen just slightly. She rubbed her thumb against Gabrielle's and glanced at the pale face, whose cheek was resting against her chest.

After a moment of stillness, she felt just the faintest pressure against her fingers, almost so slight she thought she might have imagined it. Then she decided she didn't. "C'mon, muskrat." She whispered. "You can hear that, cantcha?"

Please hear it. She silently wished. Please don't be like the others I've known who've gotten knocked on the head and never woke up again.

The faint, phantom pressure returned and she looked down at their clasped hands to see the twitching muscles across the back of Gabrielle's wrist.

Then she saw her lover's thumb move, just a tiny bit.

"Keep that up, sweetheart." Xena bent her head lower and whispered, as the music got a little louder. "I know you're in there." She rocked her lover gently. "Hear that music? You like that, don'cha?"

There was no answer, but Xena's sensitive fingertips could feel the flutter getting stronger under them, and a hint of color seemed to be back in Gabrielle's cheeks. "I love you." She murmured. "Believe it, muskrat. Wake up and talk to me."

The door opened again, and Xena looked up to find Brendan entering. Her captain was visibly damp, his armor faintly askew and a new, fresh cut seeping along his neck. "What happened to you?" She asked.

Brendan sat down on a stool and looked at her, his face twitching a little. "Man asked me the wrong question." He said, in a low mutter. "Won't ask again."

A fight then, a big one, and Brendan had washed the blood off before coming back into her presence. Xena exhaled and glanced at Jellaus. The minstrel scrunched his face a bit then continued to play, moving from one song to the next as he shifted on the stool.

Well, She'd hear about it eventually. Xena let her chin rest again against Gabrielle's head, and let her eyes close, allowing the music to seep in again and relax her. What was happening outside didn't matter, anyway.

Only what was happening here, in the circle of her arms mattered.

\*\*

At least she was away from the voice, and the light. Gabrielle felt that she was sort of floating, in a hazy gray nothing with her eyes closed, and in a state of half paralysis. There was no real urge to move, it was far easier just to stay still.

It was strange, and she was a little afraid. She wasn't sure really where she was, or what was happening to her, and as she continued to float there, she became aware that she was missing something.

Missing someone. She was alone, and she wasn't used to that anymore and as she thought that, an image formed in her mind that was Xena's face, surrounded by a disarray of dark hair.

Yes, that's what she was missing. Her tempestuous lover, who filled her life with wonder and excitement. She vaguely remembered something trying to pull her away from Xena, and she even more vaguely recalled arguing about that.

She missed Xena's voice. She could almost hear it, at the edge of all the fuzzy mist, it's low, sexy rumble winding and weeding it's way through the clouds around her and tickling her ears.

Muskrat. Was that Xena calling her? It had to be, didn't it? Xena didn't call anyone else muskrat, now did she? Only Gabrielle.

She thought she could hear it again, soft yet distinct, the word full of the warm affection Xena always put into it.

Xena didn't talk to anyone else like that. Only Gabrielle. Even people she liked didn't get that look, or get to feel Xena's touch on them, ruffling their hair, or resting the weight of her arm on them.

Only Gabrielle. She was sure she mattered to Xena, even though the other people laughed at her, and called her a peasant. Xena cherished and loved her.

Didn't she?

Gabrielle felt afraid again. It felt terrible to think that someday Xena would get tired of her, and Xena had gotten mad at her when she thought Gabrielle had thought that. She wanted to believe what Xena had said but in her mind it was hard to push away that fear.

So hard.

Did Xena know where she was? Gabrielle thought she heard her name being called again, and in back of that, the faint tinkle of music.

Her fear lifted a little, as she listened to the sound, and heard her name again, in a loving and insistent voice. And then, deep and rich and sweet, she heard "I love you." And in that gray nowhere mist, drifting in and out of reality she took those words as an anchor and wrapped herself around them in a new, and unexpected way.

It was true. Xena did love her. Gabrielle imagined she could feel her lover's presence around her and with a lot of effort she tried to close her fingers around the hand she believed with all her heart was wrapped around hers.

Xena loved her. She'd proven it in a thousand ways, and Gabrielle now could see them, little moments of her life drifting in and out of her thoughts.

With all her brash and demanding ways. Gabrielle had gotten used to Xena's quirky and sometimes mean sense of humor, her intolerance of anything going against her will, her often mercurial changes of mood.

She'd gotten used to them because she also got to experience the gentle tenderness her lover could display, the quiet consideration, and the honest and true care she took over Gabrielle's person.

She remembered long winter nights, her practicing her stories with Xena wrapped around her like a living blanket, content to just listen as they both sat before the fire eyes half closed in somnolent pleasure.

She remembered bringing Xena fresh peaches and cool fruit ade in the heat of the summer as the queen sat in her chambers working through her nobles petitions and seeing the look of simple happiness on her face as she sat back in her chair and watched her approach.

That was real. Their games of hide and seek, high up in the castle towers at night were real. The riding side by side across the grass was. Xena's laughter was. The fierceness of her hugs and the passion of her kisses were.

Gabrielle felt a sense of lightness gently push back the feeling of pressure on her chest. She let the happiness of those memories bring a smile to her face and joy to her heart. Another whisper seemed to reach her, echoing softly in all the grayness.

"I will never leave you, Gabrielle. So don't you go leaving me."

In all the swirling uncertainty, that was a constant. Gabrielle took it in, and let herself believe it was true even though she knew, at some deep level, that she was losing a part of herself in doing that. Her father had always warned her against trusting people.

Never trust them, he'd said. They all want something from you and don't want to pay for it.

She felt the heaviness settle on her again as she remembered how hard that lesson had been when she'd learned it meant, especially, not trusting him. She remembered the night Lila had crawled back into their room, biting her lip through to keep from crying after he'd taken her the first time.

She remembered her fear when he'd come and stripped her naked, to shove her in front of strange men time and again, and the beatings after none of them had been interested, or wanted to pay his coin.

She remembered how much it had hurt, the first time he'd kicked her in the stomach, and how sick she'd been after that for such a long time.

"Gabrielle."

Xena's voice. She wanted to respond to it. She could hear how upset she sounded.

"C'mon muskrat. Stay with me."

She could feel Xena's pain. Truly. It was like a fist clenching on her own heart and she didn't want that. She wanted Xena to be happy.

She fought against the mist, feeling a little angry that it was getting between her and Xena. She wanted to be past it, and feel the wonderful warmth of her queen's embrace and see the affection in those beautiful eyes of hers.

Xena had told her, she remembered, that she was sorry her father had died in the raid because it meant Xena didn't have the chance to kill him herself. Gabrielle remembered how safe she'd felt knowing Xena would never let anyone do anything to her like that again.

Xena would have enjoyed killing him, she knew. She would have gotten satisfaction in making him suffer, as he'd made Gabrielle suffer. It was how Xena was.

Intractable, mean, bold, ferocious, full of fury, craving vengeance.

And yet brave.

Loyal.

Loving. Gabrielle tried hard to close her hand again, sensing an odd warmth surrounding her. She could feel Xena's presence all at once, like the queen was holding her close, the touch of skin against skin, smell her scent – sensations imprinted so deeply in her they brought their own level of solace and comfort.

No. She snuggled closer in her mind. I won't leave you, Xena.

\*\*

Finally, the terror faded. Xena exhaled slowly, as the breath against her skin once again came with regular motion and the heartbeat under her touch steadied and strengthened.

If she looked down, she would see Gabrielle's fingers wrapped around her hand, the tension in them now visible as her grip had tightened.

She felt utterly exhausted. The strain of sitting on the balance between hope and despair was wearing on her like no battle ever had and she kept her eyes closed, blocking out the room around her and even the gentle music.

It would have been easier on her maybe to have been alone. Xena felt bare, stripped naked before the eyes of her men but she didn't have the strength to deny them their presence and the silent, unspoken support.

And, on some level, maybe, there was something in her that didn't want to be alone.

She cradled Gabrielle's head against her chest, her fingers feeling the heat of the lump and the swollen, tense skin over it. She didn't know what that was doing to the inside of Gabrielle's head but she knew it wasn't good.

And there was nothing she could do to... Xena paused in mid thought and let her eyes open. Jellaus was still at her side, gently strumming, his head leaning against the bedside table and his cheeks wet with renewed tears.

What was she remembering? There had been something that triggered her thoughts but what had it been? Another head wound she'd fixed? Xena's eyes flicked back and forth in the room, trying to push back the emotions and think.

No, no other head wound. She'd seen enough people die under her hands with them. Xena slowly exhaled. Was it a battle? Some insight she'd gotten?

Some person she'd talked to? Some scroll she'd read?

And then it came to her. No, no battle, and no scroll, and no person. Just a damnfool moment of hers and a bad move and her hand cracking against the stone wall upstairs sending every star she'd ever seen into her suddenly red shot vision.

Gabrielle, and a basin of cold well water, and her gentle fingers easing the knot on the back of Xena's hand in blessedly icy relief. "Brendan."

"Xena." Brendan was at her side, kneeling. "What can I do?"

"Get me a big bucket of snow from outside."

Brendan looked at her for a long instant, then he got up and headed for the door, as always unquestioning of her every demand. "Hang in there muskrat." She whispered. "Hang in there."

\*\*

It was hard to let Gabrielle go. To remove her arms from her lover so that she could shift around and scoop up a handful of the snow and press it gently against the lump on her head. Xena gently arranged her body on the bed and looked around. "Get me some cloth."

Jellaus handed her forward some, and she folded it around more of the snow and pressed it over the same spot.

Was it dark outside? Xena had no idea. She smoothed the pale hair back off Gabrielle's head, the melting snow dampening it along with the satin cover on the pillow. She heard a shudder against the window though, and glanced up. "Storm's getting worse?"

"Aye." Brendan said, in a quiet tone. "Told the men to bring the horses into the dance hall, Xena. Didn't want em to come to harm."

Xena nodded. "Thanks." She moved the compress a little. "Tell those circus people to put on a show. Keep everyone distracted."

"Aye." Brendan got up and went to the door, speaking to another soldier in a low tone. The man left quickly and shut the door behind him.

Xena watched Gabrielle's face intently. "Jellaus."

"I'm here, Xena." The minstrel put a hand on her shoulder.

"Go get Lastay."

The fingers on her shoulder tightened, then relaxed. Jellaus circled the bed and went to the door, handing his instrument to one of the patiently waiting soldiers.

It was hard to fathom, really, just how desperately attached she'd become to Gabrielle. Xena gently wiped the water off her consort's head and got more snow into the fabric, putting it back

over the lump. It was hard to sort through all the crushing emotion going through her mind to think, and plan and make decisions.

She wanted to break down and cry, and scream.

She wanted to beg and carry on and behave like all the grieving people she'd ever despised all her life had, understanding finally at this stage in her life the pain she'd caused so many.

It was infuriating and heartbreaking. All those people whose loved ones she'd decapitated or gutted, sending them to Hades with no more thought than brushing a fly off that she'd never understood and now, kneeling at the side of her own bed she finally did.

Oh, she did. Now it was time for her to lose her loved one. Xena felt her chest contract, and her vision went blurry with tears. She kept her hands still and breathed silently, until she could blink her eyes open and focus again. Lyceus had once told her he figured if she ever gave her heart, it would be all the way and now she found herself cursing him for being right.

Cursing herself. Cursing everyone but Gabrielle because she held no blame in any of it. All Gabrielle had done was hand over her heart and soul and hadn't looked back, loving Xena with an open innocence that made her hurt inside to think of.

"I never deserved that." Xena sighed. "I'm such a bastard. Where did I come off having her fall in love with me."

"Xena." Brendan had, apparently heard her. "Twas a case of two great hearts meetin."

Xena let out a soft, pained snort. "One maybe."

"Ah, no." Brendan touched her arm. "Xena I've followed you boy and man all these years, all of us have, not for the dinars and you know it."

No. She knew it. Even if she denied it to them, and brushed it off Xena knew the truth and pretending otherwise did Brendan and the rest no service. Did her no service, really, because it was the reason her troops were so loyal to her, the ones that were.

She loved them. She'd die for them. They knew it. She knew it. She tried to pretend it was all ruthlessness but Brendan was right. She had too damn big a heart and Gabrielle had gently enfolded it in her arms and given Xena an experience she never had thought she'd have in this life.

She never really expected to be happy. To love someone like she loved Gabrielle. To have someone love her back with an utter completeness that she knew in her heart was a great gift, one she didn't think she was entitled to.

No, not entitled to, but she'd gotten it anyway and now, faced with losing it, she knew deserved or not she wasn't willing to live without it. What excruciating cowardice. Xena looked down at Gabrielle's face. Wasn't she the one who told Gabrielle to go off and have kids and name one after her when she croaked?

Wasn't she? Wasn't she the one who hadn't really understood when Gabrielle had sobbed over her, and told her she didn't want to live without her? Thought Gabrielle was maybe a bit loopy? Xena put more snow over the lump. "Someone get me some more of this." She nudged the bowl.

Gabrielle hadn't been loopy. She had just understood in her guts what this was a lot faster than Xena had.

The door opened, and as Brendan went out with the bowl, Jellaus came back in with Lastay at his heels. "Xena, he's here." Jellaus reclaimed his instrument and settled back down on the stool, his fingers tuning it a bit automatically.

"Mistress." Lastay said, softly. "I'm so sorry."

Not even a hint of a jibe occurred to her. "Yeah, me too." Xena said. "Listen, Lastay. If things go really bad here, you need to get yourself ready to take over this place."

Xena understood what she was saying. She knew the soldiers did. Even the Persian, kneeling at her left hand, his big fingers squeezing out the linen for her knew. His big, liquid dark eyes held a surprising compassion as he handed it back to her.

“Xena.” Lastay said. “I’ll do whatever you want me to do, whenever you want me to do it” He spoke without his usual affectation. He knelt at her side, resting his big hands on the bed’s coverlet. “May I pursue this creature, in the meantime?”

“See what you can find out.” The queen said, after a brief silence. “Be careful.”

“I will.” Lastay said. “Let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you, Xena. My wife as well.”

Xena nodded. “Thanks.” She turned her head briefly and looked him in the eye. “Bring your wife in here if you want. It’s probably the safest place in the palace. No sense both of us going through this.”

The duke’s eyes filled, but he merely nodded in response. He got up and went to the door, which one of the soldiers opened for him respectfully. He passed through and then silence settled back down, save for Jellaus’ soft thrumming.

“He’s all right.” Xena said, as she gently brushed the wet linen over Gabrielle’s pale face, her hands shaking a little.

“You have created him a better man than he was, Xena.” Jellaus said, simply. “As you have so many others. You draw us all to greatness of heart and spirit.”

Xena turned around and looked at him, but he merely gazed back at her, his fingers moving over the strings. After a moment, the queen turned back to her charge.

Brendan came back in with his bowl, the soldier’s shoulders covered in snow and a dusting of it in his hair. He set the bowl down at Xena’s elbow and withdrew near to the fire, brushing himself off over the stone.

Xena reapplied fresh snow to the lump, studying Gabrielle intently. Was her breathing a little easier? She put her free hand against her lover’s cheek and brushed her lips with the edge of her thumb, feeling what surely was a phantom pressure against her palm in return.

She left her thumb against Gabrielle’s lips, and felt the soft warmth of her breath against the skin there, as sweet a sensation as she’d ever known. Encouraged a little, she shifted the snow pack, convincing herself that the lump looked a tiny bit smaller.

“C’mon, muskrat.” Xena crooned softly. “Don’t give up on me, huh? I know you’d be damn mad to see me getting the bed all wet here. Open your eyes so you can see me dumping snow on your head. I want to hear you squeal.”

“Xena.” Jellaus left off his strumming, and offered her a mug. “Some tea?”

“Later.” Xena watched her lover’s face intently. “C’mon, Gabrielle. Come back to me.”

Was that a flicker under that eyelid? She reached over and touched a fingertip to it, feeling the unmistakable motion of reaction to the faint pressure. It brought a spark of hope and Xena only barely resisted the urge to shake the still figure in the bed.

C’mon.

\*\*

Gabrielle became aware, in a hazy way, that there was someone else present in her gray mist. It wasn’t Xena, she could still feel her lover around her, this new presence was different. “Hello?” She called out. “Is someone there?”

At first, there was no answer. Then she heard a gentle sigh somewhere nearby. “Hi there.”

The voice was so strange. It sounded very much like her own did, when she heard it in her head. "Who are you?"

"Hm." The voice said, as it came closer and gave the impression of settling down next to her. "Let's leave that open for a while."

The voice didn't sound threatening. In fact, Gabrielle felt her anxiety fading a little with its presence. "Do you know where this is?"

"Yes." The voice answered readily. "But you don't, do you?"

"No." Gabrielle paused. "I'm kinda scared."

The voice gave the impression of smiling, at least, the sound of it changed the way Xena's did when she smiled. "I bet you are and I don't blame you. The first time I went through this, I was pretty scared too."

Gabrielle felt more afraid hearing that. "Am I dead?" She guessed, deciding to cut to the chase and find out the worst.

"Not exactly." The voice said. "You got hurt, and your body wants to die, but there's something keeping you tied to it."

Oh. Gabrielle was a little overwhelmed by the statement, even though it was, actually better than she'd started to fear it was. "What something?" She asked.

"Love." The voice answered, with gentle matter of factness. "You don't want to leave her, and she can't live without you."

"Oh." Gabrielle felt a surge of emotion, a powerful jolt in her guts. "You sound like you know what that's like."

The voice smiled again. "I do." It agreed. "And your beloved one is doing her best to fix your body, so.. I guess what I wanted to tell you is to hang in there, and keep sticking around."

"I don't want to die." Gabrielle said. "I don't want to leave her."

"I know." The voice seemed to move closer. "She needs you. I know you maybe don't always think so, but she does. "

Gabrielle listened to the words. "Who are you?"

The voice remained silent for a moment. "I'm someone who's a lot like you." It finally answered. "My life was different than yours, but we share a lot, including knowing what love like this is." It continued. "There's someone who went beyond, who's trying to hurt you. Let's just say, I'm here to even the balance."

That was a huge amount of information to take in. Gabrielle felt confused, and unsure.

"Someone's trying to hurt me?"

"Your soulmate." The voice answered. "But they're doing it through you. It's an old trick." Now the tone was a little wry.

"They're trying to hurt Xena?" Gabrielle clarified. "By hurting me?"

"Yes."

"That's really wrong."

The voice definitely smiled now. "It is. And the fact that it is, is what's letting me be here to kind of try and talk you through it. If they were playing by the rules, I wouldn't be."

Gabrielle thought about that. "Are you a ghost?"

The voice chuckled wryly. "No."

That was even more confusing. Gabrielle refocused on something else. "How can I get out of here? I want to go back. I want to be with her."

The voice settled a little closer. "You have to want to bad enough." It said. "You have to feel that love, and hold onto it with all your might. Think about being in your body, and .. you sort of have to force yourself back."

"Oh."

"It hurts." The voice said. "But when you open your eyes, it'll be worth it. I promise you."

Gabrielle tried to peer through the mist, squinting and imagining she could make out a vague form next to her, a seated form with arms wrapped around it's knees. She got the impression of shaggy hair and bare skin and then the mist seemed to clear just a tiny bit, enough for her to make out eyes the same color as her own watching her.

"Don't let them win." The voice said, deepening and taking on a faintly echoing strength. "Fight them. I know you can. I know you have the strength. There is nothing on earth stronger than the love you know. Trust me on that."

Gabrielle studied those eyes, feeling suddenly a sense of kinship so strong, it made her shiver. There was such absolute knowledge there, she knew what this voice, this person was saying was the truth. That this person knew as much and more about her than she knew about herself and also - that this person had been in the same place she was now and come through it.

So she figured, if they could, then she could, and if the voice was right about that, then the voice was also right about Xena needing her. "I will." She said. "I promise."

She had the impression of a strong hand enfolding hers, and squeezing it. "Be good. Be true. She is." The figure suddenly loomed over her and she felt a gentle kiss on her forehead, and then...

And then the voice, and the vague figure was gone.

Gabrielle felt a mixture of awe and disappointment, but she tried to keep all the advice the voice had given her in her mind as she felt the mist swirl around her, and then she concentrated, sure she could hear sounds through it that weren't there before.

Tinkling. The sound of water.

The sound of a heartbeat.

She could hear a growing sound, almost subliminal, a deep roaring that seemed to tug at her from all directions, and the next thing she knew she was caught in a maelstrom of sensation, and sounds were getting louder, and she had the feeling of something trying to pull her away again.

The words of her visitor rang in her mind though and she yelled out Xena's name, reaching out blindly in the grayness as she felt a white hot spear gut her, and heard an angry yowl very close by.

She understood the stakes now. She sensed a darkness rushing at her, blowing past the gray mist and enveloping her with icy suddenness, as chaos surrounded her and something very tactile grabbed her by the back of her shoulders and tried to yank her backwards.

But she could feel something just a strong pulling her forward, a calling that filled her ears as she felt hands grasping hers and Xena's voice calling her.

Calling her.

Calling her home. And though the way back to that was into darkness, she plunged forward into it and pulled herself free from the grip behind her and she tumbled forwards into a growing pit of pain and anguish, so intense it was hard for her to breathe and it got worse the closer she came to Xena's voice.

Incredible pain. She felt the gray mist calling her back, pulling her away from the agony and back to self preservation.

“Gabrielle!” Xena’s voice cut through the confusion, and the note of pleading in it caught Gabrielle’s attention with shocking completeness and she remembered what her visitor had told her.

That Xena needed her.

A whisper. “Please don’t leave me.”

And now, this close to the darkness, the voice was real, the pain was real, and she could hear the thunder of Xena’s heart and there was no question of responding.

She yanked herself forward into the storm ahead of her, and dove into it, reaching for that need, and that pain and for the truth she finally knew as she left behind the mist and fell forward into a blinding burst of real pain and ice cold and a roll over overwhelming thunder.

\*\*

Xena had no idea what time of the day it was. The curtains were pulled and she'd lost track of everything except the unconscious figure resting in her arms.

Had it been a candlemark? Two? Xena wasn't sure. She kept her eyes fixed on the slight motion of Gabrielle's chest, saying a soundless prayer between each one of them as she kept one hand touching her neck to feel the flutter of her heartbeat.

She had never felt a fear so intense as this one. It clenched her guts and kept her on the edge of tears and her stomach was so upset she couldn't even drink the water in the mug left at her elbow.

The lump on Gabrielle's head was hot and swollen and horrifically frustrating to Xena since there wasn't anything she could do about it. The damage was on the inside, and she had no way of easing it, or using her healing skills to help her stricken lover.

All she could do was sit here, and wait, holding Gabrielle gently against her, giving her nothing but her body warmth and the focus of her thoughts.

It was very quiet in the room. Her men, Jellaus, and the Persian sat a silent vigil with her, the soldiers seated against the door with their legs crossed under them, their elbows resting on their knees.

Their understated devotion touched her. No one moved, save to occasionally lift their heads and look at the two of them on the bed, then return their gaze to the floor.

But every minute she sat there, every minute they watched in silence, every minute Gabrielle's chest kept moving was a minute in the right direction.

Xena gently rubbed her hand over Gabrielle's arm, shifting her carefully a little closer into her embrace and against her body. A motion caught her eye and she looked up, to find Jellaus nearing her side, a soft woven blanket in his hands.

She gave him a grateful look as he settled it over them. "Thanks." She murmured.

"Xena." The minstrel adjusted the edge of the blanket. "You do us all honor by admitting us here, to be with you. "

"Doesn't feel like that." Xena said.

"I know, my queen." Jellaus responded in a gentle tone. "They have brought my harp outside, may I bring in and play some music for you both?"

Music. Xena nodded. "She loves music." She had to stop talking, as her chest clenched, and an echo of Gabrielle's mournful complaint of not being able to play any herself sounded in her ears and she wondered bleakly if she'd ever hear a repeat of it.

Jellaus touched her shoulder, then eased over to the door into the outer chamber and slipped through it.

"Hear that muskrat?" Xena whispered into the ear near her chin. "He's going to serenade ya." She slid back just a little, and curled her arms around Gabrielle more securely. "C'mon, You know you want to hear it."

She took Gabrielle's hand in hers and twined their fingers together as Jellaus came back in with his harp, and settled himself on a small stool near the bed, his fingers brushing the strings and bringing a comforting sound into the air.

The minstrel launched into a pretty melody, without any words but light and gentle, stirring the stillness of the air and drawing the eyes of the rest of the men.

It lightened Xena's heart, a little, and she felt the muscles in the back of her neck loosen just slightly. She rubbed her thumb against Gabrielle's and glanced at the pale face, whose cheek was resting against her chest.

After a moment of stillness, she felt just the faintest pressure against her fingers, almost so slight she thought she might have imagined it. Then she decided she didn't. "C'mon, muskrat." She whispered. "You can hear that, cantcha?"

Please hear it. She silently wished. Please don't be like the others I've known who've gotten knocked on the head and never woke up again.

The faint, phantom pressure returned and she looked down at their clasped hands to see the twitching muscles across the back of Gabrielle's wrist.

Then she saw her lover's thumb move, just a tiny bit.

"Keep that up, sweetheart." Xena bent her head lower and whispered, as the music got a little louder. "I know you're in there." She rocked her lover gently. "Hear that music? You like that, don'cha?"

There was no answer, but Xena's sensitive fingertips could feel the flutter getting stronger under them, and a hint of color seemed to be back in Gabrielle's cheeks. "I love you." She murmured. "Believe it, muskrat. Wake up and talk to me."

The door opened again, and Xena looked up to find Brendan entering. Her captain was visibly damp, his armor faintly askew and a new, fresh cut seeping along his neck. "What happened to you?" She asked.

Brendan sat down on a stool and looked at her, his face twitching a little. "Man asked me the wrong question." He said, in a low mutter. "Won't ask again."

A fight then, a big one, and Brendan had washed the blood off before coming back into her presence. Xena exhaled and glanced at Jellaus. The minstrel scrunched his face a bit then continued to play, moving from one song to the next as he shifted on the stool.

Well, She'd hear about it eventually. Xena let her chin rest again against Gabrielle's head, and let her eyes close, allowing the music to seep in again and relax her. What was happening outside didn't matter, anyway.

Only what was happening here, in the circle of her arms mattered.

\*\*

At least she was away from the voice, and the light. Gabrielle felt that she was sort of floating, in a hazy gray nothing with her eyes closed, and in a state of half paralysis. There was no real urge to move, it was far easier just to stay still.

It was strange, and she was a little afraid. She wasn't sure really where she was, or what was happening to her, and as she continued to float there, she became aware that she was missing something.

Missing someone. She was alone, and she wasn't used to that anymore and as she thought that, an image formed in her mind that was Xena's face, surrounded by a disarray of dark hair.

Yes, that's what she was missing. Her tempestuous lover, who filled her life with wonder and excitement. She vaguely remembered something trying to pull her away from Xena, and she even more vaguely recalled arguing about that.

She missed Xena's voice. She could almost hear it, at the edge of all the fuzzy mist, it's low, sexy rumble winding and weeding it's way through the clouds around her and tickling her ears.

Musktrat. Was that Xena calling her? It had to be, didn't it? Xena didn't call anyone else muskrat, now did she? Only Gabrielle.

She thought she could hear it again, soft yet distinct, the word full of the warm affection Xena always put into it.

Xena didn't talk to anyone else like that. Only Gabrielle. Even people she liked didn't get that look, or get to feel Xena's touch on them, ruffling their hair, or resting the weight of her arm on them.

Only Gabrielle. She was sure she mattered to Xena, even though the other people laughed at her, and called her a peasant. Xena cherished and loved her.

Didn't she?

Gabrielle felt afraid again. It felt terrible to think that someday Xena would get tired of her, and Xena had gotten mad at her when she thought Gabrielle had thought that. She wanted to believe what Xena had said but in her mind it was hard to push away that fear.

So hard.

Did Xena know where she was? Gabrielle thought she heard her name being called again, and in back of that, the faint tinkle of music.

Her fear lifted a little, as she listened to the sound, and heard her name again, in a loving and insistent voice. And then, deep and rich and sweet, she heard "I love you." And in that gray nowhere mist, drifting in and out of reality she took those words as an anchor and wrapped herself around them in a new, and unexpected way.

It was true. Xena did love her. Gabrielle imagined she could feel her lover's presence around her and with a lot of effort she tried to close her fingers around the hand she believed with all her heart was wrapped around hers.

Xena loved her. She'd proven it in a thousand ways, and Gabrielle now could see them, little moments of her life drifting in and out of her thoughts.

With all her brash and demanding ways. Gabrielle had gotten used to Xena's quirky and sometimes mean sense of humor, her intolerance of anything going against her will, her often mercurial changes of mood.

She'd gotten used to them because she also got to experience the gentle tenderness her lover could display, the quiet consideration, and the honest and true care she took over Gabrielle's person.

She remembered long winter nights, her practicing her stories with Xena wrapped around her like a living blanket, content to just listen as they both sat before the fire eyes half closed in somnolent pleasure.

She remembered bringing Xena fresh peaches and cool fruit ade in the heat of the summer as the queen sat in her chambers working through her nobles petitions and seeing the look of simple happiness on her face as she sat back in her chair and watched her approach.

That was real. Their games of hide and seek, high up in the castle towers at night were real. The riding side by side across the grass was. Xena's laughter was. The fierceness of her hugs and the passion of her kisses were.

Gabrielle felt a sense of lightness gently push back the feeling of pressure on her chest. She let the happiness of those memories bring a smile to her face and joy to her heart. Another whisper seemed to reach her, echoing softly in all the grayness.

"I will never leave you, Gabrielle. So don't you go leaving me."

In all the swirling uncertainty, that was a constant. Gabrielle took it in, and let herself believe it was true even though she knew, at some deep level, that she was losing a part of herself in doing that. Her father had always warned her against trusting people.

Never trust them, he'd said. They all want something from you and don't want to pay for it.

She felt the heaviness settle on her again as she remembered how hard that lesson had been when she'd learned it meant, especially, not trusting him. She remembered the night Lila had crawled back into their room, biting her lip through to keep from crying after he'd taken her the first time.

She remembered her fear when he'd come and stripped her naked, to shove her in front of strange men time and again, and the beatings after none of them had been interested, or wanted to pay his coin.

She remembered how much it had hurt, the first time he'd kicked her in the stomach, and how sick she'd been after that for such a long time.

"Gabrielle."

Xena's voice. She wanted to respond to it. She could hear how upset she sounded.

"C'mon muskrat. Stay with me."

She could feel Xena's pain. Truly. It was like a fist clenching on her own heart and she didn't want that. She wanted Xena to be happy.

She fought against the mist, feeling a little angry that it was getting between her and Xena. She wanted to be past it, and feel the wonderful warmth of her queen's embrace and see the affection in those beautiful eyes of hers.

Xena had told her, she remembered, that she was sorry her father had died in the raid because it meant Xena didn't have the chance to kill him herself. Gabrielle remembered how safe she'd felt knowing Xena would never let anyone do anything to her like that again.

Xena would have enjoyed killing him, she knew. She would have gotten satisfaction in making him suffer, as he'd made Gabrielle suffer. It was how Xena was.

Intractable, mean, bold, ferocious, full of fury, craving vengeance.

And yet brave.

Loyal.

Loving. Gabrielle tried hard to close her hand again, sensing an odd warmth surrounding her. She could feel Xena's presence all at once, like the queen was holding her close, the touch of skin against skin, smell her scent – sensations imprinted so deeply in her they brought their own level of solace and comfort.

No. She snuggled closer in her mind. I won't leave you, Xena.

\*\*

Finally, the terror faded. Xena exhaled slowly, as the breath against her skin once again came with regular motion and the heartbeat under her touch steadied and strengthened.

If she looked down, she would see Gabrielle's fingers wrapped around her hand, the tension in them now visible as her grip had tightened.

She felt utterly exhausted. The strain of sitting on the balance between hope and despair was wearing on her like no battle ever had and she kept her eyes closed, blocking out the room around her and even the gentle music.

It would have been easier on her maybe to have been alone. Xena felt bare, stripped naked before the eyes of her men but she didn't have the strength to deny them their presence and the silent, unspoken support.

And, on some level, maybe, there was something in her that didn't want to be alone.

She cradled Gabrielle's head against her chest, her fingers feeling the heat of the lump and the swollen, tense skin over it. She didn't know what that was doing to the inside of Gabrielle's head but she knew it wasn't good.

And there was nothing she could do to... Xena paused in mid thought and let her eyes open. Jellaus was still at her side, gently strumming, his head leaning against the bedside table and his cheeks wet with renewed tears.

What was she remembering? There had been something that triggered her thoughts but what had it been? Another head wound she'd fixed? Xena's eyes flicked back and forth in the room, trying to push back the emotions and think.

No, no other head wound. She'd seen enough people die under her hands with them. Xena slowly exhaled. Was it a battle? Some insight she'd gotten?

Some person she'd talked to? Some scroll she'd read?

And then it came to her. No, no battle, and no scroll, and no person. Just a damnfool moment of hers and a bad move and her hand cracking against the stone wall upstairs sending every star she'd ever seen into her suddenly red shot vision.

Gabrielle, and a basin of cold well water, and her gentle fingers easing the knot on the back of Xena's hand in blessedly icy relief. "Brendan."

"Xena." Brendan was at her side, kneeling. "What can I do?"

"Get me a big bucket of snow from outside."

Brendan looked at her for a long instant, then he got up and headed for the door, as always unquestioning of her every demand. "Hang in there muskrat." She whispered. "Hang in there."

\*\*

It was hard to let Gabrielle go. To remove her arms from her lover so that she could shift around and scoop up a handful of the snow and press it gently against the lump on her head. To feel her heart sink as she saw not a flicker of reaction, only that faint, irregular motion of her chest.

Xena gently arranged her body on the bed and looked around. "Get me some cloth."

Jellaus handed her forward some, and she folded it around more of the snow and pressed it over the same spot.

Was it dark outside? Xena had no idea. She smoothed the pale hair back off Gabrielle's head, the melting snow dampening it along with the satin cover on the pillow. She heard a shudder against the window though, and glanced up. "Storm's getting worse?"

"Aye." Brendan said, in a quiet tone. "Told the men to bring the horses into the dance hall, Xena. Didn't want em to come to harm."

Xena nodded. "Thanks." She moved the compress a little. "Tell those circus people to put on a show. Keep everyone distracted."

"Aye." Brendan got up and went to the door, speaking to another soldier in a low tone. The man left quickly and shut the door behind him.

Xena watched Gabrielle's face intently. "Jellaus."

"I'm here, Xena." The minstrel put a hand on her shoulder.

"Go get Lastay."

The fingers on her shoulder tightened, then relaxed. Jellaus circled the bed and went to the door, handing his instrument to one of the patiently waiting soldiers.

It was hard to fathom, really, just how desperately attached she'd become to Gabrielle. Xena gently wiped the water off her consort's head and got more snow into the fabric, putting it back over the lump. It was hard to sort through all the crushing emotion going through her mind to think, and plan and make decisions.

She wanted to break down and cry, and scream.

She wanted to beg and carry on and behave like all the grieving people she'd ever despised all her life had, understanding finally at this stage in her life the pain she'd caused so many.

It was infuriating and heartbreaking. All those people whose loved ones she'd decapitated or gutted, sending them to Hades with no more thought than brushing a fly off that she'd never understood and now, kneeling at the side of her own bed she finally did.

Oh, she did. Now it was, perhaps, time for her to lose her loved one. Xena felt her chest contract, and her vision went blurry with tears. She kept her hands still and breathed silently, until she could blink her eyes open and focus again. Lyceus had once told her he figured if she ever gave her heart, it would be all the way and now she found herself cursing him for being right.

Cursing herself. Cursing everyone but Gabrielle because she held no blame in any of it. All Gabrielle had done was hand over her heart and soul and never looked back, loving Xena with an open innocence that made her hurt inside to think of it.

“I never deserved that.” Xena sighed. “I’m such a bastard. Where did I come off having her fall in love with me.”

“Xena.” Brendan had, apparently heard her. “Twas a case of two great hearts meetin.”

Xena let out a soft, pained snort. “One maybe.”

“Ah, no.” Brendan touched her arm. “Xena I’ve followed you boy and man all these years, all of us have, not for the dinars and you know it.”

No. She knew it. Even if she denied it to them, and brushed it off Xena knew the truth and pretending otherwise did Brendan and the rest no service. Did her no service, really, because it was the reason her troops were so loyal to her, the ones that were.

She loved them. She’d die for them. They knew it. She knew it. She tried to pretend it was all ruthlessness but Brendan was right. She had too damn big a heart and Gabrielle had gently enfolded it in her arms and given Xena an experience she never had thought she’d have in this life.

She never really expected to be happy. To love someone like she loved Gabrielle. To have someone love her back with an utter completeness that she knew in her heart was a great gift, one she didn’t think she was entitled to.

No, not entitled to, but she’d gotten it anyway and now, faced with losing it, she knew deserved or not she wasn’t willing to live without it. What excruciating cowardice. Xena looked down at Gabrielle’s face. Wasn’t she the one who told Gabrielle to go off and have kids and name one after her when she croaked?

Wasn’t she? Wasn’t she the one who hadn’t really understood when Gabrielle had sobbed over her, and told her she didn’t want to live without her? Thought Gabrielle was maybe a bit loopy? Xena put more snow over the lump. “Someone get me some more of this.” She nudged the bowl.

Gabrielle hadn’t been loopy. She had just understood in her guts what this was a lot faster than Xena had.

The door opened, and as Brendan went out with the bowl, Jellaus came back in with Lastay at his heels. “Xena, he’s here.” Jellaus reclaimed his instrument and settled back down on the stool, his fingers tuning it a bit automatically.

“Mistress.” Lastay said, softly. “I’m so sorry.”

Not even a hint of a jibe occurred to her. “Yeah, me too.” Xena said. “Listen, Lastay. If things go really bad here, you need to get yourself ready to take over this place.”

Xena understood what she was saying. She knew the soldiers did. Even the Persian, kneeling at her left hand, his big fingers squeezing out the linen for her knew. His big, liquid dark eyes held a surprising compassion as he handed it back to her.

Would Lastay understand?

“Xena.” Lastay said. “I’ll do whatever you want me to do, whenever you want me to do it” He spoke without his usual affectation. “I’m yours.”

Lastay understood. Xena felt a little humble, hearing the sincerity in his voice. She’d been so crude to him, always.

He knelt at her side, resting his big hands on the bed’s coverlet. “May I pursue this creature, in the meantime?” He asked. “I would truly like to put my hold on him.”

“See what you can find out.” The queen said, after a brief silence. “Be careful.”

'I will.' Lastay said. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you, Xena. My wife as well."

Xena nodded. "Thanks." She turned her head briefly and looked him in the eye. "Bring your wife in here if you want. It's probably the safest place in the palace. No sense both of us going through this."

The duke's eyes filled, but he merely nodded in response. He got up and went to the door, which one of the soldiers opened for him respectfully. He passed through and then silence settled back down, save for Jellaus' soft thrumming.

"He's all right." Xena said, as she gently brushed the wet linen over Gabrielle's pale face, her hands shaking a little.

"You have created him a better man than he was, Xena." Jellaus said, simply. "As you have so many others. You draw us all to greatness of heart and spirit."

Xena turned around and looked at him, but he merely gazed back at her, his fingers moving over the strings. After a moment, the queen turned back to her charge.

Brendan came back in with his bowl, the soldier's shoulders covered in snow and a dusting of it in his hair. He set the bowl down at Xena's elbow and withdrew near to the fire, brushing himself off over the stone.

Xena reapplied fresh snow to the lump, studying Gabrielle intently. Was her breathing a little easier? She put her free hand against her lover's cheek and brushed her lips with the edge of her thumb, feeling what surely was a phantom pressure against her palm in return.

She left her thumb against Gabrielle's lips, and felt the soft warmth of her breath against the skin there, as sweet a sensation as she'd ever known. Encouraged a little, she shifted the snow pack, convincing herself that the lump looked a tiny bit smaller.

"C'mon, muskrat." Xena crooned softly. "Don't give up on me, huh? I know you'd be damn mad to see me getting the bed all wet here. Open your eyes so you can see me dumping snow on your head. I want to hear you squeal."

"Xena." Jellaus left off his strumming, and offered her a mug. "Some tea?"

"Later." Xena watched her lover's face intently. "C'mon, Gabrielle. Come back to me."

Was that a flicker under that eyelid? She reached over and touched a fingertip to it, feeling the unmistakable motion of reaction to the faint pressure. It brought a spark of hope and Xena only barely resisted the urge to shake the still figure in the bed.

C'mon.

\*\*

Gabrielle became aware, in a hazy way, that there was someone else present in her gray mist. It wasn't Xena, she could still feel her lover around her, this new presence was different. "Hello?" She called out. "Is someone there?"

At first, there was no answer. Then she heard a gentle sigh somewhere nearby. "Hi there."

The voice was so strange. It sounded very much like her own did, when she heard it in her head. "Who are you?"

"Hm." The voice said, as it came closer and gave the impression of settling down next to her. "Let's leave that open for a while."

The voice didn't sound threatening. In fact, Gabrielle felt her anxiety fading a little with its presence. "Do you know where this is?"

"Yes." The voice answered readily. "But you don't, do you?"

“No.” Gabrielle paused. “I’m kinda scared.”

The voice gave the impression of smiling, at least, the sound of it changed the way Xena’s did when she smiled. “I bet you are and I don’t blame you. The first time I went through this, I was pretty scared too.”

Gabrielle felt more afraid hearing that. “Am I dead?” She guessed, deciding to cut to the chase and find out the worst.

“Not exactly.” The voice said. “You got hurt, and your body wants to die, but there’s something keeping you tied to it.”

Oh. Gabrielle was a little overwhelmed by the statement, even though it was, actually better than she’d started to fear it was. “What something?” She asked.

“Love.” The voice answered, with gentle matter of factness. “You don’t want to leave her, and she can’t live without you.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle felt a surge of emotion, a powerful jolt in her guts. “You sound like you know what that’s like.”

The voice smiled again. “I do.” It agreed. “And your beloved one is doing her best to fix your body, so.. I guess what I wanted to tell you is to hang in there, and keep sticking around.”

“I don’t want to die.” Gabrielle said. “I don’t want to leave her.”

“I know.” The voice seemed to move closer. “She needs you. I know you maybe don’t always think so, but she does. “

Gabrielle listened to the words. “Who are you?”

The voice remained silent for a moment. “I’m someone who’s a lot like you.” It finally answered. “My life was different than yours, but we share a lot, including knowing what love like this is.” It continued. “There’s someone who went beyond, who’s trying to hurt you. Let’s just say, I’m here to even the balance.”

That was a huge amount of information to take in. Gabrielle felt confused, and unsure. “Someone’s trying to hurt me?”

“Your soulmate.” The voice answered. “But they’re doing it through you. It’s an old trick.” Now the tone was a little wry.

“They’re trying to hurt Xena?” Gabrielle clarified. “By hurting me?”

“Yes.”

“That’s really wrong.”

The voice definitely smiled now. “It is. And the fact that it is, is what’s letting me be here to kind of try and talk you through it. If they were playing by the rules, I wouldn’t be.”

Gabrielle thought about that. “Are you a ghost?”

The voice chuckled wryly. “No.”

That was even more confusing. Gabrielle refocused on something else. “How can I get out of here? I want to go back. I want to be with her.”

The voice settled a little closer. “You have to want to bad enough.” It said. “You have to feel that love, and hold onto it with all your might. Think about being in your body, and .. you sort of have to force yourself back.”

“Oh.”

“It hurts.” The voice said. “But when you open your eyes, it’ll be worth it. I promise you.”

Gabrielle tried to peer through the mist, squinting and imagining she could make out a vague form next to her, a seated form with arms wrapped around its knees. She got the impression of shaggy hair and bare skin and then the mist seemed to clear just a tiny bit, enough for her to make out eyes the same color as her own watching her.

“Don’t let them win.” The voice said, deepening and taking on a faintly echoing strength. “Fight them. I know you can. I know you have the strength. There is nothing on earth stronger than the love you know. Trust me on that.”

Gabrielle studied those eyes, feeling suddenly a sense of kinship so strong, it made her shiver. There was such absolute knowledge there, she knew what this voice, this person was saying was the truth. That this person knew as much and more about her than she knew about herself and also - that this person had been in the same place she was now and come through it.

So she figured, if they could, then she could, and if the voice was right about that, then the voice was also right about Xena needing her. “I will.” She said. “I promise.”

She had the impression of a strong hand enfolding hers, and squeezing it. “Be good. Be true. She is.” The figure suddenly loomed over her and she felt a gentle kiss on her forehead, and then...

And then the voice, and the vague figure was gone.

Gabrielle felt a mixture of awe and disappointment, but she tried to keep all the advice the voice had given her in her mind as she felt the mist swirl around her, and then she concentrated, sure she could hear sounds through it that weren’t there before.

Tinkling. The sound of water.

The sound of a heartbeat.

She could hear a growing sound, almost subliminal, a deep roaring that seemed to tug at her from all directions, and the next thing she knew she was caught in a maelstrom of sensation, and sounds were getting louder, and she had the feeling of something trying to pull her away again.

The words of her visitor rang in her mind though and she yelled out Xena’s name, reaching out blindly in the grayness as she felt a white hot spear gut her, and heard an angry yowl very close by.

She understood the stakes now. She sensed a darkness rushing at her, blowing past the gray mist and enveloping her with icy suddenness, as chaos surrounded her and something very tactile grabbed her by the back of her shoulders and tried to yank her backwards.

But she could feel something just a strong pulling her forward, a calling that filled her ears as she felt hands grasping hers and Xena’s voice calling her.

Calling her.

Calling her home. And though the way back to that was into darkness, she plunged forward into it and pulled herself free from the grip behind her and she tumbled forwards into a growing pit of pain and anguish, so intense it was hard for her to breathe and it got worse the closer she came to Xena’s voice.

Incredible pain. She felt the gray mist calling her back, pulling her away from the agony and back to self preservation.

“Gabrielle!” Xena’s voice cut through the confusion, and the note of pleading in it caught Gabrielle’s attention with shocking completeness and she remembered what her visitor had told her.

That Xena needed her.

A whisper. “Please don’t leave me.”

And now, this close to the darkness, the voice was real, the pain was real, and she could hear the thunder of Xena's heart and there was no question of responding. She yanked herself forward into the storm ahead of her, and dove into it, reaching for that need, and that pain and for the truth she finally knew as she left behind the mist and fell forward into a blinding burst of real pain and ice cold and a roll over overwhelming thunder.

\*\*

"Gabrielle!" Xena yelled for what seemed like the nth time, as the spasming body in her grip went still. "Please don't leave me." She whispered, seeing that chest stop, and the flutter at her neck stop and her world stop in all the same moment.

And then, with a rough hiccup, Gabrielle twitched and her chest heaved again, and a flush of pink flooded her face and her eyes popped open, two dazed, bloodshot green orbs tracking at once to the face of the woman holding her.

Xena had no time to dissemble. "Oh." She let out a soft, awed sound. "you listened." She shifted her grip from Gabrielle's arms to enfold her, pulling her close and burying her face in her consort's damp hair. "Ohh."

Gabrielle drew in another strained breath, unable to reconcile the pain and cold discomfort with the deep and wonderful rush of happiness that washed through her, feeling the shaking in Xena's arms and hearing the soft, almost helpless gasping cries coming from her.

She had never imagined being able to affect someone like this. "S... okay." She managed to rasp out, lifting a hand with incredible effort and putting it on her lover's hip. Xena's breathing was jerky and uneven, and finally she exhaled, and pulled back a little so they could look at each other.

Oh. Gabrielle let the emotion flood through her, as she saw the raw relief and the tear swollen eyes watching her. The voice had been right. This was more than she'd ever expected. She had no words to offer, she just managed to get hold of Xena's hand and savored the warmth of it.

Xena had no words either. She let her head rest against Gabrielle's again, her breaths finally slowing and becoming more regular as she felt the motion in her consort's body, and that soft, gentle touch on her skin. She let out a low, shuddering groan, all the energy seeping out of her.

Honesty in every bit of it. Gabrielle now felt a touch foolish, remembering all her nights wondering if Xena really cared for her. Now she didn't have to wonder anymore. Now she knew. "Xena." She whispered.

She felt Xena smile. "Ow."

"Yeah." The low, strained voice rumbled near her ear. "Bet your head hurts."

"Yeah." Everything really hurt. Gabrielle could feel her whole body aching, aside from the throbbing pounding in her head. "Ow." She mournfully repeated, realizing the voice had been right about that, too. She was cold, and she could feel dampness all around her. "Wet."

"Yeah." Xena said. "I'd pick you up and move you over to the dry side of the bed but by the gods I can't." She uttered. "Sorry."

Gabrielle managed to get her hand higher, it's shaking fingers touching the side of Xena's face. "S'okay." Warm replaced cold as Xena gently enveloped her with both arms, pulling her close against her body. She could feel the queen's hands slowly rubbing her back as she let out a long, slow exhale. "Love you."

Xena simply nodded in response.

It felt a lot better to be sitting half up, and in Xena's arms. Gabrielle felt her head throbbing less, and even though the queen was still in her house armor it was more comfortable than wet sheets. She could feel Xena's cheek resting against her head and she managed to stroke the soft surface with the edge of her thumb.

Xena made a low noise, deep in her throat.

Gabrielle felt herself smiling, so very glad she'd left that gray peace for this painful chaos. Any amount of discomfort was worth this moment, and she used what little strength she had to press her hand against Xena's face and move them closer together.

She was aware of voices around them suddenly, low male voices that seemed familiar, and the soft sounds of music that somehow seemed triumphant. She felt Xena's body shift, and the brief, exhausted motion that might possibly have been a laugh shake through her.

Then there were other hands on her, and she felt people around them and she was lifted up and cradled in Xena's arms but also in others, and after a brief bit of motion, she was being let down into the bed again, this time into dry, warm sheets.

Xena was with her, and she let her head rest against the queen's shoulder, aware of being weak, thirsty, and in pain, but also of very much being alive. She licked her lips, and as though Xena had read her mind, she felt the edge of a cup being gently eased against them, and the smell of mint rising to her nose. She sucked at the pleasantly warm stuff, hearing encouraging noises slightly over her head.

Xena was gently massaging her neck, and as she finished the tea, she felt the pain ease a trifle. She opened her eyes, and blinked, looking around the room and feeling surprised at how many people were there in it. She spotted Jellaus, resuming his seat on the other side of the bed and picking up his harp and Brendan was there, but she also saw more soldiers, and even one of the Persians up against the wall.

All of them looked relieved. All of them were watching Xena, with gentle, glad eyes.

Gabrielle shifted her head a little and looked up at her lover's profile, finding the queen gazing back at her, the faintest of smiles on her face, and an expression of exhausted relief. She had a sense that something pretty momentous had gone on but she was too tired herself to really think much about it.

Where in the gray mist, she'd had plenty of time and energy to think, here, all she wanted to do was lay there in Xena's embrace, and look at her. It felt so good to have the mist gone, and the reality of the world around her, and nothing separating her from those eyes, or the feel of Xena's touch on her skin.

She could smell the leather of Xena's armor, and the wood burning in the fire. She could hear Xena's heartbeat. It was all so beautiful she felt like crying.

Then something occurred to her. "Xena?" She rasped softly. "The horses..okay?"

Xena paused, then looked up at Brendan, one eyebrow lifting slightly.

"They're fine, little one." Brendan said. "We went up and moved em into the hall. None the worse for it."

Gabrielle managed a nod.

"You remember that?" Xena asked.

Gabrielle nodded again.

The queen's face eased into an incrementally wider smile. "Nothing after that, I bet."

Gabrielle thought about that. Then she hesitantly shook her head, reserving her experience in the mist to tell Xena about later. She had a feeling she need to talk to her about that in private, when it was just the two of them and anyway, she was far too tired and fuzzy to say much of anything in any case.

It was much nicer to just savor the moment in silence.

A motion caught her eye, and she peered through the firelight, more than a little surprised to see Duke Lastay's wife in the corner, sitting quietly, her hands clasped together.

Why were all these people in the room? She looked back up at Xena, who had her head resting against the pillows stacked behind her back. Were they here to... Gabrielle remembered the strangeness of the gray place, and what the voice had told her. Were they here to watch her die?

She watched them watch Xena.

No. Gabrielle felt a flood of compassion overcome her. She curled her fingers around the slack hand resting on her thigh, seeing Xena's lips move back into a smile as she returned the pressure, her face gentle and open, no sign of her brash air of bravada so common to her in front of others apparent.

Just a very tired, and very human look. Gabrielle gathered her strength and slowly pulled their joined hands up, pressing her lips against Xena's knuckle, then moving them to a spot just over her heart as her lover's smile increased, lighting up her eyes.

It was such a strange feeling. Gabrielle felt like she was looking at Xena for the very first time, seeing her through a new understanding of what they were to each other. She smiled back, and exhaled in contentment, feeling in her the oddest sensation of, in a sense, coming home.

\*\*

Xena really at this point didn't know what to do with herself, She was sprawled in the bed, now finally in a nice dry spot, with Gabrielle cradled in her arms miraculously restored to her. Part of her wanted to hop around the room yelping with excitement, but the other half of her was completely content to stay motionless, savoring the motion of Gabrielle's thumb against the palm of her hand.

She could see her lover's pale lashes moving slightly as she blinked, and she cherished every flicker and the feel of the steady, regular breathing pushing against her own ribs.

She wasn't entirely comfortable. She suspected since Gabrielle was lying on top of her armor that her beloved wasn't entirely comfortable either, but right at the moment it was good to just sit still and spend some time just being grateful.

She was. She was grateful that last, desperate convulsion turned out to be Gabrielle returning to a shocked consciousness instead of checking out on her. She was grateful for the support of her men and subjects. She was grateful the lump on the side of Gabrielle's head had gone down, not entirely away, but enough to allow her lover to remain awake.

She was grateful she wasn't alone.

It was so completely humbling for her to feel this grateful, and not resent it. She had bared herself raw in front of all these people and for some reason she wasn't even embarrassed, even now when everyone was just sitting there and watching her because part of that baring also let her see past the obligations these people had to her to the humans behind the roles they played in her life.

It was a shared rawness. Those tears in Jellaus' eyes weren't fake, and the gentle caring on Brendan's face showed a truth she had no choice but accept. That was okay with her. Xena found herself too emotionally exhausted to even feel uncomfortable with this new level of intimacy.

It could be she might change her mind later, but for now, it was good. So she let her gaze travel the room, meeting the eyes watching her and absorbing the emotions she found there. "Thanks." She said, after a long pause. "Thanks all of you for being here."

She felt Gabrielle squeeze her hand.

"Needs no thanks, Xena." Brendan was the one who spoke up, fitting, as he was the one who had known her the longest.

No, that was true also. Xena exhaled, getting a sense that her world, which had been halted in stasis, with no impression at all of time passing until Gabrielle's eyes had opened, with a shudder was slowly starting forward again.

Gabrielle's fingers touched her sleeve, her fingers bringing a very welcome warmth and she looked down at her again, ducking her head and kissing her gently on the lips, feeling an ethereal surge of joy as they traded breath and a joint, very faint laugh.

Regardless of anything else, life, at this moment, was impossibly good. The ache of impending grief lifted off her at least for the moment, and she was able to rest, the frantic churn in her mind easing to nothing as the Fates eased away, leaving her briefly at peace.

\*\*

Xena wasn't really sure how long they sat like that, as the fire popped erratically in the hearth and the wind howled outside impotently. She might have drifted off for a little while, but she wasn't sure about that either, as she focused on the steady heartbeat under her fingertips and the now regular breathing warming her chest.

Gabrielle wasn't asleep, but she seemed very content just to remain cuddled up next to her, occasionally looking around at the ring of quiet faces.

At last, Xena felt secure enough to carefully slide out from under Gabrielle's body and get her arranged on the bed, tucking the covers around her as she knelt on still shaky knees by her side. "I'm gonna get this off." She indicated the armor. "Before it rusts."

Gabrielle nodded at her. "Don't want you to catch cold." She murmured, catching Xena's fingers and rubbing them. "Not really in any shape to wipe your snuffles."

With a tired smile, Xena pushed herself to her feet and stood there a moment, gathering energy. Then she slowly circled the bed, moving through the watchers to where her wardrobe was and coming to stand in front of it, hoping she had the strength to take her armor off.

In a moment, Brendan was at her side. "Want me to get the catches, Xena?"

"Sure." Xena surrendered gracefully. She started unlacing her bracers as Brendan unclasped her armor, a draft from the far corner of the room hitting her between the shoulder blades as her captain lifted the hardened plates off her and pulled them clear.

She glanced back towards the bed, where Lady Lastay was kneeling beside Gabrielle, talking in low tones to her. She could see the smile on her consorts face and almost lost track of what she was doing as another flood of relief came over her.

Gabrielle was back. At least for the moment, she wasn't going to lose her and from the slowly growing alertness in her lover's eyes, it seemed the worst was over.

"Fighter she is." Brendan commented softly, as he folded the armor and carefully placed it down on Xena's arming chest. "Gods be blessed."

"Sure is." Xena pulled her unlaced bracers off and tossed them on the chest, then braced her boot on the edge and started untying her knee guards as Brendan knelt and unlaced the other one. "Damn I'm tired." She felt the gentle pat on her calf and exhaled.

Turning, she sat down on the press and set both pairs of knee guards down, resting her elbows on her thighs. After a moment she straightened up and unbuckled the sword harness and lifted it up over her head, setting it down next to her.

Now she was in her breeches and shirt, and long boots. Part of it all was damp, and she felt chilled from all the snow she'd absorbed in her haste to apply it to her lover's head. She glanced at the nearby fire, and held her hand out to it, appreciating the warmth as it penetrated her skin.

"Warm some wine up, how about it?" Brendan asked. "Chillin to the bone outside."

“Sounds good.” Xena unlatched her boots and kicked them off, then she got up and went to the wardrobe, swinging the door open and peering inside. “Ah.” She spotted a simple, softly woven blue robe and shucked her shirt off, reaching for the robe just as a loud crack echoed through the room.

In an instant, a heavy, powerful surge of adrenaline shoved all her exhaustion aside and she yanked a practice sword out of its sheath in the wardrobe and came around the corner, dressed only in her breeches with the sword sweeping out ahead of her as she looked for a target.

Two of the soldiers turned from the window, where they were examining shattered leaded glass that had tumbled out from under the drapes. They froze on spotting their half naked queen, and after a second, everyone else turned to see what they were staring at.

For a moment, there was absolute silence. Then Xena realized where the sound had come from, and she lowered her sword, her eyes finding Gabrielle’s across the room.

Tired and pale as she was, Gabrielle’s face creased into a grin. “I think I feel better all of sudden.” She remarked, in a low, serious tone. “Thanks, Xena.”

The words forced a laugh from Xena’s lips, and she lifted both hands and let them drop. “Sorry.” She muttered. “Been a long day.”

One of the soldiers held up a piece of glass. “One of the panes broke, mistress.” He said, conspicuously keeping his eyes everywhere but her.

Xena merely shook her head and went back to the wardrobe, studiously ignoring the red faces behind her. She put the sword back in its sheath and pulled the robe down, shrugging into it and tying the belt off around her waist. She gave them a chance to get their composure back and then stepped back into view, just as Brendan approached her with a mug issuing steam.

Her captain didn’t bother hiding his smile. “I’ll send someone outside to check that window.” He remarked, as she took the mug. “Make sure it was just t’weather.”

“Thanks.” Xena smiled in acknowledgement. “Get some grub sent up here for all of you.” She said. “Maybe some soup or something.” She glanced down at Gabrielle. “No point in anyone else keeling over.”

Two of the soldiers got up, touching their chests before they went to the door and slipped out. Xena went over to the bed and sat down at the foot of it, reaching over and laying her free hand over Gabrielle’s knees. She saw the pale eyes watching her, and the impish grin that hadn’t quite faded turned back up. “Glad you appreciate my healing skills.”

“I sure do.” Gabrielle responded. “That was great.”

“Was it?” Xena eased over a little more, until their bodies were touching. “I didn’t look like an idiot?”

“No.” Her lover gazed at her. “You’re beautiful.”

The sounds of the room around them slowly faded. Xena sensed the people wandering out from the bedroom into the outer chamber and after a moment, they were alone in the room.

She looked around. “Subtle.”

Gabrielle reached out and took her hand, easing over onto her side and tucking her knees up against Xena’s back. “That was really scary.”

Xena looked quietly at her for a moment. “Yes it was.” She said. “I’ve never been so afraid in my entire life.” She continued in a raw, honest tone. “I really didn’t want to lose you.” She turned her

eyes to the linen, unable to meet that loving look. “I guess I understand now, what you were telling me in that tunnel.”

Gabrielle drew in a little breath. “Oh.” She murmured. “I remember that. I felt like my life was ending.”

Xena merely nodded.

“I just wanted to scream.”

The dark head nodded again.

“I’m sorry, Xena.” Gabrielle said, gently. “I didn’t want to put you through that.”

Xena’s eyes swept up and met hers, bloodshot and exhausted, and yet, at peace. “I needed you to.” She replied. “I didn’t get it. Now I get it.” She squirmed closer and put her arms around Gabrielle. “But sweetheart, don’t ever do that again. It’ll kill me.”

Gabrielle returned the hug as best she could. “I love you.” She said. “I never want to leave you.”

The noise returned behind them, and Xena could hear the clink of dishes and pitchers. “I’m glad to hear that, because I never want to leave you either.” She whispered. “Ever.”

And now, Gabrielle believed that with all her heart. She smiled as she felt Xena straighten, running gentle fingers over the lump on the side of her head as some of the soldiers and others eased back into the room, bringing the scent of hot wine and soup with them.

Everything still hurt, but she was almost in a place where she didn’t care.

“Can’t give you anything for the pain, my love.” Xena said, smoothing the hair down over the lump. “Not until that goes down.” She looked around. “But I bet Jellaus’ll be glad to play you something to keep your mind off it.”

“My deepest honor.” Jellaus bowed.

The soldiers came in with a small table that they set up next to the bed. A bowl of soup appeared on it, and some bread and cheese. Xena was surprised to find that the scent actually interested her now

“What happened, your majesty?” Lastay’s wife spoke up. “All we heard was a collapse somewhere.”

“Ah.” Xena pondered the question. “The hatch door into the stables collapsed under all the damn snow.” She said. “Gabrielle shoved me out of the way and got clobbered.”

“That was very brave.” The duchess said.

“Yes, it was.” Xena agreed. “Crazy, but brave.”

Gabrielle smiled warmly “It wasn’t crazy.” She objected. “I didn’t want to see you get hurt.”

“See?” Xena gently stroked the mussed hair back off Gabrielle’s forehead. “I told everyone you were my bodyguard. No one believed me.”

“I don’t remember any of that.” Gabrielle confessed. “Last thing was...” She pondered, then shook her head. “Just the hall, I guess.” She glanced to her right. “Is that tea there?”

“How about some soup?”

Gabrielle exhaled, grimacing a little. “Not sure I can chew.”

Xena picked up the bowl and examined it. Then she set it down, and swiveled around, getting behind Gabrielle and settling her against her chest. “I’ll eat the chunks, you drink the broth. How’s that?”

Gabrielle leaned her head against Xena’s chest, and managed a smile. “Sounds great.”

Xena applied the spoon to the soup, and the rest of the people in the room joined in, as Jellaus alternated biting off chunks of bread as his other hand strummed his harp.

At least for now, things were good.

\*\*

It was night. Gabrielle was laying in bed, wrapped now in a warm and very cozy robe replacing her armor, and her head cradled between two very soft pillows. She’d managed a cupful or so of soup broth and aside from all the aches and pains she felt like she was doing a lot better.

There was no longer a sense of fuzziness about her vision, for one thing. Her eyes hurt, and she thought they might be bloodshot but when she looked around it wasn’t as if there was a layer of smoke in the room anymore.

Hearing was like that too. The echoes were gone, and the sound in the room was no longer going in and out on her. Gabrielle felt like she was no longer hesitating on the edge and if she closed her eyes she was pretty sure she’d open them again.

After all, she had to. She owed Xena that.

Her lover was standing near the door, arms folded, talking with one of the soldiers. She’d tied her hair back and washed her face and she no longer looked like she was going to fall over. That had really sort of scared Gabrielle, she’d felt how Xena was shaking when she’d first woken up and the unexpected fragility of her so very strong lover had been unnerving.

Now, she was sort of wishing all the really nice people who had been there to support Xena would maybe go out into the outer room, and give them a little peace and quiet together. She wanted to talk to Xena, and tell her about the mist, and the voices.

She had a feeling maybe there was something important in all that, and she figured Xena would know what that was.

But until then, she knew she would just have to patiently wait. Some of the soldiers had gone out into the outer room, leaving Lady Lastay, Jellaus and Brendan behind along with the Persian patiently and artistically tending the fire.

He looked up and met her eyes, his lips curving into a smile.

Ah, her massage teacher. Gabrielle smiled back at him.

He took that as an invitation and stood, making his way over to the bed with a cautious look in Xena’s direction before he settled down on his knees at her side. “Gracious princess.”

Gabrielle wrinkled her nose. “I don’t feel really gracious today.” She admitted. “It’s been kind of crummy.”

“Your gods surely looked after you this day, though.” Lakmas answered. “I am truly glad to see you so much the better.”

“That’s true.” She agreed. “Thanks for helping.”

The Persian produced a tiny smile. “I did nothing.”

“You were here for her.” Gabrielle responded, in a quiet tone. “That’s something.”

Lakmas studied his hands, then he looked at up at her. “My people are warriors, you know that. But we are also poets after our own fashion and there is no poetry like that which celebrates the heart.”

Gabrielle was aware of Xena’s attention in her peripheral vision. The queen was still standing near the door, still with her arms crossed over her chest, but she’d angled herself just a little so she could keep an eye on Lakmas and the bed. “Our poetry is like that too.” She confided. “I can’t really write any good poems, but I love reading them.”

“I find that impossible to believe.” Lakmas said. “You, who knows more of the heart then a thousand generations of my people?”

Gabrielle felt herself blush a little, and after a moment, Xena made her way over to the bedside from where she’d been standing.

“What’s going on here?” The queen asked, sitting down on a low settee that had been put by the bed. She reached over to gently touch Gabrielle’s head. “How are you feeling, my love?”

“Sorta crummy.” Gabrielle admitted, savoring the touch against her skin. “My shoulder hurts.”

“Hm.” Xena slid her hand around the back of her lover’s neck, and probed gently. “Did you tell Lakmas here how much I liked your new skills?” She saw Gabrielle flinch as her fingertips caught broken skin. “Ah.”

Gabrielle watched Lakmas grin with embarrassment. “No, we hadn’t got to that yet.” She said. “Oof.” She felt Xena lifting her up a little and she leaned forward, closing her eyes as a wave of vertigo hit her. “Oh boy.”

“Hang in there.” Xena murmured. “You got cut back here... damn it I didn’t see it.”

“Do you wish your healing bag, Majesty?” Lakmas asked.

“Yeah.” Xena leaned over and slid her hands under the covers. “Gonna put you over on your side so I can get to this.” She gently lifted Gabrielle onto her side, and tucked the pillow under her head. “How’s that?”

Lying down definitely felt better. “Okay.” Gabrielle said. “But to be honest you touching me is making me forget about my back.”

Lakmas sneezed, stifling the sound as Xena got up off her knees and leaned over her consort so she could make eye contact with her. “Oh really?”

“Really.”

Xena chuckled and settled back down to examine the long, ugly cut that went across Gabrielle’s shoulder blade. It had mostly closed, but she cleaned it carefully and covered it with a bandage anyway, then examined her lover’s attractive back for any other injuries she might have missed.

Then she eased her over and checked the rest of her, stifling a smile at the knowing eyes watching her as her hands slid over Gabrielle’s hips and up along her sides.

Aside from a few scratches on her thigh and a bruise along one hip, though, Gabrielle seemed relatively uninjured. She tickled her bellybutton with a light motion and tucked the robe back around her and the covers over her.

Their eyes met, and Xena smiled at the impish expression, feeling a moment of feather light joy that really surprised her. The room seemed to focus down to just the two of them and she studied Gabrielle's face intently, as though for the first time.

Scuffed and bruised as it was, the beauty in it transfixed her.

"Xena?" Gabrielle poked her gently after a moment. "Are you okay?"

Xena reached over and cupped her cheek. "Yeah, I'm fine." She said, in a quiet tone. "Want some more soup?"

Gabrielle reached up and covered Xena's hand with her own. "Why don't you have some more? You look kinda pale."

Xena didn't feel pale so much as rung out like a decade old dish rag. Threadbared and tired, hanging out on a line somewhere waving in the breeze. "I'm all right." She said. "Just need a nap maybe."

"Here in bed with me?" Gabrielle's eyes brightened immediately, making the queen smile.

"What happened, your majesty?" Lastay's wife spoke up. "All we heard was a collapse somewhere."

"Ah." Xena pondered the question. "The hatch door into the stables collapsed under all the damn snow." She said. "Gabrielle shoved me out of the way and got clobbered." She regarded her patient with fond affection.

"That was very brave." The duchess said.

"Yes, it was." Xena agreed. "Crazy, but brave."

Gabrielle smiled warmly. "I'm not crazy." She objected. "I didn't want to see you get hurt."

"See?" Xena gently stroked the mussed hair back off Gabrielle's forehead. "I told everyone you were my bodyguard. No one believed me."

A soft knock came at the door, then it opened and Duke Lastay entered. His eyes brightened when he saw the shifted tableau, and Gabrielle's open eyes. "Good news in here at least!" He said. "Outside, the storm continues. I fear."

"Strange weather." Jellaus commented. "Too early for snow."

Lakmas grunted. "Tis not something we know of." He spoke up after a brief silence. "We were afraid of it, to be truthful. It seemed terrible to us, and so unrelenting."

"There's no snow where you are from?" Lastay asked.

"No." The Persian shook his head. "We are a desert land, far more used to heat and dry winds than this."

A rumble overhead made them all look up. Xena pulled the woven cover they'd draped over her a little more snugly around Gabrielle and nodded a little as one of the soldiers went over and stirred the fire up. "Sea of sand, eh?"

The Persian nodded. "It's magnificent." He said. "The colors, and the shades of the hills, and the feel of the hot sun on your back." He was seated on the floor now, his legs crossed under him. "I remember when I was a boy, the first time my father took me out with him from our tribal home and I saw the immensity of the desert. I thought he was showing me the home of the gods."

"Sounds beautiful." Gabrielle murmured.

The man put his fingertips together and bowed his head in her direction. "It truly is."

Lastay came over and went to his knees next to the bed, steadying his balance with both hands on the edge of the mattress. "Xena, the shaft you discovered has been searched. They found many things, weapons and bags of supplies, inside."

“Ah.” Xena only just caught herself from asking what shaft he was talking about. That whole situation had faded back out of her awareness, vastly overshadowed by her concern for her. She studied Gabrielle’s face for a moment. Friend? Lover? Consort? “For how many people?”

“A half dozen, they think.” Lastay frowned. “Tis more than I expected, truly.”

“Me too.” The queen agreed. “Busts my ass thinking that many assassins are crawling around my castle, y’know? We need to catch em.” She made no shift to move though, content to sit quietly at Gabrielle’s side, her hand captured within her lovers.

She glanced at Lakmas. “Go with him and look at the stuff he found. See if it’s familiar.”

Lakmas folded his hands and pressed them against his forehead, giving Xena a bow before he got to his feet, waiting for Lastay to rise as well.

“Brendan, you go too.” Xena said. “Leave two men outside the front door, and two down at the kitchen entrance to this section.”

“Mistress.” Brendan ducked his head, acknowledging the change in Xena’s attitude. “Do me a favor, though?” He spoke up unexpectedly. “Allow t’men to do all the cooking for you both. I want no chances.”

Xena’s face shifted briefly into a wry grimace. “All right.” She conceded. “But I sure hope Gabrielle gets better soon or we’re both gonna starve.”

“Mistress!”

Gabrielle squirmed a little closer, until her head was against Xena’s hip. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.” She told Brendan, as Xena’s arm settled gently over her shoulders. “She just got used to my cooking.”

“That I did.” Xena agreed. “So start healing.”

Gabrielle rested her hand on Xena’s thigh, half closing her eyes with a faint sound of contentment.

Lastay stood. “We’ll find them, Xena.” He said. “I’ll keep you informed.”

Xena nodded, lifting her hand in dismissal as the three men left the room, and then two of the soldiers followed. That left only Jellaus with them, and two other soldiers, who made their way to the kitchen entrance and left through it.

Jellaus stood and bowed. “Gracious ladies, I will go make my self seemly.” He indicated his stained and blood spattered clothes. “Be at peace for now.” He ducked out of the room before they could answer, and then, finally they were alone.

The silence was, to Gabrielle’s surprise, quite refreshing. She stroked Xena’s leg, now able to hear the queen’s quiet breathing and the soft creaks of the windows blocking out the weather across the room. “I’m sure it won’t be that bad.” She said.

“The food?” Xena leaned back against the headboard and wrapped her arms around Gabrielle’s body. “Ah, I don’t care. I’m not hungry anyway.” She exhaled. “Too much...” Her voice stopped, then she lifted one hand up and made a vague gesture at herself. “My guts hurt.”

Gabrielle listened intently. “You really sound tired.”

“I am.” Xena replied honestly. “Every bit of me is.”

Her voice sounded it. Gabrielle could hear the hoarse edge, and the throatiness, but beyond that there was a tone there she never remembered hearing before. Cautiously, she shifted so she could look up at Xena’s face. The skin around her eyes was still puffy and she looked drawn and yes, in fact, exhausted.

Terribly vulnerable. Gabrielle put her arm around her. “All the time I was... I was so sick...” She said. “I could hear you, calling me.”

“Did you?”

“I did.” Gabrielle said. “It was... it was really strange, you know?” She went on. “It was like I could hear things, but I couldn’t move around.”

She felt Xena shift and after a minute they were all tangled together and she felt a sense of warm security surround her as the queen slid into bed next to her and got under the covers.

“I was calling you.” Xena said. “I was screaming your name so loud I’m surprised every spider in the castle didn’t come down from the ceiling on top of us.”

“There were other people there.” Gabrielle went on, after a pause. “They were telling me to come with them, to go where my family was.”

“Hm.” Xena made a low sound in her throat.

“I told them no.” Gabrielle said. “I told them I didn’t want to go there.” She gazed off into the shadows across the room. “I didn’t want to leave you.” She felt Xena exhale against her scalp and the pressure as she leaned her head against the spot. “I got away from them.”

Xena exhaled again, and sniffled a little.

“Then..” Gabrielle went on, a big hesitantly since it sounded crazy, even in her own head. “Another voice was talking to me. They... they said they were there to help.” She said. “They said someone... that someone I guess who had... they said gone before, was trying to hurt you.”

Xena remained completely silent.

“That voice. They told me I just had to want to bad enough and I could go back to you and I did.” Gabrielle said. “I could feel something trying to stop me, but I heard you calling me and...” She paused again. “Nothing could stop me from coming back to you.”

She looked up at Xena, and found those piercing eyes watching her, filled with unshed tears, but sharp, and potent and intent. The expression of dull exhaustion was gone. “Maybe I just imagined that.” Gabrielle admitted. “It was all kind of crazy.”

“Maybe.” Xena replied.

“But it seemed real.”

“They said someone who went before, was trying to hurt me?” Xena pronounced, slowly and carefully.

Gabrielle nodded. “This other voice.” She said. “She said they were trying to hurt you through me.” She frowned. “And something... I guess something like it was a usual thing.” She felt Xena’s hold tighten just a bit. “But that voice seemed to know you.”

“Know me?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle said. “She told me... to be true, because you were.” She looked back up at Xena, seeing her head tilt just a little bit as she thought, her lashes blinking and scattering a tiny shower of droplets down her face. “So I knew I had to go back and find you.”

Xena let out a slow breath. “That I was true.” She mused.

Gabrielle reached up and put her hand over Xena’s heart. She could feel the beats through the robe she was wearing. “I will be true, Xena.” She whispered. “She called you my soulmate.”

The word echoed just a little. Xena felt a prickle inch its way down her spine and she felt short of breath for a moment. She looked away, then she looked back at Gabrielle, seeing a new depth in the sea green eyes looking back at her. There was a certainty there that found an unexpected resonance in her. “I am.” She said. “I just never knew what the word for it was.”

It was Gabrielle’s turn to blink in some surprise.

“From the very minute I saw you.” The queen said. “I knew we were destined for each other. It took me a long time to figure out what, and why and how, but I knew.” She shifted a little, so they could look at each other more easily. “I’m really glad you listened to that voice, Gabrielle.”

“Yeah, me too.” Gabrielle managed a smile. “After all, you stuck around when I asked you to, right?”

Xena nodded. “I did.” She agreed. “You needed me to.”

Gabrielle looked her in the eye. “You need me.” She said, quietly.

Xena didn’t even blink. “I do.” She leaned over and kissed Gabrielle on the head. “So thank the gods you figured that out and you don’t think I’m going to dump you anymore.” She buried her face into Gabrielle’s hair, and just held her. “Sorry it took all this to do that.”

Gabrielle felt like she was floating again, but this time in a good way. It was as if she’d been waiting for this moment her whole life, and now it was here, and it was as though a door had opened into a completely different place.

It even made her head ache less. It made her heart soar.

“Anyway.” Xena sighed. “Glad you told me all that.”

Gabrielle took hold of her hand and gently kissed the palm of it, feeling the faint twitch in the strong muscles on the either side of where her lips were. “Do you know who it was, that was trying to hurt you?” She asked, looking up at the queen’s profile.

Xena studied her. Then her face shifted in a wry expression. “Could have been a whole lot of people.” She admitted. “I’ve sent a lot of souls down the river to Hades, y’know.” She let her head rest against the pillow. “Where do I start? From the kids I killed in the pit to nobles I gutted, to my own brother...” “ She shrugged a little. “Maybe they had something to do with that damn weather outside.”

Gabrielle glanced at the window. “How do you fight something like that?”

“I have no clue.” The queen said. “First time it’s ever come up. Usually people I kill stay dead, Hades, most of them probably end up in the Fields and thank me for it.”

Gabrielle continued kissing Xena’s hand. “Maybe someone didn’t end up there.”

Xena gazed quietly at the fire. “Maybe.”

“Is that fewer people to think about?”

“Maybe.”

\*\*

At last, Xena felt secure enough to let sleep start to gather her in. It was dim in the bedroom - only the glow from the fire, and two candles broke the gloom and it was quiet too, there were a half dozen soldiers in the outer chamber and four on the stairs and Brendan himself was in Gabrielle’s solarium with two other men on guard.

Gabrielle was curled up in her arms, her head resting against Xena’s shoulder. She wasn’t yet sleeping herself, her fingertips were gently stroking the skin over her lower ribcage, just an idle bit of sensation making Xena’s lips twitch into a smile.

“How are you feeling?” She asked.

“Not too bad.” Gabrielle answered. “Stiff, a little.” She admitted. “My head hurts less though.”

Expected. Xena stroked her hair, careful to avoid the still visible lump. She had let Gabrielle coax her into having some of the supper the soldiers had brought up for her and she’d appreciated even more the mug of ale that had finally relaxed her.

Her sword was resting against the headboard, in its sheath. She had confidence in her guardians, but there always was that chance, wasn't there? She wasn't going to risk not having the old thing close by.

Her soldiers were out there, with the Persians, and Lastay, searching for the intruders. Xena felt absolutely no urge to join them. Her persistent barging around in that process had lead directly to Gabrielle's getting hurt, and she'd finally gotten through her admittedly thick head making herself a target made them both one.

Well, no kidding, Xena. "I'm such an idiot sometimes." She commented mournfully

"You're never an idiot, Xena." Gabrielle protested. "Don't say that."

"But I am." Xena shifted into a more comfortable position, letting her head rest on the pillow at last, as Gabrielle squirmed a little higher and wrapped her arm around her waist. "If I was smart, and acted like a queen and gave orders to people instead of trying to do everything myself, we'd get hurt less."

Gabrielle didn't answer. "Hm." She issued a soft grunt, unable to really refute the statement.

"Stupid way to have to learn that." Xena sighed. "Anyway. You ready to see if we can get some rest?" She rubbed Gabrielle's back gently. "You'll be around when we wake up, right?"

The question was light. Xena's voice held a slightly humorous note, but Gabrielle could hear her heartbeat skip and her breathing hitch. "Absolutely." She said. "I'm not going anywhere and you better not either." She pressed herself against Xena's side and ran her fingertips in a light circle around the queen's navel.

Xena let out a soft grunt. She wrapped her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders and let her eyes close, the friendly sensation relaxing her. Briefly she struggled against sleeps onslaught, then surrendered to an exhaustion of body and mind she rarely experienced.

Gabrielle felt her lover's breathing even out and the tension in the tall form she was wrapped around ease. She tipped her head back a little to look up at the queen's face, dimly lit from the bedside candle. There was still visible strain there, and she felt a small lump rise in her throat as she thought about what they'd just been through.

A flicker of candlelight on metal caught her eye, and she looked over to where Xena's sword was resting in its leather sheath, its stern length extending down to the floor. More than her chests full of jewels, and the crown she sometimes twirled on her finger, this plain blade, its hilt worn smooth from her hands signified the power of her throne.

Gabrielle didn't want to see it wielded tonight. She'd seen far too much of Xena's vulnerability in the last few hours to want to see her defend that power. Not that she wouldn't. That one brief moment, funny and embarrassing to all of them except her had showed that.

Exhausted or not, drained or not, she'd held that sword out in a steady hand, her half naked body thrumming with visible power. Xena would do whatever she had to do, no matter what state she was in. Gabrielle studied her bedmates's face again, glad to now see the worry erased from it, finally relaxed in full sleep.

Oddly, she felt right now like she was the one who was doing the protecting, though. She felt the weight of the responsibility she supposed she always had, but now fully realized she had, to protect the fragility of this woman's soul.

Xena had, in fact, once told her but she hadn't really understood, when she'd demanded Gabrielle promise her to be able to protect herself, to keep herself alive in the dangers they often walked into. This was what she'd meant. But Gabrielle knew if she'd had it to do all over again, down there in the tunnel, under that rapidly falling ceiling, she'd do the same thing.

She'd push Xena out of the way. She'd put herself in danger to protect her. If someone was shooting an arrow at them she'd step in front of it.

Probably driving Xena crazy, because she'd have to hop over her to catch the stupid thing. Gabrielle smiled wryly, in self knowledge. But she would because that's just who she was. She figured Xena probably knew that because really, it was one of the things they shared.

What had she called it? Crazy brave? Yeah, well, they both were.

Gabrielle allowed herself to relax, the warmth of Xena's body seeping into her and coaxing her sore body into a state where she thought she might be able to drift off. She let out breath and closed her eyes, immediately aware of the sound of her lover's heartbeat and the steady motion of her ribs.

Soulmate. What did that mean, really? Gabrielle could feel sleep creeping over her as she pondered the question. She wasn't entirely sure, though she did like the term.

Oh well. She supposed they'd figure it out.

\*\*

It seemed only a moment later when she opened her eyes again. But Gabrielle knew time had passed since her entire body was stiff and she could see a dim, gray light outside the heavy curtains on the far side of the chamber. She took a breath and released it, moving her head very cautiously.

The pounding ache was gone. Gabrielle reached up and touched the side of her skull, relieved to find the lump there much reduced. Then she glanced up to find Xena still deep asleep, the queen's eyelids twitching a little betraying her lover to be dreaming.

She looked around the chamber. The candles had burned out, and there was only the barest glow from the fire, but if she concentrated, she could hear faint sounds around the castle, soft footsteps in the outer chamber, and muffled voices.

She was thirsty. Her mouth was dry and felt like there was cloth inside it, but she didn't want to move around too much because it would wake Xena up.

Then it became a moot point, as the queen's body suddenly tensed and her eyes popped open, her hands coming up in a defensive motion as her breathing accelerated.

"Xena." Gabrielle froze in place, knowing better than to get in the way. "Hey!"

After a second, the coiled body under her relaxed and Xena let her hands drop to the surface of the bed with a twin thud. "Son of a bitch." She got out hoarsely, then cleared her throat. "You okay?"

"I'm okay." Gabrielle patted her on the stomach, feeling the surface heaving as Xena caught her breath. "Are you okay?" She peered up at her as Xena lifted a hand and put it over her eyes.

"Xena?"

Xena rubbed her eyes. "Stupid dream." She said briefly. "What the Hades time is it?" She asked. "My back's killing me."

"I don't know." Gabrielle rolled over onto her own back, immediately regretting it when the chill of the room penetrated the covers and made her shiver. "Brr."

Xena sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, letting out a little groan. She got up and stretched, grimacing, before she turned and tucked the covers back around Gabrielle. "You'd think someone would have the damn sense to stir the fire in here."

She grabbed her robe off the side table and shrugged into it, tying the belt and rubbing her arms against the chill.

She made her way over to the window and stuck her head between the curtains, seeing a heavy gray sky overhead, and still falling snow. "Ugh." Xena turned and went over to the fireplace, grabbing several chunks of the wood in the hopper and tossing them into the open space. "Brendan!"

The sound of boots approaching responded to her call, and in a moment, Brendan was sticking his head inside the door. "Mistress?" He glanced at the bed, his face relaxing when he saw Gabrielle's head poking from the covers looking back at him.

Xena turned from her position standing in front of the fire. "Someone think I wanted to have Gabrielle waking up half frozen?" She went back to tossing wood on the fire, poking at it with an iron bar.

Brendan eased in. "Ah." He said. "We didn't care to wake you. Figured you both could use the rest." He apologized. "Want some supper in?"

Xena paused in her fire building and looked at him. "What?" She said. "What the Hades time is it?"

"Near going dark." Brendan said, with a touch of wryness. "Been holding all of em at bay the day long. Told em all to let you sleep." He cleared his throat a little self consciously. "Not that they've much to tell, mind ye."

The queen straightened, and put her hands on her hips. "Are you telling me we've been sleeping all damn day?"

"Aye."

"Wow." Gabrielle commented, as she pushed herself a little more upright. "No wonder I feel so stiff."

"No kidding." Xena exhaled. "Yeah, send food in here." She sat down in one of the two stuffed chairs with a thump. "Well, if nothing else, it let Gabrielle get some rest." She looked over at the bed. "Right?"

"Um. Yes." Gabrielle sounded a little surprised. "I feel pretty okay." She rotated her head a little and rubbed the back of her neck. "Any water over there?"

Brendan disappeared into the outer room, and now the sounds out there were more pronounced, and sharper. Xena got to her feet and went over to the mantle, picking up a cup and looking around. "How about.. " She paused, and frowned. "There's no damn water in here."

For a moment she seemed stumped, standing there with the cup in her hands. Then she strode over to the window again, pulling the curtain aside and unlatching one of the leaded panes. With an impatient shove, she pushed the frame open and reached out, scooping the cup full of snow and then pulling her hand back inside.

Then she went over to the fire and held the cup close to it, watching as the snow dissolved quite quickly into liquid. Then she swirled it and took a mouthful before she brought it over to the bed and offered it to Gabrielle.

"Thanks." Gabrielle sipped it gratefully, as Xena brought over a thick, woven shift and slipped it over her head.

A moment later, the door opened again and several soldiers entered, one carrying a tray. The others went around the room lighting the candles, and shortly the room was lit with a golden glow.

Xena went back over to the fire and sat down, extending her bare feet towards the warmth. "So what's going on, now that you let me spend the whole damn day oblivious."

Brendan went over and sat down next to her.

Gabrielle put the cup down and pulled the covers back, pushing herself upright and sitting up on the edge of the bed. For a moment, the room whirled around her and she almost lay back down again, then waiting until the vertigo passed.

She held on to the canopy post and stood up, relieved to let her spine stretch out.

“Hey!” Xena barked from the fire. “What are you doing?”

“Just standing” Gabrielle said. “My body’s tired of laying down.” She gave the soldier standing nearby a smile “Hello.”

“Your grace.” The soldier saluted her.

Xena got up and came over, hovering around her and glaring at the soldier until he hastily backed away. “Want to come over by the fire?”

Gabrielle nodded, not entirely surprised when Xena slid her arm around her shoulders and made a motion to pick her up. “Can you help me walk over there?” She asked. “I kinda want to work the kinks out.” She got her arm around Xena’s waist and hugged her.

“Easy.” Xena reluctantly went along with it, keeping a secure hold on her as they made their way around the bed over to the fire. She settled Gabrielle into the chair she’d been using and perched on the arm, watching as her consort held her hands out to the fire and sighed in pleasure.

“Would you like some tea, majesty?” One of the soldiers came over with a small tray and two cups. “And we have some bread and stew, made it ourselves outside there.”

Gabrielle was glad to be sitting again. The warmth of the fire was soaking into her bones and the ache was slowly easing. She took the cup Xena offered her and cradled it in her hands, breathing in steam that was scented with mint and honey.

“Go on.” Xena told Brendan. “You were telling me about a dead pig?”

Gabrielle wrinkled her nose.

“Found it in the main hall.” Brendan agreed. “Splayed open, bowels and all on the floor. Lastay came to get me.” He scrubbed his face. “Had your name writ in blood next to it.”

“Nice.” Xena grunted.

“That’s horrible.” Gabrielle said. “What a bunch of jerks these guys are.”

“Hm.” The queen grunted again. “That doesn’t make any sense though.” She took a sip of her tea. “Why a pig? They’ve focused on people up till now.” She pondered the question. “Or are they saying they think I’m a pig?” She looked more amused than insulted.

Brendan shook his head. “Like they’re playing with us.” He said. “Boys were in those tunnels all the night long. Found bags of stuff those bastards stole from us, knives and arrows and all that. I took em to the barracks. The desert boys are all over the lower levels looking.”

“So no sign of the bastards, though?” Xena asked. “Turn this place over and I bet we find something.”

Brendan shook his head again. “Problem is them tunnels down below all turn into each other it’s like chasin a pack of ground rats in a field. Chase em down one hole, they pop up another one.”

Xena leaned back a little, waving the tray with the stew on it forward. She thought about what Gabrielle had told her the previous night, about what she’d heard.. or thought she’d heard, when she’d been unconscious.

Was that real? Was there really some dead person trying to get back at her and if so, which one? She’d killed so many damn people over the years, how could she pick one? Or maybe it wasn’t real, maybe it was just some dream Gabrielle had been caught in, like she’d been herself before she’d woken up.

Crappy dream. Xena sighed. Stupid crappy dream probably a leftover from the day, her in a dark hall watching Gabrielle fade away from her, eyes sad, hand reaching.... She wrenched her thoughts away from that and took another gulp of tea instead.

“Xena?”

She looked up, to find Brendan looking at her. “Sorry. Thinking.” She said. “How do we flush these guys out into the open so we can catch them? We’ll be chasing them until spring otherwise.”

“We could use a bit of fire.” Brendan suggested.

“And end up burning the stronghold down?” Xena gave him a wry look. “All the windows are closed for the damn snow. We’ll end up smoked like salmon.”

“Ah.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle spoke up. “They’re after you, aren’t they?” She had dipped a piece of the bread into the stew and was slowly nibbling on the edge of it. “So the only thing that will draw them out is if you make them come here, right?”

Both Xena and Brendan looked at her. “The last place in the realm I want any of those bastards is here.” Xena said, flatly. “I don’t want them anywhere near you.”

“No way.” Brendan added. “We’ve got this area surrounded tight as a bug, your Grace. Matter of fact..” He glanced at Xena. “Wanted to see what you thought about going back to the old place for now.”

“But.”

“No.” Xena and Brendan talked at the same time.

Gabrielle went back to nibbling her bread. The stew was okay, not nearly as good as her own would have been, but she still didn’t have much of an appetite. It felt good to be sitting up though, and the warmth of the fire eased some of the cramping in her muscles.

Xena was out of sorts, she realized. The queen hated being caught sleeping in, and she was probably feeling a little embarrassed about all the fuss she’d let them make over her yesterday. Plus, she’d woken up from a bad dream. Gabrielle could always tell when that happened and it tended to put her in a bad mood for a while.

She leaned her head against Xena’s hip. In reflex, the queen released one hand off her tea cup and let it drape over Gabrielle’s shoulder. This put her fingers invitingly near Gabrielle’s lips, and she traded off her bread for kissing them.

Xena stopped talking in mid word, and looked down at her.

“I know you don’t want any bad guys here.” Gabrielle said. “But couldn’t you trick them? What if they thought we were going to go back up to the tower, and you figured out a way to get them there and trap them?”

Xena studied her for a long moment.

“We don’t have to be there.” Gabrielle said. “They just have to think we are.”

Xena looked at Brendan, and then back at Gabrielle. “Why didn’t we think of that?” She asked her captain. “We’re getting too damn old to do this, Brendan.” She complained. “Why in Hades does it take her to tell us the obvious?”

Brendan looked a bit abashed. “Been a long couple days, Xena.”

“What’s my excuse? I’ve been sleeping for two days!” The queen retorted.

Gabrielle wasn't really up to laughing, but she felt like doing it anyway. Instead, she very gently bumped her head against Xena's hip and was rewarded by the sensation of her lover's fingertips threading their way through her sleep-disheveled hair and just as gently scratching her scalp.

"That's really not a bad idea." The queen said. "Let them think they have me on the run, Brendan. Let them think I'm going up to the tower and hiding there. It's the most defensible place in the stronghold. Only two ways up, the kitchen stairs and the main ones, and that rotunda to put troops in."

"Be making others think that, Mistress." Brendan reminded her.

"Like I care?" Xena said. "I've spent my whole tenure here not giving a damn what anyone thought of me, why start now?"

Brendan stared pensively at her. "People are scared." He finally said. "Weather's making them crazy, somewhat."

Xena frowned. "What does that mean?" She asked. "They going to storm my chambers and strip me naked? Whip me with horse traces?" Her brows lifted a little at his noncommittal expression. "I can still use that sword back there, y'know."

"No one doubts it." Brendan responded immediately. "I'm just sayin there's lots of scared people around. More than the place usually holds. Already had to break up some fights."

"Did you." Xena said, after a moment. "What happened yesterday?" She waited, but her captain wouldn't meet her eyes. "Brendan?" Her voice took on a deeper pitch.

He finally looked up. "Some of the Westlanders acted out." He said. "Saying things about... Anyway. We put em down." He took a breath. "I take responsibility for it, Xena. I led em to it and the first blood was mine." He touched his sword. "Lost my temper and next thing I knew they were dead."

Xena studied him. "How many did you kill?"

"All of them." Brendan met her eyes.

"I see." The queen murmured. She could now imagine the chaos in the stronghold. Fear of the intruders warring with fear of her own men. "What were they saying?" She asked. "Was it about me?"

Brendan shook his head.

Ah. Xena glanced at Gabrielle, who was watching her captain with a concerned expression. "Then you just did what I would have." She said. "No fault to you, old friend."

Brendan looked up at her, as Gabrielle reached over and touched his arm.

"All the more reason then." The queen went on. "Let's take advantage of everyone thinking I've gone over the edge, that you've gone over the edge, and that my only concern is my skin and hers." She leaned over and kissed Gabrielle's head. "We're moving to the tower. Put the word out."

"Mistress." Brendan gazed steadily at her. "I will."

"Gabrielle's right. It's time to stop chasing and start laying our own trap. We've been fools." Xena said, "But all that won't matter when I've got their blood on my blade." Her lips twitched. "And it will be."

Brendan got up and saluted, then headed for the door.

Xena leaned her arm on the back of the chair and sighed. "This is another one of those times I'm going to kick my ass and flap my arms and fly, ain't it?"

Gabrielle eyed her, handing her over a bowl of stew. "Guess you'll need this then."

“Hah.”

\*\*

Gabrielle was surprised to find herself comforted by the surroundings of the tower. She'd come to much prefer their bigger, lighter quarters in the lower level, but as she was settled in the big, slightly worn chair in front of the fire in Xena's old bedroom, she felt her heart lift.

There were so many memories here. Gabrielle smiled a little as she thought about all those past winter nights she had spent in front of this fireplace, writing her stories and practicing some of them while Xena sprawled in the chair next to her, eyes half closed and her gaze lost in the flames.

Just being together. The thoughts made her happy, but it was cold, and she shivered. “Brr.”

“Bring that blanket over here.” Xena ordered, from her place kneeling next to the chair. “It's colder than a fish's ass in this damn place.”

“Thanks for carrying me up here.” Gabrielle laced her fingers with the queen's. “That was really nice of you.”

“It was pointlessly cranky and selfish of me.” Xena disagreed. “I could have given any one of these hoary loyal bastards the thrill of their lives, and what do I do? Keep it all to myself. Typical me.”

“Xena.”

“Yes, Gabrielle?” Xena seemed to have regained her sense of humor on the long walk up the steps. “I carried your ass up the steps outside in the rain with a hole the size of a spit dog in my back. That should have been enough for me for a lifetime.”

“I remember that.” Gabrielle smiled. “I was so glad to see you.”

“Likewise.” The queen smiled back. She took the blanket Brendan held out and tucked it around her consort, while two of the soldiers worked to start the fire going in the big fireplace. “I remember you cleaning out that damn fireplace and thinking ‘what kind of nut did I bring in here?’”

“Well, I was supposed to clean.” Gabrielle said. “I wanted to do a good job so you'd keep me around.”

“It worked.” Xena remarked dryly. “Probably a little better than you intended.”

“Yeah.” Her consort admitted. “I was just hoping to get scraps from your dinner.”

That got a chuckle out of the queen. “Instead you got me for dinner. Lucky you.”

“Xena, I'm going to bring up y'things and her Graces.” Brendan said. “We've got the lower tower stairs blocked off.”

“Good.” Xena said. “I heard the comments when we went through the hall. Nice.” Her humor dissolved at once. “They're lucky I had my hands full or I'd have cut some tongues out.” She exhaled. “Thought that would have ruined my plan I guess.”

Brendan frowned.

“So go down there. Act like you're worried about me being afraid.” The queen instructed him. “Do a good job, Brendan. If we coax this bastard up here sooner than later, we can go back to watching the acrobats and drinking ourselves into a stupor.” She said. “I want him to think I'm up here shaking.”

“Tis a hard thing.” Brendan said. “Does me ill to speak anything but well of you, Xena.”

Xena smiled unexpectedly, a warm, kind smile not at all like her usual one. “Don’t worry.” She put her hand on her captain’s shoulder. “I’ll let you tell them how much of a smart ass I was once I gut those damn assassins.”

Brendan sighed.

“Get Jellous to help you, Brendan.” Gabrielle suggested. “He knows how to do that. How to make a story work for him.” She watched Brendan’s expression brighten. “I’d help you too but I think Xena wants me to stay here.”

“Hah. Yes.” Xena returned her attention to her consort. “Warm enough?”

Gabrielle moved the edge of the blanket over her knees, as the fire started to catch in the grate and added its heat as well. “It’s okay now.” She felt the shivers ease and her muscles relaxed. She looked into the flames, and memories started to surface of her first few days in the castle.

It was hard to make a connection back to the person she’d been in those days. So afraid, and confused, hurting from losing her family, from watching Lila die before her eyes. Wanting so much to be angry at Xena for that and so very bewildered when she couldn’t be.

How disloyal she’d felt, when she finally figured out what she was feeling.

She remembered waking up and hurting, finding herself in Xena’s bed with Xena sleeping next to her. Her head had felt a lot like it did now, matter of fact. All achy, and as though if she moved it too fast, it would really hurt. So she let it gently rest against Xena’s shoulder.

Despite sleeping as long as she had, she still felt tired. But she blinked a few times, and picked up the cup of tea she’d brought up stairs with her. She sipped at it, the taste reviving her even though it was already cold.

“Don’t go anywhere.” Xena got to her feet, and dusted her hands off. “I’m gonna change into something more comfortable and figure out where I want to lay my traps up here.”

“Okay.” Gabrielle squirmed into a more comfortable position, leaning on the chair arm so she could watch Xena roam around the room. There were a lot of other people there too, soldiers mostly, but three servants and the Persian back against the back wall.

Xena avoided all of them as she prowled, going over every inch of the space. “Someone make sure that damn cat isn’t under the bed. I don’t want to be cutting it in half if it moves out to piss tonight.” She circled the tall dresser near the back wall and then opened it, sticking her head inside.

One of the soldiers obediently got on the ground and crawled over to the side of the bed, lifting up the linen skirting and peering underneath. For a moment he froze, then he let out a yell, throwing the entire room into chaos.

Chaos, because Xena backed out of the cabinet with an explosive bound, launching herself sideways and bowling over two other soldiers who were scrambling to get out of her way. She landed between the bed and Gabrielle and spread her long arms out, bellowing at the top of her voice.

The rest of the soldiers pounced on the bed, one grabbing the man on the floor by the waist and hauling him backwards the rest of them lifting the bed up and moving it in a show of sheer manly strength as the Persian and two other soldiers pulled weapons out and leaped forward to pounce on whatever was under it.

Only Gabrielle remained still, and quiet. She figured, rightly, that moving or getting in the way in any sense would not only be pointless, it also would probably get her hurt or worse, get Xena hurt if the queen tried to protect her from whatever it was.

The Persian dove under the bed and then a scream emerged, long and loud and high. When it ended, everyone shut up, and the Persian backed out rapidly, shaking one hand and hauling something out with the other. "Aha! A demon!"

Gabrielle's eyes widened, as she remembered what the voice in the darkness had told her. Was this the thing trying to hurt Xena?

The men clustered around as a ratty, bedraggled figure emerged, struggling against his hold, blinking against the candlelight.

Xena straightened to her full height, peering over the heads of the soldiers and then, with a disgusted little sigh, settled back down. "Hold it!" She yelled. "Stop dragging the damn woman all over the ground!"

"Oh, Xena." Gabrielle had poked her head around the back of the chair. "It's one of the circus people." She said, recognizing one of the random ones in the background of the show, moving the pieces of rigging around. There had been five or six of them, short and alike looking, with brownish curly hair and slightly flattened noses.

And here was one of them, hiding in Xena's old bedroom.

Xena put her hands on her hips. "So I see." She said, observing the striped costume, and the frightened, glaring eyes. "So I guess we need to find out why they were under our bed, huh?" She turned her head. "Thanos, go out to the dancing hall and get that old man in charge. Bring him up here. Don't tell him why."

"Mistress." The man saluted, and headed out of the room.

The Persian had the woman now by both arms, his big, muscular hands dwarfing the woman's limbs as he held her still. "Would have rather found the cat." He commented. "We like cats. Not so with snakes in strange clothing hiding in corners."

"Or under beds." Xena said. "Can you talk?" She addressed the woman.

The woman's dark eyes just remained glaring at her.

Gabrielle started to get up, then halted when Xena slowly swung around and pinned her with a pair of intent, blue eyes. She settled back in her chair and gave the queen a sheepish smile. After a moment, Xena returned the smile, holding that for a minute before she turned back around.

The woman looked scared. Gabrielle leaned on the chair arm so she could see her better, noting the bruises on her face, and the air of desperation that clung to her. "Hey, Xena?"

The queen turned and leaned on the back of her chair. "Yes?"

Gabrielle lowered her voice, turning so she was under Xena's looming form. "Maybe she ran away from them." She whispered. "She looks kinda hungry."

"Maybe." Xena whispered back. "But the coincidence of her running away and ending up in our old bedroom makes me want to stab her just to make sure."

Gabrielle made a face.

Xena leaned a little further, and kissed her on the top of her head. Then she straightened and turned back around. "Well?? She walked towards where the Persian had her held tight. "Don't make me have Lakmas find your tongue for you."

Lakmas smiled, his teeth large and very white against his desert dark skin.

But the woman remained silent, staying still in the Persian's grip, but dropping her eyes to the ground and refusing to look at the queen's face.

“Take her to the outside chamber.” Xena orderered, making sure she was very obviously between the woman and Gabrielle’s chair as the Persian got up, and he and one of the soldiers walked the woman out. “Let me know when the circus owner gets here.”

She waited for the door to close. “Search under that bed.” She told the other two soldiers. “I want to know if there’s so much as a dust bunny under there.” She turned and studied Gabrielle for a minute, then she went over and knelt next to the nearer soldier, putting her hand on his back as she peered cautiously under the space beneath the platform of the bed.

The soldier let out a squeak, then hastily glanced behind him. “Sorry Majesty.”

“No problem.” Xena said. “Just be glad I didn’t have my sword out.”

“Yes, majesty.” The man got down on his knees and elbows and crawled under the bed, as two of his comrades lifted it up. “There’s a bag under here!”

Aha. “Careful.” Xena said. “Remember all the traps we almost walked into.”

The man took out his dagger and gently probed at the dark mass, drawing his hand back and dragging it with him as he eased cautiously out from under the platform. The bag was crude and rough, a dirty gray fabric with a bit of rope to tie the top shut.

The soldier rolled over and sat up, splaying his legs out with the bag in between them. He looked at it, and then up at Xena. “Should I open it, Majesty?”

Unable to resist, Gabrielle got up as quietly as she could, holding on to the chair and leaning against it as she peered over the back to see what was going on. Xena was kneeling next to the bed, and the soldiers were all watching her like hawks as she took the dagger the man had been holding and with an expert flick of her wrist, untied the knot.

The rope dropped limply from the bag and landed on the floor, and they all looked at it for a minute. Then Xena got up from her kneel into a crouch and stuck the knife in the bottom of the bag fabric, pulling it up and dumping the contents on the floor.

The torch light in the room mixed with the wan gray from the narrow windows showed a scatter of sad little items, a lump of candle end, a small rag, a tinder flint and striker, and what looked like a bundle of twigs tied with a piece of string.

Gabrielle edged a little to her left so she could see better. “Wow.”

Xena turned her head and glared. “Weren’t you supposed to be sitting down?” She asked.

“Wondering what was going on was making me feel worried. My head hurt.” Gabrielle responded in a mild, serious tone. “I thought it would be better if I could see you.” She watched Xena’s face, seeing the twitching along her cheeks that meant she was trying hard not to smile.

After a moment the queen turned back around, and resumed her kneeling posture, poking amongst the meagre possessions with the tip of the dagger. “Somehow, I don’t think this is who we were looking for.” She said. “At least, not based on this.”

“What is it?”

“Just what you’d expect to find in the bag of some kid running from home.” Xena said, leaning her elbow on her knee.

“Mistress.” One of the soldiers came to her side. “Found this.” He held out his cupped hands, which were full of fruit pits and old, gnarled rinds. “In the little room in there.” He indicated a doorway.

“Ah.” Xena selected one and inspected it. “Too fresh for Gabrielle to have left them, back in the bad old days when she slept in there.” She glanced at her consort, who was gently smiling at her. “Didn’t last long anyway. She ended up in my bed faster than a puppy.”

Everyone blushed, except for the queen. Gabrielle felt so lightheaded, she turned around and sat down again, glad, at least, that her... She paused the thought. Her soulmate? Her brow knit. It didn't really seem to fit Xena, somehow.

Anyway. Glad at least that her queen had seemed to have recovered her spirits. Uncomfortable as it was for her, sometimes. She picked up her tea and sipped it, wishing she had a hot cup to replace it. As though someone had read her mind, the door opened and Jellaus appeared with a tray.

He came over and set it down on the table, glancing around the room. "What is it that goes on in here?" He looked quizzically at Xena and the soldiers, who were diligently searching under the bed. "And the lass outside?"

"She was under the bed." Gabrielle explained, as she swapped her cold cup for a hot one he had poured out. "Thanks for the tea." She pulled the blanket around her again as she glanced at the window. "Wow, it's really still storming outside."

"It is." Jellaus agreed. "Storming outside, and inside, I think." He poured a cup and handed it over to Xena, who had wandered over. "Xena, Brendan spoke to me. Are you sure this is the best course for you to take? Those criminals seem almost unnatural in their motives."

Xena sat down in the chair and wrapped her powerful hands around the cup to warm them. "Yes." She said, after a brief pause. "I'm what they want." She stared past them into the fire. "The longer we let this drag out, the less chance we have of coming out ahead in it. I've waited too long already."

Jellaus sighed.

"I want it over now." Xena continued. "So if the only way I can end it is to sacrifice my reputation then so be it." She looked up and over at Gabrielle. "I know what matters to me now. This." She circled her finger around her indicating the stronghold. "Isn't it."

Jellaus smiled briefly. "But Xena, what if there is some way, some hidden tunnel up here?"

Xena looked at him, and her lips twitched into a wry smile. "I'm hoping like Hades there is. But you have to make sure all of them know I think there isn't any, you got me?"

"Aye."

"They already think I'm losing it." Xena said. "They know I took myself and Gabrielle to bed drunk the other night, they know about the pig. They know about the westlanders. Now they just have to know I'm up here, scared, convinced I'm safe with my men guarding the place that I used to live in."

"Xena." Gabrielle cleared her throat. "These guys have been here for days. They know about the whole thing with Philtop. Won't they figure out you're trying to trap them anyway?"

"They might." The queen said. "But it doesn't matter, Gabrielle. Even if they think it's a trap, they'll still come after me because I've told the men to spread the word we're going to burn the lower stronghold out tomorrow morning and if it kills everyone in it, I'm all right with that."

Gabrielle blinked at her. "But you're not going to do that." She blurted out, in a tone of shocked certainty. "Xena, you can't."

Xena eased one of her legs over the chair arm, and leaned back. "Actually." She said, in a very normal tone. "I could." She took a sip of tea. "I'm capable of it. I care about what I care about. You. Him. Them." Xena pointed at Gabrielle, then Jellaus, then at the soldiers. "To rid myself of those bastards yes I would burn out the lower quarters."

Gabrielle took a breath, then just released it to trickle through her lips.

“I just don’t think it would do anything useful. They passed muster in the dining hall they’d just hide somewhere else.” The queen remarked. “I’m bloodthirsty, not stupid.” She swirled the tea in the cup. “What I want is to draw them here, and make it personal. I don’t want anyone else getting hurt or getting killed because they want to taunt me.”

A little silence fell. Then Gabrielle looked over at Xena. “You know something?”

“What?” Xena tilted her head a little, her ears catching the sounds of Brendan arriving in the other room.

“I would rather you burn out the stronghold than risk something happening to you if those guys come up here.” Gabrielle said the words slowly, and clearly, meeting the queen’s eyes squarely.

Xena regarded her in silence for a moment. “Wow.” She finally said.

“Maybe, Xena, that’s exactly what these intruders want.” Jellaus said in a gentle tone. “Don’t walk into their hands thinking the trap your own.”

Xena exhaled. “I know it’s what they want.” She admitted. “I just don’t think I have a choice.” She got up. “Let me go see what this kid was doing under my bed. Let’s get that herring out of the way at least.”

\*\*

Gabrielle was glad to be tucked back into bed, resting against several pillows in the bed she’d first known Xena in. Jellaus was perched next to her, playing a soft tune on his harp, and she had a nice big cup of freshly made hot tea on the bedside table waiting for her.

“Strange for you to be back here, Gabrielle?” Jellaus asked. “Here in what we used to call Xena’s Aerie?”

“Not really.” Gabrielle relaxed, lacing her fingers lightly on her stomach. “I like the big room downstairs but I have a lot of good memories from this one.” She admitted. “My whole life changed here, right near that fireplace.”

Jellaus smiled at her. “And her Majesty’s as well.”

“Yeah.” Gabrielle’s nose wrinkled up into a halfway embarrassed grin. “I think I didn’t realize how much until now.”

The minstrel strummed a light tune on the harp, running his fingers up the scale and plucking a gentle melody. “Nor she, I believe.” He said. “Was something that came unlooked for to her. I know she’d long past stopped expecting it.”

“Are you two talking about me?” Xena came in from the outer chamber, ending up with her knees bumping the edge of the bed and her hands coming to plant firmly on her hips.

“Yes.” Gabrielle admitted. “You’re my very favorite subject.”

“And mine as well, mistress.” Jellaus made a little bow in Xena’s direction.

The queen visibly blushed a little. “Cranks, the both of you.” She said. “Got enough pillows?” She diverted the conversation. “Now that I’m sure that little ragamuffin didn’t plant a spider bomb under the bed?”

“Runaway, eh.” Jellaus grunted. “Didn’t think that man was tough on his folk. Pity she wouldn’t speak up and say why she ran.” He swiveled to face Xena. “Strange.”

“She was scared.” Gabrielle spoke up.

“Scared.” Xena repeated the word slowly. “Scared of me? Scared of this place? Scared of being caught?”

“Scared of someone.” Gabrielle replied, in a quiet voice, as her eyes met the queen’s. “I remember what that felt like.” She could see the shifting emotions in Xena’s face. “Maybe she was running away from the same thing I wanted to get away from.”

Xena’s face shifted again, and her body posture relaxed. “Your father.”

Gabrielle nodded.

Jellaus was watching them both, his eyes going from one to the other. “He didn’t seem a man to harm his own.” He said, after a moment. “Shall I go play with them, and see if it’s so, Xena?”

“My father didn’t seem like that to anyone else either.” Gabrielle said. “The whole village liked him. He was everyone’s friend.” She paused. “Except me and Lila. I think he hated us because we weren’t sons, so..” She caught Xena’s intent, interested look. “So he was embarrassed. He said good things about us in public because he wanted to get us married but at home...”

“Ah lass.” Jellaus put a hand on hers.

“But at home, he beat us and raped Lila.” Gabrielle said, with a sense of relief that surprised her. “He beat our mother.” She added. “I hated him.”

Xena studied her somberly. “You have no idea what a disappointment it was for me to find out he was already dead.” She said. “Yeah, go see what the deal is, Jellaus. The guy didn’t strike me as a bastard either, but you never know. I find out he is, he’s going out the gate naked.”

“I will, mistress.” The minstrel got to his feet, turning and putting the harp down next to the bed. “Maybe you’d like to practice?” He offered. “Seems a nice quiet thing for you to do while you mend.”

“Quiet?” Gabrielle grimaced wryly. “I don’t want to hurt Xena’s ears. They’re really sensitive.”

Jellaus chuckled, and lifted his hand, heading for the door as Xena slid around the side of the bed and took his place on the stool. She picked up the harp and lifted it onto the bed next to Gabrielle, holding it there and scooting a little closer.

“You don’t really want to hear me play that.” Gabrielle said, with a wry expression. “I’m really awful.”

“I do.” Xena leaned on her elbows. “I don’t give a damn what it sounds like. It’s better than I could do, no matter what it is.” She said. “Only musician in the family was Ly.”

“That’s not true. You can sing.” Gabrielle objected immediately. “Xena you have the most beautiful voice I’ve ever heard.”

Xena smiled, her lashes fluttering over her eyes a little. “Thank you.” She said, in a quietly sincere voice. “Ly and I used to sing together, when we were kids. It was one way to forget how damn scared we were.” She exhaled audibly. “Crazy what happens to kids, huh?”

There was that vulnerability again. Gabrielle reached around the harp and put her hand on Xena’s arm, waiting for her to look up and gently searching the eyes that met hers, absorbing the new and open honesty there. “Yeah, it is, isn’t it?” She said. “I think that’s why I knew things were wrong, when I was so sick. They were trying to get me to go to where they said my family was... but you’re my family, Xena.”

Xena’s smile eased into a more relaxed expression. “Back at you.”

Gabrielle released her hand, and lifted hers up to the harp strings, running the tips of them over the metal strands and surprising herself with a reasonably audible chord.

She kept watching Xena’s face, and as though of their own accord, her fingers plucked out a simple tune, at first with hesitation, but then, more surely as the queen’s eyes brightened and she nodded her head a little.

Where had the tune come from? Gabrielle didn't know and it really didn't matter. Maybe all those lessons had finally kicked in. With a bit more confidence, she played another verse of the tune, and after a moment, Xena took a breath and sung along with it, putting words to the notes in harmony.

It was like magic. Gabrielle grinned in delight as she brought the tune to its conclusion, and both the harp notes and the human ones faded out into quiet. "Wow."

"That wasn't bad." Xena touched the harp. "You've been holding back on me, my love."

Gabrielle shook her head a little. "I never did that before." She said. "I mean.. I practiced it, but I..." She gently strummed the harp again, surprised at how comfortable and familiar it all felt. "I never played it straight through like that."

"I liked it."

"I liked your singing." Gabrielle said. "It's so pretty. Just like you."

Xena was leaning on the bed with her elbows, and now she smiled, the candlelight gilding her skin. Then the smile faded a little. "You know what I figured out?"

"What?" Gabrielle gently strummed the strings, watching her lover through them.

"I figured out that the people around here didn't respect you because I didn't." Xena said, in a quiet voice. "That hurt both of us."

Gabrielle tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"The names I called you. The way I talked to you." Xena said. "You might as well have been the castle dog."

Her consort remained silent for a while, considering. "You mean that muskrat thing?"

"That." Xena said. "Other stuff."

"I a.." Gabrielle paused. "I thought that meant you liked me." She added, quietly. "You didn't call anyone else anything like that."

The queen stared at the linen on the bed. "Well." She said. "I mean, it did." She admitted. "To me it did." She clarified. "It was... you're my family, Gabrielle." She looked up, watching her consort slowly nod. "That's something you only do with family."

"Yeah."

"But I shouldn't have done that in front of anyone." Xena said. "It made them not respect you."

Gabrielle lifted her hand off the harp and gently laid it against the queen's cheek. "Oh, Xe." She said. "I don't care what anyone but you thinks." She said. "Not really."

The queen remained still for a moment, then she looked up. "Yeah, I know. But I was an idiot to treat you in a way that made anyone think less of you."

Xena seemed so serious. Gabrielle let the harp lean against her to give her a better view of her lover's face. Her expression was a little sad, and she didn't like that. "I don't care." She rubbed her thumb over Xena's cheekbone. "I really don't."

The queen leaned forward and rested her head against Gabrielle's shoulder. "It'll be different." She said. "Just let me clean up this damn mess and I'll make it different. I promise."

Gabrielle touched her head to her lover's and smiled, feeling Xena's breath warm the skin on her shoulder in a moment of unexpected but perfect contentment. She decided not to tell Xena that it didn't really matter to her if she changed a thing, since this was, it seemed, something she felt strongly about.

If it made Xena happy to tell her things like that, Gabrielle was happy to hear it. "I love you." She murmured. "You've made my life so amazing."

Xena turned her head a little. "And often scary and crazy making." She seemed to regain some of her usual humor. "But never boring, right?"

"Right."

Xena took a breath to speak again, when a loud, thundering crash rumbled through the castle, bringing the queen to her feet so fast she actually hopped into the air making Gabrielle grab hastily for the harp before it tumbled off the bed "What the Hades!" She barked. "Brendan!"

Loud boots running were heard through the door, and shouts, and then another crash.

Xena took a breath, her hands clenching into loose fists near her thighs. She stared at the door, then she relaxed, walking over to where her sword was sheathed and drawing it. She brought it back over to the bed and sat back down on the stool, extending her booted legs and crossing them at the ankles and resting the point of the sword right where they crossed.

Gabrielle watched her curiously. "Aren't you going to go see what happened?"

"No." Xena leaned back against the table. "My crazy, paranoid brain is wondering if someone did that just to draw me out and leave you here. So I'm not going." She shifted her grip on the sword and leaned her elbow on the bed next to Gabrielle's. "Maybe I'll get lucky and some shifty bastard will sneak in here thinking I'd leave you unprotected in my manic frenzy."

The queen didn't look particularly manic, Gabrielle reflected. And she wasn't in a frenzy. She was just sitting there with her sword in her hands, and that made her consort feel very, very safe. "Do you really think they'd try that? I mean, even if you did go look, there are soldiers outside."

"You think I trust soldiers to guard you?" Xena turned her head and regarded her mildly. "Much as I love my army, and I do, I can beat the crap out of any of them and you know it."

"You can." Gabrielle agreed. "I watched you do it all last winter." She pointed at the ceiling. "Up there in your big room."

"You sure did." Xena said, then she fell silent her brow wrinkling. She shifted her eyes off to the right, and they went out of focus. "Huh."

Gabrielle let her think, turning her attention to the harp. She moved it to a more comfortable spot and gently plucked its strings, trying out a few chords. It was thrilling and fun for her to hear them correctly sound for once, this surprising and new skill making her heart lift.

Why this? Why now? She struck another chord, then hesitantly started plucking the notes for another one of her practice tunes.

"You know something?" Xena said, suddenly. "I know when this started. It wasn't when Philtop got here."

Gabrielle stopped playing and looked at her. "It wasn't?"

The queen shook her head. "No." She said. "The last time I was up in the practice hall... there was something." She uncrossed her ankles, drawing her knees up and putting her sword point between her feet, her hands wrapped around its hilt. "I thought I saw something... or heard something... thought someone was playing a prank or something on me."

"Wow."

"There was someone there." Xena said, positively. "I'm sure of it. I went around that place three times and searched every damn inch but..."

"You didn't find anyone?"

Xena shook her head. "But there was someone there. I.." She paused. "I sensed it." She leaned back again. "Like I can sense you."

"Me?" Gabrielle felt her sleepiness fade, intrigued at these unexpected confidences. "What do you mean?"

The queen booted the bottom of her sword a little with one foot. "I don't know. It's stupid." She muttered. "I'm starting to sound crazy."

Gabrielle reached over and put her hand on Xena's leg. "Is it like... whenever you're coming towards me, even if I'm not looking in that direction, I know you're there?"

Xena eyed her, one brow hiking up. "You do?"

"I used to think it was - I guess I thought I was seeing people around me react to you coming, so I looked up, but then one time I was alone in the courtyard, no one else was around, and I just knew you were coming up behind me and I turned around and there you were."

"You heard my boots."

Gabrielle shook her head. "No, the wind was blowing into my face, I couldn't hear anything behind me. I remember that, because they were harvesting herbs in the kitchen garden and I could smell them." She disagreed. "I just felt you."

Xena studied the hands she had clasped around her sword. "Yeah, it's like that." She said, after a long pause. "It's like you're a part of me."

"Yeah, you know, that's true." Gabrielle replied. "It's a sort of funny feeling, I can't really describe what it's like but..." She put her hand on Xena's, rubbing her thumb over the queen's knuckle. "I like it."

She watched the queen's profile, seeing a tension there that made her hitch herself up a little. "Xena?"

For a moment, Xena's expression was stark, and lost, and then she reached up with her other hand and pinched the bridge of her nose, shaking her head a little. "Yeah? Sorry." She said, taking a breath and releasing it.

"You okay?" Gabrielle asked, softly.

The outer door opened and Xena hastily drew herself up, clasping her hands on her sword hilt as boots crossed the outer hall. "Brendan?"

"Aye, mistress." Brendan's stocky form filled the doorway. "Thank the gods you and her grace came up to here. Whole glass in your rooms downstairs collapsed"

Xena blinked a few times. "Snow?"

"Ice more like." Brendan said. "Snow went to rain a bit, turned it all to ice on the top there." He turned to Gabrielle. "Woul'da come down on both of ye."

Xena nodded. "Sometimes my instincts are true." She commented. "Place wasn't safe. Should have known that when that first pane cracked. Rain means it's warming a little."

"Aye." Brendan agreed. "Circus man said they'd do another show tonight take minds off it."

"Wish I could see that." Gabrielle said, wistfully. "That was so much fun, Xena."

The queen's eyes had been scanning the room, her expression thoughtful and intent. "Yeah, it was." She replied. "Brendan, refresh my memory. Didn't that piss ass dance hall have a royal booth up on the second level, behind those dusty brown curtains?"

Brendan frowned, and his gaze dropped to the floor. "Did it now?" He muttered. "Have to say, didn't spend much time in there."

“Me either.” Xena agreed. “But I remember Stanislaus mentioning it one time. He wanted to clean it up for me.” She glanced up at Brendan, going still when she saw the expression on his face. “He check out?”

“Aye.” Brendan answered after a pause. “Twas yesterday night, Xena. One of the boys went to check on him, and..” He sighed. “Just gone. Already cold. Every one of us was so..” He stopped.

“Yeah.” Xena sighed, herself. “Damn.”

“Oh Xena.” Gabrielle felt tears stinging her eyes, even though the fussy, often disdainful Stanislaus had never been a favorite person of hers, or she of his. “I’m sorry.” She squeezed her lover’s hand in hers.

The queen returned the squeeze. “I’m sorry too.” She said. “Sorry that poor bastard got his ass caught in my business, and sorry he went like that.” Her voice faltered a little. “All alone.”

All alone, because everyone who might have cared had been completely focused on her and the terror she was going through with Gabrielle’s life in the balance. It was all about her, hadn’t she said that? Hadn’t she told Gabrielle that over and over again?

Stanislaus had known that. But if she’d taken the time to check up on him, maybe he’d still be here. Xena faced that fact with an inner pang. “Damn it. I’m too damn old to be developing a blasted conscience.” She muttered under her breath.

“Mistress?”

Xena sighed. “He gets all honors, Brendan.” She said. “If he had a family, I’d be glad to pension him, but I don’t think he did, did he?”

Brendan shook his head. “Had a brother, once, but he died in the change.”

In the change. Xena had to admit her heart, at this moment, felt leaden. She, herself, hadn’t particularly cared for the man - but he’d been very good at what he did, and she’d respected him for that and treated him as fairly as she’d been capable of.

Not a pretty epitaph. She didn’t even have the comfort of succoring a family he’d left behind. Sucked to be her at the moment, didn’t it?

A gentle squeeze on her hand made her look to her right, where Gabrielle was watching her, with an expression of heartfelt sympathy.

No, it didn’t suck to be her at the moment. Xena felt like stabbing herself in the leg, disgusted at her self centered self pity. She was the luckiest bitch in the realm and she didn’t deserve any of it. “Let’s see if we can find that alcove and get it cleaned up.” She finally said. “I want Gabrielle to enjoy her circus.”

“Xena, you don’t have to do that.” Gabrielle hitched herself up again. “We can just stay here. I’ll tell you a story.”

“Humor me.” Xena lifted their joined hands and kissed the back of Gabrielle’s. “Come watch with me. Please?” She asked, with a look of gentle entreaty.

Gabrielle really had no idea what to say to that. Xena saying please to her was really unexpected. So she just nodded, and exchanged looks with Brendan.

“I’ll take care of it, Xena.” Brendan murmured. “Let you know when it’s ready.” He turned and left, and the room grew somber and quiet again.

“Xena?” Gabrielle finally said.

“Yeah?”

“Can I give you a hug?”

Xena straightened up and looked at her. "Do I look like I need one?" Her brow arched up.

"Yeah."

Luckiest bitch in the realm. Xena leaned over and let herself be enveloped by Gabrielle's arms, feeling a warmth surround her that was part real, and part emotion, surrendering herself to the need for it. She could have gone like Stanislaus had a hundred times over and instead, she was graced with this.

Damn.

\*\*

Despite her protests, Gabrielle was really glad to be tucked into a comfortable armchair high above the dance hall with a great view of the show area.

Brendan had found the little booth, and he and four soldiers had cleaned it out and brought in the comfortable chairs in, along with a plush carpet to warm the stone floor.

So here she was, with a blanket around her and the faint murmur of the other spectators far below her, seated on the platforms that had been built for that purpose. Xena was standing behind her, talking to Brendan and Jellous, and she could see the circus people starting to practice before their show.

She let her head rest against the high back of the chair and smiled. Though staying in the tower with Xena would have been great, being here and being able to see the circus was even better and here in the stone balcony, guarded by a whole bunch of Xena's most loyal soldiers she also felt safe.

Of course, Xena was there too, in her armor, with her sword on, along with her big round knife, and daggers pretty much everywhere. Even though she had a pretty satin robe over all of it when she walked and kicked the edges up you could see her worn leather boots and the draped, lined hood over her back only partly hid the sheathed blade.

It was sort of scruffily adorable. Gabrielle, who had been described as just that on more than one occasion, smiled as she watched her lover look around, her dark head outlined against the torchlight.

Her little servant Mali was there too, tucked in a corner, her eyes bright with excitement. She was dressed in one of Gabrielle's cloaks and every once in a while she looked around her with an expression of mild amazement. "Oh, your grace!" She said, peeking over the balcony. "What are they doing there?"

Gabrielle looked out at the stage. "They're setting up to swing on those ropes there, see?" She pointed. "They swing on them, and then they jump from one to the other."

"Really?" Mali edged a little closer. "Isn't that dangerous?" She leaned her elbows on the balcony and watched the players. "Oh, look at them!"

Gabrielle tucked her blanket a little more snugly around her and leaned on the chair arm. "They juggle too and there's animals. There's a big cat, really big, and it's orange and black. Xena let it lick her hand."

Mali looked over at her, eyes wide.

"What story are you telling about me now?" Xena had heard her name, and sidled over, leaning her weight on the back of Gabrielle's chair. "Got a nice view up here?"

"Yes." Gabrielle tipped her head back a little so she could see the queen. "I was telling Mali here about that big cat"

"Ahhh." Xena peered at the action outside. "To tell you the truth, I'd forgotten all about that."

“Really?”

“Really.” The queen responded. “I got sidetracked by something a lot more important.”

Ah. Gabrielle realized what that something was, and it wasn't the bad guy. “Sorry about that.” She watched Xena's face. “Can we go see the cat again?”

“Sorry for what?” Xena ignored the presence of Mali. “Sorry that you're the focus of my life? Don't be.” She half smiled. “Maybe we can go see the big pussy later. We'll see.” She pushed herself upright and went to the balcony, leaning her hands on it and looking out.

Gabrielle turned her head to keep her in sight. She was warm, and mostly comfortable, and though her head still ached and her stomach was unsettled, she was glad to be where she was. “Hey Xena?”

“Hey Gabrielle?” Xena glanced back over her shoulder.

“What was this place?”

The queen turned and leaned against the balcony. “This room?” She indicated the small alcove. “I think I remember someone telling me that some old bastard that used to run the place lost a leg and was too embarrassed to show up in the hall but liked to watch the dancing.”

“Your Majesty?” Mali spoke up timidly. “Is it the old king's father you speak of?” She said. “Radulph the Bold?”

Xena's pale eyes turned to her, and she studied her consort's body slave for a long moment. “You know something about him?”

“Only what we.. what I would hear down in the slaves quarters.” Mali said. “They were talking before, about how this place we're in was someplace he would go to.”

“Uh huh.” Xena folded her arms. “And”

Mali looked apprehensive. “That he was missing a leg, that is true, but also that he..” She glanced at Gabrielle. “He lost it in fighting a dragon!”

“Really?” Gabrielle said. “A dragon?” She brightened. “I've heard stories of those.”

Xena's eyebrow hiked up.

“A dragon, your grace!” Mali said earnestly. “And I heard.. he would stay up here because the dragon bit him in the face and it looked so horrible he didn't want anyone to see him.”

“Wow.” Gabrielle immediately felt herself attracted to the story, her mind splurting up thoughts and images and questions about what that would have been like. “That's so sad, isn't it Xena?”

Xena had meandered back over to lean on the back of Gabrielle's chair again. She tried to remember what she'd heard about the old man of the bastard she'd killed and she realized there wasn't much. They'd talked about the son, the guy she'd offed, but not so much about his predecessor. “If it happened.” She responded.

“Everyone knows the story, your Majesty.” Mali said.

“They do, huh?” The queen studied her. “Funny I never heard it before.”

“I don't know, your Majesty.” Mali responded. “I remember hearing it since I was small.”

Now that was interesting. Xena looked at the kid for probably the first time, at least since she'd scoured her background before she'd let her spend time in Gabrielle's presence. She was open and apparently honest, not the brightest of girls but not an idiot either.

“Is there someone who knows the whole story?” Gabrielle asked. “Can they come here and tell it to us? I'd love to hear it. I can't hardly imagine a dragon. Have you see them, Xena?” She looked up at her lover. “I bet you could beat one up.”

“Nope.” Xena said. “But y’know something? I’d like to hear that story.” She focused on Mali. “So why don’t you go downstairs, and find some old geezer who can tell it to me, mkay?”

Mali looked nervous. “Everyone’s really busy.”

“Too busy to come up and talk to the queen?” Xena’s eyes widened in mock astonishment. “Unbelievable!”

The girl got up. “No, I’m... I’m sure they’ll be glad to come tell you.” She said. “Your grace, can I bring you something back?” She said. “Some tea?”

“Tea sounds good.” Gabrielle admitted. “I feel kinda yucky.”

Xena came around the side of the chair and knelt at her side. “Want to go back to the tower?” She asked putting a hand on Gabrielle’s cheek, then touching her forehead. “No fever at least.”

“I want to see the circus.” Gabrielle said. “I’m okay.” She tucked the blanket around her a little more. “Some berries, or sweetcake would be great.” And mild enough for her unhappy stomach, she reasoned, though even if that wasn’t true, she knew they wouldn’t go to waste if Xena was around.

“Bring the tea and the taleteller.” Xena ordered Mali. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Majesty.” Mali made her a neat curtsy then she pattered out the door, turning right and heading for the back staircase down to the center of the stronghold.

Xena waited a moment, then she went to the door herself and stuck her head out. “C’mere.” She beckoned one of her guard over.

“Mistress.” It was Brent. “What can I do to serve you?”

“Go down to the merchant hall.” Xena said. “Get me a bunch of whatever goodies they have down there. Cakes or whatever.”

“Of course.” Brent smiled tentatively. “It’s good to see the little one about.”

Xena gave him a long look, then, she smiled back. “Yeah.”

He turned and went for the stairs, trotting down them out of her sight before she could say any more.

Good man, Brent. Xena pulled her head back inside and went over to Gabrielle’s chair, taking a seat herself on a padded stool next to it. She extended her legs out and crossed them at the ankles, resting her elbow on the chair arm.

Immediately, she felt her arm enveloped by warmth, and she glanced to the side to see Gabrielle’s hands wrapped around it as her consort shifted a little and rested her cheek against her shoulder. “You okay?” She asked, feeling more than a little anxious.

“Now I’m perfect” Gabrielle said, snuggling closer. “I’m okay. I just feel kind of ratty all over. Things hurt.” She said. “My backs sore, and my head.”

Xena sighed. “I can’t give you pain herbs.” She said. “I’m afraid you’re head’s still rattled.”

“Ugh.”

“Sorry, honey.” Xena paused, and made a face. “Where in Hades is all this damn gush coming from?” She inquired in an aggrieved tone. “I’m starting to sound like an old grandmother.”

“I love you.” Gabrielle stroked the queen’s arm. “Just being here next to you makes me feel better. I don’t care if you do sound like a grandmother.”

Xena made a low, grunting noise.

“Do you think the bad guys will come up here?” Gabrielle asked, in a whisper.

"I don't think so." Xena whispered back. "I've got too many soldiers out there."

There were, Gabrielle knew. Probably two dozen at least, in the small hallway with guards on both ends, and at the bottom of the only steps that led up to where they were. Plus, of course, Xena herself was here with her, the queen's sword and chakram leaning against the stool she was sitting on.

So it felt pretty safe. Gabrielle turned her attention to the hall, seeing the circus people starting to move out into position. She was glad she was here. She figured the acrobats and the animals would take her mind off her aches and maybe, if she was lucky, she'd get some honeycake to settle her stomach.

She watched the horses come out, feeling Xena shift next to her, craning her neck to watch. She shifted her hands, tucking her fingers around the queen's arm and let herself become absorbed with the show. "Oh look, Xena. They didn't do that the other time, did they?"

Xena felt her eyes widen, as she watched the two men standing up on the backs of their horses, swordfighting with each other. "No... I would have remembered that." She said. "I think."

A soft knock came at the door. Xena reached out and took hold of her chakram, then cleared her throat. "C'mon in." She called out, half turning to watch the door open, yet leaving her arm in Gabrielle's grip.

The big, heavy wooden door opened, and Brent poked his head in. "Mistress?" He called out cautiously. "It's Brent."

"Ah, how well he knows me." Xena chuckled briefly. "You're safe." She released the chakram as he entered and brought a basket over. "What'dja find?"

Brent crouched down next to her. "Mess of stuff."

Gabrielle craned her head a little to see what the stuff was. She wasn't exactly hungry, but she could smell some sweet, rich scents coming from the basket that was getting her interested. She glanced back at the show, then back at the basket, only to have something touched to her lips. "Oh."

It smelled of honey and apple, and she closed her teeth on it and chewed. "That's really good." She swallowed and turned her attention fully to what her lover was sorting through. "Is there more?"

"Ahh." Xena looked delighted. "There sure is." She removed a slice of the confection and handed it over. "Glad you want some."

Gabrielle did. She settled back in her chair and broke off a piece of the cake, watching the horses dance between two poles down on the floor.

"Have some late harvest cider, Mistress." Brent said. "Good tasting."

"Did you drink some?" Xena chuckled.

"Ate all of what's in the basket, mistress." Brent said, in a casual tone. "S'what took me so long."

Xena paused and studied him. "Thanks Brent." She said, after a bit of silence. "I appreciate that. Not so much for my sake."

"No, mistress." Brent smiled. "I saw you have some of that apple cake first."

Gabrielle looked at Xena, then at Brent, and both of them smiled a particular, half embarrassed smile back at her. "Well." She said. "I guess I'm eating the most of it then cause of something happens I want to be involved."

Brent handed her a cup of cider. "Would be the honor of my life to share a fate of yours, Gabrielle."

“Hey. What about me?” Xena felt a sense of giddiness that had nothing to do with the cider, or the situation, as she watched her consort take a sip of the drink and noted the alertness starting to come back into Gabrielle’s expression. Though it had been good to have her here, and watching the show, there had been a layer of glassiness to her eyes that put the queen’s guts churning.

Now that was fading. Xena had brought her up here and hoped the circus would help, but she’d take her wins however she could get them. “Ah.” She drew her hand out of the basket. “Honey balls.”

“Yeah?” Gabrielle was finishing the cake. “The messy kind?”

Xena held up a thumb covered in honey, not expecting Gabrielle to lean right over and suck on it. “Hey!”

“Mm.” Gabrielle leaned her head against Xena’s shoulder and savored the rich taste.

Brent chuckled.

Xena let her own head rest against Gabrielle’s and closed her eyes briefly, unable to put aside the poignantly horrific reminder of what she’d almost lost, her breathing coming short and rough for a moment.

“Xena?” Gabrielle murmured into her ear. “What’s wrong? Did I bite you?”

The queen exhaled. “Sorry.” She let her eyes blink open. “Go ahead, bite me again.” She fished in the basket, and came up with one of the goopy treats. “Here.”

She glanced at Gabrielle, then immediately regretted it when she saw those pale eyes at very close quarters, full of worry and concern.

For her.

Xena could feel the caring and her heart clenched. What would she have done, if she’d lost this? A faint roaring started in her ears. If she’d been sitting here, all alone?

A soft knock came at the door. Brent stood up and went to answer it, drawing his sword and holding it behind his thigh as he blocked the portal with one boot while opening it.

“Are you okay?” Gabrielle asked.

Was she? Xena felt her body relax a little. “Yeah.” She said. “Haven’t gotten over you scaring the socks off me.” She reached up and rubbed her chest, which was full of a twinging pain. “Maybe I need some of that cider.”

Gabrielle brought her cup over and held it to her lover’s lips, watching her profile as she took a mouthful of it. She released the cup as Xena took hold of it, and gently smoothed the hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ear. She waited until the color came back into the queen’s face, then she broke the honey ball in half, and offered a portion to her. “Here.”

“Aren’t I supposed to be fawning over you?”

“Your grace?” Mali appeared on her other side, with a tray. “Here’s some tea for you... uh.. and her Majesty.” She put the tray down. “The cook said he would come up if your Majesty wishes, and tell the story about the old king.”

Xena straightened up. “Yeah?” She collected herself with an effort. “Great.”

“Thanks Mali.” Gabrielle leaned back against the back of her chair again, keeping her hand tucked around Xena’s arm. “That would be great if he could do that after the circus. Right Xena?”

“Sure.”

“Shall I tell him that, your Grace?” Mali looked uneasily at the queen’s still face.

Gabrielle waited, then she nodded. “Could you please? I know we’d love to hear it.”

Mali curtsied, and left.

“Oh, Xena, look.” Gabrielle gently nudged her. “Look at the horses.” She indicated the floor, where six of the animals were trotted in a circle in unison, while the riders walked across their backs. “Isn’t that amazing?”

After a moment, Xena lifted her eyes and peered across the room. She felt Gabrielle’s fingers gently stroking her skin, and finally the gray haze lifted. The sound of the room flooded into her ears, and she could appreciate the skill of the riders. “That’s pretty damn good.”

Gabrielle relaxed. “How do they do that? Make the horses go like that?”

“Practice, like anything else.” Xena got her scattered wits collected and offered up another honey ball. “They probably train them inside a small corral.” She took a ball herself and bit into it, chewing the pastry thoughtfully. “Sorry if I freaked you out.”

“It’s okay.” Gabrielle took a little more of the cider. “I know you must have been really upset, Xena. I sort of could feel that.”

“Could you?” Xena found a pear in the basket, and took a bite of it. “Yeah, well, I was.” She bit off a chunk and handed it over. “Anyway, let’s try to forget that.” She looked out at the circus. “Here come your little buddies.”

Gabrielle took the piece of pear and nibbled it. The acrobats were scaling their tower, and she could sense the excitement of the crowd. She watched them get to the top, and one of them, Zak, she thought, got onto his ropes and started swinging.

After a moment, she looked at Xena, really unsurprised to find Xena looking at her. She remained that way, in silence, then as if by common consent they leaned towards each other and kissed.

Then, finally, when they took a break and backed off to regard each other, Xena smiled. “Thanks.”

Gabrielle smiled back. Then she let her gaze return to the acrobats, content to watch them as she felt Xena’s arm slip around her shoulders. It felt warm and good, and grounding in this odd and strange atmosphere she found herself in.

What would happen? Where were the bad guys? Were they out there, in the hall, watching them?

Were the bad guys here, really part of what she’d heard in the gray place?

She watched Zak reach his hands out, and catch his brother, who was spinning through the air, fearless of the drop to the ground, trusting the grab completely.

Everyone was amazed. The crowd roared. Gabrielle could see the wide eyes, and pointing fingers and... “Xena?”

“Hm?”

“Look down there, behind that wooden box. See the guy there?” She pointed, herself. “See him? He’s wearing those slippers, Xena, the ones you made me p..” She stopped speaking, as a flicker of motion to her right turned into a powerful surge, as Xena picked up her chakram and released it in an impossibly fast backhanded move.

Not even the space of a heartbeat.

\*\*

No thought, no planning, just the savage power of a weapon thrown by a strong hand, backed with an intense passion. The chakram slashed through the acrobat’s structure, skimming Zak’s leg by a hair and squeezing between one of the grooms and one of the horses to bury itself into a man’s skull with a hard, cracking sound.

Blood flew everywhere. Bone flew everywhere.

The fiddler stopped abruptly, and a woman screamed, then everyone panicked, the players running away from the falling body and the acrobats swarming down their ropes. The audience reacted, getting up and scrambling away from the stage, stampeding through each other heedlessly.

“Huh.” Xena brushed her hands off and stood up. “Be right back. Brent, watch her please.”

“With my life, mistress.” Brent answered quietly.

Xena put her hands on the balcony and vaulted over it, disappearing into space as Gabrielle made a grab for her leg. “Xena!” Her consort yelled. “Hey! Wait!”

She and Brent both put their hands on the wall and looked over as Xena landed on the top platform of seats, scattering people right and left as she powered her way towards the stage.

“Brent, we should go help her.” Gabrielle said. “The bad guys could hurt her in all that mess.” She watched anxiously as her lover got to the performance area.

“Be easy, your grace.” Brent said. “My partner’s down there. He’ll watch out for her.” He pointed at the entrance, where a flood of men in Xena’s black and yellow were pouring. “And some of the boys, as well.”

That didn’t make Gabrielle feel any better. She could see Xena’s tall form in a swarm of bodies now, Brendan shoving his way up next to her but she could sense the danger in the room and it almost made her ignore the sound of the door opening behind her.

Almost.

Brent didn’t ignore it. He came up from his crouch, drawing his sword and circling the chairs and in the next second, the balcony was filled with struggling forms as he got between the door and Gabrielle’s chair and faced off against two black clad figures with curved blades and hooded faces.

Gabrielle felt a cold wash of fear come over her and she got up, holding onto the chair for balance to see what was going on. She spotted Brent fighting with two figures in the shadows and she let out a yell of alarm as one of them dodged his grab and came at her.

The other man engaged Brent furiously, trapping him between the chair and wall with a flurry of sword strokes and Gabrielle realized in a blink she was in some real trouble.

Without really thinking she reached for the spear Brent had left leaning against the wall and pulled it to her, getting it up and into position just as the dark figure reached her and swung his scimitar right at her, aiming for her neck.

The spear? Useless, mostly. Despite Xena’s long and patient training, she had no more real idea of how to use the big stick than she had on the very first day she’d been given it. Not really. When they trained together, she sometimes did things right with it but more often Xena would just laugh and shake her head and go off to do something a lot harder.

But here she was, here it was, here was this guy coming towards her with a knife.

No time to think. No time to plan. She felt her body react as the figure’s arm swept towards her with the glitter of a blade, and the next thing she felt was the odd shock as wood hit steel and the blade flashed past her as she turned and whacked the other end of the spear against the shrouded head of her attacker.

Much to her surprise, the figure stumbled to one side and then the butt end of her spear swept out and pulled it’s legs out from under it and her adversary was upended and sailed through the air, smacking it’s head against the wall.

In an instant, Brent was on it, another flash of steel his dagger going home into the black clad figure, letting out a bellow of triumph just as the light from the outer room was blocked out by another dark figure swarming up over the wall.

Another enemy? Gabrielle started to turn and then that feeling washed over her, that sense of presence, and familiarity that she knew so well and her body relaxed.

No bad guy. She was safe.

“Gabrielle!” Xena’s yell easily overpowered Brents, as the queen vaulted into the room and drew her sword, circling it as her head whipped back and forth, searching for her consort. “Gabrielle!”

“Here!” Gabrielle managed to blurt, her brow creasing at the figure on the floor. “I’m okay!”

“It’s all right, mistress!” Brent panted. “Two of em! Barstards! But I got one and her grace got the other.”

Xena had circled the chair and was intaking a deep breath to continue yelling when she stopped. “What?” She asked, in a more normal tone. “She what?”

Brent straightened up. “Got that one.” He pointed his blood covered dagger at the slumped figure behind him. “And her grace took out this un. I just finished the job.” He pointed at the other body. “Was out already, head cracked like.”

Xena looked at the form, then at her consort, who was leaning back against the wall, the spear clutched in both hands. “You did that?” She asked, in a quizzical tone.

Gabrielle felt little shivers going up and down her arms and legs, as her heartbeat slowed. “I think so.”

Brent went over to the door and yanked it open. “Where the Hades are the guard, you bastards!”

Xena sheathed her sword and went over to where Gabrielle was standing. “Divide and conquer.” She said, dourly. “They all ran down to try and save my hoary old ass when I jumped out the window like an idiot.” She put her hand on her consort’s shoulder. “Are you all right?”

Gabrielle had put the butt of the spear down on the ground and was leaning on it. “Sort of dizzy.” She admitted.

Xena got her back to her seat, after carefully extracting the spear from her hands and leaning it against the wall. She tucked the blanket back around her, ignoring everything else in the room including Brendan bustling inside and the sound of the troops arriving back at the door.

“Got that body secured, Xena.” Brendan said. “Scared the living out of them little circus boys, ye did. And this here.” He held up the chakram. “Didn’t want no one touching it.”

“Thanks.” Xena took the weapon and inspected it. “Nailed that sucker.” She said. “Thanks, Gabrielle. You spotted him right before the little son of a bitch was about to cut those ropes.”

Gabrielle inhaled sharply. “Really?”

“Really.” Xena was still kneeling next to her. Now she put a hand on Gabrielle’s knee. “You saved those kid’s lives, my love. Really.” She rubbed the skin under the blanket. “He wasn’t expecting anyone to be up here. You could only see him from this angle, and you did.”

Brendan and Brent were kneeling together by the bodies, stripping off their robes. “Here, Xena.” Brendan said. “Same as the one below. House livery.”

Xena looked past the chair. “Damn it.”

Gabrielle turned around and looked, seeing familiar colors on the body. “Who is it?”

“One of the kitchen help.” Brent answered, briefly. “I don’t understand it.”

“And the other?” Xena was still crouching down next to Gabrielle. “The one Gabrielle clobbered?”

Brent went over and pulled the hood off. He studied the man’s face for a minute, then snorted. “Westlander.” He said. “Brendan, what about the one down there?”

“That one was a stranger.” Xena replied. “At least, neither of us knew him.”

They all exhaled at roughly the same time. “Feels good to get a blade on em.” Brent said. “No more phantoms. Frontal work. I like this.”

“Aye.” Brendan agreed. “Got bold, or maybe figured they’d be flushed.”

“Hm.” Xena grunted. “In general, I just like killing people.” She remarked. “But it was damn good to kill that one.” She glanced at Gabrielle. “So.”

“So.” Gabrielle felt exhausted from the effort.

Brendan went to the opening and looked out. The crowd was milling nervously, looking up at the balcony as the circus group huddled together on the stage. He lifted his hand and moved his fist in a circle, and Xena’s soldiers still on the floor started directing people back to the seats. “All’s done.” He called out. “Garbage to the middens.”

Immediately, the sound of the crowd increased, as voices rose and the guests started reluctantly straggling back to their seats.

“So. Tell me about this fight of yours.” Xena said, resting her arms on Gabrielle’s thighs. “Did that guy come after you?”

Gabrielle nodded.

“And?”

And? Gabrielle felt her limbs stop shaking and she let her head rest back against the chair. “And... I don’t know, Xena. I just picked up that spear and I guess.... I guess all the stuff you taught me just bubbled up.”

Xena studied her. “Bubbled up?”

“I just did it.” Her consort explained, somewhat helplessly. “I don’t know.”

The queen smiled at her. “That’s just the right answer, my friend. How much thinking do you think I did before I sent this deadly dinner plate out there?” She held up the chakram. “I wont’ keep ya in suspense. None.”

“None.” Gabrielle murmured.

“None.” Xena repeated. “My eyes saw the guy, my ears heard what you said, my hand reacted. There was no decision making involved. I trusted my instincts.” She put the chakram down and put her hand back on Gabrielle’s leg. “If you just swung that stick in the right place at the right time and have no clue how ya did it... you just made me the happiest homicidal maniac in the realm.”

“Uh.” Gabrielle covered Xena’s hands with her own. “Okay. I guess I’m glad.” She said. “So.. did we get all the bad guys? Are we okay now.. oh.” She watched Xena shake her head. “Guess it couldn’t really be that easy, huh?”

A timid knock came at the door, and Brendan crossed quickly over to answer it. He opened the door with Brent slipping in behind him, sword raised. “Ah.” Brendan took a step back, but only a step. “Mistress, tiss her Grace’s servant.”

“Does she have a cook with her?” Xena asked. “From our kitchen?”

“Aye.” Brendan sounded surprised.

“Let em in.” Xena got up and then settled herself on the chair arm, holding the chakram in one hand, still spattered and stained with blood and hair. “Let’s see what story the old man has to tell.”

Brendan and Brent stepped back and let Mali enter. Her eyes were huge and filled with fear, and she stared at the bodies on the floor before she looked up at Xena. “Your Majesty.”

“That’d be me.” Xena was in a much better humor now. She twirled the chakram on one finger, sending bits of dead skin flying in all directions.

Gabrielle grimaced. “Xena.”

“What?” The queen looked down at her.

“That’s gross.”

Xena took a breath, then studied the weapon, and hastily brushed some debris off her consort’s shoulder. “Sorry about that.”

Behind Mali was a heavy shouldered, thickly bearded man. He stood silently, not looking at the floor, or at the queen. His expression was a mixture of resentment and wariness that immediately drew Xena’s attention.

She got up off the chair arm and approached him. “Well well.” She studied him. “I hear you’ve got a story to tell us.”

“Not one you’s want to hear.” The man muttered, keeping his gaze on the floor.

“You’d be surprised.” Xena seated herself on one of the stools, and motioned him to take the other. “Don’t worry about the mess here.” She rested her elbows on her knees. “Start talking.”

Mali scurried around to the other side of Gabrielle’s chair and crouched next to her. “Oh, your grace! What happened!!!” She whispered. “What happened to Gilford? Why is he here?”

“Well.” Gabrielle was torn between wanting to listen to the story, and comforting her scared servant. “He came in here and started fighting with Brent. He tried to hurt us.”

Mali’s eyes grew even wider. “Gilford?”

Gabrielle nodded. “And the other guy was one of Philtop’s people.” She watched Mali’s face as her eyes went to the body on the floor. “So it seems whatever is going in, involves people we know.” She waited, as the girl’s head turned again and their eyes met. “Do you know what it’s about, Mali?” She lowered her voice. “If you do, you should say so.”

Mali stared at her.

“People can’t keep trying to hurt us.” Gabrielle said, in a gentle tone. “They’ll just keep getting hurt themselves, you know that, Mali.”

Behind them, the cook grudgingly started his story, his low, gravelly voice rumbling and almost harsh. He paused, when Brent picked up the Westlander’s body and slung it over his shoulder, murmuring to Brendan as the older man opened the door for him.

“Your grace.” Mali whispered. “I can’t tell you.”

Gabrielle leaned forward. “You should.” She murmured back. “The Westlanders were from the last regime, the tunnels were, and you are too. Xena knows that.”

Mali turned pale. “I.. your grace, I can’t tell because I don’t know!” She said. “They won’t tell us, not the younger ones.” She lowered her voice even further. “We’re all scared!”

“Hey.” Xena reached around the chair and touched Gabrielle’s arm. “Listen to this. This guy’s got no idea how to tell a story.” She got up and put her hands on the chair back. “Hang on.”

Gabrielle hastily grabbed the chair arms as she felt herself lifted up in the air and turned so she could see the cook. The man glowered at her and took a step back, watching warily as Xena came around and took her seat again. “G’wan.” She gestured at him.

Mali crept over to the corner, and sat down, edging away from the bloodstains on the stone floor. She pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, avoiding looking at either the cook, or Xena.

“Told you wasn’t much to tell.” The man said. “m’father was a cook in the old king’s kitchen. Used to keep us kids shut up with crazy stories.”

“About dragons?” Gabrielle asked. “Is that what the story was about, that the old king fought a dragon?”

The man shrugged. “Lost ‘is leg somewhat.” He said. “Face was all scarred up too.”

“I could do that.” Xena had finished cleaning her chakram, and set it onto it’s hook. “Doesn’t take a made up animal. Just a sword and a knife.”

The man shrugged again. “Was as we heard it.” He said. “Word was, the old king gave up his looks and all, to save the realm from the dragon. Seemed was a good sort.”

“Had a crappy son.” The queen commented.

The man stared at her.

“He did. The coward ran from me and hid in a pile of cow manure.” Xena said. “Wasn’t worth the chintzy gold crown around his neck.”

“Huh. You’re meaning that one.” The cook muttered. “Aye, probably.”

Xena cocked her head to one side. “So that’s all you’ve got to say, huh?” She watched him nod. “Okay, Brent, take him back downstairs. I’ve heard all I want to for tonight. Sounds like a bunch of crap anyway.”

“Aye, mistress.” Brent took the man by the arm.

“You.” Xena pointed at Mali. “Go finish sorting out Gabrielle’s rooms. I don’t want a single hairball or spider in there. Got me?”

“Majesty.” Mali got up and followed Brent and the cook out, as Brendan went with them, closing the door and bracing himself against it, his sword scraping against the wood on the other side.

Xena regarded her consort. “What do you think?”

Gabrielle shifted in her chair and slowly rocked her head from side to side. “I think my head feels better.” She said. “Xena, I think Mali knows something.”

“Oh really?” The queen gave her a very droll look.

“Really. I think her family maybe was here for a long time, and they know stuff.” Gabrielle missed the sarcasm. “I mean, look, there’s that guy from the kitchens, and th...” She stopped talking, as Xena’s long fingers very gently covered her mouth.

The queen slowly leaned forward until her mouth was right near Gabrielle’s ear. “I got it.” She whispered. “I figured out why Philtop showed up here, and why scumbags could somehow hide inside corners and cracks in my castle without me finding them.”

Gabrielle looked at her in question, since her lips were still covered.

“I figured out why someone’s going around the place telling people about some old king who fought dragons to save his people.” The queen went on. “I just never expected these stinking sheep to try and usurp me. My bad.” She released her consort’s mouth.

They looked at each other.

“Not everyone.” Gabrielle said, positively.

“No.” Xena agreed. “But the question is, do they have someone to put in my place.” She studied her hands thoughtfully. “More importantly, do I want to let them?”

“Let them?” Gabrielle leaned on the chair arm nearest her.

Xena slowly nodded. "There's a plan here. Lot of people in on it. All those bastards hiding, someone had to be helping them." She pointed at the floor. "Cooks from downstairs, and servants from Philtop's lands." She gazed somberly at her consort. "Maybe I should let them get away with it. You want to go off with me, Gabrielle? Go into exile?"

Gabrielle blinked. "Can we go on that boat?" She asked. "We could take Patches and Tiger, right? Some of the guys might want to go with us too, Xena. We could.." She stopped, her mouth covered again.

"Thanks for the answer." Xena said. "Part of me wants to get mad and kick everyone's ass over this. But part of me.." She exhaled a little. "Part of me wants to just run. Go see what's out there."

Her consort lifted her hand and gently moved the fingers blocking her speech. "Wherever you go, I go." She said. "It doesn't matter where it is."

Xena smiled, then let her head drop, as she studied her now clasped hands. "I'll hold you to that, Gabrielle." She said. "Let's just see what happens."

\*\*

They were back in Xena's old chambers, now conspicuously very clean, and swarming with Xena's soldiers tucked in every nook and cranny.

It was strange, and Gabrielle could feel the uneasy energy in the men as they walked quietly up the steps and two of the soldiers opened the doors for them.

Inside, in the outer chamber, Brendan was waiting along with Duke Lastay, a bunch of the other nobles, and a dozen or so of Xena's senior officers. Everyone looked serious. Xena waved them all towards the doors at the far end of the room, and the soldiers hurried over there to open them up.

Beyond that was the big council chamber the queen had once used for audiences and she followed the crowd inside, her arm tucked securely around Gabrielle's body. "You doing okay?" She asked, just as they reached the doors.

"I'm okay." Gabrielle was really tired, and achy, but she also really didn't want to miss anything. "My head hurts." She admitted, after a pause. "But I want to stay with you."

"Hope you'd say that." Xena saw her settled into one of the two seats at the head of the table. "This won't take long. Then I can tuck you into bed."

It sounded a little odd to hear Xena talking like that, in that quiet, private tone usually reserved for when they were alone together. But then, Xena seemed to be very somber, taking a seat in the big chair next to hers and folding her powerful hands on the table. "Sit down."

Everyone did.

"Okay people." Xena said. "We finally put a hurt on my enemy here, thanks to Gabrielle." She said. "My question to you is, are they your enemies too?" She slowly scanned the room. "No time for lies here. I know there's a faction trying to usurp me. Probably with a bastard of the old line. "

Everyone looked at each other then back at her. "Mistress." Lastay said. "Your enemies are my enemies. Did they not try to kill me and my wife?" He asked, in a somewhat plaintive voice. "Who are these people? I have not heard of any plots."

Xena studied him, then smiled faintly. "I'll take that as a compliment. Or maybe you should" She said. "Because it means whoever this is knows where you stand. They'd have tried to suck you in otherwise, like they did before."

Lastay consider that, then nodded. "That is true. The whispers no longer reach me." Now he smiled briefly. "I like it that way."

"Xena." Brendan leaned forward "What makes ye so sure it's someone from the old line? Been many a year you've been on the throne here."

"I wasn't sure until I splatted the bastard in there. Then it all tied together. Philtop's coming here, the old tunnels we never knew about, stories about the former king here who fought dragons and lost a leg doing it." Xena ticked off the items on her fingers. "Same question occurred to me too. Why now? Well, why now? Why not now? I took this place from marginal badlands to prosperity. Then I beat the crap out of an old enemy of not only this realm but everyone else's around here and given them a good reason to come back and get me. What better time to boot me out, so when the Persians do finally show up all they need to do is show them my head and offer them tribute."

"You think they're behind the usurper?" Lastay mused. "Aye, it could be. Heard from Philtop's people about them trying to buy alliances rather than fight us direct."

"Yeah." Xena agreed. "So back to my original question." She scanned the room again. "You want me to let them?"

Everyone stared at her in silence.

"What?" Lastay finally said. "Do you mean?"

Xena looked down at her hands. "I've had a good run here. I've got enough put away to last me and Gabrielle a while. We could just take off and go places together. I don't need to be queen. Not anymore." She glanced to her left, where Gabrielle was seated. "It's just not important to me."

One of the nobles stood up. "Your majesty." He said. "Are you saying you'll abdicate?" His voice was almost squeaking with disbelief. "Just so?"

"Yes, Edgar." Xena replied. "If that's what you all want, I'll do it." She tapped her thumbs together. "Sorry to make it all seem so easy, after all those years of plotting and planning and trying to kill me, but there you have it." She leaned back and propped her knee against the table, reaching over and clasping Gabrielle's hand in hers. "Rather not have anyone else croak. So let me know."

Gabrielle thought everyone in the room except for her and Xena was freaking out. And even she was freaking out a little, because Xena seemed very serious about it, and she realized there was a good chance she and Xena would end up walking out of the castle with maybe a few bags, and Patches and Tiger with them.

What did she really think about that? Gabrielle watched the faces around the table, and saw a mixture of shock and .. was it disappointment? There wasn't any sense of triumph, or expressions of happiness at Xena's words. Part of her was excited about the prospect of seeing the world – she didn't deny that – and it was very true that wherever Xena was, that was her home. But she was also human enough to know she appreciated the privileged life she'd come to lead and this new one would be much harder.

Well, maybe they could take that nice wagon with the bed with them. It would be all right for Xena to sleep in so long as they weren't moving. And they could have that beautiful tent, with the little brazier in the center and the furs.

Hm.

"What do you think, Gabrielle?" Xena asked, squeezing her fingers.

"Where you go, I go." Gabrielle answered as naturally as breathing, not really even having to think it through. "Even if that wherever is the ends of the earth, or Tartarus." She felt the faint tremor in Xena's fingers. "All I need in the world is you."

Xena smiled. "And sweetcakes." She demurred, blushing just a little. After a long silence, she looked up again. "So." She said. "It's in your hands." She got up. "You've got till morning to let me know."

"Xena." Brendan stood up. "You know where I stand. Have no need to wait for morning."

"I know, old friend. I know." The queen responded quietly. "Before I give up the crown I'll take care of all of you. I promise it." She said. "Settle the lot of you on land near the port city. Make sure you've got what you need."

Gabrielle thought maybe Brendan was going to start crying. He had that look, and she felt herself like bursting into tears just from the gentle tone of Xena's voice. She reached over and held on to the queen's arm, glad when she side stepped over closer.

"C'mon, my love." Xena gently assisted her to her feet. "In to bed with you."

There was a shuffle of noise and Xena quickly looked up, only to find everyone else in the room quietly standing. She guided Gabrielle out, as Lastay slipped over to open the door for them. "Thanks."

"Mistress." Lastay said, easily. "I too will recuse myself, as my sword, and my heart, are likewise given."

Xena gave him a slap on the shoulder as she went through the door, leaving the silent crowd behind her. She wasn't surprised, though, when she heard footsteps following her and then the door close, and found Lastay and Brendan at her side. "So how much of an idiot am I?" She asked after a few steps.

"Not at all." Lastay said, crisply. "Were it me who discovered, after all that has happened, after everything that has gone on, that there are those here conspiring to murder me and my loved ones so they can take advantage of my excellent stewardship of the land I do believe I'd have run verily amok."

Xena eyed him. "Feel free." She offered. "I'd love to watch."

Brendan chuckled shortly. Then he fell silent as he fell in alongside Gabrielle. "Comes to a point you just get tired." He said, as they crossed the outer chambers and entered the inner one, where four soldiers were waiting. "Too much. Yeah?"

"Yeah." Xena agreed. She nudged her consort over to the bed and helped her to sit down in it. "I've got a cup of herbs I think you can take now." She settled Gabrielle against the pillows. "You up for it?" She watched Gabrielle watch her as she pushed the pale hair back off her consort's head, laying her palm against it. "No fever. That's good."

"Know what I really want?" The gentle green orbs studied her.

Xena peered back, then she looked around at the soldiers, and Brendan and Lastay. "Gabbbrrrielle." She rolled the name on her tongue. "Not in front of the men they'll grow hair on their hands and go blind." She drawled. "C'mon now."

Gabrielle grinned suddenly, very very glad to hear the black humor return, even if it was at her expense. "Besides that." She said. "I'd really like some warm milk and honey if there is any."

The queen nodded, with a pleased expression. "We'll get ya some if I have to go milk the cow myself." She said, standing up. She hardly managed to turn, before two of the soldiers were bolting for the back stairwell, powering through the door and clattering down the steps together. "Or maybe I won't have to." She remarked. "Hey! Don't bring the damn cow up here!"

She went over to one of the big chairs next to the fire and stood there a moment, then picked up her herbal kit and opened it up. "Yknow, it's true." She said, after a brief pause.

"Mistress?" Lastay cocked his head at her.

"I did the best I could for this place." Xena mixed a couple of herbs with expert fingers. "I made it prosperous, I protected it, I defended it at the risk of my own hoary old ass." She slowly poured a little sweet fig wine over the herbs, and stirred them before she brought the cup back to the bed. "Nothing's good enough for these bastards I guess."

Lastay seated himself on a low stool near the bed. "I think it's a bit of willful blindness. I heard some of the stories they were telling yesterday, about the old days." He clasped his big hands together. "Well, Mistress, I'm no child. I remember those old days, only I remember them a bit different than they do."

Xena chuckled softly. She sat down on the edge of the bed and offered her concoction up to her consort.

"I remember the last big sickness before you came." Lastay said. "They turned everyone out of the stronghold. Men. Women. Children. Into the snow. You saw the bodies sticking up out of it, a hand. Maybe a foot." He exhaled. "And the king sent soldiers out, to gather in all the supplies of herbs we all had, to make sure he was safe. Never mind the rest of us."

Xena was watching him, listening quietly.

"This is my second wife, did you know?" Lastay looked over at her. "He took my first wife. Liked her looks. Bedded her for a while, then she died in childbirth not long after." He sighed a little. "Pretty woman she was. Made what you did, rescuing my lady wife now all the more precious to me."

"Don't make me out a vestial virgin, Lastay. We both know I'm not." Xena said, after a short silence. "I'm glad I saved your wife but I've done a lot worse."

"Aye." He nodded, a mild expression on his face. "But no matter what it was, there was reason behind it, Xena. It wasn't random cruelty. If you caught the edge of your sword, it was for cause."

"Aye, tis true." Brendan said. "S'why we all follow her, not needing to question. Always a good reason."

Xena snorted softly. "Boy do I have you two fooled." She leaned against the back of the bed, observing her patient. "You drink all that yet?"

"Almost." Gabrielle was still sipping the tisane. "Is it supposed to make me feel better?"

"Yeah."

Gabrielle let her head rest against Xena's shoulder.

"Are you really going to let them decide, Xena?" Lastay asked. "You know, this is something many have prayed to the gods for these years."

Everyone waited for Xena to speak. As she considered, the inner door opened carefully and the soldiers returned, bearing a tray and cups. A small kettle was centered on it, and that was issuing a tiny curl of steam. "Your majesty." Brent said. "I milked the cow myself."

"Did you really?" Gabrielle smiled at him.

"I did." Brent said. "Taking no chances." He carried the tray over. "Milked the cow, and the honey's from our barrack's stash." He glanced at Brendan. "Got me skinned for that almost before I said who it was for I'll tell you."

"Pour a cup for everyone." Xena said. "And we'll settle down to wait to see whether or not I'll be packing our bags tomorrow." She added. "I did mean it. If those bastards want to put some son of a son of a donkey on the throne here, they can have at it."

Brent was filling the cups, and now he looked up. "Is it true, Mistress? They seek to bring back one of the old line?" He brought the tray around and waited for everyone to take one. "They say they have legitimate heir?"

"We think so." Brendan said. "From what the signs are, it looks it. Spreading some stories around, whole thing with the Westlanders, the tunnels, so on." He took one of the cups and cradled it in his hands. "Something the cook said too, Xena."

"Eh?" Xena had taken a cup and was applying it to Gabrielle's lips with a solicitous look.

"You said.. the old man, the old king, had a bastard son." Brendan said, slowly. "He got a funny look, yeah?"

"Huh."

"He did." Gabrielle said. "He looked like he was getting mad, and then Xena said something like, 'well, he was because I had to be really mean to him.'"

Xena started laughing.

"Well I said something like that." Gabrielle admitted.

"But then the cook said, 'oh, that one.'" Brendan finished. "Like there was more'n one."

Xena took a sip from Gabrielle's cup, then offered her another one. "He did react a little funny." She allowed. "I thought it was just the usual reaction of someone who thinks I'm going to cut their heads off."

Brent took a seat on the floor and sipped at his hot milk. "The people below, they've always held a grudge." He said. "NO matter how you treated them, always seemed their hearts were elsewhere. Heard them talking just now, about the old times."

"Old times." Lastay grunted. "Blithering idiots forget entirely what those old times were like."

"I think a lot of them were mad about us going off last spring, and taking all the stuff with us." Gabrielle said suddenly. "I remember I was in the garden and one of them found me there, and she sounded really upset with all the people who'd died in the sickness and all that, too."

Xena considered this quietly. "Or they're mad about me shoving half of them out in the snow last winter."

"They deserved it." Gabrielle said. "They tried to get you hurt." She protested, her brows creasing. Xena looked affectionately at her. "You're so sexy when you're mad." She leaned over and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. "Love ya."

Gabrielle felt herself blush and she leaned back. "Well, they did. They wanted to lock the doors and watch us die, Xena."

"They did." The queen agreed. "That's why I sentenced them to banishment. But I'm sure they didn't look at it that way. Not sure why they tied up with Bregos though. He wasn't part of the old regime."

"Maybe he promised them he'd bring em back." Brendan suggested.

"Maybe." Xena conceded.

Lastay rested his elbows on his knees. "Mistress, I would beg you a favor. Allow us to stay here, in the outer room for this night. There's something not setting right in my bones and I would feel the safer for it."

"Aye." Brendan said, at once.

Xena didn't look offended. In fact, she smiled at them, with an unusual quiet affection. "Sure." She said. "Gwan and camp out there, or in the conference chamber, or..." She chuckled. "There's a little alcove in the outside hallway that used to be where my body slave bunked out."

Gabrielle smiled. "I remember the first night I spent in there." She said. "You left me a note."

"I said I'd keep ya."

For a moment, she just quietly remembered that moment, when she'd opened the note and read those words. "And you did." Gabrielle tucked her hands around the queen's arm. "If they do decide they want to have someone else be in charge, boy am I going to tell mean stories about them everywhere we go, that's for sure."

Everyone chuckled, and then Brendan stood up. "Let's get ourselves settled lads." He indicated the soldiers. "You two, on the other side of the door. Nothing passes."

Two of the soldiers disappeared through the door to the kitchen stairs, and it closed behind them. The rest followed Brendan out, and Lastay bowed as he trailed after them. The door to the inner chamber closed, and they were alone.

Gabrielle exhaled. "What a crazy day."

“Yeah.” Xena wrapped her arms around her consort and rested her cheek against Gabrielle's head. “Didn't much enjoy it.” She watched as Gabrielle's hand closed on hers, and it was gently tugged up to her lips. “But this part ain't bad.”

Gabrielle could feel the herbs now, and her entire body relaxed, the aches fading into the mists. “I feel really sad.”

“You do???”

She nodded. “Just a couple days ago it was so great, you know Xena? The harvest festival, and everyone coming and being happy and bringing presents to you. Now it's all sad and mean. It's not fair.”

Xena chuckled wryly “Life isn't fair.” She said. “I've never been fair. Why should things go right for me? I've spent most of my life killing people and destroying lives.”

Gabrielle exhaled.

“But yeah, it sucks.” The queen concluded. “I was really looking forward to a nice, plush, hedonistic winter with you, my love. Now we may end up living in a cave somewhere.”

“Or on a boat.”

“Or on a boat.” Xena agreed. “Or maybe I'll just go conquer Persia. They seemed like they'd have nice beds, right?” She mused. “I bet I could get our friends in the dungeon to come with me.” She regretfully eased away from Gabrielle's embrace and stood up. “Let me get out of the metal and get my pigsticker set. Then we can snuggle.”

All those soldiers all around them, and still. Gabrielle watched Xena get out of her armor, putting it down on the garment press with careful, almost reverent hands. In the candlelight of the chamber she could see the glow against Xena's skin and hear the rasp as she tugged the bracers off her arms and unclipped her knee armor. Then she drew her sword and came back to the bed, easing under the covers as she set the sword into its place wedged in the bedframe. “Want to do me a favor?”

“Anything.” Gabrielle drew in a breath of clean linen and leather.

“Tell me a story.” Xena stretched out and welcomed her consort as she curled herself around her body. “Tell me something cute and funny and maybe has me doing something worthwhile.”

“Sure.”

“Make me feel something besides disappointed.”

“I really, really love you.” Gabrielle gave her as much of a hug as she was capable of.

“That's a pretty good start.”

\*\*

Xena watched the bedside candle flutter softly in the faint motion of air. It was very quiet in the chamber, though she could hear faint sounds outside as soldiers shifted at their posts, and the thump and spatter of the now freezing rain against the windows.

Gabrielle was draped over her, warming her right side and sending gentle breaths against the skin of her neck. Her eyes were closed and there was a faint smile on her face, and Xena considered this as close to Elysia as she was probably likely to get.

The words of Gabrielle's story were still tickling her ears. Not so much the content of them but the voice behind them, so full of gentle love it was like having a fire warmed blanket put around you coming in from the cold.

She didn't even feel bad about thinking that. Xena carefully curled her arm around Gabrielle's body and savored the wonder of it, half closing her own eyes as she felt her consort stir in her sleep and nestle closer.

What would tomorrow bring? Xena examined the question, intrigued to find herself not honestly caring one way or the other what decision her nobles would make. She couldn't even find it in herself to be upset at the thought they would ask her to leave.

Sort of shocked her. She wondered why after all this time, it didn't feel worse.

Would she miss being the queen? Xena watched the faint shadows move across the ceiling from the candle guttering at her bedside. Would she miss being in charge of all these people and her army? Would she be able to handle just being by herself, with Gabrielle just out there wandering around?

No one to give orders to? No one to make her bed? Clean? Take care of her things and her clothes? No servants? No minions?

Hm.

Xena suspected it would not make her happy to be a vagrant. She'd spent a lot of time being the queen. She liked having people around to give orders to, and she liked being the one in charge.

Now, she knew if it was just the two of them she'd still be in charge. But it wasn't the same thing. So she figured wherever they went she'd probably need to conquer something so she could be in charge again. That made sense, didn't it? Maybe the boat was a good idea.

They were pretty small, and easily conquered, and Gabrielle seemed to have an attraction to them.

So she'd go take over a galleon, and find her a crew, or more likely, use the men she knew would follow them out of the stronghold and they'd be pirates. She'd take the boat, and the crew, and sail down the coast and they'd find some nice port town and invade it.

Xena smiled, as she thought of it. Maybe she'd find some people who appreciated her more than this bunch apparently did. Maybe they'd find better weather doing it. She thought Gabrielle would like some of the places further south, where the sun shone longer and warmer all year.

She could have her garden. Maybe a few animals to take care of. Xena could imagine Patches ambling along behind her, a warm late afternoon sun splashing over both of them, with baskets of fresh things on the pony's back bound for wherever it is they picked to live together.

It was truly shocking to think about how happy that made her. She could imagine sitting on deck at sunset on the boat too, sharing a cup of sea grape wine with Gabrielle sprawled next to her, telling her a story.

For a moment, an image formed in her mind of them walking down a road, outlined in the setting sun heading to someplace new. She could even in her mind hear her own laughter floating back on the wind.

A faint real sound, though, caught her attention. She flexed her ears and felt them cup the air, her eyes closing shut as she focused her other senses. Though it was late, she knew there was activity still going on in the castle, though up here in her tower she could hear far less of it than she could down in the main hall.

But this hadn't come from below. She replayed the sound in her head, and nodded faintly as her memory came to the same conclusion that she had in thinking the noise had come from above her. And yet, there wasn't much above her save a stair case, and the hall she used to practice the arts of war in.

Hm.

Xena studied the shadows and remembered when she thought this thing had all started. Up there, in the practice hall, on a fall afternoon that now seemed years ago past.

So. Xena listened intently and after a silent moment, she heard the sound again. Just a faint noise, flesh against stone, a soft rasping that almost no one would have heard but her.

Now, why would anyone go up there? More hiding circus kids, trying to get away from working the ropes? Like the kid they'd found before, a poor half wit who'd had a fight with her sister and decided to try and hide out and go for something different.

Xena thought about that for a minute. Wasn't that what she was doing?

Back to the practice hall. Why would someone go up there? There was nothing there, no scrap of furs, no chairs, nothing but bare rock wall, hard floors, and the few tools she used – the wrapped logs and weights she'd built her strength with.

She heard the sound again, teasing, seemingly taunting her.

Maybe it was someone, taunting her. Teasing her, and trying to draw her out, draw her up there for a confrontation, to bring to a close this crazed and deadly attack. Was that what they wanted? They wanted her up there, alone in an ambush? Maybe they'd circle her, and taunt her and reveal their motives.

Gabrielle exhaled, and tightened her grip. Xena gazed down at her lover's pale head, tucked so comfortably into her shoulder, still with that smile on her face.

That might be what they wanted, but she wasn't going to give it to them. She was content to stay where she was, waiting to see if the guard outside also heard the sounds and went to investigate. After all the traps and all the stealthy killing, she wasn't going to walk her ass in some place alone and maybe end up getting skewered by more sharp objects than she had hands to block them with.

Probably exactly what they wanted her to do. Expected her to do, since her penchant for brazen risk of her own skin was well known, and had blatantly been on display the past year or so, starting with the arrow in her back that had started it all and not ending with the horrific wrenching she'd given her back during her last mixup.

Everyone had seen and talked about her facing off against the Persian army by herself. Everyone had seen her lead the charge through the pass.

Everyone knew what a freaking mindless idiot she was about her own ego.

Why couldn't the stupid bastards come down here? Stalk her in her own lair like she'd intended them to? Come into her trap with all her soldiers carefully stationed everywhere to catch them?

Xena sighed. She flexed her free hand and felt the callus along her fingers, the roughness on the pads at the base of them built up over years and years of handling a blade.

She would let them stew up there, and then maybe tomorrow morning it would all be a moot point, when the nobles asked her to get the Hades out and all their machinations would have been for nothing.

She nodded to herself.

That's right. That's what she'd do.

The noise caught her ears again and she opened her eyes, peering up at the ceiling for a long moment, absolutely sure she could see spiders up there. Then she sighed again. Who in the Hades did she think she was fooling?

Really. Who?

With a long, exhale, she very gently disengaged herself from Gabrielle's embrace, sliding out from under her and carefully tucking the covers back in around her sleeping body.

Then she knelt at the bedside, and put her hands on it, the faint candlelight outlining the scattering of scars on her skin. Scars that marked every fight, every struggle, every inch she'd taken for herself in this life and had no regret for.

She looked at Gabrielle's face, quiet and peaceful and beautiful in a way that touched her deep inside. Her love a grace granted her by the same capricious Fates who were even now pulling her away, and drawing her to the confrontation waiting for her up the stairs.

Well if it was anything she'd learned in life, it was that everything worth having was worth fighting for and that was what it seemed whoever it was who was against her was wanting her to do.

Fight.

Xena got to her feet and went to the garment press, lifting it silently and removing a folded garment from it. She took off her shift and put the garment on, tightening the straps of it and twitching it straight. It was well worn cloth, a layer of padding that felt soft and comfortable against her skin.

She turned and sat on the press, drawing on her boots and lacing them up. Deliberately she left aside her leathers and armor, standing up and crossing to the bed to retrieve her blade and clipping it to the holders on the back of the practice tunic.

Deliberately, she went over to a waterskin clipped to the bedpost, and uncapped it, lifting it to her lips and draining it dry. Then she went to the basin, and washed her hands, drying them on the small piece of linen next to the bowl.

She listened for the sound, but instead, heard the light rasp of skin against linen, and heard Gabrielle's breathing quicken. She turned, to find her consort sitting up and looking around. "Over here." She said quietly.

"Oh. Xena." Gabrielle rubbed her eyes and peered at her. "Where are you going?"

The queen came back over and sat down on the bed. "Got restless." She said. "I couldn't sleep so I figured I'd go upstairs and work a few kinks out."

Gabrielle reached out and touched her arm. "Don't go."

Xena felt her heartbeat skip. "I think I have to, sweetheart." She covered Gabrielle's hand with her own. "Remember I said I thought it started up there? I think there may be a clue up there waiting for me." She could see the quiet seriousness in the pale eyes watching her, and a prickle went up and down her spine. "You know I never let trouble come to me."

"I'm coming with you." Gabrielle said. "Let me just put something on."

Xena drew in a breath to protest, then just let it trickle out of her lips. It hadn't been a question, she wasn't being asked to give permission.

"Don't say no." Gabrielle interpreted her expression. "Please, Xena."

"I wasn't going to." Her lover responded. "We belong together." She cupped Gabrielle's cheek. "So, c'mon. Let's go see where my hunch takes us."

Gabrielle gave her a heartfelt smile, her eyes lighting up with a true and simple joy. Xena reflected, not for the first time, that both them were truly matched in complete and utter insanity because what she was doing was nuts, and Gabrielle was nuts to want to join her.

So in that case, life, she supposed, was good. She helped Gabrielle out of bed and got her shift exchanged for her favorite hawkhead tabard, sleeveless and belted in a fashion not unlike what she herself was wearing. They both kept silent, and when she'd put Gabrielle's boots on for her and stood, they kissed in the same utter quiet in a building passion that left them both a little short of breath.

It made her feel very alive. Xena put her arm around Gabrielle and guided her to the door to the outer chamber. She opened it and they slipped into the room, finding soldiers curled up asleep all over it. Xena almost, almost let out a yell to wake them, but then she stifled the urge and they moved through the space, getting to the outside door without disturbing anyone.

Outside was another story. Brent was in the hall, very awake and very alert and he came to meet them as they emerged. "Some alarm, majesty?"

"No." Xena told him calmly. "Just restless." She said. "Going to take walk upstairs and smack myself in the head a few times."

Brent smiled. "I'm sure you will do no such thing." His eyes shifted to Gabrielle. "Are you feeling better, your grace?"

Gabrielle stopped and thought about that "I am, matter of fact." She said, sounding a little surprised. "I thought I'd watch Xena and maybe write some poems about her."

Brent smiled wider. "Now that I do believe."

"Excuse us." Xena guided Gabrielle slowly over to the narrow steps that led up to the top of the tower and her practice hall. At the base of them, she turned and looked back at her faithful soldier. He was standing in the center of the hall, his hands at his sides, watching them. "Don't let anyone but the two of us come down the stairs, okay, Brent?"

Unsurprised, Brent nodded. "I won't, Xena."

Xena nodded, then she turned and started up the steps to the tower, her right arm tucked tightly around Gabrielle's body. She felt the cold dampness of the walls close around her as she and Gabrielle walked slowly upward, the soft scrape of their boots against the stone the only sound.

Her skin felt a touch chilled, since her practice gear ended midway between her knee caps and her hips and her arms were bare exposing them to the gusts of cold breeze coming down from the upper level.

That put her hackles on edge. "Someone left a window open up there, Gabrielle." She commented. "Maybe it was me."

"I feel it." Gabrielle responded softly. "It smells wet."

"It does." Xena took a deep breath of the air, testing it for the unknown. She reached out and touched the wall, finding it damp with condensation and she knew her hunch, at least, was going to end up more than just one.

There was a fight ahead, she could sense it. Her skin was tightening and the muscles in her back were shifting and settling her sword sheath a little more comfortably along her spine. Rather than fearing it, she realized she was truly welcoming whatever the challenge was, since regardless of what the decision was tomorrow morning she wanted this threat well and done over with.

It was time. "So you'er going to write poems about me huh?" She remarked, as they turned the last corner of steps before the inset door to the practice chamber, and she saw the sliver of outdoor light coming through the crack between the edge of the door and the frame.

Without hesitation, she walked towards the opening and as they reached it she lifted one leg and kicked the door open, shoving it back into the room almost back against the inside wall but not quite. A stronger puff of cold air hit them and she ducked inside, gracefully half turning so that her body was between Gabrielle and anything that might be waiting for them.

There wasn't, though. She scanned the room and knew it for empty. "Hm." She walked in further and circled the walls, stopping by the far window which was, as she'd expected, cracked open. Her ears pricked, and she focused her senses on the room around her as she slowly closed the window and latched the iron bar across it. "Not nice to leave the window open, huh?"

"No." Gabrielle agreed. "I have a striker. Do you want me to light the torches?"

"Gimme." Xena held out her hand and closed her fingers over the object Gabrielle put in them. She walked over to the first torch and struck a spark to it, and as the torch caught, she felt a motion in the room. Ignoring it, she went to the next one, and the next, with Gabrielle pacing quietly next to her, and ended up almost where she started with the room bathed in an orange glow.

Now it smelled of the torches, of the pitch and resin they were doused in and the acrid hint of smoke that curled up from them and trickled up through the square, rough cut chimney in the center of the roof. The hall was at the very top of the tower, so there were only rafters above them and the above that, the stormy sky.

Xena could hear the ice crackling overhead. She walked Gabrielle over to one of the big, stuffed bales she used to strengthen her back. "Siddown." She said. "Just keep your eyes and ears open, love. Anything could happen."

Gabrielle looked around, then she walked over to the corner and retrieved one of her practice sticks, a tall hardened pole she brought back to the bale with her and sat down with. "Ready."

Xena looked at her with deep affection. "Lets see what we get." She walked to the center of the room and drew her sword out, feeling the familiar weight of the blade against the muscles of her arms as she held the hilts up in front of her eyes and stayed briefly in that position before she released one hand and let the sword come down.

She started into a set of warm up drills. Slow rotations of the blade first in one hand and then the other, loosening up her arms. She extended the blade, now making patterns in the air with the tip of it, moving with slow rhythm at first and then going faster.

The blade cut the air with an audible whistle. She glanced at Gabrielle, finding her consort watching her with intent fascination, her hands curled around her staff... Xena paused that thought and paused her practice, coming to a standstill with her hands clasped on her hilt as she thought about what she'd just said in her mind. "Gabrielle?"

"Something wrong?" Gabrielle stood up carefully, leaning on the big stick.

"What do you call that?" Xena pointed her blade at the item

Her consort regarded her in some confusion, then she looked at the stick. "This?" She indicated it. "Did you ask me what I call it? Do you want me to give it a name, like Patches?"

"Never mind." Xena chuckled a little. "Siddown."

Gabrielle did, but her brow was creased, and she was now watching Xena with a perplexed expression. "Its my stick, isn't it?" She asked. "Though Jellaus called it a staff the other day. I'm not sure what that is."

Ah. Xena nodded, and started her practice up again. That must be where she'd heard it. Jellaus had maybe made a poem or song about the thing and he'd probably been practicing it days ago.

Must be. "It's .. that's what they call something like that when you use it for a lot f things." Xena moved into a figure eight pattern. "To walk with, or to hang a flag on, or fight with."

"Oh." Gabrielle studied her stick with more interest. It was one of the older ones, the wood was a dark mottled brown and it felt very hard and unyielding in her grip. In two places Xena had wrapped strips of leather to give her a hand hold, and she rubbed the edge of her thumb over one and felt the slightly rough softness. "Cool."

"What?" Xena shook the hair out of her eyes and started a more complicated routine. "How's your head?"

Gabrielle considered that. "Okay." She said. "It doesn't hurt anymore." She added. "Just still a little sick to my stomach but you know, Xena, it feels better to be sitting up for that."

"Good." Xena consciously flushed the errant thoughts out of her mind and got to business, switching from her warmup routine to a more serious workout, feeling her body wake completely up and a faint bit of sweat start to gather under her padded workout gear.

She was no longer cold. She started around the chamber with short, digging steps, turning in one direction and twisting her sword in tight spirals in the other. She could feel the energy gathering, and the torches cast shadows upon shadows over her as she moved through them.

It felt good to be in motion. She had felt odd and disconnected laying downstairs in bed, waiting there like some kind of brood cow in line for a bull. Even though it had been her own plan, and even though the plan had made a kind of sense to her, the longer she lay there the more unsettled she'd gotten.

This felt better. She still felt like she was drawing a noose around her own neck but at least she'd be up on standing and have a sharp thing in her hands capable of doing considerable damage.

She was an excellent swordswoman. Xena didn't even feel a twinge of her own ego thinking that. It just was what it was. She could do things with this weapon most people could not, and she proved that to herself by drawing the blade in tight and booting a piece of leather up into the air, tightening the arc of her motion down to just her wrists as she sliced the leather in mid air.

Tiny bits of it went flying and she passed the sword around her back and grabbed the leather with her right hand as her left took the sword, then she flipped it over towards Gabrielle and watched it land at her feet.

"Wow." Gabrielle reached down and picked it up, displaying the leather patch full of crosshatches and diamonds.

Xena smiled. She paused and flexed her hands, considering her next move and then just as she turned she sensed motion again. She swept around in a circle, peering into the shadows between the torches, moving quickly to get herself between where she'd sensed it and Gabrielle. "Second time."

"Second time what?" Gabrielle said.

"Something's here." Xena told her, her eyes sweeping quickly right and left.

Gabrielle stood up again and moved closer to Xena, turning her head to look around. She couldn't see anything but the torches, and Xena's tall form, but she could see the queen had become alert and very tense. "What is it?"

Xena could feel it. It was a brushing against that different sense she seemed to have, that knew Gabrielle's presence and was part instinct, part... something else. It was as though something was there bending the light, putting pressure against the instincts she used to catch arrows and turn sword thrusts coming at her from behind.

It was real, and not. She shifted her sword from one hand to the other, sending flashes of torchlight into the dark spaces and suddenly her eyes opened wider as the shadows gathered together and she sensed a form there, facing her.

With a bound, she moved forward and focused on the shadow, seeing a hint of a blocky, powerful outline and the flash of something against what might have been eyes.

Then it was gone, and she sensed it behind her and she turned, seeing the casting shadows heading towards Gabrielle. She took one long step and launched herself into the air, turning and twisting and ending up between her lover and the motion, swiping out with her sword and feeling the faintest hint of her blade catching on something.

A brush of air, a hint of a laugh, and before she could move any further the door at the end of the hall slammed shut, and they both heard the bolt shooting home on the far side of the portal.

Gabrielle reached out and touched her. They both took a step back so the wall was behind them and they were facing the room, and as they watched the shadows came alive into an odd, discordant motion. "This is kinda creepy." She whispered.

"Kinda?"

"What's going on?" Gabrielle took a tighter grip on her staff and looked around. The room still seemed empty, but she could feel Xena shift and start to breathe a lot faster, and she thought maybe she saw something move. "Are we trapped here?"

The wind blew against them, trapped between closed doors and closed windows, and carrying a cold laughter on its edge.

"Are we?" Xena said, arching her back a little and coming over her center of balance. She twirled her sword in her hand, and dredged up every bit of bravado she'd ever had. "Let's see whose trap it really is."

Now the shadows became distinct, and she heard Gabrielle gasp and she could see the host arrayed against her.

Ah well.

She was here, and it was a fight, and she wasn't alone. There was nothing more she could possibly ask from life, now was there?

"I... " Gabrielle sounded as freaked out as she ever had. "I'll watch your back. Okay?"

Oh yeah. It was going to be a night to remember.

\*\*

She wasn't afraid, though she suspected she should be. Xena took a deep breath and let it out, as the shadows formed and became more solid.

There was a hissing sound about them. It reminded her of snakes, and she felt her hackles rise in a primal sensation that blew cold air down the back of her neck.

She could see flickers that were shadows of weapons and she shifted her stance a little, glad she'd taken time to warm her body up as she got ready to defend herself against whatever the Hades this was.

That it seemed to be from the otherworld didn't faze her.

The tallest shadow faced her and she took a careful grip on her hilt, and waited. It really didn't have a face, but she got the sense there were eyes there watching her.

"Bold mortal." From the hissing came a hissing voice. "Do you value your life so little?"

Xena smiled. "Want my life? C'mon and try to take it." She strained her eyes but the shadow remained that, only a shadow.

"You have many enemies beyond. Do not risk yourself so hastily as you might not like meeting them again."

A soft chuckle forced its way from Xena's throat. "Bet once I'm on the other side they'll like meeting me again even less."

The shadows moved closer and their leader loomed over her, its hands moving in front of it in a swirl of darkness clenching around a deeper bit of darkness that might have been a sword. The rest of the dense shifting crowd seemed to part then, and make as much of a circle in the round chamber as they could with Xena's position against the curve of one wall.

For a moment they both were very still.

"Be careful, Xena." Gabrielle whispered.

"Be brave, my heart." Xena whispered back. "All right, whatever you are. Put up or get lost."

It attacked with no further speech and Xena knew at the first parry she was in deep trouble. This force she was facing was stronger than she was, and she could feel the chill eat into her hands as her sword shunted it's aside and an ice cold jolt went down the blade and up her arms.

Not good. She had limited space to move too, as the now solid ring of shadow caught them in one corner of the tower and she had all she could do to shift and duck as the shadow followed up the stroke with a second, that whispered past her ear as she moved just out of range of it.

She turned and moved her sword across her body as she dodged his stroke, their blades meeting and sending a clash of steel across the room. Aside from that and the soft rasp of Xena's boots against the stone, there was no sound, just a sense of oppressive dread that closed tighter around them every moment.

But having known a deeper fear so recently, Xena just concentrated on the motion she could barely detect, concentrating on the faintest hint of the shadow's intent as they circled each other and then met again.

It was implacable . The strokes were hard and deadly, and she only avoided them by the speed of her footwork and a lifetime of experience handling her sword that kept her just ahead of it, just a little too quick for it's lunges, and with just enough angle to her blade to deflect the powerful strokes that sought to disarm her and get through her defenses.

As she turned, she caught brief glimpse of Gabrielle's form outlined in the torchlight, it's lines tense as her lover stood against the wall with her staff clasped firmly in both hands.

None of the shadows approached her.

It was all about Xena, apparently. The queen dove out of the way of a powerful sweep and hit the ground, rolling up and back onto her feet as she backswiped in response, and felt her sword impact her opponents, her momentum letting her power through the stroke and pull his weapon out of position.

Instinctively she followed that up with a kick to the area of the shadow's body that would have been a ribcage feeling a jolt of icy cold as her leg passed through her adversary coming perilously close to making her lose her balance.

She could see the swirl of darkness though, and he moved back a pace, bringing his sword back into position as she completed the turn and faced him.

There was still a chill tingling along her leg and she wondered if she looked down would there be darkness clinging to her flesh or frost. She could feel him staring at her and she twirled the sword in her hand and arched her back a little, raising her free hand and crooking her fingers at him. "C'mon. Bring it."

He did. The next instant she was in a flurry of motion as he came at her with vicious intent, slamming his blade against hers with horrific strength. Xena just barely got her reactions in order in time, using speed and instinct to counter the attack. She twisted and angled her blade, shunting his parries to this side and that as she kept moving, refusing to give him a solid target.

If she'd paused to think about it, it would have been very unnerving – those eyes that weren't, the body that was only a darker outline in the shadows in front of her, the clustering, ever shifting crowd of shades blocking them in.

But she didn't, she let her battle training take over and let her experience drive her attack and defense as she ducked and turned, forcing him to move in a circle to follow her.

She shifted her sword from one hand to the other, then she whirled and ducked under his moving blade, going counter to the motion and getting her sword up under his and feeling her blade pass through his arm with a physical jolt that nearly made her drop it.

He hissed.

Xena didn't wait to see what would happen. She reversed her course and leaped right at him, letting her body crash against the shadow in front of her and feeling a blast of horrific pain and cold as she kept going and landed on the ground behind where he'd been standing.

Only instinct let her get onto her feet and only experience brought her sword around up in front of her as a landslide of darkness and shadow poured over her.

She twisted and yanked her arms back as she sensed danger over her head, and just barely got her sword up as his crashed down on top of it.

It drove her to her knees, but she went with the motion and let herself hit the floor, rolling to one side and moving as he came after her.

He kicked her and she felt the impact, ice cold and hard, and there was an explosion of stars in her vision along with the pain that came with it. She launched herself sideways to avoid a repeat of it, then got up and was bringing her arms around when she realized it wasn't going to be in time.

A yell. So loud, and so suprising in that world of darkness and hissing that had become the norm in this fight. A yell that was clean and loud and followed by her name as she heard boots against

the stone coming up behind her and she quickly dropped to the ground just as something whistled over her head and she heard the sound of metal against wood.

Then she was up again and getting her breath back, turning and slashing, catching the shadow's sword as it turned back against a hard breathing and furious Gabrielle.

Sexy.

Xena only had a bare moment to consider that before she was fully engaged again, drawing the shadow away from her consort and matching him strike for strike as Gabrielle edged around behind her with her staff held across her body. "Thanks." She called out.

"They were throwing things at you!" Gabrielle called back. "Jerks!"

Ah. Xena focused on her adversary. "So you being an undead spook wasn't enough, huh?" She turned her sword and angled a stroke off his lunge, stepping past it and turning unexpectedly as he tried to slash at her, crouching and leaping into the air and tumbling into a somersault, swiping her blade in reverse and getting the jolt of ice and pain as it slid through the shade's body.

He hissed again, and turned, then moved back as she landed and faced him again, shifting the sword from her left hand back to her right. "Enough!"

"Had enough have ya?" Xena taunted him.

"Enough playing with you mortal!"

Then he produced a high keening sound and at that the rest of the shades rushed forward and flowed over her bringing a wash of terror, and cold and pain that shoved her to the ground. She felt the air rush out of her lungs and when she tried to draw it back in it felt like ice and her chest refused to move. She could hear the growing hiss and felt a pressure unlike anything she'd ever felt pressing her into the stone and immobilizing her.

She felt a pain in the back of her skull. She felt her heartbeat pulsing hard against her eyeballs, making stark red flashes as she struggled to breathe and couldn't.

She heard Gabrielle let out a bellow, and then the ice around her was cut with a block of warmth that slammed her in the back and surrounded her as she felt warm breath hit the curve of her left ear.

She felt Gabrielle inhale sharply, and gasp.

Her body responded to that in a rapid and convulsive way, as she ripped herself free of the immobility and hauled herself up and around to grab Gabrielle as the darkness closed around both of them with crushing force.

Then a loud crack sounded and the noise vanished, the hiss replaced with a lack of sound that made her head ring as the torches went out with a sense of pressure that was on the edge of agony for a breath until it was gone.

Then all she could hear was Gabrielle's rasping cough and feel the hammering of her heart against her skin as her body was slowly released from its paralysis and she could breathe again.

She did, as the gray haze faded a little. "Did it just get better or worse?" She whispered.

"Afraid to look." Gabrielle whispered back, her eyes tightly closed as she crouched over Xena's body, the pulses of her own heartbeat hammering in her ears finally easing. "It's really dark in here."

Xena blinked her eyes, then closed them, casting her other senses out instead. She couldn't hear anything around them inside the chamber, just the pressure of the wind against the leaded panes and nearby, a soft rattle of stones trickling downward.

She felt a presence though. "Something's here." She said, after a pause. "Let me up." She said. "But don't go far."

Gabrielle eased off her back and knelt next to her, reaching around her to feel for her staff. She was far too freaked out to be scared and since she couldn't see anything at all including Xena next to her, she couldn't even imagine how much trouble they'd gotten into now.

Couldn't even start to imagine it. There were no pictures in her head, just an echo of the darkness surrounding them.

Her heart was pounding so fast it was making her shake, and she was pretty sure her knees wouldn't hold up, making her glad she was kneeling at Xena's side. She felt the queen slowly move and sit up, hearing the faints scrape of her boots as she pulled them up under her. "Are you okay?" She gasped.

"Peachy." Xena answered, gently feeling around her, relieved when she felt the hilt of her sword and curled her fingers around it. She lifted it and guided it into the scabbard on her back then exhaled. "Touch me." She said, reassured when there was an immediate warmth curled around her arm as Gabrielle squeezed it gently.

It was so dark even she couldn't see. She held her hand up in front of her face and strained her eyes, but there was nothing but blackness without even a hint of motion as she wiggled her fingers. "Wow." She said. "On a scale of one to ten for kicking my ass this is twenty."

Gabrielle scooted closer and leaned against her, bringing a very welcome warmth all along her right side. She felt arms go around her and her consort bury her face into the side of her neck.

In the dark, she could smell stone, and then behind it, a rank, acrid odor that seemed to be coming from something nearby. She slowly extended her boots, and kicked along the rock with her heels until she came to an unexpected edge, and felt one boot go over an open space.

She knew, in a moment of startling internal panic, that things were moving out of her control. Below the floor they were on was the chamber she'd spent most of her reign living in and she knew quite well there wasn't any holes in the ceiling of it. Cautiously she leaned over and extended her arms, reversing her position and feeling out until her fingers came to the crack in the floor and she felt the sharp, newly etched edge of it.

"Stay here." She leaned over and inched forward, until her head was over the opening and then she looked down. For a moment she saw nothing, then very far away, as though she was looking down a chimney she saw a faint hint of red a long way below.

After a second, she felt Gabrielle's shoulder press against hers, and heard her consort's breathing close by. "Thought I told you to stay back there?"

"Sorry." Gabrielle said as she inched closer. "What is that? What's going on, Xena? Where are we?" She asked. "It's so dark. There isn't any light even coming in the window up there."

Xena rested on her elbows. "I don't know." She said. "See that down there?"

Gabrielle remained silent for a moment. "That red thing?"

"Mm." The queen grunted. "Least we're not blind." She said. "How's that for a silver lining?"

She felt Gabrielle lean against her and then the pressure of lips against her shoulder. "Let's get away from here." She eased backward, and then slowly squirmed back away from the opening, moving back towards where she remembered the wall to be.

She felt along the ground carefully, hoping not to find another open crack. There wasn't any, but she almost cracked her own skull open when it hit stone, and she stopped abruptly. "Uh." She felt the surface, relieved to find it the wall she'd expected to find and she stood up next to it.

Gabrielle stood up next to her, a soft clatter of wood against stone sounding clearly as she pulled her staff up next to her. "Xena?"

"Hm?" The queen pulled her workout gear straight, and tightened the straps, flexing her arms and legs to determine what damage she'd taken in that very strange fight. "You okay?"

"Yes." Gabrielle said. "But... I think the red's getting bright over there."

Quickly, Xena looked up and spotted a now visible glow in the center of the room. As she watched it increased, and now she could see the outline of the crack in the floor and a faintly visible mist emerging. At the same time, she became aware that the acrid smell was getting stronger.

On one hand, it was scary. On the other, any light was better than no light, and she was relieved to be able to see something. Then the thought evaporated when she saw a figure step out of the opening, outlined in the dim red, tall and menacing. "Uh oh."

Gabrielle moved closer and put her hand on Xena's hip. "That's the real bad guy isn't it?"

Xena slowly drew in a breath and released it. "If he made that hole, I bet he is."

The figure moved away from the crack and towards them, with a distinctive swagger in its walk. It stopped just short of them and lifted its arms, and they heard a snapping sound.

The torches lit.

Xena pressed her back against the wall and felt her breathing shorten, as she knew a moment of true fear. The torchlight revealed a very tall, very muscular man in black leather, with a close trimmed beard and night dark hair. He had an angular, very handsome face and pale eyes that were focused directly on her.

Very few things frightened her. For the second time in two days, she'd found something that had.

"I assume you know who I am." The figure said.

"Yes." Xena only hoped her voice didn't break. "The images in your temples don't do you justice."

Surprisingly, a smile appeared on the figure's face. "Not that you spend much time in them."

"No." Xena admitted. Her throat felt dry, and she knew her knees were shaking. She felt Gabrielle press against her and she glanced down at her consort, who was looking up at her in apprehension. "I don't." She looked back up. "This is the God of War, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle was staring at him, wide eyed. "Is that good or bad?" She managed to squeak out.

"We'll find out." Her lover answered faintly.

He smiled again. Then he turned and regarded the room, glancing down at the crack and snapping his fingers at it. It closed in a flicker, leaving the floor in its original, flat, stone condition. "Depends on how you look at it." He turned back around. "From the perspective of having your ass kicked, probably good." He moved towards them. "From the perspective of getting me interested in you, probably bad."

"Wasn't on purpose." Xena muttered. "I was just trying to have a damn Harvest festival."

The figure laughed, his voice rich and dark, making their nape hairs lift. "Maybe you're just lucky I don't take kindly to some half ass wannabe Persian god horning in on my territory." He concluded. "And I do like sexy chicks who can kick people's ass."

"Persians." Xena repeated, ignoring the second part of his statement.

He stopped in front of them and put his hands on his hips. "That was a beautiful war." He said.

"Best entertainment I've had for eons." He said. "There I was being bored listening to all the chatter up on Olympus when what do you know? Out of the back end of nowhere comes that."

Xena smiled hesitantly. "Glad you enjoyed it?"

"Oh, I did." The God said. "But when the King of Persia got your note, he sacrificed a score of virgins to his lame ass god and asked him to take revenge on you for it." He spread his hands out and turned around. "Presto, I have to deal with weather magic and even lamer ass shadow warriors all poking in my business here." He turned to look at them. "I don't like that."

"So those guys were from him?" Xena asked, pointing in the general direction of the room. "What were they?"

He studied her. "Shades." He said, finally. "What's left of what you left on the battlefield."

“Ah.”

“Anyway. They’ll be back. They won’t stop until they croak ya.” He said. “Nasty way to go.” He smiled. “Now, maybe I could be persuaded to solve that little problem for you.” He said. “For a fee.”

Xena was silent for a moment “What kind of fee?” She asked. “What do we have that you don’t already have a hundredfold?”

The God moved closer, folding his arms over his broad chest and watching them intently. “I like blood.” He said. “I like killing. So do you.” He added. “You’ve got potential.”

Xena was finding it hard to breathe. “Thanks.” She murmured.

“Become an acolyte of mine, and I’ll take care of this little problem for you.” The god continued. “Not much to ask, huh? You’re most of the way there already, you just need a bit of polish.” He reached out and touched her chin, turning her head slightly. “What do you say?”

Xena didn’t answer. She studied his face, noting the harsh lines and cruelty there along with the attraction. There was an ancientness to his eyes, a flat pale color she couldn’t really determine in the dim light. “I have to think about it.” She finally said, in quiet tone.

“Really?” His voice dripped sarcasm. “I come here and save your ass and you need to think about it? You owe me.” He tightened the grip of his fingers. “Really?”

Xena felt the danger. This was something she had very few options in. “I have to think about it.” She repeated, even more softly. “I’m not new at this, and you’ve waited this long.” She felt her body shifting and her muscles responding to the implied threat, instincts unfazed by the presence of godhood.

Maybe he knew that. After a blank moment, he smiled, and released her, taking a step back. “You’ve got a turn of the sun, baby. Then I’ll be back and you better have made up your mind by then.” He lifted his hand, and snapped his fingers, and then he was gone in a flash of blue light that made them both blink hard in response.

For a long moment, the silence went on, then Xena exhaled and slumped against the wall. “Hades.”

Gabrielle put her head down against Xena’s shoulder. “I thought that was Ares.”

That forced a faint half breath, half laugh from Xena’s chest. “We’re in deep trouble.” She said. “Deep, deep trouble.” She half turned and put her arms around Gabrielle. “I was hoping we’d end the night with some sneaky bastard spitted on my blade and what I got was being spitted on myself.”

She could feel Gabrielle shaking a little, and became aware of how cold it was in the room. Xena looked around, and spotted the window open again, this time wide, with bits of snow dropping inside onto the floor. “Let’s go back downstairs.” She said. “I don’t think those black things will be back tonight.”

“Great idea.” Gabrielle said, clamping her jaw against her chattering teeth. “Sure could use some hot tea, huh?”

Xena picked up the staff and walked around the chamber towards the door, avoiding the center where the hole had appeared and then, disappeared. It looked solid enough, but after what she’d just experienced she wasn’t going to take any chances. Then the thought of that nearly made her gag, as she remembered that hard grasp on her face, and those taunting eyes.

But the last thing she was going to do right now was think about Ares offer. Right now she just wanted to get back down to her bedchamber, get a heavy robe around both of them, and give herself a chance to stop freaking out.

There would be time then to think. To think about all the bad choices she now had spread in front of her. To figure out what to do to ensure survival for her, and for Gabrielle.

And here she thought an usurper was the worst of her problems.

Gabrielle wasn't about to talk. She could see the serious, intent look on Xena's face as they got to the door, and she hesitantly reached out for the latch, flinching a little as she touched it. She felt the motion as her lover relaxed then, and undid the lock, opening the door and letting them out of the chamber and into the stair tower, the torches on the walls fluttering a little in the draft from the door.

They started down. As they got around the curve Brent trotted up a few steps, his hand on his hilts. "All well, Mistress?"

Xena looked at him briefly. "Peachy." She said, continuing down the steps. "Tell them to stoke the fire in my room, willya?"

"Mistress." He trotted back down and headed for the door.

"What are we going to do?" Gabrielle whispered.

Xena sighed. "Have sex." She said. "It might be the last chance we get and I'll be damned if I'm going to waste it."

"Urmp."

\*\*

It was quiet again. Gabrielle tucked her hand under her head and curled on her side, watching the silent figure seated crosslegged beside her.

Xena had changed into a shift and taken off her boots. Her hair was loose around her face, and she had her elbows resting on her knees, her long fingers laced together in front of her.

She was thinking, Gabrielle decided. Her eyes were looking just past Gabrielle's head, and were a little unfocused. There was a very serious expression on her face, and her thumbs were very slowly tapping against each other.

The teapot rattled, and she slid quietly out of bed, crossing the thick rug and picking up the pot with its wrapped handle. She poured the water over two waiting cups, taking a deep breath of the richly herbal scent that wafted up to her. It was a little bit of normality in the recent chaos, and she remembered briefly her delight at finding the late season herbs hidden away in her garden.

Her garden, which was now buried under snow and ice, all its last potential destroyed by the storm. Gabrielle frowned, finding this bit of injury more hurtful than she'd expected. She'd looked forward to gathering that last bit of fruit, left to ripen long on the trees to develop the sweetness her lover enjoyed in some late seasons jam. "Stupid bad guys."

There was honey with the herbs, though, and she could smell that sweetness, knowing it came from flowers she'd grown and nurtured for the big, fat honeybees that buzzed placidly around and catching just a hint of spiciness from the roses she'd clipped to put on Xena's dinner plate just a half moon before.

She'd felt so good about the harvest season.

With a sigh, she stirred the cups with the glass rod, the soft tinkling sound loud in the storm's lull outside. She picked the cups and returned to the bed, handing Xena hers as she crawled back under the covers.

"Thanks." The queen said, softly. She cradled the cup in both hands and gazed into it, her lashes blinking a little as the steam bathed her face. "How's your head feeling?"

"It's okay." Gabrielle answered automatically – but found that the statement was actually true. The nagging ache had gone completely and aside from everything else she realized she felt on the whole pretty good. "It doesn't hurt at all."

Xena smiled at that, her eyes taking on a mild twinkle. "You're not just saying that so I'll ravish ya, are you?"

"No." Her consort assured her. "But I would." She added after a brief pause, with a small grin of her own, which widened when Xena actually chuckled hearing it.

Then she went back to studying her tea, slipping back into a deeper thought.

Gabrielle decided that just sitting quietly and waiting was a good idea. The soldiers were back out in the hallway, and they were alone again, this time with the candles starting to burn down and show the late hour. There was change in the air, she thought. Things were moving in odd ways, and she had a sense that tomorrow's dawn could pretty much bring just about anything to them.

The fight upstairs had been really scary. Gabrielle flexed one hand, remembering the sting of wood hitting it as she wielded the big stick. She thought she'd done pretty well though, a little surprised at the emergence of this new skill at such an odd time. Could her knock on the head have maybe shaken something loose?

Weird.

But it really had happened. Gabrielle remembered clearly the feeling when she'd charged at the other shades, and balanced and right it had felt when she swung the stick at them. Not at all what she'd felt like before practicing with Xena. She flexed her fingers again thoughtfully.

The shades had been terrifying, and all the more so the big one fighting Xena because it had seemed a lot bigger and a lot scarier than even the queen was.

Had Xena been scared? It hadn't seemed like it. Not until Ares had shown up. Then the queen had been scared, and scariest of all had been the fact she'd been able to see it in her tall lover's face as she put her back against the wall. So few things scared her.

Gabrielle had really gotten terrified then. Afraid not so much of sudden attack, but the possibility of a more profound and permanent loss.

"So." Xena finally spoke up. "What a manure pile we're in, my love."

That, at least, made Gabrielle smile. She was sort of getting used to being referred to like that, instead of as a muskrat. "Are we?"

"We are." Xena confirmed. "Way I see it, I've got two choices. Either I blow off Ares, and have the googly spooks come and kick my ass the hard way, or I give in to him and have him own me." She lifted her eyes and focused on Gabrielle. "I don't really like either option."

"Me either." Gabrielle agreed. "I guess the whole running away and being a pirate won't work either?"

Xena scratched her chin. "Probably not." She said. "I just don't know what to do." She sighed. "What do you think?" She peered at her consort. "Got any ideas?"

Gabrielle's pale brows lifted almost to her hairline. "Me?" She asked, on a half indrawn breath. "Ideas about what? The spooky black guys or the spookier guy in black?"

The queen smiled, just a little. Her eyes dropped then lifted again as Gabrielle reached over to put her hand on her knee. "You may end up regretting that whole you go where I go thing, y'know?"

Gabrielle thought a moment, back to the time in their last adventure when she thought Xena had abandoned her, and sailed off on her ship leaving them all behind. She remembered the utter emptiness of the moment, and felt all over again that deep ache. "No, I don't think so." She said, quietly

Xena smiled again. "No, huh?" She let her eyes drop once more.

"Even if it does end up in a creepy place, no." Her consort replied. "I'd rather be with you in Tartarus than be without you anywhere else.. and besides.. I think they told me I wasn't going to get another chance at the nice place so that's okay anyway."

Xena's eyes lifted sharply. "What?"

Wasn't that what they said? "When they were trying to get me to go where my family was." Gabrielle said. "When I said no, they said it was my last chance at it."

The queen stared at her, tea forgotten. "Were you just dreaming that?"

Had she been? Gabrielle thought about that. It hadn't felt at all like a dream when it had been happening but she supposed it could have been, maybe. "I don't think I was sleeping." She finally said, in a subdued voice. "I remember looking down and seeing you holding me."

Xena shifted uncomfortably. "Okay, well, whatever. I get it. You're coming with me lets talk about something else okay?" She said, gruffly. "Change the subject, ask me a question, do something."

"Xena." Gabrielle pushed the sad thoughts aside and complied with the request. "If the Persian god is really trying to hurt you, and the black spooky guys are from him, then who were the other guys in the castle? And the tunnels? It doesn't seem to really match up, you know? Are the old castle people really trying to do something sneaky at the same time the spooky guys are?"

The queen considered that seriously.

"It just seems so weird." Gabrielle went on. "I mean, okay, having the old people here be all about the old guy king with the dragon sort of makes sense." She said. "And.. I guess, having the King of Persia be pissed off about you beating up his army sort of makes sense."

"Me coming to the attention of the God of War doesn't make sense?"

Gabrielle shifted a little. "Well, I don't know much about that, but..." She frowned. "Isn't he kinda..."

"Late to the game?" Xena asked, in a very droll tone. "As in, aint' I a little old to be catching his eye now?" She eased out of her seated position and stretched out on her side next to Gabrielle. "Yeah. Know what? This feels like a setup."

Her consort looked puzzled. "A what?"

"Something's not right." The queen clarified. "I don't think even I can collect this much bizarre crap at one time. Problem is can I figure out what it is before tomorrow night?"

"I'm sure you can." Gabrielle said. "Maybe the Persian guys here know something about that god thing?"

"Hm. Maybe." Xena's expression brightened a little. "Wonder if I can outbid their king for his services? Could we find two dozen virgins in this stronghold?" She watched her consort grimace a trifle. "Hey don't worry. You don't qualify anymore." She reached out and gently touched Gabrielle's face. "And I wouldn't give you up anyway."

"I wasn't worried about that."

"Really?"

"Really." Gabrielle squirmed closer. "That sacrificing thing made me queasy though."

Xena folded her arms around her lover and brought them together, feeling her entire body relax as the warmth of Gabrielle's penetrated the light shift covering her. She felt exhausted, but more in her mind than her muscles, the stress of the last few days grinding against her senses and making her want to pull the covers over both of them and not take them down.

She had so much to think about. So much to decide. There were things she knew she had to investigate, to find out, to discover before it all came crashing down on her tomorrow. She should get up and question the Persians, for one thing, and think about how to beat the shades, and....

"Xena?"

"Yes?"

Gabrielle gave her a gentle hug. "You're making really weird noises."

The queen sighed. "I know." She said. "I'm scared." Her cheek came to rest against Gabrielle's head. "I'm afraid I'm out of options, y'know? If I say no to Ares, those shades will kick my ass and I'll end up in Tartarus. I don't want to go there. I don't want you to go with me there."

"What if you don't?"

Xena gazed down at her lover with wry, true affection. "Sweetheart, there's no question of that. We both know it."

"I don't."

"Gabrielle."

"I don't." Gabrielle peered at her. "I really think you're a hero, Xena, and you're going to end up wherever it is heroes go." She argued. "Especially if something happens to you while you're defending people here. C'mon!"

Xena sighed.

"But I .." Her lover paused. "I think if you say yes to Ares you will end up someplace not nice."

The queen shifted a little and peered down at her curious. She could see the angle of Gabrielle's jaw in the candlelight and as she watched the surface shifted and bunched, as her consort clenched down on her teeth and swallowed. "What makes you say that?"

"I just feel it." Gabrielle answered, in a very soft voice. "My heart feels it."

Xena examined that seriously. She'd never quite heard that tone from Gabrielle before and she could see and feel the emotion in her as they huddled together.

She'd never put much stock in the gods. Ares had hit the mark when he'd said she never spent time in his temple, but the same was true of the rest of them. Xena had always relied on herself, and whatever fate threw her way, and she'd neither asked nor given much to the lords of Olympus. She knew about them, vaguely. There were temples in the city, small ones, and the odd acolyte or two wandering around, but even her men who might be expected to provide offerings tended not to, reserving their idolizing pretty much... well, for her.

If she'd ever been one to bend a knee to them, she considered, it would likely have been Ares though. The God of War, the master of violence and blood really was right down her alley. In fact, it was probably somewhat flattering that he'd finally noticed her.

So why did she want to run the other way? Was it her ego? She'd lived this long without having to mess with gods, hadn't she?

She felt Gabrielle's slow, measured breath warm the curve of her breast. "Funny." She said. "I feel the same way." She admitted. "Only person I want to belong to is you." She felt the motion as Gabrielle smiled, and looked down at her, just as her lover looked up.

Strange, how she could feel the echoes as their souls bounced off each other, there in the night. She didn't even feel slightly embarrassed thinking that as she felt Gabrielle's arms wrap around her and hug her hard. Deliberately, she set aside the worry and returned the hug.

It felt warm and very good.

Here in the night she decided wasn't a good time or place to be talking about gods or shades or what her options were. Here, now, maybe was the last dark night of her life, and this was a time and a place for them to be together and savor each other no matter what tomorrow would bring.

She had joked, earlier, about it but there was a truth there. This was a time for love. Xena gently cupped Gabrielle's cheek and brushed her lips over her consorts. She felt the immediate reaction and as their bodies pressed against each other she felt the anxiety fade and drift off away.

And then someone knocked on the door. Xena turned her head and stared at the portal, as if by directing enough displeasure at it, she could cause it to burst into flame. "This better be good."

She pushed herself off the bed and grabbed her sword hilt, yanking it from its sheath and sending the leather cover flying across the room to clatter against the wall.

She got to the door and yanked it open, glaring through it into the muted dimness of the outer chamber. A moment later she relaxed. "What is it, Brent?"

Her soldier was standing on the other side of the verge, looking both upset and a little fearful. "Majesty." He said. "I'm sorry to disturb you."

Xena let her sword rest on her shoulder and eyed him. "But?"

He swallowed. "There's something I need to tell you." He said. "Something about myself that might be important given all that's happened this day."

The queen took a step back and let the door swing all the way open. "C'mon in." She brought the sword over to the chairs before the fire, and settled herself into one, indicating her should take the other. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Gabrielle curled up on her side, one arm tucked under her pillow as she watched what was going on.

Brent somewhat timidly sat down in the big seat across from her and let his forearms rest on his knees, his fingers twisting together nervously "Men have been talking."

"Since the dawn of time." Xena agreed, watching him closely.

That got a very brief smile from him. "Your majesty." He paused. "Xena." He went on. "I know you were thinking them belowstairs were trying to swap one of the old king's line in for you."

"Mm." The queen grunted softly. "You know otherwise?"

Brent took in a deep breath, and released it. "I know they don't have none that's legitimate." He said. "And I don't... I don't think they're trying to make the change, no."

Xena laid her sword across her knees and steepled her fingers in front of her face, her eyes sharply watching her long time minion. "They've tried worse."

He nodded. "They have, aye, but Bregos happened because they had no right candidate. Still don't." He said. "Know they don't, Mistress as the old line only had but one as lived through the time and that one he never wanted no crown."

Xena slowly began to smile. "I see."

Brent looked up at her, meeting her eyes. "Know many would talk like that."

"If they wanted to live, sure." The queen answered, in a soft voice. "But not many would put their sword where their mouth is all this time." She added. "Much less get it as bloody as you have."

Brent smiled briefly, his eyes dropping to his hands.

"Wait." Gabrielle had reversed her position and now had her head at the foot of the bed, her weight resting on her elbows. "Are you saying you're related to the old king? The one with the dragon?" Her voice lifted in amazement. "Really?"

Xena chuckled. "Yes, he is." She said. "Old Ranulf's youngest son, if I'm not mistaken."

"Did you know then, Mistress?" Brent queried.

But Xena shook her head. "I knew two of his kids survived. One of them died of chest sickness the year after I took over and the other one disappeared into the woodworks. Figured that meant he was the brains of the bunch." She studied Brent anew, seeing nothing of the long, angular features she remembered. "You don't look like em."

Brent's smile went a bit twisted, and wry. "Most thought I was a bastard." He acknowledged. "Could be I was, but I never did agree with much. I hid in the dungeons for a year, watching, then liked what I saw and figured a life as man at arms wasn't the worst I could come to."

"You were just a kid."

“Aye.” He nodded. “Never regretted it though.” He straightened up and looked at the queen. “Never wanted to own up to it, Mistress. I left that part of my life long long ago and wanted no other. But I couldn't stay quiet with all this talk going around and knowing it false or else, an impostor at work.”

Xena studied him quietly. “Most people would assume I'd behead them finding that out.” She said, in a conversational tone.

He nodded. “My life's always been yours, Xena.” He said. “No difference, really.”

The queen smiled. “But I happen to think blood relationship isn't anything but a convenient excuse. I never trusted most of mine, on one hand, and I completely trusted a total stranger who wandered into my bedroom on the other. “ She glanced over her shoulder at the avidly watching Gabrielle. “What do you think?”

Brent looked over at her. “Wasn't really a dragon, your grace.” He said. “Truth was, the old man got into his cups, and tried to ride his horse through the hall and fell off into the firepit.” He said. “Wasn't much of a ruler, truly. Used to beat his women and hated the lot of us.”

“Aw. That's too bad.” Gabrielle said. “A dragon makes a much better story.”

“Aye.”

“But having you be loyal to Xena all this time makes a pretty good one too.” Gabrielle smiled. “And hey Xena..”

“Hey Gabrielle.” The queen responded.

“That means there's nothing for them to decide tomorrow morning right?”

Xena leaned back. “Depends.” She said. “Depends on if they have what we know now is an impostor or not.” She leaned her elbows on the chair arms. “But it changes our options, sure.” She said. “Now why don't you tell Brent what happened to us tonight up in the chamber? Since we're all sharing.”

Brent looked uncertainly at her. “Mistress?”

“Matter of fact, get Brendan and your partner.” The queen said. “And have a tray of grub brought up here. Let's make a party of it.”

He frowned, and peered at her.

Xena peered back. “I'm not going to kill you if that's what you're waiting for. If you wanted to stab me in the back you've had a decade to do it and haven't and I don't believe men are that patient.” She lifted her hand. “G'wan. The sooner I scare the codpiece off you the sooner I can ravish my consort.”

Brent stood and shook himself a little. “Sorry, Mistress. I was... I wasn't sure if you'd want my service hearing the truth. I wasn't so afraid for my skin.” He explained. “Is a chance.”

“So was trusting me.” The queen replied, her voice serious. “And now we might be into something really deep and dark because of it so let's put our heads together and see what we can do about it.”

Brent nodded, and left, touching his head as he passed Gabrielle in a gesture of respect. He closed the door behind him, and then they were once again alone together.

Xena turned in her seat, an exaggerated sigh issuing from her. “As if tonight wasn't screwy enough.”

“Wow.” Gabrielle said. “I sure didn't expect that.”

“Me either.” Xena agreed frankly. “Don't I feel like an asshole. Ten years I've got the old line's heir guarding my behind and never knew it.” Her voice was mournful. “And here I thought those tunnels were bad.”

Gabrielle grinned wryly at her. “At least he's nice.”

“At least it didn't turn out to be Stanislaus.” The queen got up and retrieved her sword sheath, seating the blade and tossing it on the dresser before she launched herself across the bed and gathered Gabrielle up in her arms. “Maybe I should rethink that whole run off and be pirates thing.”

“I'd like that.” Gabrielle nibbled her collarbone, wriggling up against her and exhaling in satisfaction. “I want to be a pirate with you.”

Xena chuckled. “You would until you hit your first storm at sea.” She said, rolling over onto her back and bringing Gabrielle with her. She lifted her head and kissed her, savoring the earthy heat as it washed through her gut. “World's all gone crazy, Gabrielle. Should we just enjoy it?”

Gabrielle's hands slipped under her shift and her body pressed down, as her consort returned the kiss.

Xena took that for an answer, and hoped Brendan would prove a little hard to find.

\*\*

Brendan braced his elbows against his armored knees and blinked a few times. “Be damned.” He finally said, after Gabrielle had stopped speaking. “Lived a long time and I ain't never heard nothing like that before.”

“Wow.” Brent murmured.

Brent's partner, Gerard was pinching the bridge of his nose and grimacing. Lastay was simply sitting in his seat, shaking his head.

They were all in the sitting area in Xena's inner chamber, around the freshened fire with a pot of mulled and well spiced wine heating and a tray of crusty new baked bread and meats nearby. The torches were newly lit in the wall sconces, and the room had taken on a warmth as they listened to Gabrielle relate her tale of earlier that night.

Ghools and gods and all.

Xena was sprawled in one of the big chairs nearest the fire, swirling some of the wine in her cup. “So.” She said, as the story ended. “Surprised? I was pretty damn surprised.”

“Mistress, I cannot even begin to imagine what to say to that.” Lastay said, mournfully. “Of all the things I have pondered you perhaps sharing with me, this was not one of them.”

“Wait, I got another one for you.” The queen said. “Brent's the old king's son.”

Lastay turned and stared at Xena's man at arms. So did Brendan, and Gerard, whose jaw dropped.

“And Gabrielle can fly.” Xena added, in the same tone.

They all turned to look at her consort, who was sitting in a particularly non flying way on the carpet. “Not really.” Gabrielle said, after a brief pause. “But everything else is true.”

“You!” Gerard looked at his partner. “Been keeping that under all these years?”

Brent sighed. “Been so many years I'd forgotten it, really.” He admitted. “Reminded me, when Philtop showed, but I just laughed about it.” He glanced at Xena. “Glad to see that one die. Deserved it.”

“He did.” The queen agreed. “But since we're being all cozy an sharing, I should tell you all I didn't do it.”

“Truly, Xena?” Lastay's voice rose in surprise.

“Truly.” Xena answered. “Stupid bastard was crawling around in there, no doubt about it, but he was dead when I came hauling out of my bed to chase him down.” She sipped her wine. “That whole story bothered me. Why the Hades was he in there, dressed in black, snooping? Did he really think he was there trying to protect me? Me?” Xena lifted her hand. “I smacked him around outside the day before. I didn't need a protector and he knew it.”

They all pondered that. "If not to be here, then what?" Lastay asked. "Was he acting the thief, then?"

"Thief?" Xena murmured.

Brendan sat back. "Was bad in need of coin, Xena. Maybe his Grace has a point there."

"Thief." The queen repeated, rubbing her temple with her fingers. "Was it that simple?"

Gerard got up and roamed around the room. "But a thief of what? Mistress, do you keep anything there of such easy value?"

Xena noticed they were all much more willing to talk about Philtop than about ghoos and the God of War. That made sense to her, and she was content to let that question slide for a while. She thought about the big room downstairs and considered, trying to see it from a thief's viewpoint.

It was a big room, and there were hangings on the walls that were nicely made and prettily colored, picked by Gabrielle along with the furniture and the thick rugs on the floors. It was lighter in color than the room they were in now, and with all the windows, far better lit.

Nothing of true value. The decorations were nice, and niches also held trinkets and things her nobles had given her, but there was nothing there that was easily portable or salable and worth stealing. "Nothing." She said. "The most valuable thing in the whole suite besides Gabrielle here is in my weapons chest."

"The round thing?" Gabrielle guessed.

Xena nodded. "Those stones are sapphires and real." She shifted in her chair. "Jewel chest in the dressing room has some pretty good stuff, but he'd have to have come into the inner chamber for that and it would have been suicide." She pondered. "The crown and regalia's in the treasury. Locked up."

Brendan sat up. "Xena, that chest in there, isn't that where you kept the land grants?"

They all fell quiet, then everyone looked at the queen, who had stopped swirling her cup. "Land grants." Xena mused. "Damned if that isn't where they are. Gerard." She eyed her assassin. "Go get Jellaus, and that chest."

"Mistress." Gerard got up and scooted out the door, closing it carefully behind him.

Lastay got up and got the pot of wine, making a circuit and pouring out everyone's cups. "Surely they can't be after that." He said. "What's so interesting with the grants? They cannot sell them."

"Xena." Gabrielle got up and went over to the queen's chair, perching on the arm. "Everything really started getting really weird when you told everyone you were going to have that guy get the stuff near the city." She said. "Remember?"

Had it? Xena closed her eyes and thought back, to that court when she'd on a lark, almost, handed over the lands to her care worn holder out there on the fringe. "Son of a bitch." She opened her eyes and looked at her consort. "Bresius His men were the first ones killed."

"That's right! And just after, that Westlands bastard showed up!" Lastay said. "Though, hardly could have been connected, he'd been traveling long days to get here."

"Bresius." Xena mused. "I cede him lands, and right after, that, it goes to Hades." She hiked one knee up. "Wasn't even something I thought about in advance. I just liked the daggers the damn man gave me."

Lastay sat back down. "But... why would it matter?" He asked. "Was some good farming lands there, Xena but hardly something to start a war over." His eyes watched her. "For that is what it seems to me, that this is a war."

"Sure it is." The queen agreed. She leaned her head against Gabrielle's side. "Could this be it? I had a whole room full of toadies yammering at me after I did it warning me off this guy."

"Aye, yah, you did." Brendan agreed. He got up and went to the tray, collecting a husk of bread and setting slices of meat into it. "Remember that. They were saying not to trust him."

"Irony." Xena said. "I was pretty sure half of them were Brego's toadies. Then I wasn't."

Duke Lastay frowned. "I know those men. That area never did lean Brego's way, Mistress. Truly. Especially Bresius. Very dark horse, that one was."

"Yeah?" Xena eyed him.

"Word is, the reason he had to resort to raiding was those landholders refused to give in to him." Lastay related. "Shut the gates and fired on his envoy."

"Really?" Xena sat up, with an interested expression. "How come I'm just hearing about this?"

"Men came with them, were talking in the hall." Brendan said. "We just heard it today."

Lastay nodded. "Aye, and I heard it from others as well, not so pleased with them either."

Xena chuckled softly. "Then it must be true." She rested her elbows on the chair arms. "Maybe I did wrong them.. like they said." She admitted. "So hard to know who to trust."

"Aye." Brendan sighed.

Gabrielle leaned over and gave the queen a kiss on the top of her head. "Wasn't hard for me for some reason."

Xena smiled, glancing up at her. "No. Wasn't hard for me in your case either."

The door abruptly opened.

Xena didn't stop to think. She was up out of her seat, with her sword in her hand, and past her men in a breath before the body coming in cleared the door and she recognized him. "Gerard, knock." She relaxed, and let the blade drop. "What is it?"

Her assassin was breathing hard, and also, empty handed. "Xena, that room's been ripped apart. The chest is gone." He said. "There's dead men there. You should come see."

"You'er damn well right I should." Xena shoved her sword back in it's sheath. "Let me put some boots on. This is insanity. What do they think that chest is worth? The grants are held here." She extended her hand and closed it into a fist. "Not on parchment." She said. "Someone go find Bresius. Bring him downstairs."

The room burst into activity. Xena went back into her bedroom to get some clothes on and Gabrielle followed her. Brent went out to find Brenius. Gerard went near the fireplace to catch his breath, and spill the details to Brendan and Lastay.

"Nuts." Xena pulled her house armor on and fastened it. "Nuts, nuts, nuts."

Gabrielle was getting into her own armor and tabard, glad her head had stopped aching, and her stomach had returned to normal. She sat down to pull her boots on and tightened the laces, feeling her heart start to race. "What do you think it means, Xena?"

"It means I won't get to go to bed with you yet." Xena sighed. "This really isn't my night." Gabrielle grinned briefly. "Besides that."

"I don't know." The queen offered her a hand up. "Let's go find out." She handed Gabrielle her staff and headed for the door, twitching her shoulders to settle the armor over them. "Cant really be that much of a surprise after everything else that's happened today."

Well, that was probably true. Gabrielle gripped her stick and followed. The men were waiting in the doorway and they all emerged into the big round hall and headed for the stairs in a group, thundering down them and sending echoes against the thick stone walls.

Soldiers started pouring out from all directions, weapons drawn until the lit torches revealed the identity of the group and then the guards became escorts as Xena led the way to the doors of their chambers. As she reached them, she put her hands out and shoved them open.

Gabrielle was right behind her, and she got a look past the queen's shoulder as they went through the audience chamber and entered the outer room to their living space.

Both of them stopped, and she almost crashed right into Xena's back. "Whoa!"

The chamber was truly in shambles. Xena slowly turned in place, looking from one side to the other, her pale eyes widened in surprise. "Looks like someone let my horse loose in here with a couple of randy mares."

"Wow." Gabrielle agreed, peeking out from behind her arm.

"How did this happen and no one heard it?" Xena turned and looked at the guard. "I heard a rat up stairs in my drilling chamber and chased it down. No one heard THIS?"

It seemed hard to believe. Gabrielle tried to reconcile her memory of the room with what she saw now. Every bit of furniture was in splinters, and the hangings had been blasted off the walls. The walls themselves had chunks missing and the floor was covered in rubble and scattered in the rubble were three bodies.

Everyone was looking around in equal disbelief.

Brendan took the lead, and moved past Xena into the room with Brent right behind him. They crouched next to the nearest body, rolling it over onto its back. It was dressed in dark clothing, but with nothing to hide its face. "Be damned."

Xena took a step to one side to see what he was looking at. "Bresius."

Gerard was rolling over the second body. "One of his men, Mistress."

Lastay walked over and touched the wall. "Looks like a ram hit it, my liege." He glanced at Xena. "Some hard thing, at any rate."

Thus appealed to, Xena went over and joined him, running knowledgeable hands over the destruction. "Something sure did." She mused. "And the land grants are missing, or were they taken out somewhere? No need to leave them in my quarters was there?"

Brendan stood and put his hands on his hips. "Might have been." He said. "But it would have been Stanislaus have done it, eh?"

"Sure." Gabrielle spoke up. "No one else would have messed with them."

"Stanislaus." Xena repeated, in a thoughtful tone. "Yeah, the old meddler might have put them away." She said. "Maybe someone was trying to get a look at them and he turned them down."

"Maybe that's why he got shived." Brendan said.

"Maybe." The queen agreed. "Is it possible this whole damn mess is as simple as greed?"

Gabrielle snorted under her breath.

Xena sat down on an overturned chest, that had once held folded hangings and linens. "Something's not adding up." She gazed around. "I thought I was getting a handle on what was going on here but now I've got no damn clue." She glanced at the third body on the floor, nearby her boots. She studied the face. "Anyone know who this is?"

Brendan came over and looked down, and Gerard joined him. Lastay wandered over to where Xena was seated and leaned against the wall, and after a moment, Gabrielle joined them, resting her hand on Xena's shoulder.

The body was small, and slight, the head covered in blood but fair haired and almost square in shape. "Don't know him." Lastay finally said.

"Me either." Brent crouched down to examine the body. "Got hit in the head. Maybe by whatever did that." He indicated the crack in the stone behind Xena. He leaned closer, and then he turned back the thick tunic the man was wearing exposing his shoulder.

There was a mark there, and after an instant Gerard joined him with a candle and they stripped the arm free, turning it out the light so everyone could see it. "He's marked."

Xena looked at the dark stained tattoo on the man's arm. "Brendan. Go get Lakmas."

Without a word, her captain left, breaking into a trot as he cleared the door.

"Is it a Persian mark, Mistress?" Brent asked. "The man himself doesn't look like one." He tilted the head, which had a huge gash on one side, as though a sword blade had bisected it. It was hard to discern his features, but the fair hair and pale skin attested to Brent's words.

"Gerard." Xena seemed to be absorbed in thought. "Go to Stanislaus's chambers. See what you find there."

"Aye, mistress." He stood. "I'll take a few of the men with me. No telling what might be there ahead of us after this." He motioned to two of the guard who were standing hesitantly just inside the doorway, and they followed him with every evidence of relief.

Xena looked behind her at the wall, reaching out to touch the destruction. She could feel the harsh, rough edge of the rock against her fingertips and she paused, only her eyes moving as she tried to put the pieces together. "What's so damn special about those lands?" She mused.

"Didn't seem so." Brent said. "Flatlands, to the river after the pass we fought in."

Flatlands, yes. Xena shifted her gaze and called up images of them in her memory. She'd barely paid attention to them on the way to the city, her focus on the end result itself rather than what she'd been passing through but she remembered rolling lands that were open and wild, save for the stands of forest spotted along the ridge that overlooked the sea.

Cleared and broken, they would be good for planting, especially since the river they'd ridden along had long overflowed its banks and enriched the soil around it. But that was nothing that special, it was just better and more fertile than the valley past the pass that they'd found Bregos in.

Good lands, certainly she got why the other landholders had been ticked off she'd given them to Bresius but nothing worth doing what had been done here, which would result in them having their heads cut off by her.

Peaches were good, but if the mouth you hoped to eat them with was filled with worms, what was the point, really? Were they really worth the raising of her fist against you?

Really?

That made no sense. "What do ya think?" She asked Gabrielle.

The pale green eyes went from the body to her. "About what?"

"This?" Xena indicated the room.

Gabrielle sat down next to her, pressing along her left side in a warm and very pleasant way. "I think it's weirder than singing sheep." She finally said. "I don't even know what to say Xena. What's going on here? Is that a bad guy?" She pointed at the marked man.

Xena folded her hands. "Well, none of us know him, he's wearing an Eastern tattoo, and no one gave him permission to be in here so it looks like he's a bad guy but at this point, my love, I'm not ready to assume anything." She leaned back against the wall and exhaled. "I'll go with that singing sheep of yours."

Lastay folded his arms. "I didn't spend much time in the area, but was there something to be had in these lands, Mistress? Some gold, or gems or suchlike? Nothing else seems to make any sense to me that would drive men to insanity seeking them. "

"Didn't spend much time there either." Xena said. "I didn't see anything like that while we were in the area. Aside from the port city itself being valuable, wasn't much there." She got up and went to the unidentified man, going down on one knee to examine him.

He had a wiry frame, and under his thick, dark clothing his body was very sinewy, the surface covered in a tracework of thin scars that rang a faint bell of familiarity in her.

Then she realized where she'd seen them before. "Gabrielle, c'mere a minute."

Her consort came over and knelt next to her, resting her hand on Xena's thigh. "What is it?"

Xena pointed to the scars. "You know what caused those?"

Gabrielle studied them. "No." She said. "What?"

The queen turned her head and looked at her. "You really don't know?" She studied her consort's face intently, finding nothing but open puzzlement there. "Really?"

"Should I?" Gabrielle asked, after a minute. "Why?"

Xena hesitated briefly. "You have them all over your back."

Her consort jerked upright in surprise. "I do?" She asked, in an astonished tone, one hand reaching around to touch her spine. "No I don't, do I?"

The queen nodded mutely.

Gabrielle's gaze turned inward, and she stared at nothing for a long moment. Then her expression cleared and she looked up at Xena. "I think I do remember when I must have gotten them. I never thought about it." She said.

"Yeah? I thought maybe your crumb of a father did it. Maybe you didn't want to talk about it."

Xena watched her consort's face again closely. "Don't blame you."

But Gabrielle shook her head. "No, not that time. I had to chase four of the sheep up into the ridge above our holding and climbing around up there I slipped and fell into a crack in the rocks." She explained. "It was all.. I guess the rock was all rough? Kind of sharp? When I slid through it cut my back all up and hurt a lot."

"Ah."

"Then I had to climb up out of the cavern I fell into, and I had to pull myself out." Gabrielle lifted her hands and mimed hauling herself upward. "My shirt was already ripped mostly off, and the rocks raked me. Lila helped me clean it all up and it hurt a lot for a while but... " She paused. "I guess mostly I forgot about that. I never told them. He would have beaten me."

"For getting cut up?" Xena's voice dropped in disbelief.

"For ruining my shirt." Gabrielle answered her quietly. "It was in shreds."

"By the gods." Lastay had been listening. "What animal could this have been?"

Xena sighed and gently patted her consorts back. "You remember what kind of rock it was? Those are sharp, thin lines." She pointed at the man's chest. "Wasn't the granite we were climbing over out there."

Gabrielle reached out to touch the cold skin. "They were crystals" She said. "I remember because the sun was going down and the light on them was so pretty and I remember thinking such a pretty thing shouldn't have hurt me like that."

"Crystals." Xena looked over at Lastay. "I wonder what kind."

"By the gods."

\*\*

Lakmas rested his big forearms on his knees and gazed down at the dead body, a pensive expression on his face. "No doubt, magnificence. The marking is in the fashion of my people, but this one." He indicated the body. "Is no Persian."

"No." Xena was sitting in one of her big chairs, having been dragged in by some of the soldiers. The other bodies had been removed, and three servants were scurrying around cleaning up the chamber. "He's no Persian unless his mother looked like Gabrielle."

Lakmas frowned, then both big shoulders lifted in a half shrug. "That has been known to happen." He admitted. "But those such have not an easy life."

"Is any life really easy?" Xena mused. "Mine wasn't and neither was Gabrielle's." She picked up the man's hand and examined it. The stiffened fingers were callused, and the palm was very thick with muscle. She turned over her own hand and compared it. "He was a fighter."

"Only a dagger on em, though." Brendan commented, extending it to her.

Xena dropped the hand, ignoring the muffled thump of the dead flesh against the stone. She took the dagger and removed it from its sheath, sighting along the blade. It was a finely made weapon, dead straight and well sharpened and the hilt showed evidence of long use of it.

She handed it over to Lakmas. "What do you think of that?"

The Persian studied the knife. "It's not in our tradition." He said. "This is one which I'd think to find here in the north of this land, rather than my own."

Xena nodded. "Agreed." She stood up and dusted her hands off. So far, the examination of the room had only served to add more questions to her basket rather than answer any of them. She looked around at the wall, and tried again to imagine what could have made the holes in it. "Sure didn't do that."

"No." Lakmas went over and touched the hole. "Seems like only a war hammer driven by a god's arms could do this damage, without having a battering ram to do it."

Gabrielle and Xena exchanged looks. "Interesting idea." The queen muttered. "But I doubt any damn god was in here beating up my walls looking for land grants."

Gerard slipped in the door at that moment and looked around, spotting Xena. "Mistress." He had a thick bound set of scrolls under one arm. "I found this. Not sure if it's what's needed or looked for but.." He brought the packet over to where Xena was standing and handed it to her. "Wasn't much else in his quarters. Didn't look like anything was touched in there either."

Xena took the packet over to one of the credenzas against the wall that had survived the chaos and set it down. "Well, he's dead." She said. "I guess they figured there was nothing else to gain there." She examined the packet, which was tied with a leather strap and laces. "Know what, Gabrielle?"

"We're moving back up to the tower for real?" Gabrielle had come to stand next to the credenza, and leaned against it.

Xena smiled briefly. "Well, until I get this place remodeled." She glanced around. "But what I was going to say was this looks like something you'd do." She indicated the parchment, then she gently untied the laces and undid the strap, opening up the bundle and laying the sides down flat. "Bring that candle over here."

Gabrielle did, setting it close enough for them to read the contents, but not close enough to set the thing on fire. "What is it?"

Xena touched the top of the first page, squinting a little to read the faded letters. It bore a legend, and she realized it was a dating from before her arrival and conquest of the stronghold. She read the first few lines then flipped a page, and read a bit more. "It's a journal." She said.

Gabrielle leaned next to her. "He wrote it?" She looked at the page. "Is it.. oh, it's the day to day stuff. I remember him taking notes for that when you had court. Did he record all of it? Really? I thought the scriviner did that."

"He did.. I mean, he does." The queen said. "I think Stanislaus just did this on his own." She turned to the back of the parchment bundle and found sheets with more vivid ink, current notes that ended just... Xena touched the entry on the last page. Just before he'd been attacked. "I can only imagine all the names he called me in here."

She turned and went back to the raider's body, leaving Gabrielle to thoughtfully turn the pages and examine the writing. "Okay. Someone wake up Jellaus, and get the archivist in here. I need to recreate those grants before the place goes insane."

"They come from your hand, Xena." Brendan said. "No harm then, is there?"

"They do come from my hand, but the last thing we need is word to get out we don't have record of who has what and they all start beating each other over the heads here in the stronghold." Xena said. "Schedule a big court at dawn. Let's get this all out in the open."

Gabrielle rested her elbows on the credenza and studied the page in front of her, covered in thin and uneven script. She, too, suspected Stanislaus hadn't written fondly of her, but this section he'd left for last had been about Xena, and there was no anger in it.

*Today, at last, her Majesty looked at me, not past me. It was a fine and terrible thing, to be seen as a person and not as a servant, or a thing, or something to be made fun of. Strange, it was the revealing of my maiming to her that got me this attention, this unlooked for compassion that took me so by surprise I could hardly answer her.*

*I realized today why my knee still stayed bent to her, all these years. Through all the death and the ridicule and shame there is a truth to her that cannot be ignored. No matter what her words were to me, I know that if great evil comes to us, she will stand between it and those who follow her.*

*She does not hide. She does not stand back and let others die in her place. She has a hard hand, all in truth, but also an open heart I never suspected and I am glad I can say on this day, today, I felt it.*

Gabrielle sighed and closed the book, mostly ignoring the motion in the room behind her. "Poor Stanislaus." She murmured. "I'm sorry we never were friends."

She turned and surveyed the room. The soldiers were taking out the body of the unknown man, and Xena and Lakmas were standing talking to Brendan and Duke Lastay about him.

She felt a little adrift. So much had happened, she wasn't sure where she stood, or where they stood for that matter or what was going to happen tomorrow. It was disconcerting. She almost wished she and Xena had just stayed in their tower and snuggled under the covers with each other.

Jellaus arrived, looking half asleep and worried, with Davos the archivist tagging along behind him. Behind them she spotted Mali, who was very wide eyed and had a terrified look on her face. Gabrielle started forward on seeing her, and got to the door just as they entered. "Mali."

"Oh! Your grace!!!" Her servant gasped. "I was afraid something terrible happened to you again!"

"No, we're fine." Gabrielle drew her into the room. "We weren't here when this happened." She looked at the chamber. "Where were you?"

Mali was looking around the chamber in horror. "Oh no!" She put a hand up to her mouth. "Who did this?"

"We don't know." Gabrielle said. "We came down here to look for something and we found this." She edged into a corner of the room with her body servant. "Did you hear anything? Did anyone?"

Mali looked around slowly, then back up at her. "We were all in the servants quarters." She said. "We were sleeping.. at least, I was sleeping. We were all tired from all the excitement going on. Josha.. that's my brother.. he'd just gotten back from bringing bread and stew to the performers when we heard all the soldiers running. It woke me up."

"I think you can go back to sleep now." Gabrielle said, as she caught sight of Xena dismissing everyone. "We'll all talk about everything in the morning."

Mali gave her a scared look. "Yes, your grace." She murmured.

Gabrielle remembered what she'd just read of Stanislaus. "You don't want to go back downstairs?" She asked, gently. "There's a place you can sleep up in the tower if you want to." She offered. "Would you like that?"

The girl looked wide eyed at her. "Oh yes." She answered, in a faint tone. "Yes, your grace I would like that a lot. It's just so.. it's.. " She drew in a breath. "Everythings so scary down there. Every noise.. we think someone's going to attack us." She whispered. "We all think we hear footsteps."

Ugh. Creepy. Gabrielle patted her shoulder. Creepy, and not necessarily untrue. "Come on up with us, and I'll get you settled in there. It's not a big place, but the soldiers are guarding that area."

“What's going on here?” Xena swooped up next to them and peered down at Mali. “Ah. Your little cat.”

“I'm going to take her back up with us, Xena. She can sleep in that alcove.” Gabrielle said.

The queen studied them briefly, then nodded. “Sure.” She gestured to the door. “Let's get a move on. Nothing else to see in this old dump.” She looked around at the people in the room.

“Oh great one.” Lakmas said. “Honor me by allowing me to join your guard this night.”

Xena studied him. “Sure.” She said, after a moment. “C'mon.”

They trooped back up the stone steps to the tower, Xena and Gabrielle in the lead. Brendan and Lakmas trailed behind them, Brendan talking in a low tone to the Persian who was nodding.

Gabrielle was conscious of being very tired. She had Stanislaus's parchment under her arm, and her head was aching a little, whether from her injury or just the stress she wasn't sure. She sighed, and a second later, Xena's arm was around her, the queen moving close.

“You doing okay?” Xena asked, as though she could read her mind.

“I'm kinda tired.” Gabrielle admitted. “And scared.”

Xena pulled her closer and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. “Me too.” She said. “Hang in there. We'll get through this.”

Be true. Gabrielle suddenly heard the words sounding in her head. She is. She looked up at Xena's profile, seeing it outlined in ruddy gold as they passed one of the torches in the hall. She could see the furrow in her lover's brow and the lines of worry and tension in her face, and she realized that Xena knew, better than any of them, just how much everyone was depending on her to make things right.

What was right? What really was going on? Was Xena going to have to submit to Ares, just to get everything back to normal?

Would she?

What would that mean for them? Gabrielle felt Xena's arm tighten around her, and she exhaled, pushing the grim thoughts aside as they reached the tower rotunda and passed the guard on the landing.

She got Mali settled in the alcove, watching the young girl flitter around the space, looking both relieved and excited as she touched the stuffed straw mattress, and the chest next to it. “Is this okay?”

“Oh, your grace.” Mali sat down on the bed. “It's so nice.”

Gabrielle smiled. “I thought so too.” She said. “It was my first place here, and more space and privacy than I'd ever had in my whole life up until then.”

Mali stared at her, the girl's mouth a perfect O of astonishment.

It made her want to laugh. “Kinda strange, huh?”

Mali looked around the snug space, tucked into a corner of the rotunda right across from the doors to what were now Gabrielle and Xena's quarters. “You stayed here?”

Now, Gabrielle did chuckle. “Yes I did.” She said. “Not for long.” She acknowledged. “I think maybe... a sevenday or so. Then I moved into a little room inside there.” She indicated the sturdy and ornate door across from the alcove. “It was a strange, and scary time of my life but it turned out okay.”

“Did you ever think you would become so?” Mali asked, in a shy voice, reaching out to touch the edge of Gabrielle's tabard.

“No.” Gabrielle answered after a brief pause. “I come from a small village. My father worked the land and the best my sister and I had to hope for was getting married to one of our neighbors and

a lot of hard work.” She studied her servants face, outlined in the candlelight. “But I guess you never know with life, huh?”

Mali smiled. “Thank you for letting me stay here.”

Motion stirred behind Gabrielle and she turned her head as Xena leaned in to the alcove, bringing that ever present air of energy with her. “What's going on here?”

“Just getting Mali settled.” Gabrielle said. “I was telling her about the time I spent here.”

“All about that time?” Xena asked, her brows hiking. “Why Gabbbbrriellleee.” She hooked her fingers into the belt around her consorts waist. “Didn't know you liked telling those kind of stories.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle covered her face with one hand, trading an embarrassed look with her body servant. “Anyway.”

“Anyway, it's time to go get some rest.” Xena started moving backwards, pulling Gabrielle with her. “Enjoy your digs, kid.” She winked at Mali, as she steered her consort across the hallway and through the huge doors into their chambers, shutting them behind her.

Inside there was something of a bustle, as Brendan and the soldiers, including Lakmas were settling down again, finishing the meat and bread they'd all left behind when they'd gone barrelling downstairs.

Xena was glad enough to escape into their bedroom, feeling her shoulders relax as they were once again alone together in the quiet of the night. She shut the door and went over to the hearth, dropping down into one of the chairs in front of it with a sigh.

“Would you like some tea?” Gabrielle moved the waterpot near the hearth, picking up the poker and adjusting the logs in the fire. “Boy it's been a long day huh?”

“Yes, and sure has.” Xena let her head rest against the chair back. “Tomorrow's going to be longer.” She added, in a soft voice after a moment. “But at least this whole thing about people getting croaked is starting to maybe make a little sense.”

Gabrielle retrieved several splits of wood and arranged them on the hearth. “Because of the grants?”

“Yeah.” Xena said. “People killing other people for money... I get that.” She propped her elbow on the chair arm and her chin on her fist. “I get that a lot more than some crazy spooks invading my castle, or even, some fake usurper trying to take over my throne. If there was some thing kick ass valuable in those hills then this whole thing takes on a lot more familiar stink.”

“Do you think that's whats going on?” Gabrielle pulled two mugs over and opened her herb jars, drumming her fingers on the heart edge as she decided what combination to make. “You think it was those crystals everyone's after? They were sort of pretty but I didn't think they were valuable.”

“Depends what they were.” The queen said. “Someone thinks something's valuable out there and I'd wager a couple stones from my crown that maybe those lands were behind what Philtop was after.”

“You think that's what he was looking for that night.” Gabrielle turned and looked at her. “In the other room?”

Xena nodded.

“But... “ Gabrielle poured the hot water over the herbs. “Xena, that makes no sense Those grants are just papers. I wrote some of them. Just having them doesn't give someone the land, does it?”

“No.” The queen said. “But destroying them could take it away from someone, if they were also intending on getting rid of me.” She glanced at her consort, who had stopped in mid motion, and was staring at her. “So just think of it? I croak. Someone else takes charge, and the first thing they do is review the grants to see who has what. That grant's missing, so whoever's in charge can give

it where they want. Bresius is dead now, no one to contest it since I'm pretty sure his heir isn't around anywhere to have seen what went on."

Gabrielle broke out of her stillness and brought the cups over. "Wow." She set them down and sat herself down in the chair next to her lover. "That actually makes sense."

"Gee thanks." Xena gave her a droll look.

"No I mean.." Gabrielle paused. "This whole thing hasn't made any sense to me, Xena, not at all ever since it started. What you just said... I mean, okay. "

"Mm."

"I understand about people being greedy." Her consort said. "If that part is what it's all about then I get it." She added. "But I don't like it." Gabrielle frowned. "Especially if part of it means they caused all this trouble for us "

"No kidding." The queen agreed. "I don't much like that either, my love." She added quietly. "I don't like that, or the fact that you got hurt and I almost.." She stopped talking, and shook her head. "By the gods that hurt." She murmured.

Gabrielle got up and knelt down next to Xena's chair, putting her hands on her lover's knee.

"Xena."

Xena shifted and reached out to cup Gabrielle's cheek with both hands, bringing her closer and kissing her. "I don't have time to find out what those crystals are." She rested her forehead against her consorts. "And that doesn't change those guys in black or the fact that Ares is going to be back tomorrow night to find out what my answer is to him."

Gabrielle eased between her knees and rested her elbows on the queen's thighs. "You think someone here might know what they are? What about those guys who came with Philtop? If he was really into it they might know something."

"Hm."

"So what if you found it out, and told everyone?" Gabrielle asked. "We had everyone on our side before the festival.. would it help if we got that again?"

Xena studied her with a very serious expression.

"I think those spooky guys really like it when everyone's scared." Her consort said.

"I think you're right." Xena said. "I just don't know if, after all this time, I can leverage what little goodwill I have here against them. I think it's too late."

"It's never too late." Gabrielle disagreed. "Xena, remember at that feast? Everyone was on your side."

"No. Everyone was refraining from trying to kill or usurp me." The queen objected. "That's not the same thing." She watched Gabrielle's face tense into a frown. "Nobody here but you... " And here, she paused, and thought, remembering the long hours when she'd held Gabrielle's stricken body in her arms.

"Xena, people love you." Gabrielle said, in a gentle tone, almost as though she was reading her mind. "Not just me."

The queen remained silent.

"We need you, Xena." Gabrielle whispered. "I saw everyone watching you when I woke up. They care. They love you. Don't say I'm the only one."

"No I know." Xena finally said. "I'm just scared."

"Of the scary guys?"

The queen's dark lashes flickered. "Of myself." She uttered in a bare whisper. "I'm scared to say no to him because I don't think I can beat those guys, and I'm even more scared to say yes to him

because I think I'll end up losing everything." She stared into Gabrielle's eyes. "I think he'll make me into something even you won't love."

Those eyes filled with tears in an instant. "Nothing can do that."

"Don't be too sure. I know what I'm capable of, Gabrielle. I'm not sure you are." Xena pressed her forehead against her consorts again. "And I'd rather die than lose you."

Gabrielle felt herself stop breathing for a moment, as those words echoed softly in her ears.

She understood what that meant. She felt the truth of it in her own soul. "Xena I'll stand by you no matter what you do." She said. "I'll face the scary guys with you, or I'll follow you to Olympus if that's where he takes you but my heart will always be yours even if all you do is break it."

Xena bit her lip, her brow tensing. Then she exhaled and blinked, and tears dropped to lightly splash against the backs of Gabrielle's hands. "I wish I deserved that."

"It doesn't really matter if you do or not." Gabrielle said. "It's just true." She covered Xena's hands with her own and gently squeezed them. "I can't change that and I don't want to."

Xena sniffled a bit. "I don't want to change that either." She said. "So we have to find a way to get through this together because I'm not ready do anything else." She took a deep breath. "Sorry I got nuts."

Gabrielle lifted up her hands and kissed them.

"It's been a long damn day."

"It has." Gabrielle said.

Xena drew in another breath. "Let's you and me get some rest, and let tomorrow just come. We'll see what happens." She said. "Maybe there are people who'll support me. Maybe I'll figure out what to do with the land grants Maybe someone will cough up why those damn crystals matter."

"Okay." Gabrielle kissed her hands again.

"Maybe I'll end up getting my ass whipped by a bunch of Persian ghosts." Xena, finally, smiled.

"I'll be right there with you." Gabrielle stood up as the queen did, and put her arms around her. "They'll have to get to your ass through me."

Xena hugged her, then they walked over to the bed and climbed in, still dressed in armor, pulling the covers over them and leaving all the candles lit.

Outside, the winds finally died down, and the snow stopped falling. For the first time in days, at least, there was peace.

\*\*

Against all odds, she slept. Xena was aware, vaguely, of the wisps of some dream fading as she opened one eye and saw daylight past the curtains, faint and purple.

It was quiet. She could hear the snores of her guards in the outer room, and Gabrielle's gentle breathing where her lover was curled up next to her, one hand tucked around Xena's upper arm.

She wasn't entirely comfortable, since she was in her armor and there just wasn't any good way to sleep when you were partially encased in leather and metal. That was mostly why Gabrielle wasn't sprawled half across her, since if there was anything less comfortable than sleeping in armor it was sleeping on armor.

But it was morning. They'd both survived the night, and now she had a brief time to collect her wits and think.

Except she really didn't want to think. Pretty much everything she had to think about was depressing with the single exception of Gabrielle. She studied the sleeping face of her consort, relaxed and open, a slight smile on her lips. The bruise had faded completely from her head, which seemed like a miracle, but with all the other strangeness going on Xena was perfectly content to take good where she found it.

So.

First off, she'd hold court. Now that she knew the royal ringer she'd suspected was her royal ringer, she was more curious than wary of what her nobles might have come up with in terms of demands. Maybe they would surprise her. Maybe they wouldn't.

So then after she had them all there, she'd start beating them up to find out what they knew about those riverside lands. Maybe then, she'd find out what was going on with all the killings.

The spooks and Ares? That would wait for later.

One pain in the ass situation at a time.

Content with her plan, Xena stretched out a little, crossing her booted feet under the covers and shifting her shoulders a little to nudge the plates into a different position pressing into her back. It was cold, the fire had burned down to mere embers, but under the covers their combined body heat had things nice and toasty and the lack of the sound of wind and ice hitting the windows seemed to promise some better weather in any case.

She felt a gentle squeeze on her bicep, and she peeked down to see Gabrielle gazing sleepily up at her. "Hey."

"Hey." Gabrielle amiably responded. "You know something?"

"What?"

"Falling asleep in all this stuff really makes you feel bad in the morning."

Xena chuckled softly. "Yeah it does." She admitted. "I remember the days when I used to sleep in my gear because I didn't want to have to take the time to put it on if we were attacked."

"I feel like every hair on both of my arms is pinched in those links." Gabrielle said. "I'm sort of afraid to move."

"Then don't yet." Xena eased the covers back and slid out of bed, getting her boots under her and standing up as the chill of the room made what skin was exposed prickle. "Brr." She went over to the fireplace and ducked to the side to grab several logs off the stack of firewood, kneeling down to arrange them with casually expert hands.

She stirred the embers up and after a moment was rewarded with the soft crackle of flame as the edges of the dried wood caught. She poked it a little more then stood up, satisfied with her work. Then she dipped some water into the pot and set it on the hearth to heat. "Okay."

She turned, to see Gabrielle curled up on her other side now, watching her. "Let this old dungeon heat up then I'll get you unkinked. Okay?"

Gabrielle grinned.

Xena grinned back, and felt her shivers abate as the fire built and started to spread its heat into the room. Rubbing her hands together, she held them out to the hearth and flexed her fingers. Outside, she could hear the start of stirring, the soft scrape of chair legs against the stone floor, and the grunts of men waking up.

She reached up and unlatched her shoulder armor, lifting it up and setting it down on the cabinet near the hearth. She unlaced one of her bracers as she watched the water pot, rubbing the marks the armor had made on her skin idly. The air in the room brushed against her skin, cool and damp but not entirely unpleasant.

"Xena?"

"Hm?"

"I think I heard a bird."

The queen cocked her head to listen. After a long moment of silence, she heard a soft piping and smiled. "I think you did." She said. "First one I've heard in days."

"You think Ares made the weather go away?" Gabrielle asked "Gods can do that, right?"

"I'm sure." Xena got two cups ready, studying the stone crocks full of herbs with a faintly creased brow. Which ones was she supposed to use? Back in the day, as in, back before Gabrielle came into her life, tea was simple. Either someone made it, or she had a single jar of tea leaves to dump in her cup.

Now?

Now she had at least a half dozen of the damn things.

"Something wrong?"

"Why would something be wrong?" The queen eyed her over one shoulder.

"Because you're staring at the hearthstone making weird noises." Her consort promptly said. "You don't usually do that."

Xena put her hands on the stone and smiled. "No, I don't." She said. "The truth is, I have no idea how to mix this stuff so it makes that peachy berry thing you do." She said. "And that makes me feel like an idiot."

She had barely stopped talking when Gabrielle was at her elbow, nudging her aside and reaching for the jars herself. "Hey." But she moved aside, bending down to put more wood on the fire as Gabrielle opened the tea holders, releasing the rich scent of the leaves into the air.

"It's easy." Her consort was saying. "See? It's this jar, and..." She paused, as Xena stood up and kissed her on the neck. "Xena?"

"It's the second jar, and?" Xena unlatched the scale armor covering her lover's body. "Do ya crush em?"

"With your fingers." Gabrielle agreed. "And the fifth one here, that's the mint." She took some, "And this is the dried blackberry you like."

"I like you." Xena set the armor aside and loosened the ties on the heavy undershirt protecting Gabrielle's skin. "But the tea's not bad either." She leaned over and kissed the spot long the top of the line that crossed from her consort's neck to her shoulder.

Gabrielle smiled, crushing the leaves between her fingers in a rolling motion and lifting the water pot up to pour the now steaming liquid over them. "Thank you." She said. "Are you hungry?"

Xena chuckled softly. "Yes." She gently kneaded the smaller woman's neck with both hands, and felt the shift as Gabrielle exhaled. "And I'd like something to chew on too that isn't you." She admitted. "I don't remember having much dinner last night."

Gabrielle didn't much either. She waited for the tea to steep, picking up the bottle of honey and drizzling a good stickful into each cup. She was hungry, and it seemed to her that her body had finally returned to almost normal, since the hunger was that growling in the guts kind she hadn't had since she'd gotten hurt.

It just all seemed better today. She felt Xena's hands stripping the rest of her armor off, tickling her kneecaps as she took off the guards on her legs and then finding her breathing come short as the queen's teeth nibbled the skin on the inside of her thigh.

It felt good. It felt clean and right. It made her forget about all the weird and terrible things that had been happening and returned her focus to them, and to Xena, and to how wonderful the queen could make her body feel. She'd lost sight of that in the last few days and now she was glad it was back.

Xena stood and hugged her, then she picked up her now discarded armor and put it down next to her own, on her way over to the window to push the heavy curtains back so she could peer outside. "Hey!"

Gabrielle galloped over to see what she was looking at, delighted to see a glint of pale, dawn light off the glistening stone of the stronghold. "Oh wow!"

It wasn't sun, and the ground was covered in snow and ice, but at least no more was falling. Xena pulled the fabric all the way back and hooked it open then she stood there, elbow propped on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Things are looking up."

A soft knock came at the inner door. Gabrielle eased out from under her lover's arm and went over to it, getting a hand on the latch and starting to work it before Xena's tall form swooped down on her, and encircled her with one arm. "Arup!"

"Ah ah ah." Xena neatly moved her out of the way, and opened the door herself, unsheathing her dagger as she took a step back. "I'm still a little more dangerous than you are."

"Mistress?" Brent cautiously poked his head in.

"Ah it's just you." The queen said. "Not some Persian assassin or spook."

"No, mistress." He entered and ducked his head in Gabrielle's direction. "We were going to bring up a tray from the kitchens. May we bring some for you?"

Xena sheathed her dagger and waved him inside. "I was just taking Gabrielle's clothes off." She said. "But I know she's hungry."

Brent blushed and issued a weak smile in Gabrielle's direction.

"It's okay." Gabrielle reassured him, as she headed back towards the tea. "I think she's just in a good mood because it stopped snowing." She stirred the tea and brought Xena over hers.

"Tell." Xena paused, then sighed briefly. "I'm going to have to name a new seneschal aren't I?" She said. "Damn. Never thought I'd say I'd miss the bastard but I do." She sipped her tea. "Tell Brendan to announce court, in one candelmark. I want everyone in there."

"Will do." Brent left, closing the door softly behind him.

Gabrielle thought about that. She hadn't liked Stanislaus much. He had tried to get rid of her when she'd arrived, and since Xena had joined with her he'd never missed an opportunity to snipe or needle her in a very respectable way. But was she glad he was gone? "Who are you going to let take Stanislaus place?"

Xena had dropped into a chair and propped her still booted feet up on a stool, her hair in messed disarray from sleep. She looked a little wild. "Who." She mused. "That's a damn good question."

The door opened again and Brendan entered. "Mistress." He said. "Sent the word out. Weather's cleared a bit, and some of the merchants were askin to set up again outside."

"Tell them to wait until tomorrow to go outside the gates. They can set up in the courtyard today if they want." Xena said. "In fact, let's get all the banners hung out." She watched the flames. "Damn storm interrupted my harvest festival and I want it back."

"Still have some ill doers around, Im' thinking." Brendan said. "Not the ghostly ones, mind, the killable ones."

The queen nodded. "I want to kill them. Let's.. " She paused. "Let's use the break in the weather to get everyone outside, Brendan. Let's see if we can flush those bastards."

"Mistress" Brendan nodded.

"Pretending to be afraid hasn't done squat." Xena said. "Trying to coax them to me didn't work. Trying to smoke them out didn't work, until they got careless." She said. "So let's see what ignoring them does. Make believe we got em all."

"Maybe we did?" Gabrielle suggested.

"No." The queen said. "There's a small, strange one we haven't got yet. Who can walk unseen, and laughs. Who's got feet smaller than yours, and smells like spices from places farther away than Persia. We haven't found that one yet."

"Sent by the Persian king?" Brendan asked. "We could ask Lakmas. Decent sort for one of em"

“Not... “ Xena paused. “I don't think it's from him. Not his style, and come to think of it, sneaking around and trying to pay off losers like Philtop isn't his style either.” She turned to face them, swirling the tea in her cup. “No, there's something still missing in this mess and I'm starting to think there's both more and less to it than we think.”

Brendan and Gabrielle studied her in respectful silence. Then Brendan cleared his throat. “Right, well, I'm off to get them all stirred. I'll let the men know the little rat we're looking for.” He swung his cloak around him and ducked through the door, letting in the sound of the soldiers outside.

Gabrielle followed him out, carrying her cup, her body still encased in the fabric undergarment she'd worn under her armor. It was light brown, and came to her knees, the sides laced up to where her bare arms emerged from it. “Good morning.” She greeted the men in the outer chamber.

It was odd, to have so many people in their quarters. The soldiers all scrambled to get out of her way as she headed to the door to the corridor, returning her greetings. Lakmas was the one nearest the entrance, and he opened it for her, bowing low as she ducked past.

Outside in the rotunda she could hear the sounds of the stronghold waking up, the clanks and bangs of the big doors being opened, and voices echoing softly up the main stairs. Barefoot, she got across the stone floor and peeked inside the alcove that had once been hers, startling Mali who was just washing her face. “Morning.”

“Oh! Your grace!” Mali hastily wiped the water out of her eyes.

“Xena's men are bringing up some breakfast, so I didn't want you to run downstairs for it.” Gabrielle said. “The storm is over.”

“It is?” Mali sounded very surprised.

“It is. So Xena wants the festival to go on again.” Gabrielle said. “So you can let the kitchens know later. We're going to have court, and they've opened the doors downstairs.”

Mali stared at her intently. “Okay I will get dressed and go downstairs.” She said. “Would your grace like anything sent to her majesty's viewing chamber?”

“Sure. Have them send a tray of goodies up.” Gabrielle smiled at her. “Xena loves that.” She lifted her tea mug in Mali's direction, then she turned and recrossed the hall, joining Jellaus as he came up the stairs. “Hello!”

“Ah, Gabrielle.” Jellaus smiled briefly at her. “Good morning.”

They went into the outer chamber together, where the men were putting things in order. Their attitude was brightening, and someone had pushed aside the chamber curtains to let the dawn light in.

There was a sense, of some trial passed, some dread left behind. Gabrielle wondered if it was just her perception, or if something real had passed them by.

Hm.

“I would ask her majesty about court.” Jellaus said, as they crossed the room. “May I enter with you?”

Gabrielle pondered that. “Hang on.” She opened the inner door and poked her head in, then pushed it wider. “Sure, c'mon.” He followed her inside and they found Xena seated in the window alcove, her long legs extended across the cushion there as she regarded the brightening sky outside. “Hey.”

“You're back.” Xena observed. “And you brought company. Bad girl.”

Jellaus bowed. “I will stay but a moment, your majesty. I just wanted to ask if you had any special desires for your court. I have had all of the banners hung.”

“Nah.” Xena said. “Just make sure everyone's there.” She said. “And spread the word I want a big banquet tonight, the works.”

Jellaus nodded slightly. "You expect a celebration."

Xena chuckled. "I expect nothing but trouble. But this time, I think I want to cause it."

The minstrel bowed, and smiled, then he left.

Xena looked at Gabrielle. "Ready to get dressed and go hunting?"

"Can we have breakfast first?"

The queen chuckled again.

"What are we doing?" Gabrielle came over and sat down on the edge of the stone sill. "I told Mali to let the kitchen know about the festival."

"Good." Xena reached out and took her hand, clasping it with gentle confidence. "I'd tell you what we're gonna do if I knew what it was, my love. I've been playing a pointless chess game for days now." She pondered that a moment. "A chess game I didn't even know the rules to."

"Really?"

Slowly the queen nodded. "I'm in over my head." She said, with surprising honesty. "So I'm just going to do what I feel like and see what happens next."

"Okay." Gabrielle frowned. "How is that different than what you usually do?"

Xena started chuckling soundlessly. "Good point." She admitted.

Gabrielle was sure she looked as confused as she felt. "Okay." She said. "So... is that like.. what is that? I don't really get it."

Xena squeezed her hand. "Don't worry about it. I'm not entirely sure I get it either. Just go with me, huh?" She gazed affectionately at her. "Let's get our good togs on, and go play queen for a while. Maybe we'll get a surprise."

"After breakfast, right?"

Now the queen laughed out loud. "Now I know you're feeling better." She teased. "Glad to hear it."

Her consort blushed mildly. "I'm really hungry." She admitted. "I feel like I haven't eaten in a week."

The sound of doors opening and voices added to the clatter of crockery announced the arrival of the food tray next door. They got up and went outside to join the soldiers, Xena's arm still draped over Gabrielle's shoulders.

They'd used Xena's desk as a table and it was covered in trays, the bright colors of freshly harvested things next to bowls of steaming things and pitchers. Four big loaves of bread were in the center of the desk and as she surveyed the bounty, Gabrielle felt her mouth water.

It was almost a little embarrassing. She diffidently clasped her hands behind her back and waited, as two big chairs were quickly brought over so she and Xena could sit down.

It was strange, a little, this return to formality. Gabrielle went over to the desk and started assembling plates for them, picking the things she knew Xena liked while the queen took a seat in her throne and started giving orders. It all sounded very normal, and she saw the men relax as they listened.

She brought Xena's plate back and slipped it in front of her, adding a mug of morning ale to it. Then she went back and got her own, returning to take her place next to the queen and putting her plate on her lap before she selected a big slice of pear and took a bite of it.

"So what's the damage report?" Xena asked, busy with her own breakfast. "How'd the stables do?"

Gerard came forward consulting a bit of parchment. "The watch reported in just a little bit ago, Majesty. The roads are blocked with snow, but they were able to clear the front gates, and they've

started a march of the walls.” He said. “There is much damage in the outer town. Many roofs are collapsed, and they have seen buzzards circling.”

Xena munched on a bit of bread and cheese. “Tell someone to hitch the biggest four horses we have up to a wagon. Let em make a path down to the river.”

“Majesty.” Brent touched his chest. “I know what you mean. I will get it done.” He trotted out of the room before she could answer and closed the door behind him.

“Brendan, tell the guard anyone who comes towards us, let em in. Soon as they get that road cleared, send a troop down it to see what they can do to help.”

“Aye.” Brendan nodded.

“Lakmas.” Xena turned her head towards the Persian. “So I was told that your king offered a sacrifice to your gods and they threw this storm at them. What do you think about that?”

Lakmas stepped forward, his solemn, bearded face moving into a frown. “Who said such?” He asked. “A sacrifice to the gods.. yes, that is usual for my people. When we go to war, when we want good luck. I am sure that yes, his Magificence of Persia would offer up a sacrifice for whatever his needs were.”

“Do your gods listen?” Xena indicated the window. “Would they bring bad weather?”

The Persian looked puzzled. “That is what I mean when I say, who said such? Sacrifices we give, yes. But sacrifices to bless our own acts, not to ask the gods to do something in our places. I could see a slave, a woman being given to the gods so that they might smile on his march against you.”

“Hm.”

“It was so when we came across the waters to the port city.” Lakmas continued. “We came to the temple, all of us, and bowed our heads and the king offered up three sacrifices on the altar, to ensure good fortune for his daughter's virgin leading of the battle.

Xena eyed him. “Didn't work out that well.”

“No.” Lakmas didn't seem upset about it. “Men of war, as I am, and also yourself, know that no matter the gods watching over it's the hands in the fight that matter.” He held his out, big and powerful, crossed with scars. “So I find it very strange, yes, very strange that someone would have told your majesty this storm was brought by our gods. After all, what do they know of this cold?”

Ah heh.

“And of course.” Lakmas said, almost as an afterthought. “What honor would there be in having another, even a god, win one's battle for them?” He nodded a little. “Was it not this that allowed us to be taken captive by you with our own honor intact? You ask for none to fight for you. The little princess – she thought to be that way but her heart wasn't up to the task of it.”

Ah heh. Xena glanced to her right, where she found Gabrielle looking at her with that adorable crap hitting the ox's whisking tail expression. “Interesting.” She peeled a boiled egg and bit into it, quite pleased to find the yolk soft and gooey. “Very interesting.”

Lakmas bowed. “I am, as always, glad to be of service to you, Majesty.”

“Xena.” Gabrielle leaned very close to her. “Did things just get better or worse?”

The queen popped the rest of the egg into her mouth and chewed it. “Let me get back to you on that.”

Gabrielle sighed. “I'm going to get another plate.”

\*\*

The sun had risen over the walls by the time they arrived in Xena's big audience chamber and it was pouring in the windows, bringing a touch of warm grace to a room more usually known for it's dour gloom.

The chamber was full and there was a sense of excitement in the air. Xena stood quietly just inside the side entrance, taking a moment to appreciate the bright colors and the unexpected beauty of the space. It was still a bit cold, but it was a brisk cold rather than a chilling one, and against the far wall the big hearth was stoked and a pair of her soldiers were standing guard in various places.

She twitched her robes a little straighter, her sword in its sheath tucked neatly into the crook of her arm as she judged the mood and waited to make her entrance. Behind her, Gabrielle was also waiting, looking gravely dignified in her own crimson robe with its silver trim. "Ready?"

"Me?" Her consort looked up. "Sure."

The sun peeked into their hiding spot and draped over Gabrielle's body, highlighting her golden hair. Xena reached over and gently ran her fingers through it, then she leaned to one side and kissed her on the lips. "Today's gonna be a day." She said. "So let's get it started."

The soldier banged his spear, Jellous announced her presence, and then Xena moved from the doorway with Gabrielle at her heels and glided through the crowd, passing from the shadows of the columns into the pools of sunlight from the window.

She climbed up the marble stairs to the dais where her throne rested, and went to it, turning and waiting for Gabrielle to come up next to her. "Sit." She indicated the smaller chair they'd put at the throne's side.

Gabrielle sat, then Xena turned and took her seat, letting her sword rest across her knees. She paused for a moment and studied her audience, scanning the faces attentively waiting for her to speak. "Good morning."

Duke Eldaron stepped forward. "Your majesty." He said. "Last night, you asked something of us."

"I did." Xena agreed.

Duke Lastay, dressed nattily in his family colors, his sword belted at his waist, walked up the steps and approached her throne, bowing to her, and then taking up a spot just behind the throne, his hand resting on one finely carved spindle on the back.

He didn't say anything, and apparently felt he didn't need to, the motion itself laying his choice out plainly enough. Xena glanced at him and smiled, then turned and refocused her attention on Eldaron. "Yeess?"

Eldaron clasped his hands together. "Majesty, many terrible events have occurred in the past few days. It grieves me deeply that we have lost friends, have taken damage to our land and have had our harvest festival so grossly interrupted."

"Me too." The queen nodded. "I love a good party."

"There was a thought, your majesty, that there were some among us that plotted in some way to find another to take your place on the throne of this land." Eldaron said. "I spent many hours looking for the root of this thought, and in long deliberation with my fellow lords because I will say to you, Xena, it came from none of us."

The sound of her name, so bare of adornment, made Xena smile again.. "I see." She cleared her throat. "As it happens, I found my usurper myself." She sniffed reflectively. "He found me, really."

An almost visible jerk of surprise went around the room.

"Speaking for my peers, we wish no other leader." Eldaron said, forging ahead. "I cannot pretend to you that what has happened here these last days hasn't frightened all of us, but we are content to stay the course."

Xena studied him, then swept the room with her gaze. To her surprise, most of the eyes looking back at her didn't shift, or look away, or down. They stayed fixed on her, for once quiet, for once without the visible dislike she'd come to expect from them.

How real was that?

How real was anything today?

“So, as you asked us, that is what we say.” Eldaron said, after a moments silence. “Your majesty.” He added, after the quiet went on long enough to become uncomfortable.

“Thank you.” Xena said. “I know I’ve been a pain in your collective asses for years now, but I’ve tried to gut more of our collective enemies than you all when all’s said and done.”

Eldaron grimaced wryly. “Majesty.” He said. “While often your style... ah... “

“I’m a homicidal maniac.” Xena encouraged him. “Gwan. We all know it’s true.”

He paused. “Yes, but you’re our homicidal maniac, Majesty. It makes all the difference to us, really.”

A startled, chilled silence fell after the words stopped echoing, and even Eldaron blanched, realizing what he’d said.

Then Xena started to laugh. The light, musical sound rang out against the walls with surprising clarity, and she applauded in Eldaron’s direction. “Nice!”

Hesitantly, he smiled back, and gave a little bow.

Xena let her laughter wind down, then she cleared her throat. “All right people.” She let her elbows rest on her throne arms. “A lot of crazy things have happened over the past few days. I’m not really sure how much of it was planned, how much of it was coincidence, and how much of it was just the random crap that seems to happen to me.”

She got up and handed her sword to Gabrielle, who gripped it with a startled look. “One thing I think we figured out is just how much someone wants those lands between the port city and the pass. They want them enough to kill people for them, and wreck the archives which prove out all the land grants for the rest of you.”

A low murmur started. “So it is true then, that Bresius is dead?” Eldaron asked. “And your chamber... destroyed?”

“Yes.” Xena said, briefly. “The archivist is locked in my bedroom recreating the grants. So don’t worry about that part of it especially since I didn’t end up croaking last night and leaving you all in chaos.”

Eldaron put his hands on his hips. “But who has done this?” He looked around at the rest of the nobles, who were also looking around at each other. “None here would have any reason to do that.”

Xena crossed her ankles, debating with herself on how honest to be. Then she half shrugged. “I’m thinking that someone didn’t want Bresius to get those lands. Matter of fact, a lot of you didn’t, or so you said.”

She suddenly smelled the fear, and it made her briefly grin. “So I have to wonder what’s so interesting about that dirt that makes someone risk what they risked in my chambers last night.” She studied them. “Bresius died. His seneschal died. And a man none of us knew died, who had some very interesting scars on his back.”

Her ears twitched, listening hard. She open her lips a trifle, sucking in the air with that stench of fear on it.

Not from Eldaron though, he spread his hands out, his body language only bewildered, not wary. “Majesty. We warned you not to trust him because we knew so little of him. Now it seems he has brought misfortune, and has died. Were we not right to be wary?”

“Depends why he died.” Xena said. “Before you ask, nope, wasn’t me.” She studied the group “While I’m getting all of this off my chest, I didn’t whack Philtop either.” She added casually. “So you know, maybe I’m not the only homicidal maniac around here.”

The nobles all looked at each other, and even Lastay craned his head around to gaze at Xena. “But, you let us think you had.” The duke said, after a pause.

"I did." The queen agreed. "Because I would have killed him if I'd found him dressed as a thief in my bedroom. But someone got to him before I did."

Silence.

Gabrielle cleared her throat. "I think her Majesty didn't want people freaking out more than they already were." She suggested, in a diffident tone. "Xena." She turned to the queen. "Do you think he was after those grants?"

Xena lifted both hands and opened them fully. "What the Hades good would they have done to him, or anyone else unless I croaked?" She asked. "Those parchments don't give the land, I do." Her tone was exasperated. She gestured at Lastay. "Or my successor will."

Lastay's face twitched. "Hopefully, my liege, that will be left to my son. I have no wish to do it myself."

Xena eyed him "If you think I'm sitting on this chair until your kid's a man you've got sea sponge for brains." She muttered. "So." She turned her attention back to the crowd. "Who's going to cough up what the big deal is about that land between the pass and the city?"

Everyone was silent, and the nobles looked at each other uneasily.

"Someone knows. I can smell someone about crapping their breeches." The queen said.

But the silence lengthened.

Gabrielle leaned on the arm of Xena's throne. "Could they have been looking for something else in there besides those things?" She wondered. "Maybe it's still there."

Xena was watching the nobles from the corner of her eye, with the rest of it fastened on her consorts adorable face. She didn't see any of them flinch, and she watched carefully for that and for the inadvertent look towards her chambers.

Nothing. Hm.

"Maybe." She mused. "We'll have to go look." She returned her attention to the crowd. "In the meantime, looks like the weather's cleared up, so I want our festival to get back on track. Everyone get your party shoes on and start dancing."

After a moment, the nobles all relaxed and some smiled.

"Tell those circus people to get ready, and make sure the merchants have space in the courtyard." Xena went on. "And tonight, there'll be a feast in the big hall. Got it?"

Eldron bowed. "Majesty, it will be a pleasure."

The queen lifted her hands and made a shooin' gesture, as the nobles stirred and started to leave, not without forming little groups whose heads were bent close in soft chatter. Xena sat relaxed in her throne, leaning on the arm closest to Gabrielle as she watched them go.

At last they, and Lastay, and Brendan were the only ones left.

"Know what I wish?" Xena said, after the echoes of their footsteps faded.

"What?" Gabrielle asked.

"I wish I knew what the Hades was going on." The queen lamented. "I feel like one of those damn puppets they were messing with. Someone else pulling the strings." She turned her head and gazed at her consort "Got any clues?"

Gabrielle soberly shook her head. "Should we go look for something in that room?" She asked. "Maybe they missed something." She leaned against Xena's shoulder. "I'm glad they all said they liked you."

"They didn't say that." Xena immediately objected. "They said they couldn't find anyone to take my place right now. Not the same thing." She leaned her head over and bit Gabrielle's earlobe gently. "But yeah, I'm glad they said it too." She uttered softly. "Wasn't going to be a good morning otherwise."

Gabrielle remained silent for a moment. "Would you have let them do that?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't think so."

Xena smiled. "I would have started gutting people." She remarked conversationally. "That's what I mean, wouldn't have been a good morning. Now we can go clue hunting without me having to wash the blood off my hands first." She wiggled her fingertips.

Gabrielle smiled.

The queen tipped her head back and regarded Lastay. "Thanks for the vote of confidence by the way."

The duke grinned, a bit rakishly. "I do believe I have started to become quite the risk taker as my years increase. You have been an influence on me in that regard."

"Me too." Gabrielle agreed.

Xena looked at both of them then rolled her eyes. "You're both in a crapload of trouble if you're looking to me for inspiration." She got up and stretched. "Let's go look at that damn chamber. Maybe Gabrielle was right and they were looking for something other than those grants."

They left using the back door, and went down the steps to the rotunda which was now lit from the sunlight coming in the open castle doors. A fresh, cold breeze blew through, fluttering the tapestries and the soldiers on guard braced to attention as they passed.

Xena could hear a buzz of activity outside, and she cocked her ears to listen, detecting the flap of tent fabric on the breeze and the sound of livestock moving. She nodded a little in approval and led the way up the shorter steps to her quarters, where there were yet more guards standing staunchly on either side of the entrance. "Open er up."

One of the men quickly unlatched the door and got it open in time for her to walk through and she did, going to the center of the space and pausing to look all around.

It was a big chamber, this outer one she used now for small private audiences and as living space. They had removed the bodies, and someone had cleaned the floor, and thrown the windows open to air the room out. She could smell the sharp scent of soap and water from outside and she took a breath of it, finding nothing on the wind that didn't belong there.

That, she realized, was new. She'd been aware, maybe even under her conscious awareness, that something had been off for the past few days, some scent, some half memory that had been bugging her. Now it was gone.

Hm.

She started to prowl around the room. "Turn over everything and look everywhere. "She instructed. "Look for cracks in the wall, or places some rat might hide."

Lastay removed his cape and draped it over a chair then he went to the far side of the room and started examining the wall, while Gabrielle went over to the big desk she often sat at to write Xena's missives and began searching through it.

Xena watched them briefly, then she selected a bit of wall and went to it, shoving aside the drapery that covered it to peer at the raw stone. It was clean, she was mildly surprised to note, not a hint of dust or dirt on it. She ran her hand over the stone, feeling the chisled edges bite gently at her skin.

This was the outside wall of the chamber. There could be no hidden passages in it, right? Xena went over to the window and stepped up onto the sill, balancing on one foot on the narrow space as she regarded the wall the window was set into.

Single blocks of granite, locally cut stone from the mountains around them. The blocks were heavy and very well set, the edges flush and carefully grouted with a finely ground sand mixed with wax. Someone had taken care when they built this place, and that got Xena to thinking again.

“Xena?”

The queen, still balanced on one leg, turned to regard the speaker. “Hmm?”

Gabrielle was seated behind the big desk, one that the queen remembered having been in the castle when she took it over. She was looking closely at something on the surface, and now she looked up. “Could you come see this?”

Xena hopped off her perch and scooted over to the desk, sweeping around it and joining her consort. “Yeess?” She knelt at her side and studied the wood. “What am I looking at?”

“Well, see.” Gabrielle got down with her head near Xena’s. “See how thick this top is? It’s as thick as my head.”

Xena gave her a sideway glance and muffled a grin.

“But” Gabrielle touched the front of the furniture. “Why is it? There’s no drawer here or anything.”

The queen rested her elbow on her knee, and regarded the desk. Then she ducked her head and looked underneath. “Maybe its... no, it isn’t.” She said. “Bottom’s flush here.” She leaned back again. “Huh.”

Experimentally, Gabrielle rapped on the top, but it merely sounded a hollowish thump. “Do you think something’s in there?”

“Can’t be that easy.” Xena shook her head. “Let’s look everywhere else.” She stood up and walked around the desk though, putting her fingertips on the edge and seeing if any part of it would lift up. It seemed as solid as it looked though, and she regretfully moved on to the large wooden credenza that held the minutiae of leadership she used on a daily basis.

Gabrielle tapped her fingertips on the top of the desk and studied it for a minute, then she equally regretfully got up and started searching the long, low bench that went along the wall leading to their sleeping chamber.

The bench had a padded seat of tufted fabric and it smelled a little musty as she eased along its length and searched for... well, whatever she was searching for. Experimentally she pulled on the cushion to see what was under it, surprised to find it fastened to the top of the bench.

With a frown, she sat down cross-legged on the stone floor and peered at the cushion. Why would someone attach it to the bench? With a soft grunt, she got up and went over to the desk, selecting the slim dagger Xena kept there to open scroll and make mild threats with and brought it back over with her, sitting back down with it and poking at the fabric.

“Whatcha doing?” Xena’s voice nearly made her levitate off the floor.

“Yow!” Gabrielle turned to find her beloved peering over her shoulder, having approached in silence. “I was just wondering.” She made the cut a little bigger. “Why they stuck this soft part to the wood?”

Xena reached out and tugged on it, one dark brow hiking and the other dipping lower. Then she stood up and got a good grip on the cushion, tightening her hands and making the fabric squeak. “Stand back in case this thing’s got spider’s in it.”

Gabrielle scrambled to her feet and got behind her. “Okay.”

The queen took a breath and then yanked backwards with all her strength, expecting the cushion to come ripping off the surface. Instead, with a startlingly loud crack, the top of the bench lifted up and split in half, part of it coming loose in Xena’s hands and nearly sending the queen flying backwards.

“Yow!” Gabrielle repeated, jumping out of the way.

“What the..” Xena yanked the wood loose and tossed it from her, stepping forward to look down into the now visible hollow of the bench. It was mostly empty, but she saw the edge of something near the end, still covered with the wood. Turning sideways, she kicked the remaining part free and it flipped over the side to clatter on the stone. “Huh.”

“Huh?” Gabrielle put her hands on Xena's hips and poked her head around the the queen's side to have a look. “It's a box.”

Lastay came over and joined them. “Ah hem.” He sniffed. “Got the old king's crest there. Want me to bring it up for a look, Mistress?”

Xena took the dagger that Gabrielle was still holding in one hand and leaned over the bench, poking the blade down and jabbing the wooden surface with it. “No sense taking chances.” She said. “Every damn wood box I've seen in the last quarter moon's had an asp in it.”

“Be only bones of one in that eh?” Lastay suggested.

The queen poked a few more times at it, then she used the blade to slide the box along the wooden inside of the bench towards her, hearing the faintest popping sound that made her lunge back, grabbing Gabrielle and Lastay and yanking them backwards violently.

She dove for the floor and took them with her, her senses prickling as something flew over her head and landed nearby.

“Mistress!” Lastay grunted. “What's the problem?”

“Stay still, both of you.” Xena ordered, lifting her head cautiously. She looked carefully around, and spotted the projectile, lifting her body over Gabrielle's to put her between the device and her consort. “Dart.” She inspected it warily, reaching out with the dagger to move it over.

“Bigods.” Lastay had crawled around to see. “How long was that in there? Is it new?”

Xena picked up the dart and brought it closer to her, sniffing it cautiously. The small barb smelt musty, but no more, and she squinted at it, seeing a thick coating of dust covering the surface.

“Don't think it's recent.” She said. “I probably triggered it moving that damn box.”

Slowly she eased back towards the bench, holding the dagger out in front of her as she lifted her body up and peered inside. The box was where she'd left it, but now on the back wall of the bench she could see several small holes that it had been obscuring. “Gabrielle?”

“Right here.” Gabrielle's shoulder bumped her hip.

“Get me a boot.” Xena said. “I want to block those holes back up. I don't trust that only one dart was in there.”

Gabrielle sat down at once and tugged at the laces on her left boot, stripping it off her foot and handing it to her lover. “Here you go.”

Xena was watching her. “It didn't have to be your boot.” She commented mildly, but took the offered item and eased to one side, carefully dropping it into place in front of the holes.

No sooner had she done so, then four more soft pops were heard, and four more tiny black darts were now stuck in the leather of Gabrielle's footwear.

“Mistress.” Lastay pondered the boot. “Do you have an oracle's eye?”

Xena snorted softly and reached inside again, stabbing the box with her dagger and piercing the lid. “Back off, both of you. I'm gonna pull it out.” She waited for them to draw back, then she yanked her arm up and over, pulling the dagger and the box with it to clatter onto the stone floor by her side.

Everyone stared at it in silence for a minute, then Xena jerked the knife free, and studied the enclosure. It was a finely made box, with inlaid wood in the top forming the crest, an iron handles on the ends to carry it with. Now, of course, the top was also graced with a narrow split hole.

“It's pretty.” Gabrielle finally said.

“Aye.” Lastay agreed. “Had a fine woodworker here in the old times. I remember seeing work like that in some of the older holdings .. had a tiny bit of it in the place my family took over when you came to rights here.”

'It's not as nice as Xena's though.' Gabrielle concluded. 'See that part there? Not all the way even.' She pointed at one corner. 'Xenas's is perfect.' She looked up, to find mildly amused blue eyes looking back at her. 'Well, it is.'

'Hm.' Xena braced the box against her foot and inserted the tip of the dagger into the lock hole, rotating it with consummate skill until the lock popped.. She tipped the hasp up, and eased the box lid open, her free hand up and ready to deal with anything flying out of it.

Nothing did. After a cautious moment, she peered inside, then let her hand drop. 'Huh.'

Gabrielle's head pressed against her shoulder. 'What is it?'

Xena reached inside and lifted out the contents, a much folded and dusty piece of parchment. She turned and put it on the ground for them to see, opening it up and spreading it out in the light coming in the window.

'Is that a map?' Lastay leaned closer, putting his hand on one hand flattening it. 'It is.'

'It is.' Xena agreed.

'Wow.' Gabrielle squirmed over and stared at it. 'Is it... isn't that here?' She pointed at the left side of the parchment. 'It sort of looks like this place.'

'Without the outer guard tower, and the town. Yeah.' Xena scanned the map, catching details that immediately pricked her interests. 'That's the road we took to the port city.' She indicated a wiggly line that went between what was drawn in as hills and the far edge, which had a tiny town where she knew the city now stood. 'This is from a long time ago.'

'What's that, Mistress?' Lastay pointed at sigils scribbled in the area between the town and the hills.

What was that? Xena studied the grid, seeing an almost wiped out line that went in and out of the bends of the slopes, stopping at regular intervals which were marked with a tiny cross, and a circle quartered in four with glyphs in each section. The line then wound its way down out of the hills to the north of the town, past a drawn in escarpment to a squiggle she reasoned was the edge of the sea.

There was a box drawn in there, and a very crudely drawn picture of what might have been a ship. She squinted again, seeing on the faint line tiny offshoots that seemed to be arrows.

Arrows. Pointing from what looked like a ship, to places in the hills.

Bringing something from a ship, to places on land, and hiding it.

Xena's eyes went unfocused a little, as she jogged her memory. 'Gabrielle. You remember that village.. the one we found the raiders burning? That first one? With the kids?'

'Yes.' Gabrielle answered in a quiet tone. 'That one I never forgot.'

'Remember what was in that cave, with them?'

Her consort pondered the question. 'No, not really.. I just remember those kids, and that ... oh, wait.' She said. 'There was a chest there. You sent it back with them.'

'A chest full of gold chains and coins.' Xena said. 'That I completely forgot to follow up on when I got back here in order to find out where the Hades it came from, and why they had it.' She sat up straight and looked at them. 'Why a village in the back end of the woods had a half a king's ransom hidden in a cave behind their middens.'

Lastay stared at her. 'A treasure?' He said. 'Is this what... this?' He pointed at the map. 'This is what they were looking for?'

'Son of a bitch.' The queen stared at the parchment. 'Maybe I could use a ransom.'

'Majesty?' Lastay gave her a puzzled look.

'Maybe.' She looked at Gabrielle. 'And you even know where one of these damn caves is.'

\*\*

Gabrielle spread the old map out on the top of the desk, examining it closely. She'd never seen a treasure map before, though she'd heard of them in stories. The markings on it fascinated her, and she had plenty of time now to pour over it.

Plenty of time, because Xena had ordered their quarters closed and guarded, and she herself was over by the fire in quiet consultation with Brent. She'd changed out of her fancy gown into her house armor, but she still had her soft indoor boots on to combat the chill of the rock floor.

She had ordered Brendan to leak out the news that she'd found an ancient map. Gabrielle wasn't sure if that would stop people from trying to get in or make them want to get in more, and she wasn't really sure which of those was what Xena was after, but she was content to ponder the piece of parchment before her, and imagine what stories were behind it.

Pirates, maybe?

"Hey, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle looked up to find both her lover and Brent looking at her. "Yes?"

"Can you make a copy of that thing?" The queen asked. "Just in case."

"Sure." Gabrielle trotted through the door to their inner chamber, and into her little room behind it, picking up her parchment and quill case and slinging it over her shoulder. She paused, as she heard music coming in the window and detoured over to the sill to peer out.

The sun drenching the courtyard was so welcome. She smiled into it, grateful for its warmth and light after the terror of the storm, and if she stood on her toes she could see the circus players out in the yard, practicing.

Maybe it was going to be all right. She turned from the window and trotted back into the outer chamber, seeing Xena half standing as though she was about to come after her.

Was she? "Got it." She held up her case. "I was just looking outside. It's so pretty."

"Hmph." Xena sat back down.

Gabrielle went to the desk and pulled out some parchment and quills, setting up her workspace with studious care. She sharpened the edge of the quill on the stone fastened to the case's edge, and opened her wax sealed pot of ink to draw with. After a moment, she sensed eyes on her and looked up, to find Xena watching her with a look of gentle affection.

It made her want to melt. She really hoped everything would all work out now and she and Xena could get back to their lives that she was just really starting to enjoy. She had so many things she wanted to do in the winter months, and she crossed her fingers that the bad things would stop happening so she could get to doing them.

She was sure Xena had a plan, sure that the queen would know what to say to the God of War, and that after today they'd be able to relax and get on with their lives.

Really. She was sure of it. She smiled at Xena and was rewarded with a smile in return, then she settled down to her work and started to carefully trace the outline of the map. Xena always had a plan, and even when she didn't, she could make one up so fast it didn't matter.

"So Xena." Brent was examining the box. "This is definitely from my grandfather's reign." He rubbed a thumb over the joining. "But I don't really understand – you said the map indicated something brought from a ship and hidden in the hills?"

The queen nodded. "I think that more of what we found in that village is tucked away up there, and that's why there was such an uproar when I gave out the land grants. Can you imagine Bresius digging for mushrooms in his new patch and finding enough gold to buy this whole damn stronghold?"

"Huh." Brent shook his head. "Would have been a tangle, for sure, but.. you know, majesty, I don't remember ever hearing anything about this. I would have expected my grandfather to have gone out and recovered this, if he'd known of it."

"Well, I sure as Hades would have." The queen remarked. "Is it possible this came before his time? She got up and motioned Brent over. "See, look at this stronghold. It's missing a lot."

They bent over the parchment, keeping out of Gabrielle's way as she patiently copied it.

"See, the whole forecourt isn't there, or the outer town." Xena touched it with her finger. "So how long ago did that happen?"

Brent shook his head. "I don't know. It's been there as long as I've known it."

"Damn." Xena knocked her knuckles against the desk. "So we need to find some oldsters around who might remember and might be willing to tell me about it."

"Hey Xena?"

"Hey Gabrielle?" The queen cocked her head and regarded her consort.

"When I came here there were all those hangings on the wall." Gabrielle was busy with a sketch of the stronghold. "I thought one of them might have had something like ths on them. You remember?"

The silence went on long enough for her to look up. Both Brent and Xena were staring at her, jaws slightly dropped. "Well, it did." She repeated, slightly hesitantly. "I mean, maybe someone saw it after we took it down?"

"When we took it down." Xena repeated slowly. "When we took it down."

She thought about that, trying to remember... ah. Yes. She could hear the echo of Gabrielle's voice, overseeing the removal of the old rags and the raising of the new ones. She could smell the scent of the fresh dye in the back of her mind.

"Before I went out on campaign, when everything started to go crazy." She turned to Brent. "Go see where that ended up. I'd ask someone who knew but that someone's dead."

"Stanislaus."

"Stanislaus." Xena agreed. "Find out where those old hangings went to." She perched on the desk and folded her arms over her chest. "I've been trying to figure out why the Hades the Persians came here."

"For you, mistress?" Brent said, in a mild tone. "I remember in her camp, yah?"

Xena wrinkled up her nose. "I remember." She said. "However. That would be gratifying to my ego, but I don't think the guy in charge out there would risk his kid and all those soldiers just for me." She added. "But maybe he would if Bregos told him about treasure."

Brent grunted. "Or maybe the princess used that to entice her father into funding this. It seems to me that her interest, no offense, was in yourself."

"I think so too." Gabrielle spoke up.

"You were jealous of her." Xena pointed out, dryly. "So of course you though that."

Gabrielle blushed a little "That's true, but I still think she was more interested in you than in some old gold coins." She responded, tapping the edge of the quill against her chin. "I don't think she cared about treasure at all."

"I'll go find out about the hangings." Brent got up and dusted his hands off

"Bring Lakmas back when you do." Xena said. "Let's see what he knows about why he was here."

"Will do, Mistress." Brent headed out, stepping back to let Brendan come in his place.

The old soldier came in and took up a seat on one of the small stools next to the desk. "Word's spread, Mistress." He rested his elbows on his knees. "Now's to see what comes of it."

“Indeed.” Xena stood up and walked around, swinging her arms. “It's going to go two ways. Either someone will shed blood to get in here to get at it, or no one will because they're scared pissless I'm going to kill them.”

The room went silent save the faint scratching of Gabrielle's quill. Then that stopped. “Wouldn't they be scared of that either way?” Her consort asked. “I mean, about you killing them?”

Xena turned and faced her, planting her hands on her hips. “You'd think.” She said. “But now that they all know I know what it is, maybe they'll give up trying to get it and go away.” She walked over to the desk and studied the map. “And yet, this really doesn't tell anyone exactly where it is. Just marks in the hills.”

Brendan joined her in looking. “Well it does a bit.” He said. “See, it's drawn like you'd see if you were standing in the pass, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Xena mused.

“So it's counting, four hills, and two, with a space between em.” Brendan put his finger on the map. “Remember that, Xena? We passed it by. Them hills with that big gap what the river came down from.”

“Do I remember that?” The queen wondered. “Or have I gone completely senile?”

“I think you were busy beating the Persians when we went by there.” Gabrielle suggested. “You were pretty busy.” She went back to copying the parchment. “I don't remember the hills, but I think I was pretty busy too.” She touched the map with her quill. “I think that's where the Persian army was camping, when we stayed with them.”

“Aye, yes.” Brendan agreed. “We had to cross the river there to get to the city, s'why I remember it.” He traced a path up the river. “Ford here, then cross over into them little hills there.”

Gabrielle nodded. “If you go up to the head of that river, and fork to the right, that's the path to where I'm from. So the cave's up on the slopes there, above the river.”

Xena drummed her fingers. “We could go there.” She suggested.

“Tomorrow?” Gabrielle was watching her face.

Xena smiled. “Tomorrow.” She said. “Brendan, we'll put together a force to go out there and see what this cave really has in it.”

Brendan nodded. “Aye.” He said. “Weather's better now, it'll be a good ride.” He rubbed his hands together. “If'n that was the cause of all this kick up, Mistress, taking it in and getting it under guard's a fine thing.”

“Yes, it will.” Xena went back to her audience chair, draped in a thick fur, and dropped into it slinging one leg over the arm of it and leaning back. “So we have the banquets planned? Let's get some grub on for everyone who was trapped in this damn place the last couple days and do it right.”

“Kitchens are working on it.” Brendan said. “I've got the men cleaning up t'mess from the storm. Good to be out in the fresh air.”

Xena rolled her head around to look at her consort. “Want to go out in the fresh air?” She inquired. “Take the runt and Tiger out for a ride?”

Gabrielle perked up visibly. “I'm almost done with this.” She indicated the parchment. “Can we take a picnic?”

“Sure.” The queen agreed. “I'd love to do that.”

“Great!” Her consort settled back to work, not without a happy wriggle.

Xena's smile turned pensive, then she let her head rest on the chair back and watched the low flames in the fireplace.

\*\*

It was a beautiful day outside. Gabrielle had her cloak tossed over her shoulders, its ends draping down over Patches' sides as he trotted amiably along the path next to Tiger. The sun had come out and dried off most of the mud and the brisk, cold breeze was more fun than freezing.

Patches had a double saddlebag on that had their lunch on it, and aside from the damage from the storm, it had been a great ride so far.

Xena had on her armor and her thick cloak which was draped over her sword on her back. She had her warm gauntlets on and she seemed to be enjoying the day, smiling a little to herself.

They were headed to the small grove of trees just outside the stronghold walls, up on a rise a little, that had a tiny spring and fallen trunks perfect for sitting down on.

"Hey Xena."

"Hey Gabrielle?" The queen glanced back at her. "Is that runt bouncing you around too much?"

"Not at all." Gabrielle stroked Patches' neck. "I'm really glad they didn't get hurt in the stable. That crushed in part looked really scary."

"Me too." Xena readily agreed. "I'd hate to have had something happen to this big bastard after everything he's been through lately with me." She tugged fondly at her stallion's mane. "He's a good boy."

"They really have been through a lot, huh?" Gabrielle said. "I think we've been through a lot too."

"No kidding. I've had more crap happen to me in the last year than in the previous ten." Xena remarked. "I think it's your fault."

"My fault?"

"Mm. You think I'm amazing so I have to go prove it and there you go. Instant crap." The queen sighed mournfully. "Before you showed up I was a boring old wine head that never had anything happen to them."

They rode along in silence for a moment. Then Gabrielle cleared her throat. "I'd rather have you be amazing and have things happen than be a boring anything."

Xena laughed gently, a touch of chagrin in the sound. "Yeah, me too." She admitted. "You should live life, Gabrielle. Otherwise it's just existence. I was going nowhere until you showed up. Now I'm usually on a road down to the Styx but it's more fun."

The glade was soggy, and there were pockets of snow in the hollows between the trees. Two of the taller ones had also been blown down, and the center of the area was full of branches and leaves and debris. Xena dismounted and tossed her cloak over her back, striding forward to deal with this impediment to their comfort.

Gabrielle got down a little more slowly, patting Patches on his shaggy shoulder and giving him a hug. The pony turned and peered at her, giving an uncanny impression that he was winking.

She gave him a kiss on the nose. "I'm glad you didn't get hurt, Patches." She whispered into his ear. "But I'm really, really sure if anything ever does happen to you, that you're going to end up in Elysia." She took hold of his reins and followed Xena into the glade, watching in bemusement as the queen hauled limbs out of their way.

That was one of the things she loved the most about Xena. Even though she was the queen, and she could have had any number of soldiers and servants with them to move things out of her way and spread out a nice place for her to sit, she didn't.

"All right." Xena surveyed her results, removing her cloak and spreading it out over one of the thick fallen trunks. Then she sat herself down and crooked her finger at Gabrielle. "Bring the lunch, my love."

My love. Gabrielle smiled and came over, laying the thick saddlebags with their burden of goodies down over the trunk before she took a seat on it next to Xena. The thought occurred to her that their love was a pretty cool and amazing thing. "Okay let's see what we've got."

“Don't you know what we've got??” Xena eyed her. “You didn't let some kitchen scrunge pack that did you?”

“Xena.”

“Just asking.” Xena extended her long legs and crossed them at the ankles, leaning back on her hands. She took a deep breath of the cold air and relaxed a little, enjoying the silence around her. Or well, not really silence. She could hear the leaves and branches whispering and the soft crunch of snow falling off them as they swayed in the breeze. She could also hear the quiet movements of Gabrielle removing treats from her sacks and her consorts steady, even breathing.

But there were no other people around, and she felt a sense of peace in the knowledge that at this moment, she didn't need to watch over her shoulder or suspect the motives of everyone around her. “Glad it stopped storming.” She commented quietly. “Damn weather.”

“Here, I made this from the first roast.” Gabrielle handed her over a half loaf stuffed with slices of meat. “It's still warm.”

It was. Xena took a big bite out of it, chewing contentedly as she watched Tiger and Patches nose around the snow covered ground, finding some grass that hadn't been killed yet by the cold and cropping it. “So.”

“So.” Gabrielle was nibbling on her own sandwich.

“What do you think about that map?”

Gabrielle chewed for a while as she thought about that. “I think it's sort of cool. Like a pirate treasure map.” She said. “Do you think it's real? That there's really stuff out there?”

“We know there is.” Xena took a swig from her wineskin, which currently was actually a ciderskin. “We saw it in that cave. I just wish I'd remembered that when we got back. Damn it. Brendan couldn't find any of those kids to ask them where it came from.”

“Well, we had a lot of stuff happen to us after that.” Gabrielle said. “I mean, with the army, and the other army, and the port city, and you beating everyone up and all that. I didn't even remember seeing that cave until you reminded me of it.” She said. “What are you going to do with all of it?”

Xena took another bite. “I thought I was going to see if I could offer it to Lakmas's gods to get them off my back.” She said. “I'm just not sure I'm going to get the chance.”

A little silence fell. “What does that mean?”

“Ares is going to be back tonight.” The queen said. “I don't know what's going to happen after that.”

Gabrielle exhaled.

“But whatever happens, I want you with me.” Xena added, unexpectedly. “I want you to stick with me when I go up there and meet him, Gabrielle.” She studied the woman sitting next to her. “You'll do that for me right?”

Her consort stopped chewing and stared at her. Then she hastily swallowed. “Sure!” She said. “Of course I will, Xena!”

The queen smiled briefly, and went back to her sandwich. “I want you there.” She repeated, in a quieter tone. “It'll probably be scary like it was last night.”

Gabrielle nodded. She thought she probably should be afraid about that, but she wasn't. “If we end up fighting I'll do the best I can.” She promised. “But it's kind of like those guys that went with us to Sholeh's army, Xena.”

“Huh?”

“The guys who went with us.” Her consort repeated. “They knew bad things were going to happen but they didn't care. So I don't care. They just wanted to be with you and whatever happened to you it was okay if it happened to them too. That's how I feel.”

Xena thought about that for a while as they worked their way through their lunch, there in their slightly desolate clearing, with snow on the ground and down trees all around them. She wondered, briefly, if she deserved that kind of idiotic devotion. "I don't know why people do that."

"Because you'd do the same for us."

And that, actually, was true. "Hm."

Gabrielle took her hand, lifting it and kissing the back and then the palm. "Let's really enjoy today, Xena. I can't wait to see the circus again."

Xena leaned over and returned the kiss, on her lips. "All right." She said. "Let's have the best day ever. Then whatever happens, happens." She eyed Gabrielle. "Got any nutbread in there?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe!!!"

\*\*

The courtyard was full of excitement and color and people by the time they got back. The big space had been cleared of snow and debris, and the merchants were setting up their wagons, looking relieved and happy as they rubbed their hands in the cold air.

Xena and Gabrielle rode together through the open gates at a placid walk, turning their heads to regard the scene as they made their way through the market now being re-established in front of them.

"Your majesty!" One of them called, waving a hand. "Many thanks for your protection from the weather!"

A chorus rose up, as they spotted the tall, dark haired rider in their midst. Xena lifted a gauntleted hand in response, slowing Tiger so she could see all the preparations in progress. "There are your buddies." She indicated the circus performers, who were out near the wall, bouncing like balls, apparently very glad to be out in the sun. "Gwan and see how they're doing."

"Sure." Gabrielle turned Patches head and tightened her knees. The pony amiably broke into an amble and they crossed the inner yard, arriving next to the circus performers as they started tossing around a ball. "Hey there."

"Oh!" Zev spotted her. "Hey there m'lady." He came to Patches side, and the rest of the players followed him. "Are you feeling better now?"

"I am." Gabrielle said. "I'm really sorry your show got interrupted last night."

"We aren't!" Zev said. "You guys caught the bad guy! That was amazing! They told me the queen herself threw the knife is that true?"

"It's true." Gabrielle nodded. "She saw the guy and boy... she moved so fast you couldn't even see her."

"It was great." Zev's brother patted Patches shoulder. "And we were so glad we were inside during that storm I don't really know what we'd have done if we were outside."

"Frozen." Zev said, succinctly. "But we were snug inside, and we've been working on making it like home in there. Want to see?" He grinned at Gabrielle, and she smiled back at him. "The queen hasn't changed her mind has she? The tucker here is awesome!"

"No, not at all." Gabrielle said. "Let me see.. " She half turned, and spotted Xena talking to some of the merchants. She waved, and the queen looked quickly over, focusing on her as she pointed at the door to the dancing hall."

Xena nodded, and waved her hand.

"Let's go." Gabrielle aimed Patches towards the door as the circus players gathered around her and trooped along at her side. They wound their way through the building market and entered the long sloping ramp that led up to the dancing hall.

It didn't much look like anyone was going to dance in it now. Gabrielle felt right at home riding Patches inside because the floor had been covered in thick straw and there was more than a hint of manure in the air. The circus people had settled in, and behind the performance area the wagons had been unpacked and set up.

"Whoa." Gabrielle got off Patches back and turned, only to find a groom hovering at her heels. "Oh, hello Josha."

"Your grace, may I take him?" The groom asked. "Glad I was to see you riding again."

"Sure." Gabrielle handed the reins over, giving him a smile. The military grooms were some of Xena's favorites in the army, and hers as well. "Thanks. Not that we rode very far, but it was nice to get out."

"Too right!" Zev said. "Look what we did back here." He led the way across the straw and past the poles, ducking between two of the wagons. Behind the big open space they'd put the wagons in a square, and in the middle of the square they'd set up housekeeping. There was a nice firepit set up, set on stones they'd apparently collected, carefully put in an open space with the layer of straw well cleared back.

In front of each wagon a little sitting area had been created, with half barrels and stools and low slung camp chairs serving as seats and tables with bits of daily living scattered about.

It looked cute, and comfortable, and there were two small children racing around with a stuffed rag ball. It all made Gabrielle smile, and think a brief, wistful thoughts about memories of her very early years, when she and Lila had done such chasing in the front of their small house.

"Isn't it great?" Zev was walking alongside her. "It's so nice to just be able to stay in one place for a while."

All of the strange activities hadn't seemed to faze the circus players. They seemed relaxed and cheerful, Zev pointing out the water buckets and hammocks hung between the wagons which provided places for them to sleep. "I'm looking forward to the show tonight." She said. "How are all your animals doing?"

They walked past the camping area into the back, where the performing animals were comfortably confined. Gabrielle spotted the big cat sprawled near the back of the big room, its eyes closed in sleep.

"They're doing real good." Her companion chattered on. "The kitchens have been super nice giving us stuff to feed them. Bones and stuff too." He patted one of the riding horses on the rump. "I was really scared they were going to get hurt with all the bad guys around, specially after Durgo got stabbed, but they've been fine."

One of the acrobats was climbing up and down a rope connected to the wall, and Gabrielle stopped to watch him. "Wow." She said, after a minute. "I had to do that a few days ago and boy, it's a heck of a lot harder than it looks."

"It is." Zev agreed. "Why were you climbing a rope?" He asked after a pause, turning to look at her.

Why had she been? Gabrielle thought about that, the memories she had of just before she got hurt more than a little fuzzy. "There was a hole in the wall. Xena wanted to know what was in it."

Zev blinked. "So she made you climb up there?" He asked, in a dubious tone.

"It wasn't exactly like that. There were some shoes she wanted to test out and I was the only one they fit." Gabrielle went over to where the big cat was and studied it, admiring the shiny, soft looking pelt. She remembered Xena patting it, but she, herself, had no desire to get any closer. "He's so pretty."

"He is." Cellius had been leaning against one of the wagons and now she came over to them. "And doesn't he know it, the arrogant bastard." She laughed as the cat lifted his head and peered at

them, yawning to show his enormous curved teeth before he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

"I've never even heard about anything like him." Gabrielle admitted. "Though I guess I haven't been many places to hear either."

"So you told us you were a storyteller." Cellius smiled. "You didn't mention the rest of it." She pointed at the wagon. "We've got tea, want some?"

"Sure." Gabrielle joined them near the tiny brazier, not too different than the one Xena had used when they were out with the army at war. "No, I didn't mention the rest because I think I'm still a little weirded out by it." She sat down. "I come from a sheep farm."

Cellius chuckled and sat down, while Zev poured some tea. "I think it's really cool" She confided. "It means.. well, you know you always hear about how the nabobs are always in charge?"

"Nabob?" Gabrielle cocked her head. "Do you mean the nobles?"

She nodded.

"Well, yeah. I know. My family worked the land for one of them."

"And now you rule them." Zev grinned, taking a seat on a low stool. "That's a kicking story itself, you know?"

It was, really. Gabrielle smiled. "So are you going to change your show tonight?" She changed the subject. "I know Xena really likes the horse stuff." She said. "Did you see the horse she was riding? That's Tiger, her war horse."

"Nice beast." Zev said. "Looks chancy."

"He bites." Gabrielle agreed. "But I give him apples and I think he likes me." She paused to take a sip of tea. "Want to hear a story about him?"

"Sure." Cellius relaxed on the camp chair. "Why not?"

Gabrielle smiled and settled herself, thinking about Tiger, and the story she'd made up in her head about how he and Patches had found their way home again. "Well, it was in the time before the war.."

"Were you in the war?" Cellius interjected.

"Yes I was. I was with Xena when we ambushed the Persians, and when we set their boats on fire, and when we chased them out of the port city and then chased them right into our army out in the pass." Gabrielle said. "So anyway, it was in the war."

Zev studied her. "You've done a heck of a lot for a sheep herder."

Gabrielle managed a modest shrug. "We were escaping from the bad guys running up and down a mountain and Tiger got lost." She began the story. "But he's a very smart horse, so instead of running away, he hid from the bad guys and started a big adventure to find his way back with his friend Patches the Pony."

"Is that your horse?" Cellius's eyes twinkled

"It is." Gabrielle said. "And he's pretty smart too. So they had to find a way across the mountains and.."

\*\*

Where was Gabrielle. Xena jumped off Tiger's back and entered the dancing hall, barely noticing the groom that raced up to take her stallion's reins. There were quite a few people in the hall, but most of them were strolling around looking at the circus rigging, or gathering at the small booth just inside the door where an enterprising merchant had set up a makeshift bar.

Something drew her across the straw, and she spotted the wagons and motion behind them. A bit of sound traveled to her and she cocked her head, her ears twitching as she caught the distinctive

sound of her consort's voice. Her shoulders relaxed, and she headed in that direction, ignoring the swift and awkward bows in her direction as she passed.

Gabrielle's voice got louder as she ducked around the wagon and she emerged into an open square space that looked quite homey. Spotting her consort, she paused to watch, a smile appearing on her face as she studied the blond woman seated on a half barrel, legs swinging a little as she gestured with her hands in telling her story.

The circus people were seated in front of her, listening intently.

So far, Gabrielle hadn't spotted her. Xena leaned against the wagon, her smile widening as she listened to this to her new story about her favorite horse.

It was all nonsense, of course. Though the queen was easily able to imagine her warhorse and her consorts scrappy little pony rambling around the countryside biting Brego's men in the ass she knew of course that nothing like that actually had happened.

Xena's head tilted a little. She was sure about that, wasn't she?

"But Tiger knew we needed him and Patches to save the day so he found all the other horses.. "

Well, who knew? The queen circled around and found a seat, dropping down into it as Gabrielle caught the motion and spotted her. She was unable to help herself from grinning as her consorts face broke into a big smile and she lifted her hand and waved a little as she extended her legs out across the straw.

Crazy, really. She could be in her comfortable audience chamber, or even her own bedroom and here she was, sitting in the straw with the scent of manure and some kind of vegetable stew flowing over her. And yet, she felt good to be here, surrounded by these traveling buskers who held no allegiance at all to her.

A rumbling growl echoed from behind the wagons, and she made a note to pay a visit to her furry friend before they left. For now, she folded her hands over her stomach and crossed her ankles, letting herself get drawn into to Gabrielle's goofy tale.

"And then, just when everyone was wondering what we could do, Xena waved her arms, and like magic, Tiger led the rest of the horses into our camp right at the moment we needed them."

Xena inhaled to protest, then she just sighed, as the rest of the players turned and looked at her in awe. She managed a modest little shrug in response, then waved her consort to continue on with her outrageous fabrication.

"And then we got all of us together, and we rode down the path and charged at the rebels who were trying to hurt the castle. Xena got into a fight with all the bad guys, while Patches raced around to the castle gates to get them open so our friends inside could come help us."

Xena let out a whistle. "Hey." She said. "Are you forgetting you had something to do with all that?"

Gabrielle smiled at her. "But Patches did all the hard work, Xena. He had to pull the wagon."

"From what I remember, you were pulling him."

The players all chuckled, keeping a wary eye on the tall figure sprawled nearby.

"Anyway." Gabrielle concluded. "Patches pulled the gates open and all the soldiers came out, and everyone started fighting. The bad guys go so mad at us for that they came over and tried to hurt us, but when it was almost too late, Xena jumped into the fight and saved us." She paused, her eyes meeting the queen's. "Saved me, and put herself in the way of the bad guys and made them attack her instead."

The players looked back at Xena.

"I never did get that whole royal thing down worth anything." Xena commented, with a smile. "Gets me in trouble all the time."

"We heard that." Zev said, timidly. "Someone was telling us that.. they said you beat the Persian army by yourself."

Xena's nostrils flared. "She helped." She pointed at Gabrielle. "Ask her about biting the Persian leader in the face and ripping her cheek off."

Eyes swiveled back to Gabrielle, who blushed vividly.

"Anyway." Xena got to her feet, and extended a hand towards her consort. "We've got a court to administer. See you all tonight."

They strolled out across the performance space, back over to the door where sunlight was spilling in. "How come you always tell people about that?" Gabrielle asked, after a period of silence.

"About you biting her?"

"Yeah."

Xena chuckled. "Because I think it's the best thing I ever saw." She said. "That bitch holding you up there and then you chomping down on her like that.. it was gutsy and fierce and I loved it." She draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders. "You feeling okay?"

Gabrielle was just fully engaged in thinking about being the most awesome thing Xena had ever seen and that nearly made her trip and fall flat on her butt. "Uh.. yeah, I am." She caught herself and responded. "So what are we going to do now?"

The queen hugged her. "Let's go find people, and surprise the Hades out of them." She said. "Today I really want to party."

\*\*

The mood in the stronghold was lighthearted and enthusiastic. Gabrielle ducked into the kitchens and found it so even there, the workers giving her a look that was far more welcoming than she'd ever experienced before even from the first day she'd worked down there. "Hello."

"Hello, your grace." The cook greeted her. "Are you feeling better then? You look very well."

"I am, thanks." Gabrielle said. "Her Majesty is calling everyone into court. Can I get a tray of snacks for her? And some wine?"

"Of course." One of the stewards wiped his hands on a towel and came over. "Your grace, is it possible for you to maybe remind her Majesty the seneschal's position remains to be named? We all miss lord Stanislaus, but it's hard to keep things organized.."

"Without someone in charge." Gabrielle said, softly. "I think Xena understands that pretty well. I'll see what I can do."

The man bowed. "Many thanks." He said. "I will bring the tray up shortly for you."

"Thanks." Gabrielle turned and headed out of the kitchen, going out the main door and through the lower hall rather than up the inner stairwell. Xena was waiting in her big throne room, and the smell of the banquet they were going to have along with the circus performance permuted the hall.

"Ah, y'Grace." Brendan caught up with her as she trotted up the big formal stairs. "Market's full outside. Men came back from the lower town, got some damage there, but they brought back a lot of folks in wagons and we'll find em space until we can build it back."

"Everyone's happy." Gabrielle commented.

"Relief, yah." Xena's captain agreed. "Majesty took care of business, as she always does."

They entered the big chamber together, where Xena was already seated in her big throne, dressed in her royal robes with her crown set neatly on her head. The room was filling with her subjects and soldiers, everyone with at least a partial smile on their faces, even the Persian captives who were all over against one wall with a group of Xena's men standing idly by.

Lastay was standing next to Xena talking to her, and Jellaus was tuning his sitar a few steps over.

Gabrielle got to the top step and sat down in the seat next to the queen, smoothing her hawk's head tabard down and tucking her booted feet under her. She felt comfortable and she ran her fingers through her hair, pulling it free from her collar and leaning back as she surveyed the room.

"Your grace?"

She turned, to find Mali there with a pillow, bearing her circlet. "Oh. Thank you."

"May I put it on you, your grace?" The girl asked, waiting for her nod before she removed the circlet and gently placed it on Gabrielle's pale hair. "It's very pretty."

The circlet felt a little funny, but then, as Gabrielle looked out over the crowd, getting fuller by the minute, she felt suddenly that it was right for her to wear it.

She was Xena's consort. "It is, huh?" She gave her servant a smile. "Xena had it made for me."

"What?" Xena leaned against her throne arm. "Ah, got your hat on?" She reached up and tilted it a little. "Looks good on ya." She glanced past Gabrielle to where a parade of kitchen workers were coming in, carrying trays. "I hope one of those is for us."

"I think all of them are." Her consort mused. "I was hungry."

Xena eyed her.

"I'll share with you."

The queen started laughing.

Lastay took a seat on the other side of her, and his wife joined them, and now the room was almost packed with nobles, and servants, and soldiers, the bodies warming the still chilly air. The trays were emitting the scents of roasts and spices, and sure enough the first set of them arrived promptly at the throne level as the rest waited behind.

Xena eyed them. "Did really ask for all of them?" She whispered, giving her consort a bemused look.

Gabrielle just grinned back at her.

The queen shook her head and waved the tray bearers forward. "Let's get this going." She watched them fasten three of the trays to holders and set them in front of the thrones. Three of the servants produced plates and started loading them and the rest of the room relaxed and turned their attention to the queen.

"Don't worry" Xena remarked. "You'll all get yours later." She stood up and stretched, leaving her sword behind her draped over the back of her throne as she took a step forward.

That made everyone relax more, Gabrielle realized as she accepted a plate of nibblements from Mali. Everyone knew when Xena had that weapon in her hands, the odds were she'd use it on someone and not in a good way. Except for her naming of Lastay as her heir, the blade usually ended up just making a mess.

Not today. Gabrielle set her plate down and picked up a bit of bread with a slice of meat on it and some sauce. She stood up and went over to where Xena was, taking a small bite of it and then offering it to her.

Xena paused and regarded her. Then she smile faintly and took the bread, popping it into her mouth and chewing it. Then she turned and faced the crowd. "Okay people." She said. "A lot of crap has happened in the last few days, but now it's over. We found the creeps who were trying to kill people, and we found out why they wanted to."

Gabrielle kept her eyes on the queen, listening to the lie but not reacting to it. She wasn't entirely sure what Xena's plan was, but that was normal. But she could see by how relaxed Xena's body was that she was comfortable with what she was doing so it would probably turn out okay.

“So I'm in a good mood.” Xena concluded. “I'm in such a good mood, that I'm going to spend the next candlemark or two giving everyone presents. We've had a good harvest and I think everyone deserves a little extra.”

The delighted surprise was unmistakable.

“And I want to thank everyone for standing by me when Gabrielle got her head whacked.” Xena said. “I really appreciated that.”

The wondering shock was also unmistakable. Gabrielle darted a look up at her lover and saw a very unusual quiet introspection there. That, she felt, was not a lie, and she felt a sense of humbleness about it, knowing the pain it had caused Xena.

“So let's start from the bottom.” Xena cleared her throat. “As a result of the last war, we took some prisoners.” She looked at the Persians, who were all watching her alertly. “And they have proved themselves honorable captives throughout the summer and fall. I don't think their king's gonna ransom them and I'd rather have them be useful so to Lakmas and his cohort I offer amnesty, and a place in my army if you want one.”

Lakmas broke into the biggest grin imaginable, his white teeth showing vividly against his dark and bearded face.

“If not, then I'll guarantee you safe passage out to the port city, and then you're on your own to get home.” The queen concluded. “So get together and let me know what your decision is.”

Lakmas moved forward immediately, arriving at the steps leading up to the thrones and dropping to his knees, then falling flat on his face and extending his hands forward towards her.

Xena paused and regarded him with some bemusement. “Huh.” She grunted. “Hope that's a yes.”

Brendan chuckled behind her, shaking his head.

\*\*

Gabrielle rested her head against the back of her chair, too full to even want to move. She was comfortably ensconced in a nice padded seat on a well built platform in the dancing hall, waiting for the circus to start.

The hall was as full as she was, seemingly packed with every person around anxious to see the show and enjoy the products of the cookpits that were working overtime outside and the circulating wine merchants who walked with skins slung over their shoulders.

She put a hand on her stomach, licking her lips a little and remembering the fruit glazed stuffed goose that had been the last meat course of dinner. It was one of her, and Xena's favorite things and the cooks had smiled when they brought it in, knowing that.

Boy that had been good.

She exhaled and relaxed, musing on how far she'd come since she'd arrived at the stronghold, a half starved, terrified newly captured slave who'd lost everything who was now sitting on a throne, with a new princess hat on her head, and a throng of servants to do whatever she asked them to do.

And puffy honeycakes for dessert. Crazy, really. Like a story she might tell about someone else, in some far off place. Not here, not her, and yet, here she was.

She felt content and happy, even though the happy was sort of melancholy at the same time because she knew they would be in trouble later, trouble that even Xena might not be able to get them out of.

Gabrielle considered how she felt about that. She thought she probably should be scared, and worried, but for some reason, she wasn't. She just was looking forward to the show, and to sharing it with Xena, who was standing out on the performance floor talking to the circus owner.

What would be, would be, she guessed. She'd been so close to death so many times in the last year it was getting hard to be afraid of that – though that felt funny to even make it sound in her head that way.

“Your majesty.”

Gabrielle almost didn't react, since being called that was very new for her. A candlemark, in fact. “Oh.. ah. Yes?” She eyed the liveried servant. “Is there something wrong?”

The man bowed. “Would you like a footstool?” He held one up. “The chair is a bit tall.”

“And I'm a bit short.” Gabrielle mustered a grin “Sure.” She watched him put the padded bench down and she parked her soft indoor boots on it. “Thank you.”

The man bowed, and smiled. “May I say too, your majesty, that it does my heart good to see you well again.” He said. “And that it seems our fortunes have turned.”

“Thanks.” Gabrielle replied softly. She watched him leave, and studied the bench, thinking about the new, heavier golden circlet on her head, and Xena's elevation of her to some other weird title that made people bow even deeper to her and which had even less meaning really in her life.

She didn't need any titles or hats, she'd told Xena. Not when she had Xena's love for her, and the queen had blushed, truly, at hearing that, her eyes turning a little shy and overwhelmed for just an instant.

So endearing.

But it had made Xena happy to give her the stuff, and since she was handing out titles and lands, and presents to everyone it would, Gabrielle acknowledged, have looked strange if she'd been left out.

She wasn't really sure what that was all about, since Xena had always seemed to want to be on the receiving side of presents before – though she'd never been stingy with the stuff she'd given Gabrielle. Even from the start she'd gotten clothes and parchments from the queen.

Pearls even.

So she had piles of stuff back in their chambers, a shopping spree so totally out of character for her impatient lover she'd received them in wide eyed amazement, ending up with her chair in the audience chamber completely covered in stuff and her body draped in cloth and furs, jewelery and trinkets.

The boots on her feet were new, beautifully crafted leather lined in fur that was currently warming her toes, and her body was draped in a silk robe in Xena's colors.

The only person who hadn't gotten anything was the queen herself.

“Ah.” Xena arrived at her side unexpectedly. “Got one more thing for ya.” The queen had one hand behind her back and a half grin on her face. “Ready?”

“Xena.” Gabrielle gazed at her. “C”mon.. I haven't even had a chance to get anything for you yet.”

Xena's expression gentled and sobered. She laid her palm on Gabrielle's cheek and leaned closer. “Gabrielle, you've given me everything I've ever truly desired.”

Gabrielle blinked.

“So here.” The queen removed her other hand from behind her back and brought it around, offering what she held out. “It's not romantic, but you might have a use for it sometime.”

Gabrielle reached out to take the finely made dagger, holding it in her hands as she studied it. “It's beautiful.”

Xena sat down and leaned one elbow on the arm of her throne closest to her companion. “Thank you.” She said, simply. “I made it.”

Gabrielle almost dropped the thing as she jerked upright in surprise. "You did?" She looked back down, studying the leather sheath. It had a hammered filigree of metal around it, and the hilt of the dagger was carefully shaped with a solid wide tang to protect the wielder's hand. "Wow."

Xena smiled and leaned back in her throne, exhaling softly. "Took me a long time to find it." She said. "I made it for Ly Ws going to be his birthday present." She tilted her head and watched Gabrielle turn the dagger over in her hands. "I almost gutted myself with it after I found him."

Gabrielle looked quickly up at her. "Do you really want me to have this?" She asked, in a soft voice.

The queen nodded. "I do." She said. "Because now I'm glad I didn't. I would have missed out on knowing you." She reached over and tickled the back of her companions neck, as she watched a few silent tears appear. "So you take that, my love. That belt should fit ya."

Gabrielle closed her hand around the hilt and drew the dagger out, exposing the blade to the light. To her surprise, it was a burnished dark color unlike Xena's sword, and there seemed to be a slight, wavy pattern in it. "It's amazing." She finally said, putting the dagger back in its sheath.

She then stood, and put the dagger down on her seat, moving over to fit herself between Xena's knees and take her hands, raising them up and touching her lips to the queen's knuckles. "Thanks."

Xena pulled her over and hugged her. Then she released her and picked the dagger and its belt up, unrolling the leather and passing it around Gabrielle's waist. She fastened the clasp and shifted the blade to one side a bit, giving her a wink, and a pat on the side. "There."

Gabrielle sat back down and put her boots up, letting her wrist rest lightly on the hilt of her new adornment. The pommel of it had a hawk's head hammered into it, and she felt it completed her outfit even though she was pretty sure the best she'd do with the weapon would be cutting slices of apple for Xena with it.

"Here we go." Xena noted, as the circus performers started to enter the ring. "Want some grapes?"

"Uh uh." Her companion shook her head. "I think I'll pop if I eat anything else right now."

"Anything?" Xena's tone turned teasingly sultry.

Gabrielle felt a blush heat her face. "Xena."

The queen chuckled. She settled back in her throne to watch, her peripheral vision watching soldiers take up guard positions around her, vigilant even though she'd spent the previous two candlemarks showering everyone with gifts.

Gifts of land and grazing rights, coin and honors. The entire realm was confused as Hades with it all but no one was complaining.

Brendan was standing just to the right of the platform, and Lakmas, now wearing a hawk's head tabard over his big frame on the left.

The Persian was standing so tall with pride it made Xena smile, and she could see the rest of the Persians scattered amongst her men, already accepted comrades. She nodded a little and picked up her goblet, taking a sip of the rich, sweet wine her vintner had just poured for her.

She was going to savor this night. Savor the smiles and the laughter of her subjects, and the solicitous attention of her servants.

Savor the presence of Gabrielle at her side, and the confident presence of her army around her.

Tonight she was going to indulge herself in being the queen, indulge herself in the pleasures of the table and her cup, enjoy the show, and then take Gabrielle back to their quarters and made wild, intense love with her before they had to go up to the tower, and face whatever it was they would end up facing.

She didn't want to have any regrets when she walked up those stairs.

"Xena, look. There's the horses!"

Xena took another swallow of wine, and plucked a grape. "Let's see if they make em do somersaults." She said. "That's what I asked em for."

Gabrielle turned and stared at her. "The horses???? Won't they get hurt???" She asked, shocked. "Xena!"

The queen chuckled. "Just kidding." She said. "I told em I might do a somersault on one if I don't drink too much of this?" She held up the cup. "Give everyone a real show."

"Can you do that?"

Xena studied the horses. Could she? "Yeah." She said, after a moment. "I can fight standing on Tiger's back if I have to. Probably could do a tumble." Her voice sounded slightly surprised. "If I don't fall on my ass doing it."

"Wow." Gabrielle imagined the tumble, if not the falling. She could picture it, Xena's tall body, relaxed and balanced as the circus riders's were, and then her jumping in the air and whirling around like she'd often seen her do in the tower during her practice. "Hey Xena?"

"Hm?"

"Why do you practice the somersalt stuff? Isn't it dangerous to do when you're fighting for real?"

Xena smiled. "It is." She admitted. "I do it because it's cool." She cleared her throat. "And occasionally it freaks the guys I'm fighting out long enough for them to drop their guard and let me kill them."

"Oh."

"You up for telling them a story?"

"Yes."

"Gonna be a Hades of a night."

\*\*

Gabrielle was very glad to have Xena's arm around her shoulders as they walked down the steps from the dancing hall and crossed the courtyard over to the main. It was cold, and her boots were wandering as she managed to keep her eyes half open to watch them.

"You're a really cute drunk." Xena observed.

"I am?" Her companion asked. "I don't think I've ever been drunk before." She bumped her head against Xena's side, savoring the warmth of the queen's body. "Have I? It feels funny."

Xena chuckled softly. "We're both a little drunk." She admitted, feeling the faint sense of dislocation that put a bit of fuzziness between her and reality. "Great show, huh?"

"Yeaah." Gabrielle agreed. "I loved those arobcast... abroca... those cute guys on the bar." She laughed faintly under her breath. "And you were so amazing with the cat."

"I was." The queen nodded. "Freaked those guys out."

"Oh yeah you sure did. I thought that one guy was going to go crazy when you sat down next to it."

"Cat likes me." Xena said. "It was purring."

Gabrielle pondered that. "I guess we have something in common?" She said. "I feel like purring when I'm near you too."

Xena snickered. "You are drunk."

"No I feel like that even when I'm not drinking anything." Her consort protested, making a muffled cat sound as she walked. "See?"

They climbed up the steps into the stronghold and passed the guards, who saluted. Xena waved casually back at them, then turned right and headed down the hall to the tower stairs.

It was quieting down. The well fed and well wined nobles were all straggling off to their suites, and the merchants and musicians were bedding down in the courtyard, the gates once again closed against wolves and weather.

The circus had been fun. Xena smiled, thinking of the prancing horses and the jugglers, and the flyers high overhead whose tumbling antics had so enthralled her consort. There had been no hint of trouble, no whisper of thugs with darts, just a long night of carousing and entertainment.

Fitting. Xena guided her meandering companion up the steps and they climbed past the wall sconces that held fluttering torches and the alcoves that had a soldier in each one of them, all in her tabards, all touching their chest in respect as they passed.

They reached the landing where their old quarters were, and Xena bumped her hip against the door, sending it inward to the chamber. Inside, the fires were lit and the candles were positioned, lighting up the space in a warm golden glow. She untied the throat catch on her cloak and pulled it off as Gabrielle did likewise, the door behind them pulling to as the guard discretely closed it.

It smelled good in the chamber. Xena detoured over to one of the tables, spotting a painfully clean tray with a flask of honey mead on it, and a selection of sweet treats.

Could she manage one? Xena eyed them as she poured a measure of mead into one of the cups. Gabrielle had no such hesitation and she sat down on the chair next to the table, curling her legs up and selecting one of the treats. "Don't tell me you're still hungry."

Gabrielle bit into the cake and grinned. "Only a little." She said. "I think I worked off some of that dinner with all those stories."

"Uh huh." Xena handed her a cup and sat down opposite her, extending her feet out towards the fireplace. "I still think you've got worms." She studied her consort's slim form, shaking her head. "Where in Hades do you put it all?"

"I don't know." Gabrielle answered seriously. "I can't see down my throat." She stuck her tongue out and peered at it. "You really think there's a worm down there? Wouldn't I feel it wiggling?"

Xena chuckled, and held her cup out, waiting for Gabrielle to touch it with her own. "Here's your worm, my love." She said. "Keep it happy with all the treats you want." She gazed fondly at her consort, watching the pale green eyes light up with simple happiness.

Xena drained her cup and set it down, then she stood and held her hand out, palm up. "Let's go enjoy each other. I've been wanting to take that silk off you all night."

Gabrielle stood and took her hand, clasping it in both of her own and squeezing it. "I love you."

Xena glanced at the floor then back up at her, a wry smile appearing on her face. "I know. I still can't figure out how I ever deserved that."

"Xena, c'mon." Her consort gently rubbed her fingers over Xena's knuckles. "You're the best."

"I'm the best." The queen mused, as they wandered through the outer room and into the sleeping chamber. "Well, I'm glad you think so." She glanced around the room, a smile returning to her face. "Your mouse has been in here cleaning."

The chamber was visibly freshened, she could smell the scent of pine where the stones were brushed and the fire was snapping and neatly laid in the fireplace. The bed had been prepared, the pillows appeared invitingly plump and a thick, plush fur cover had been added to the silks.

A bowl of steaming water was on the dresser, with neatly folded pieces of linen laid ready next to it. Gabrielle went over and touched them, looking around with a charmed smile. "She made it so nice."

Xena sat down on the bed and reflected on that. It was nice. There was true care evident, something she hadn't seen since Gabrielle herself had been her body slave and taken care of the

place. Then she'd found it like this, all in perfect order, with the little touches right like the warm water.

And, in Gabrielle's case, a rose on her pillow. Xena smiled at the memory. "Remember you putting that flower on my bed?"

Her consort grinned. "I do." She admitted, as she washed her hands off. "I felt like I was going crazy, all I wanted to do was follow you around and kiss you." She brought a damp towel over and gently washed the queen's face, cleaning off a bit of soot as those beautiful eyes watched her. "Hearing you say you loved me back was so amazing." She paused. "No one had ever said that to me before."

"No one?" Xena unlatched the belt holding the dagger and removed it, tossing it onto the nearby chair. "Not even wahtshisname?"

"Perdicus?"

"Yeah."

"No." Gabrielle shook her head. "Not Perdy or my family, or anyone else." She laid the damp linen down on the chair arm and cupped Xena's face in her hands. "Only you." She gazed down into Xena's eyes. "Which I guess is right because you're the only one I've ever said that to or felt like that about."

Xena's lips twitched into a return smile, as she undid the belt holding Gabrielle's silk robe closed. "Glad to hear that." She let the robe fall open, as Gabrielle untied her laces in return. Easing to her feet she shucked the fabric off her and stepped forward, letting her body brush against Gabrielle's as her consort's robe drifted to the floor. "Because I don't want you to ever have been anyone else's but mine."

She watched Gabrielle's eyes close as she folded her arms around her, delaying the urge to pick her up and toss her on the bed long enough to savor the hug and the return squeeze. "You taught me to do this, y'know."

Gabrielle went still. "Do what?" She asked, her voice slightly muffled.

"This." Xena squeezed her. "You don't get much of this when you grow up as a pit fighter."

"Oh that." Her consort sounded a bit relieved. "Well you taught me to do everything else so I guess that's fair, huh?"

Xena chuckled, rocking them both back and forth a little. "Yeah, I guess that's is fair." She singled out the sensation, concentrating on it as her body shifted and relaxed, absorbing the affection contentedly. She remembered the first time Gabrielle hugged her, after she'd told her.. told her what? Some hard luck story?

Oh, no. She'd told her about Ly. The queen exhaled. Yeah, that probably rated a hug. She still felt sad about that, even after all those years. Sad for Ly, and for herself, since he'd died for her. Died because of her. Xena went still for a moment. Like Gabrielle almost had.

Not by malice, not because she was a target. Just because she loved Xena enough to want her out of danger despite being in danger herself.

Just exactly what Xena herself would have done if she'd been facing in the direction of the collapse in the same moment. "Know what?"

"What?"

"We're a pair of sopping idiots."

"Is that good or bad?"

Xena laughed gently, and squeezed Gabrielle to her, lifting her up and hearing the slight cough as her lungs emptied. "It's the best."

They tumbled back onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and rolled into the center of it, faint puffs of warm air brushing over their bare bodies from the fireplace.

It felt good. Xena stretched out and rolled half on her side as Gabrielle nuzzled her throat, nibbling gently along her skin as her consort's hand came to rest on her hip. A moment later they were pressed together belly to belly and Gabrielle's thigh was sliding between hers.

That felt even better. Xena let her mind slip, pushing aside the knowledge of what the night would bring and concentrating on the knowing touches and gentle pressure that sent a jolt of aching tension into her guts. She returned the touch, tracing the shape of Gabrielle's nipples and meeting her lips.

She could taste the faint residual of honey, but sweeter still was the love she could feel in every motion and she let it seep into her, a heady sensation that was a little scary but she didn't care.

She wanted to savor this feeling, breathe it in and hold it inside her and remember how incredible it was to have someone love her like Gabrielle did, because..

"Xena."

"Mm?"

Gabrielle's lips were right near her ear. "No matter what happens, I'm glad my life had you in it."

Because nothing else mattered. Xena understood that, finally. All the castles and soldiers in the world didn't mean a damn thing if you didn't have something like this. "Likewise." She wrapped an arm around Gabrielle, pulling her closer, feeling the need ignite.

Let the future happen. Xena felt Gabrielle start to work her way down her body, taking possession of her in a way only Gabrielle had ever been allowed to do. Gods and ghouls could go to Hades for now. She didn't care.

She inhaled Gabrielle's scent and let it all go.

\*\*

Now the castle was very quiet around them. Xena had one foot braced up against her old weapons chest as she adjusted her knee armor, tightening the plates and snugging them more firmly around her leg. She had her leathers and the rest of her gear on, her sword was in its sheath between her shoulderblades and the chakram was seated on its hook at her hip.

Gabrielle was seated nearby, in the chair near the fire, already dressed in her chain and scale armor, with her new dagger strapped around her and her big stick nearby.

"Don't we look scary." Xena straightened and put her boot down, bouncing a little to settle everything. "Ready?"

"Well." Gabrielle drained the cup of tea at her side and set it down. "I guess I am, as much as I can be." She stood up and picked up her stick, wrapping her hand around it and exhaling. "But boy, I sure wish we were still in bed."

"Yeah, me too." Xena extended her hand. "C'mon. Let's get this over with."

Gabrielle took her hand, and they walked out the side door into the little hallway, and then through the outer door into the big round hall. Across from that door was the tiny alcove she'd once slept in, and then to the right were the stairs that led up to Xena's tower practice room.

It was dark, and very quiet. There were torches in sconces, but up here there were no soldiers – they were at the base of the stairs below and the bottom of the small servants stairs that went down to the kitchens. It was cold out here, and Gabrielle was glad she had her armor on, and her new lined boots too.

They walked across the stone floor and arrived at the steps. Xena turned and looked at her, putting her free hand on her shoulder. "Thanks for sticking with me."

Gabrielle smiled, glancing down at the floor then back up at her. "Are you scared?"

The pale blue eyes regarded her quietly. "Yes I am."

"Of dying?"

The queen shook her head. "No. I've never been afraid of that. You can't be..." She paused. "You can't live like I do and be afraid of that." She gently shifted her hand to cup Gabrielle's face. "It's my soul I'm afraid of losing. That's why I want you there. You have a hold on that."

Gabrielle nodded soberly.

"Fight for me, Gabrielle. Don't let me do something stupid, okay?"

"I won't." Gabrielle said, in a firm tone. "But Xena, I don't think you would. Someone told me..." She cleared her throat gently. "When I was hurt. When I was in that other place. Someone told me I should be true, because you were. You are."

Xena cocked her head to one side. Then she patted Gabrielle on the shoulder. "Let's go." She said turning to start up the stairs. "I'm not sure what you're talking about but I hope to Hades we can talk about it later."

Gabrielle shifted her grip on her stick and started up with her, matching her steps to Xena's steps as they climbed up the curving stones, leaving the landing behind them.

For a moment there was silence, then the softest of scuffs echoed as a number of armored bodies entered the lower landing from the lower stairs, brightly burnished helms and swords reflecting the torchlight. The man in the lead stopped the upper stairs, and held his hand up, cocking his head to listen.

Xena felt her heartbeat start to rise as she climbed, her attention focused on the chamber at the top of the stairs. The door was closed, unlike the other night, and she didn't hear anything, or feel any draft coming down from it. Pausing before the entrance she surreptitiously wiped her hands on her leathers before she reached over and worked the latch, shoving the door open and stepping inside.

Gabrielle was right behind her, one hand resting on Xena's back as she peered past her.

Xena wasn't sure what she'd expected, but what she found was her practice chamber, torches lit on the walls, completely empty as she'd last left it the previous day. The torchlight showed a solid stone floor, and closed windows and after a minute, she relaxed. "Hmph."

Gabrielle walked a few steps in, coming to stand shoulder to shoulder with her. "Looks pretty normal, huh?"

"Uh huh." Xena agreed. She started across the room, steeling herself to cross over the space where she'd seen nothing but a gaping opening the last time, and ended up in the center of the room, turning herself briefly in a circle.

Unlike the night before, she didn't sense any intruders. There was no strange feeling, or smells, or wind blowing in the iron window coverings. No prickling at the back of her neck.

Just a room. Just the training chamber she'd used for years, honing her skills and keeping herself in fighting shape ready to repel whatever challenges here realm threw at her.

Gabrielle strolled cautiously around the perimeter of the room, past the rolled up sacking weights and the practice weapons, sticks and poles Xena had taught her with. The room felt cool but not cold and she shifted her stick in her hands as she ended up across from Xena, against the far wall.

They looked at each other. Xena lifted her hands in a shrug, and crossed the space between them, ending up at Gabrielle's side. She stopped and turned, folding her hands over her chest as she regarded the empty space. "Looks like we got all dressed up and don't have any place to go, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle set her stick down on its end and wrapped both her hands around it. "I don't think they gave up, Xena." She said. "They really wanted to hurt you."

“Yeah, but I think they were chickenshits.” Xena said. “All of them against one of me? In the dark? In a storm? Cowards.”

Gabrielle felt the prickle go up her spine, and she looked quickly at the queen. She felt Xena's body tense next to her as the queen slowly took her arms down, letting her hands rest on her bare thighs, her right hand half curled.

The air compressed suddenly and there was a soundless crackle, then a blue flash erupted in the center of the room. When it faded, the torches outlined a tall, swaggering figure, who strolled forward to face them. “You've got a lot of balls for a mortal woman.” Ares said, as he stopped a length or two from them. “I like that.”

Gabrielle felt Xena stiffen next to her, and in reflex she put her hand on her back, just below her sword keeping her other hand firmly on her stick. She studied Ares intently, feeling the faintest sense of familiarity as she looked at him.

“Some people say that.” Xena answered quietly. “Other people just think I'm out of my mind.” The god chuckled. “So what's it gonna be?” He asked. “I see you came dressed for my kind of action. I didn't expect you to bring your little lamb with you.”

He stepped closer, his eyes on a level with hers. “Ready to leave this cow pasture behind, beautiful? C'mon and learn what it's like to be a real ass kicker.” He put his hands on his leather clad hips. “There's no place for you to go here. Those Persians are gonna show up and raise this place to the ground.”

“I beat them before.” Xena said, her voice determinedly steady. “Got a couple of them downstairs guarding my bedroom.”

Ares chuckled. “They'd rather be in your bedroom.” He said. “But they won't stop the old man. Neither will you. So c'mon.” He held a hand out. “Let's blow this joint before it gets ugly.”

The air seemed to change, somehow. Gabrielle felt a little tickle on the back of her neck, and she hiccuped a little, her breathing stopping and restarting. She flexed her hands and felt just a little different, just a little stronger, her body standing a little taller, blood starting to race inside her as she got ready to...

“It's too late, Ares.” Xena's voice sounded, almost gentle, certainly quieter than her norm. “You waited too long.”

Gabrielle looked up at her, watching her profile. She could see Xena's nostrils flaring, and feel the tension in her body through the hand on her back.

“Really?” The god asked, skeptically. “You really want to stay here and get flayed to death when that army runs over you? Want to die that way? Really?” He glanced at Gabrielle. “One more chance, babe. I'll save you. I'll even throw in the runt there if you want. It's not too late. Come.” His voice deepened and echoed. “Be mine.”

And now, with the question in hand, Xena realized there never had been any risk at all. She met his eyes as fear faded, tossing chance to the wind with no regret. “I can't.” She said. “I'm already hers.” She jerked her head in Gabrielle's direction. “You waited too long, Ares. If I die fighting as a warrior at the gates of this place I'll take it.”

It was true. She felt it. It was too late, she was too old, her morals too solidly set for her to go back to being a sycophant kneeling at the feet of the god of war.

She would never conquer the world.

She would just remain here, in a backwater, struggling to hold onto what she'd taken if she could. She was aware of the touch on her back, and felt Gabrielle shift a little closer, hearing the deep intake of breath at her side.

“Well that's a damn shame.” Ares said. “But you know what? Those shades they sent won't even let you get that far. And it'll be a lot more painful death.” He snapped his fingers, and an ice cold blast shocked the room. “So long. Too bad.”

With another snap, he was gone, and the room was changed.

Torches went out. Whispering started. They sensed motion and in a single accord, they took a step back and put the wall behind them. “I think life's about to suck, my love.” Xena said. “Sorry about that.”

Gabrielle felt tears, but not sad ones. “Don't be.” She said. “I'm with you.”

A rolling wave of stench overwhelmed them, and Xena drew her sword, a bare flash of silver in the darkness. “C'mon you scumbags. I'm... we're not afraid of you.”

A whisper. “You should be.” The darkness parted, and a single figure emerged, cloaked in shadows but with glowing eyes that pinned them. “Because I'm going to eat your heart right out of your chest.”

The voice was harshly familiar. “Sholeh.” Xena said. “Should have recognized the stench.”

The figure moved forward, faint shadows and flashes revealing ghostly armor and a long sword held in front of her. The face was hooded though, just the glaring eyes showing. Behind the figure, there were more, dozens and dozens that filled the room entirely, blocking any view of the walls or the door.

The one that went before. Gabrielle heard that voice again, the one in the gray place. “Why are you mad at us?” She spoke up suddenly. “Your own people killed you.”

A bolt headed towards her without warning and before Xena could deflect it she had her stick up and in front of her in a motion half intended and half instinctive, ducking and moving to one side as the bolt came past her and slammed into the wall.

Xena glanced at her. “Nice moves.” She complimented her companion, before she turned back to Sholeh's shade. “Better be careful not to get her pissed off. She ripped your face off last time.”

“Not this time. Now I'm something that can kill you with almost no effort. And I will.” The shade turned it's focus to Xena. “You destroyed me. Now I'll destroy you.”

Xena twirled her sword, and bounced forward, feeling her body respond to the threat and her energy surge. Before she could get any further though, Gabrielle stepped in front of her, staff held crosswise of her body, back a little arched. “Gabrielle!”

“She didn't destroy you.” Gabrielle said. “You destroyed yourself, you stinkweed.”

The bolt came right at her this time and she didn't have time to avoid it. She started to move though, then found herself lifted and tossed gently out of the way, as a flash of silver blurred past her and deflected the energy in the other direction.

Then Xena moved past her in a blur. Her sword hit the ghostly one Sholeh had and they were engaged, as the rest of the host in the room spread out and circled them.

Gabrielle gathered herself up and leaped through the closing ring, feeling the icy touch on her back as she landed behind Xena, really surprised at just how scared she wasn't. “Go Xena!” She yelled at the top of her voice. “Beat em up!”

“I will enjoy raping her and slitting her throat once you're dead.” Sholeh hissed at Xena. “You don't understand how powerful I am on this side.”

Xena dropped into a balanced stance. “Sure you want to kill me then?” She asked. “As easily as I could kick your ass when you were alive, might want to think about what I might be like on that side.” She set herself and reacted as the shade rushed her, slamming that silver light against her blade with stunning force.

Oh this was going to be either a really short or a really long night. Xena swiveled and deflected the strike, turning and twisting her wrists to send the force off to her left. She'd never fought

Sholeh really when she'd been alive, but she'd always gotten the sense the bitch knew what to do with a blade.

Apparently she did. Xena got her sword up in time to meet Sholeh's next attack, and they circled each other in the darkness – the shade's form visible to her as a combination of gray and silver shadows outlined in the faintest of silver glows. She was damn glad she had her armor on, as she caught the glitter of a dagger and she caught it on her bracer, flicking her arm to one side and sending it skittering to one side.

Then she half turned, then reversed her motion, bringing her blade back across her body and slamming it against Sholeh's, feeling the stunning shock as a wash of power shivered through her arms, nearly making her drop the sword as her hands went briefly numb.

But she kept her body in motion and powered through it, keeping a grip on her hilt through sheer will alone. Sholeh's weapon was knocked out of position but she stepped forward and slammed against Xena, shoving to knock her backwards.

The pain was incredible. Xena got a breath into her lungs and let it wash through her as she held her ground, leaning forwards as their blades ground together and ended up crossed at the hilts, bringing Sholeh within a hand span of her and letting her see what was inside the shadowy cloak.

Her heart almost stopped, seeing that emptiness. There was only a ragged skull there, with shreds of flesh and pinpoints of glaring light in the eye sockets.

Sholeh laughed. Then she lifted her sword back and chopped it down hard against Xena's, shoving the flickering weapon towards her throat and throwing her opponent over as she lunged after her.

Xena let herself fall, twisting as she did and rolling to get herself out from under the ghoul as a shiver went through her whole body. She came back up onto her feet and ducked Sholeh's sword as it came at her head, then she gathered herself and exploded up into the air, hauling over the ghoul's head as she swept her blade downward and smacked the skull under the gray shadows.

A furious scream filled the air, as she tumbled and twisted, landing on her feet and leaping to her right as Sholeh attacked, sweeping at her with a blade moving so fast Xena could barely follow it.

But her body knew. Her hands brought her sword up to parry the blow and she felt the numbing force again, the shock going up her arms and making her shoulders ache. She ducked and turned, bringing her sword around with all her strength and blowing through Sholeh's guard, sending the ghoul flying in the opposite direction.

Tough. She got herself set, feeling sweat starting to gather under her leathers as she faintly regretted the long day of carousing. Not the smartest thing she'd ever done, but then, this fight wasn't the smartest thing either. "You haven't killed me yet."

"I'm enjoying myself too much." Sholeh rasped back. "Getting tired, Xena? I'm not. I never get tired. I'm going to enjoy watching you though. Start breathing hard? Feeling your mortality?"

"At least I have some." Xena taunted her back. "I didn't lose my daddy's army to a ragtag bunch of hacks and pit fighters."

"Bitch." Sholeh overhanded a dagger in her direction that Xena ducked, then she followed that up with a powerful strike that nearly bowled Xena over, only her guts keeping her in place and refusing to back down. "You can't win, Xena. You've already lost."

Xena went on the attack in a blur of motion, letting the clean anger wash through her. She braced herself and focused past the impact and the pain, hacking and slashing her way through Sholeh's defenses until she crashed into her and shoved her backwards.

By the gods, it hurt. But Xena didn't hesitate. She half turned and booted Sholeh in the chest as the ghoul rebounded, putting enough force in that to send her opponent to the ground as the circling wraiths swirled and chattered. "Mortal as I am, you'll never beat me."

Her whole body was on fire. Breathing hurt. But Xena focused on her opponent in that tight and exclusive way she'd learned to do in battle, when her own safety and health became irrelevant. She braced herself and brought her sword up as Sholeh flew at her, anger in the motion and in the savage power of the blow that hit her blade.

She turned and deflected the hit, ducking and avoiding the glitter of a second knife, starting to move into an attack when she heard her name yelled so loudly it echoed firmly inside her skull.

Without thought she dropped to her belly on the ground sensing something coming over her head as her peripheral vision caught the sight of ethereal arrows whipping over her and smacking against the stone wall. "Coward!" She growled, shoving off the ground and to her feet. "That's why your damn army deserted you, Sholeh. They had honor. You don't."

"I take all my advantages!" Sholeh was circling her. "Not like you, soft hearted fool."

Soft hearted fool? Xena almost started laughing. Who in the Hades was this creep fest talking about? She paused and reversed her motion, catching Sholeh's sword out of position and slamming her hilt against the ghouls. Despite the pain and the over whelming power of her opponents attack, she could feel that animal part of her responding with ferocious glee, starting an internal howl that made her smile.

Sholeh attacked her, but the energy was rising in her guts now and she blocked the attack and plucked the chakram off her hip, whipping her sword up to knock Sholeh's aside as she slashed backwards, feeling the chakram hit something and make her entire hand numb as she powered through the stroke and came out the other side.

No time to think about it. She ducked and whirled, bringing the chakram back around and feeling it hit again, then rip free as she brought her sword down in an overhand motion that went through Sholeh's guard and slammed into something.

There was resistance. She jumped forward to aid in her momentum and then she was falling through something that felt like ice, bringing a wave of pain over every inch of her skin. Holding her breath she kept going and rolled into somersault, turning and slashing in every direction since all she could see was darkness.

"Xena!" Gabrielle's voice yelled again.

No idea where to duck. Xena uncoiled from the ground in a leaping bound, tumbling in mid air as she tried to aim for where she'd heard the voice coming from. She heard a yell, and then the sound of wood hitting something, and then she was landed and making a filigree of silver between a flight of arrows and the two of them, whipping the blade into a blur that deflected the arrows in every direction.

Gabrielle pressed up against her, breathing hard. They were back against the wall again, with the ghouls ringed in a tight circle around them.

So this was it. Xena looked out at the force facing her, and felt the icy menace seep through her bones, making her aware of her flagging strength, and the leeching pain and yes, her mortality. She could only do this so long no matter what her will wanted her to do.

She could feel her legs shaking.

Dropping her guard a moment, she turned and ducked her head, turning her back on the ghouls and kissing Gabrielle on the lips. She pulled back just long enough to meet Gabrielle's eyes, vivid even in the shadows. "Thanks."

Then she turned and faced the ghouls again, seeing the dark blot that was Sholeh, seemingly more irregular now, and full of swirling chaos and almost jumped when she heard a low, loud booming sound.

A moment of silence. Then the booming started again. It sounded like the drums of Hades coming at them, and Xena sensed the excitement in the ring around her, shifting and moving, shadows and flashes of godfire mingled among them

“Get her!” Sholeh shouted. “Bring her down!”

A feeling of desolate triumph filled her. Xena understood in that moment that she'd achieved the unlikely in standing off Sholeh's shade, but in doing that, frustrated the undead bitch enough to bring the rest of them down on her.

Ah well. “Come and get me, gutless ragheads.” She bellowed at the creeps. “Since the coward that's leading you lost.”

Gabrielle felt her heart racing. She knew bad things were coming, and more frightening still, she knew Xena couldn't stop them. Though the queen had held off Sholeh, it had been hard, and she could feel the shivers working through her lover's body where it was pressed up next to her.

These weren't people. These were something beyond them both and Gabrielle felt a rough mixture of fear and anger in watching them. “So unfair.” She muttered. “But that's what you're all about.” She let her voice raise, as she focused on Sholeh. “Sheep fart.”

A faint chuckle worked through Xena's body just as the horde came at them, and she took a deep breath and put both hands on her hilt as she got ready to die.

And really, if you were what she was, wasn't dying in a battle against overwhelming odds how you would want to die? Rather than rusting out? Or dying in bed of some fever? Xena felt the fear leak out of her as she came to terms with it, regretting only that Gabrielle had to suffer this with her and not get a chance to live.

The black cloud hit them and she closed her mind off and started fighting, deliberately shutting her mind to the agony as a wave of pain rolled over her. She got herself in front of Gabrielle and just kept swinging, focusing solely on keeping the flashing, ghostly blades from touching them.

Really, from touching Gabrielle. Here in this fight, she was able to burnish her soul a little, giving up of herself in a lost effort to protect someone she loved.

Appropriate, she thought, since Gabrielle was the one who had created her into this half assed hero image she'd become so invested in.

She would just keep going as long as she could.

Gabrielle was swinging her stick frantically, as hard as she could as the black wave came over them, stinging her skin and making her ache as the stick hit the figures and bounced off. They were already against the wall, and the ring was pressing harder and harder against them, and the booming roar was getting louder and louder.

She wasn't sure she was doing any good, but it felt right to be striking out at them, and she ignored the pain in her hands as she hit the ghoul closest to Xena as hard as she could.

Was it Sholeh? She'd lost track, they were all so scary and so ugly it hardly seemed to matter. But she could hear laughter, skittering mocking laughter to her right and so she turned her attention there and saw a looming dark figure about to envelop her.

Somehow, she knew. She remembered that hateful face leering at her when she was dragged up onto the horse, and now those empty sockets held the same disdainful expression as she was face to face with Sholeh's shade and it was reaching for her.

She heard Xena roar sensing that the queen was struggling to reach her and just as in the field that day, she knew it wouldn't be in time. She managed to get her stick up and between them and just as she did, she felt a presence behind her, and a sense of rushing power that made her entire body tingle.

“Shh.” A voice sounded in her head. “Let me grab that a minute, okay?”

Was it a dream? Was she just scared? Gabrielle released the stick and watched it move without her just as Sholeh enveloped her and the staff slammed against the ghoul's body with an odd, very echoing crack.

Then it was very still for a brief moment, as those echoes played out, bouncing off the walls.

Sholeh stumbled back and went down, and then the staff was back in her hands, and she felt a phantom pat on the back as the shades descended on them again and the fight continued, as the booming sound suddenly ended in a huge cracking sound, and then they were enveloped by the dark.

\*\*

And so there it was. Xena felt the sweat dripping down her neck as she blinked into the darkness and set herself for the nth time, her body so numb with pain it was a miracle it was responding to her demands at all, much less with enough energy to hold off the undead horde.

Hold them off she had. She was standing in front of a small alcove she usually kept her spare weapons in, with enough space behind her for Gabrielle to crouch and be as protected as she could be.

That was exactly where her consort was, having lost her stick and been knocked back against the stone with stunning force. She was breathing hard, and fast, and Xena could sense the near panic in her, unable to feel anything but sympathy for it. "Hang in there, my love."

A deeper breath. "I'm here." Gabrielle said. "Boy I'm scared though."

"Me too." Xena admitted. "Don't think I can hold em off much longer."

Her enemy was milling around, and she could sense them moving in on them again, and she drew in a breath and lifted her sword, letting the blade rest briefly against her forehead before she came up on the balls of her feet and waited for the attack.

She could hear, suddenly, the sound of clashing swords on the other side of the room and it confused her. She felt Gabrielle's hand touch her back, and for a long moment, the darkness seemed to hold its breath.

"Xena!" Sholeh's voice came out of the blackest part of the dark, right in front of her. "Give up."

Xena licked her lips and felt like laughing. "Idiot." She said. "I have no damn idea on earth how to give up." She said, tasting the honest truth of the words as they came out of her mouth. "Give up for what? Give up for you to gut me? Give up for you to dance on my grave? What does giving up get me? I get to die faster? Slower? What?"

Gabrielle pressed against her from behind, wrapping her arms around Xena's body and hugging her.

No words, no sounds. Just that pressure and the emotion behind it that unexpectedly brought tears to Xena's eyes.

Sholeh's ghostly figure emerged from the dark, with another just behind her. More behind that, but shape of the second one was familiar to her eyes, and to Gabrielle's as well, apparently.

"Xena." Gabrielle whispered.

"I know." Xena gathered the moments she had left to her to restore whatever strength she could, and between one breath and the next, came to terms with the understanding that she was likely at the end of the line. That Gabrielle was. "Got that knife?"

A breath. "I have it."

"Give up, and your slut and the rest of your mangy hangers on back there will go free." Sholeh said. "They will live. You will die. I think that's fair, don't you?"

"Give up and what?" Xena asked.

"Give yourself to us." Sholeh said. "To your enemies. We'll take our vengeance on you, Xena.. me and your brother, and your young lover, and all the rest. You'll burn with us. But this place will stay untouched. Your peasant will live. Your.. what did you call them? Your army?" Sholeh laughed. "They will live. Only you will suffer. Isn't that fair? Don't you wish to save all your pitiful minions?"

Xena straightened and turned her back on Sholeh, facing Gabrielle instead. Despite the darkness, and the overwhelming fog of fear, she could see Gabrielle's eyes, and the shape of her face and the tears that matched her own.

"No that's not fair." Gabrielle whispered. "I'm not going to live without you, Xena."

Any other person, and the statement would be simply foolish sentiment. Xena tucked her sword under her arm and raised her hands, cupping her lover's face with them, seeing in those eyes the absolute truth of what she'd said.

"Please don't leave me." Gabrielle whispered, her eyes filling with tears, that spilled over and down her cheeks. "I don't care what happens to us Xena I just want to be with you."

"Yeah I know." Xena replied. "I don't want to leave you. And those guys back there.. " She now recognized the fighting and the noise for what it was. "They've been looking for an excuse."

"Xena!" Sholeh yelled. "I'm waiting!"

"This is gonna hurt." Xena said, gently, ignoring the Persian shade at her back. "A lot. And it might go on hurting for a very long time."

"I know."

"Okay." Xena leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. "I don't know what'll happen on the other side, Gabrielle, but stick with me like a tick, okay? Keep me honest."

"I will." Gabrielle almost gasped in relief. "I swear it."

"Xena!" Sholeh barked. "Now!"

Xena turned back, putting an arm around Gabrielle and shifting her sword in her other hand as they faced the horde. Then with a almost casual motion, she tossed the blade down, hearing it hit the floor with an odd, echoing clang. "C'mon." She said. "Do your worst."

She put her other arm around Gabrielle and hugged her close, feeling a sense of melancholy joy that quietly overwhelmed her.

"Release her, and I will take you, Xena." Sholeh said. "I will take your soul, and we will do to you what you have done to so many. All your enemies are here beside me, waiting."

Likely they were, starting with her brother. Xena just stayed still, looking down into Gabrielle's eyes. "No way." She said, after a pause. "That soul's not mine to give, or yours to take, scum whore of Persia."

She felt the jerk of a sob go through Gabrielle's body.

"So you can destroy this body." Xena went on, her voice deep, and sure and inevitable. "But all I really am belongs to her." She tilted her head and kissed Gabrielle on the lips, feeling the tremor in them, and tasting the salt of her tears. "Nothing can change that." She whispered, focusing on her partner and ignoring everything else. "Nothing will change that."

"You would take her to Tartarus?" Now it was Toris' voice, dripping with loathing. "Isn't that so like you, Xena."

"I go willingly." Gabrielle spoke up for the first time, turning her head a little to look at him. "If you want to torture her there you'll have to go through me to do it."

Xena let her cheek rest against the top of Gabrielle's head, surrendering herself to the moment. It made her smile, despite everything and finally and at last, she felt a sense of peace in her heart.

"You're a fool." Toris said, directly to Gabrielle. "Ten thousand want to torture her. You think you can stop them all?"

Gabrielle put her head down on Xena's chest and exhaled. "I sure can try." She said. "So Xena's right. Come on and do your worst, you stinky sheephead."

For a moment, everything was still. Then with a scream, Sholeh lifted her sword and drove towards them, with the rest of the horde at their back.

Xena just hugged Gabrielle closer, and closed her eyes, concentrating on the feel of the arms around her, and the love. An unearned grace. "Damn, I love you."

Gabrielle tightened her grip, and let the fear go.

And the darkness hit them. It flowed over them and hammered against them, bringing a wash of intense pain and a sense of burning that brought them both to their knees immediately, as a roar of hatred spilled out of the horde as it hit them.

"Sorry" Xena managed to get out, wrapping as much of herself around Gabrielle as she possibly could.

"It's okay." Gabrielle gasped back.

Then the undead cloud rolled over them and they were blown against the wall and then it was dark.

And then it was quiet.

\*\*

Xena was chiefly aware of having one killer of a headache. She opened her eyes, unsure of where she was or what was going on. She was aware of a cold surface under her back, and the warmth of another body laying over her, and around her an unearthly silence.

It was dark, and it took a while for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, the space over her very slowly resolving from nothing into the startling outline of her own tower roof.

She felt around with one hand, and found a stone floor, which explained the cold and as she tipped her head back she saw the lead paned window only to find the first gray hint of dawn reflected there. "Ugh." She groaned softly, feeling motion against her as Gabrielle stirred in her arms.

Rolling over was excruciating. She felt like every bone in her body was broken, and her skin flayed off, and she lifted a hand to look at it with some trepidation that she'd find tendons exposed on it.

"Oh." Gabrielle uttered. "Ow."

"You said it." Xena responded. She pushed herself painfully to a seated position, half turning to examine her companion anxiously. "Hey. You okay?"

Gabrielle was half sprawled in her lap, and now she opened her eyes and blinked up at the queen, grimacing as she lifted a hand to rub her face. "Ow." She repeated. "I feel like I was stung by bees all over." She gasped. "Everything hurts."

"Yeah me too." Xena slowly turned her head and looked around. The chamber was empty, save the dozen or so still figures near the door. She felt her heart clench a little, seeing them. "What happened?"

Gabrielle peered up at her. "I sure hope you're not asking me that." She said. "Last thing I remember was hurting a lot, hanging on to you and then something hitting me." She touched Xena's leg. "And it was loud."

Xena digested this. "Well, we're not in Hades." She eventually said. "So I guess we're not dead."

"No." Gabrielle rolled over and leaned on her elbow, looking over to see what Xena was watching. She saw the figures on the ground and drew in a breath. "Oh." She put a hand on Xena's. "Are those our guys?"

"I think so." The queen said, in a small voice. "I'm really glad you're still around here with me."

They both fell silent. "They were supposed to kill us." Gabrielle said. "I think they really wanted to." She added. "I don't get why they didn't."

Xena nodded. "Yeah me either." She studied her hand, not wanting to look over at the bodies. "After all that spectral boasting you'd think they'd have croaked us, huh?"

Gabrielle reached out and took hold of the queen's hand, bringing it over and very gently kissing it. "I'm just glad we're together." She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against Xena's knuckles. "Is it over now Xena?"

"I don't know." Her companion admitted. "I guess we should go find out."

They both got up. Xena groaned as she straightened, sending bolts of pain through her legs. "Augh!" She leaned against the wall and eased her shoulders back, reaching out to grab Gabrielle as she did the same. "Haven't hurt this bad since that damn ambush."

Gabrielle grimaced and flexed her hands. "I don't think I've ever hurt this bad." She admitted. "Even when they beat me up that time."

It was very quiet. Xena wondered bleakly if she would find a lot more bodies if she walked out of the tower, shivering a little at the thought of encountering nothing but death in the rest of her realm. Her stomach twisted, thinking of that.

Was that her bargain? They left her and Gabrielle alive but took everything else?

Then why didn't they kill Gabrielle too? Xena watched her consort collect her staff and lean against it, her face pale, and her motions stiff and painful. "I'm sorry." She muttered. "Didn't want you to get hurt because of my damn enemies."

Gabrielle managed a brief grin. "They're mine too now I guess." She commented. "We really pissed them off, huh?"

"Yeah." Xena went over and picked up her sword. She lifted it up and examined it, but the blade was unremarkable and unmarked, the same condition she'd remembered it in. Painfully, she managed to put it into its scabbard, then she held her hand out and waited for Gabrielle to take it.

Her consort did, and they walked together across the chamber, towards the still, silent forms lying on the ground between them and the door.

Halfway there Xena felt her knees start to shake and she knew a moment of private, intense fear, that despite her bold words, and her bravado that she would face the knowledge that her personal decision had caused soldiers loyal to her to die in some horrible painful way.

These soldiers who had stood by her side, as she held Gabrielle's dying body in her arms. "Why didn't they kill me?" She exhaled. "Why them?"

Gabrielle shifted closer and put an arm around her waist.

They came to the first of the bodies and paused, looking down at it.

"Oh." Gabrielle drew a little closer. "It's just..."

"Bones." Xena said, quietly. "Just bones." She studied the artifacts. "But those are my men. My colors."

Tunics, with her hawk's head boldly on them. Xena closed her eyes against the pain of it. "Why the hell weren't they down in the hall getting drunk?" She sighed. "Why did they come up here?"

"Because they loved you." Her consort said, softly. "Xena, they all do. We all do."

Xena walked slowly through the bodies with her, careful not to step on even a ripped sleeve. "I'll be back for you." She said, as she reached the door. "Put your bones in the ground myself, I swear it."

Gabrielle caught up and took her arm, gently squeezing it as the queen leaned against the door, her shoulders slumping. "Something must have worked out okay since we're still here, right?"

"Yeah." Xena studied the floor. "I wonder if they left us like this just to watch me deal with everyone else being dead."

"Xena." Gabrielle inhaled softly. "That can't be true."

The queen lifted a hand and rubbed her eyes. "I should be used to it huh?" She answered softly. "I thought I was. I've been killing people since I was seven years old." She sighed. "Ah well."

With a shake of her head, the queen worked the latch and opened the door, stepping out into the stairwell and stopping, as her sudden appearance caused a wholly unexpected swirl of motion, the rasp of leather and cloth against stone loud and startling in the hall.

"Xena!" Brendan was on his feet, staring at her. "Bigods it's good to see you." He let his hand drop from his sword as the rest of the soldiers clustered at the doorway got to their feet. "Trying all night to get that damned door open to get to ye... heard the gods only know what going on."

"We thought..." Brent paused, and exhaled. "Glad you're both all right."

Xena was standing, stunned, watching them. She turned and looked behind her in the room. "W." She blinked at what she saw and felt her heart skip.

Gabrielle turned too, shocked to find the floor empty. She looked up at Xena, seeing a ferocious mixture of emotion on her face. "Was that all fake?" She ventured.

The queen closed her jaw, and the door as well. "Good question. Let's save that for later." She turned and leaned against the closed door, and studied them all for a long moment, not missing the grubby faces, and swollen eyes and seeing them in a way that made her feel surreally humble.

Was she worthy of this, really? Of this steadfast adoration from these men, and the willing soul sacrifice of Gabrielle? Really? Xena took in a breath, and released it, lifting her head as a rooster crowed outside, and as if that was a signal, the normal sounds of the stronghold started to filter in, echoing softly off the stone walls.

Was it an answer, of sorts?

She walked down the two steps to the landing and faced Brendan, . "Glad to see ya, you old goat." She hesitated, then in an uncharacteristically awkward motion, stepped forward and embraced him.

"Uh. B.." Brendan froze, unsure of what to do. Then he hesitantly returned the pressure. "Ah, glad to see you too, your majesty." His eyes found Gabrielle's past the queen's shoulder, and whatever he saw there made him smile. "Xena, I'm glad ye're all right." He added softly. "Ye had me true worried."

"Back at ya." Xena released him and stepped back. "Thanks for trying to come save me from half the contents of Hades."

Slowly the dawn light was starting to flood into the windows at the top of the tower. It lit them up with color, and as it touched Gabrielle she felt herself relax just a little. They'd survived the night. The sun made her think maybe they'd survive the day as well.

Xena solemnly greeted the rest of the soldiers, even Lakmas, with the same hug, making them close to crazy. "Some badass things went on in there last night." The queen said, leaning against the wall. "Glad it's morning."

"Us too." Brent said. "When we couldn't get in the door.. " He paused, and then shook his head. "We really feared for you, your majesty."

Xena sighed. "Yeah." She thought longingly of her tub, and of the hot water she imagined in it. "I feared for me, too. I've got no real idea why I'm still around." She admitted, letting her body slump against the stone. "If I didn't feel like every horse in the stable stampeded over me. I'd think I'd hallucinated it all."

"Well, I saw it too." Gabrielle leaned on her staff. "So if you were so was I."

Xena regarded all of them. There were twelve soldiers in the hall, eleven of her most senior men and Lakmas. Safe, and sound here in the hall, and now she really had to wonder what the bodies in the hall had been all about. "No one went in there, right?"

"If only we could have." Lakmas said. "We threw ourselves at the door, great one, and tried our axes on it, but not a splinter would budge."

The bodies were gone from the floor – were they left there just to taunt her? Give her that moment of pain, before she escaped and found the truth outside? "What'd you think you heard in there?"

"Screaming." Brendan said, promptly. "Sounded like ye, Majesty. " His body was battered, and there was a cut above one eyebrow. "As he said, we went for the door half the hight. Drove me mad." He sounded and looked as tired as Xena felt. "Drove us all mad." He added, in a low mutter. "Aye." Brent said, softly. "Heard screeching, and the wind... like nothing I ever seen."

Xena sighed. "I think I need a drink." She indicated the stairs. "Wanna join me?" She extended a hand to Gabrielle and waited for her consort to take hold of it then she led the way down the steps

\*\*

They went down to the lower level, bypassing their quarters. "I want to know the worst." Xena said, as they crossed to the main doors into the stronghold and passed through them.

A steward was crossing the hall, and he paused and bowed low to them. "Good morning, your majesties." He greeted them, in the most normal of ways. "You are early this morn. Shall I have the kitchen make your breakfast ready?"

Xena stopped and studied him. "What's your name?" The man was vaguely familiar to her, one of Stanislaus's many right hands she'd seen around the place for years.

"Garon, your majesty." The man replied.

"Congratulations." She clapped him on the shoulder. "You're now the seneschal. G'wan and get breakfast started I've got some very hungry friends with me here."

The man blinked in true startlement. "Majesty! You honor me greatly!"

"I do." Xena agreed. "Don't make me look like a jerk. Do a good job."

He smiled and bowed again, this time with a bit of a flourish. "Majesty, I will." He headed off towards the kitchens at a purposeful trot, and they continued on into the big hall.

The early dawn light was coming in the eastern windows, and it spilled across the trestle tables that lined the room. Xena wound her way through them and went to the royal dais, taking a seat in her throne like chair in the center and waving the rest to sit down as well.

They did.

Xena folded her hands and let them rest on the table, unused to being in this room as early as this. Generally she had her breakfast in her chamber, usually and recently served to her with love and adorableness by her consort. "So."

Brendan was sitting on her left hand side, since Gabrielle was perched on her right. He looked tired, and beaten up, his hands knicked and bruised as they rested on the table.

So. Xena pondered in silence. Maybe that's why this damn thing is happening. Teaching me to be a human being. "Sorry I caused you a night of Hades, Brendan." She said. 'Didn't mean to.'

He smiled briefly. "No, ye didn't." He agreed. "Was worth it, though, seeing that door open this mornin." He regarded her. "Look a bit warshed out yerself."

"I am." Xena admitted, with a sigh. "Havent' been this tired since the last time I got my ass kicked in the war." She looked up as kitchen slaves came pouring in, bearing trays of morning ale and food. She saw Gabrielle's attitude perk up seeing them and smiled. "Hurry up before Gabrielle starts chewing on the table here."

Gabrielle had her legs pulled up crossed under her and she was leaning her elbows on her knees. "Keep me from falling asleep anyway." She took a mug of ale and a big piece of brown bread with sliced eggs and venison on it. "Boy that looks good."

The room was starting to fill with other guests and residents of the castle. Gabrielle sat back with her bread and enjoyed the full flavors, glad the pain in every inch of her was fading.

It was hard, really, to think about what had happened to them. The memories of the fury and the shades was fading, only the aches making her realize she had gone through that trial. A quick look at Xena told her that the queen was as exhausted as she'd ever seen her, and she figured maybe after breakfast they'd get a chance to go to their quarters and get some rest.

And a bath.

"Gabrielle." Brent had ended up next to her. "Was it the dark ones again, in the chamber?"

Gabrielle was aware that Xena was listening in, her dark head tilted slightly to one side. "Well, it was scary and dark, that's for sure." She replied. "I'm not really sure what was going on, to be honest. It was loud, and we were fighting something, and then it all stopped."

Xena's shoulder lightly touched hers, just a faint nudge really but she took that as a sign of approval, something in her resisting being completely honest with Brent about what had happened though she wasn't entirely sure why.

"Sounds terrifying." Brent shook his head.

"It was." Gabrielle didn't mind admitting that. "If Xena hadn't been there, wow." She rested her head against the queen briefly. "She was amazing. She went up against those guys.. and there were hundreds of them!"

"Gabrielle." Xena demurred.

"There were!" Gabrielle protested. "It was so scary." Her voice dropped to almost a whisper. "They were so awful."

The men were all looking at Xena with wide eyes. The queen opened her mouth to reject the half assed heroics and then she had to stop, and think, and she closed her jaw with a snick because she realized what Gabrielle had said was not only true, but understated.

They were awful. They were scary as Hades, and there were so many she couldn't even have counted them all if she'd been able to see them.

She'd done it. "Yeah, and damned if I don't feel it." Xena said. "That hurt."

"It did." Gabrielle rubbed her fingertips together.

"You hit them too." The queen rested her head against her hand. "I saw you whack Sholeh."

"Sholeh?" Lakmas jerked upright. "She came back from the dead?"

"Not really. She came back as the dead." Xena said. "Figured to get me, I guess."

Now everyone was staring at Xena in some discomfort with the exception of Gabrielle. The queen briefly wondered why, if she really hadn't wanted her consort to tell everyone what happened that she herself was well on the way to doing so. "Anyway." She half shrugged. "It's over."

She felt Gabrielle's hand touch hers, and her fingers fold over Xena's. The queen glanced sideways at her, but Gabrielle seemed to be lost in thought and the motion automatic. "But Gabrielle was in there swinging." She found herself saying. "Knocked that stupid bitch on her ass, matter of fact."

Her consort grinned a little, and her face creased into a bashful expression.

For a moment there was silence, then Brendan cleared his throat. "So now what is it, Xena?" He asked. "Have they gone? Tis a scary thing, yah?" He half turned to study the queen. "Dead things coming to fight with ye."

Xena wasn't really sure how to answer that. She knew what she would like to be the truth, but given everything that had happened, she had no confidence that she knew for sure what was going on. So she considered the question carefully. What had really happened there, at the end?

She remembered the darkness, and feeling like her skin was on fire from the pain of it all. She remembered Gabrielle standing at her side, breathing hard, her body shaking. She remembered

sensing the rush of the darkness as it came at them, and then the pain as it hit them and bowled them both over, and her back hitting the wall...

And then?

Why hadn't they died? Why hadn't the undead taken her? Taken them as they stood, arms around each other, locked in an embrace.... Slowly Xena turned her head and looked at Gabrielle's profile. A faint, soft echo of words sounded inside her head.

*I go willingly.*

After a minute, Gabrielle realized she was being watched and she turned to meet Xena's eyes, her head cocking slightly to one side in question.

Hm. Xena smiled at her, and watched a return smile appear on her face. She'd never paid much.. okay, any.. attention to the traditions of the gods, her early life never had any and after she started fighting there had never been any want or need for it. "Someone get Jellaus in here." She said, abruptly. "I want some information before I start talking crap."

"Mistress." Brent got up and trotted off.

Xena leaned back in her chair and picked up her mug, sipping the ale thoughtfully. "Brendan, damned if I know if they're gone or not but I figure they had their chance, last night to take what they thought they could take and they didn't." She said. "Maybe they found out it was tougher than they thought."

"Be right seeing as it was you." Brendan managed a smile. "Aint' none tougher."

No, that was probably true. Xena acknowledged. She wasn't always the brightest coal in the fire – something she'd only ever really say to herself – but tough and stubborn she was and no one knew that better than she did.

"I liked when you told Sholeh your soul wasn't yours to give." Gabrielle spoke up suddenly, a tired grin on her face. "Or anything else for that matter."

Xena felt her skin heat with a blush.

"We knew that too." Brendan blithely agreed. "Twas all yours, by the gods, and their grace it was." He studied Xena's profile. "Mistress, their blessing is on ye."

Remembering the God of War's disdain, Xena wasn't really sure about that but after all, here she was. She looked around the room, now filled with her subjects, and buzzing with life and conversation and thought about that one moment in the tower when she'd wondered.

Got her mind off her red face, anyway. She looked down and studied her hands, one of which was neatly enclosed in Gabrielle's and sighed. Then she cleared her throat. "Why do you all go get some rest." She said. "And.. ah.. I guess we should start planning that expedition out of the hills."

Brendan stood up, with a grateful look in the queen's direction. "Aye, sounds a good thing." He motioned for the rest of the soldiers who'd stood with him. "Let's go you lot. Need to get ourselves ready for a march."

Gabrielle very gently cleared her throat.

"Maybe we should too?" The queen's eyes twinkled just a little. "Tired, my love?"

"Sorta." Gabrielle admitted. "Kinda achy too."

"Hm." The queen inhaled, and seemed about to stand up, when the doors to the banquet hall opened and two of her guard came in, moving towards her in a purposeful way. "Somehow, I think we're gonna have to postpone the nap for a while." She sighed, resting her chin on her fist as the guards reached her. "What's up?"

"Majesty." The first one bowed his head. "Word just came in from the outpost at the pass."

Xena waited. "And?" She prompted him.

"They say soldiers are coming towards us. Not an army." The man peered at a scrap of parchment. "They look strange."

Xena held her hand out. "Give me that." She took the parchment and looked at it, aware of Gabrielle standing and leaning on her shoulder so she could see too. "If I was a betting woman, I'd bet we've got Persians coming to visit." She remarked. "Aint' that special."

"What makes you think it's them?" Gabrielle whispered into her ear.

"Say that again." Xena instructed, feeling a wash of recklessness come over her. She waited for her consort to obey, then chuckled. "I love when you whisper in my ear."

"Xena."

"And when you say my name." The queen chuckled again. "I think it's Persians because they're carrying curved scimitars, and they've got a royal transport with em." She pointed at the words. "See this? Color box in red and geld between a ox?"

Gabrielle blinked. "Is that what that means?"

"Be glad they didn't decide to try and draw a picture of it." Xena advised her. "Yeah." She put the parchment down and tapped her fingers on the tablet. "So my guess is, this is an envoy of war from the old man." Her eyes flicked to Lakmas. "Am I right?"

The Persian soldier came to her side and peered at the report. "His royal magnificence does travel in such a way." He agreed. "But..." He frowned. "Not with so few men."

Xena thought about that. "Would the rest of them be in ships offshore waiting to land?"

Lakmas shook his head. "In the past, in campaigns I have been in they would have put the men ashore already somewhere. Then perhaps, the envoy would come to make a deal, but it would be a lie." He didn't seem embarrassed about that. "The force would be coming in for attack, while the speech is going on."

"Really." Xena mused. "Well, Philtop told me they were around." She said. "Someone go get me Philtop's lackeys. Time to get all the liars in one room and see what we've got here."

"Mistress." One of the guard headed for the door.

Gabrielle was still pressed against her. "We're not going to get that nap, huh?"

The queen smiled. "Not just yet." She said. "You can go sack out if you want to." She half turned her head and regarded her consort, seeing the look of stubborn disagreement clearly in those eyes. "Or not. You're a big girl and you can make your own choices."

"I choose you." Gabrielle whispered again in her ear. "And I want to know what's going on too."

That all sounded so nice and high and mighty. Xena appreciated the sentiment. However, it occurred to her that sometime between now, and when the envoy got to the stronghold, she'd better take them both off and get some rest because if it was the worst, and she had some reason to expect the worst, it would be a long time before she could rest again.

Xena sighed. Damn it, she really didn't want another war. "I'm getting too old for this crap." She muttered. "Time for the Fates to leave my ass alone."

Gabrielle pressed against her and gently kissed the side of her neck. "Maybe we could go do that pirate thing?" She murmured into her lover's ear. "Would there be less Fates around if we did?"

"With my luck? No." The queen grouched. "Lakmas, what would the old man ask for if it really is him?" She indicated Brent's abandoned chair and the Persian sat down in it. "What would he be more pissed at, me beating his army, or his daughter getting offed here?"

"The army." Lakmas answered immediately. "He was fond of Sholeh, make no mistake, oh great one. But she was a girl child. He hated the fact that his woman never gave him a son." He rubbed his hands together. "We believed... in the army.. that the woman did so deliberately. She was from the east, and some called her a witch."

“She was a war captive, Sholeh said.” Gabrielle spoke up. “Her mother was, I mean. Was that true?”

Lakmas nodded. “It was true. The king took her when he invaded Chin, and won great lands there. Lao Ma, she was called. He brought her back and forced her to bed with him, but she bore only Sholeh, and then she died.”

“Hm.” Xena rested her elbows on the table. “They thought she was a sorceress? A woman of magic?”

“They did so.” The Persian said. “She was killed when he thought she would teach Sholeh foreign ways, but it was always my mind that she tried too hard to prove she was his daughter and not hers.”

Xena leaned back. “Maybe she didn't kill her soon enough.” She mused. “Or maybe she was born a natural bitch who ended up carrying a grudge right into being dead.”

“Was it truly her shade?” Lakmas asked, seemingly more interested than afraid of that.

“Sure sounded like her.” Gabrielle confirmed. “But she was really ugly to look at. She wanted to take Xena.”

Lakmas nodded. “To bring back such a mighty warrior to her father was her goal to come here. First, to prove herself in battle, and again, to prove to him a woman could also be a formidable enemy.” He looked thoughtfully at his hands. “We would have fought to prove the first, she was her father's heir and we were given to her, but the second...” He shook his head. “None would have thought it true had we not been here, and seen it.”

Xena's eyebrow lifted.

“We had heard of you.” Lakmas continued, in a soft voice. “But it wasn't until I saw you that my heart changed. Sholeh then seemed like a wayward child to me, and her father, wise and ancient as he was, seemed to me a small and boastful man.”

A faint, sexy grin appeared on the queen's face. “I doubt his Poohbah the small and boastful is going to appreciate hearing that sentiment when he gets here. So g'wan and get some rest before our lives all go to Hades in a handbasket again.”

“My liege.” Lakmas smiled back, touching his forehead before he got up and circled the table, heading for the doors to the banquet hall. He was dressed in one of her hawk's head tunics and he twitched it straight as he walked through the crowd of castle inhabitants with obvious pride.

“Wow.” Gabrielle was still leaning against her. “That explains a lot.”

“That Sholeh wanted me as a prize of war to take back to daddy?” Xena eyed her.

“No. I knew she wanted you.” Her consort responded. “I said so, didn't I? But that she wanted to prove to her father that a woman could be a great fighter.” She paused. “My father wouldn't have believed that either.”

“Your father was a jackass who deserved to be flayed and given to the dogs.” The queen responded bluntly. “If he'd been alive after I found out how he treated you I'd have done it and enjoyed it.”

Gabrielle paused, and then nodded. “I know. But he still wouldn't have believed how amazing you were unless he saw it.” She said. “He thought women were useless except for making babies and cooking his dinner.”

Xena got up, then sighed and sat back down again as the guard entered with the contingent from the Westlands. “Hold that thought.” She folded her hands on the table as the nobles approached, and Brent returned with Jellaus following close behind him.

The crowd milled around with interest, and she looked back at them. “Actually.” She stood up and put her hands on her hips. “Bring these guys back to my audience chamber.” She told Brent. “No sense in spilling all the beans in one place right?”

“Mistress.” Brent bowed.

Xena held her hand out to Gabrielle and waited for her to take it. Then she led the way through the crowd towards the door. “Besides.” She added in an undertone to Gabrielle. “I’ve got herbs in my kit there that’ll make us both feel better.” She winced a little, now that she was out of sight of the soldiers. “Damn my ass hurts.”

Gabrielle carefully put her arm around her companion, circling her waist. “Just being with you makes me feel better.” She admitted. “Are the Persians coming to attack us?”

“Probably.” Xena sighed.

“Yuck.”

The queen started laughing. “Yeah, I feel the same way.” She draped her arm over Gabrielle's shoulders. “I feel like just packing everyone up and riding for the hills. That old goat wants this place? Let 'm take it.”

“Maybe we could talk them out of it?”

Xena exhaled as she reached the door to her audience chamber in the tower, and shoved it open. “Maybe you could talk the old bastard out of it. I’ll probably just slug him.”

“You really think that would work?”

“It sure would work for me.”

\*\*

Gabrielle sat quietly at her little desk in the corner, her hands wrapped around the cup of tea and herbs Xena had mixed up for her. It had honey in it, and the taste of the herbs was only a little weird, not bitter or rank like they sometimes were and she was enjoying sipping it as she listened.

The sun had come out, and was shining through the window at her back, warming her skin and that, plus the herbs, plus being able to just sit quietly was making her feel better. Not as good as climbing into bed with Xena would have made her feel, but still.

But still.

She tried to pay attention to Xena's questioning of the Westlanders, but her mind kept wandering back to the terrors they'd been through, and the fight in the tower the night before.

They'd done okay, her and Xena. After she'd turned down the God of War and all that. She remembered how much it had hurt when she'd hit the scary creepy things and she flexed her hands, glad only a residual ache was there to remind her of it. She'd held her ground, and Xena had done more than that and she couldn't get past the fact that she'd fought against creepy things and lived to tell about it.

She had. She remembered hearing stories about ghosts, when they'd been inside during the long winters and how scary that had been when people had told of finding long lost loved ones coming back to haunt them.

Now she had a ghost tale of her own. Gabrielle gazed thoughtfully across the room, to where Xena was slouched in her big chair, elbow propped on the arm, head resting against her fist. Xena hadn't been scared at all, just angry, and brave, and standing there after she'd thrown her sword down – courageous and true.

True to her. Just like the voice in the grayness had told her she was. And, as the voice had also told her, she had been true to Xena and stood by her, and had been willing to die and go wherever Xena was going to go even if that was Tartarus, and an eternity of pain.

She tried to imagine what that would have been like. She was sure it would have been nasty. But she also was sure that no matter how bad it would be, just being there with Xena and holding her hand would have made it all right.

So now the Persians, maybe, were coming here to ask for something. Or demand something. Or yell at Xena or... Gabrielle pondered a moment. What if the Persian was really there to offer up the ransom the queen had asked for? Maybe he valued his men like Xena did, after all.

She looked over at Lakmas, who was standing like a statue beside the door, fully armed and wondered what he would do if that were to happen. Would he go back to his people?

Or stay with Xena?

Gabrielle exhaled and moved her body gingerly, the ache in every bone still present. She hoped he would pick Xena, if it did.

“Ggggabrielle?”

She looked up to find the queen crooking a finger at her. Uh oh. Still carrying her cup, Gabrielle got up and limped over to where Xena was sitting, hoping like crazy that she wasn't going to be asked an opinion on all the stuff she hadn't really been listening to. “Yes?”

Xena studied her. “When you had those rags taken off the walls.” She indicated the outer hall with a jerk of her head. “Who did it?”

Gabrielle cocked her head slightly to one side. “You mean, who got up on the ladder and took them down?”

“Uh huh.”

Her consort let her wrists rest on the arm of her chair and thought about that a minute. Then she looked up with a faintly surprised expression. “Well, it was Stanislaus.” She said. “And two of his stewards, I think.”

“Stanislaus.” Xena repeated softly. “Who got knifed in my banqueting hall.” She picked up Gabrielle's cup out of her hands and took a sip of the herbal tea. “What in Hades is in that treasure? What's in there that's worth a Persian's heir, a dozen men's lives and enough royal intrigue to keep you busy writing scrolls about it the whole damn winter long?”

Gabrielle scratched her nose. “You think we should find out?”

“Before we end up croaking again for it? Maybe a good idea.”

\*\*

“He knew something.” Xena repeated patiently to Philtop's chief lackey. “Do not toss that same old line about him pining for me back at me or I'll cut your tongue off.” She'd gotten up and now she was pacing back and forth. “I don't buy it.”

The man shook his head. “Majesty, with all due respect to you, his mission was honest. Our crops did fail, our people face starvation. None of that is a lie.”

“Why?” Gabrielle spoke up suddenly.

He paused, and stared at her. “Pardon?”

“Why?” Gabrielle was content to stay parked back at her worktable, her elbows braced on it keeping her body as still as she could. The aching was starting to really bother her, and she felt her temper perking a little in response. “I mean, no one else's did. Not that we heard of. It's been a great harvest year for everyone else. So what happened to yours?”

He remained silent. Xena paused in her pacing and turned to regard her consort with interest.

“When I was small.” Gabrielle said. “My family were tenant farmers raising sheep. If we were the only ones whose sheep all died, I think the landholder would have asked my father the same question. What happened?”

He continued to stare at her.

“As in, what did we do wrong?” Gabrielle clarified. “Because sheep are pretty sturdy and they don't just keel over unless you screw up and let wolves get to them or didn't keep their layout clean and they all got sick. So what went wrong?”

Xena swiveled her eyes towards the lackey, her brows lifting. She folded her arms. “Well, Melchus?”

“We just had bad luck.” He refused to meet her eyes. “Weather... locusts.. I don't know.”

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged glances. “You don't know why your crops failed?” The queen repeated. “Philtop didn't ask? He just accepted empty wagons? Really?”

Melchus remained silent.

“That doesn't seem right, does it, Gabrielle?” Xena turned to her consort, who was solemnly shaking her head no. “He knew I'd ask.. Hades he knew I'd send someone to check. So what's the deal, Melchus?” She walked over to where he was standing. “Maybe he didn't question what happened but no one in their right mind would think I wouldn't get around to that.”

She eyed Gabrielle. “Eventually.” She conceded, seeing the ghost of a grin flit across her lover's face. Then she focused on her more fully, seeing the tense, painful posture. “Tell you what, Melchus. You think about that for a couple minutes while I have a private conference with my one and only here.”

“Mistress.” He muttered.

“Brent, make sure he doesn't wander off.” Xena went to where Gabrielle was sitting, and extended her hand. “C'mon.” She gently lifted her to her feet and escorted her through the ornate doorway to the private chambers beyond. “Been looking for an excuse to get you to myself all alone.”

“Were you?” Gabrielle felt the cool calm of the bedchamber descend over her and it made her muscles relax a little as Xena kicked the door shut behind them and then circled around to face her. She looked up into the queen's face, finding a look of intense concern there. “I sure wanted to be with you alone.”

“Hurting?” Xena asked, gently.

Gabrielle nodded, glad not to need to dissemble. “Tea wore off I guess.” She said. “It got better for a while.”

The queen very nudged her carefully over towards the fire, which was snapping placidly in the hearth. “Know what?”

“I know I love you.” Gabrielle answered, as she watched, bemused, Xena's long fingers as they unlaced the tunic she was wearing over her armor. “I know I wish all this stuff was done so we could go have another picnic.”

Xena smiled.

“Or just go to bed.” Her consort sounded mournful. “Or have a bath.”

“I think I can arrange for all of that.” The queen got her tunic off, and then unclasped the the straps that held on the scaled armor, lifting it up off her and setting it aside.

“Ungh.” Gabrielle had to close her eyes as the warmth of the fire, and the cool breeze in the room warred in penetrating her linen undershirt. “That feels better already.” When she had the armor on it hadn't seemed at all heavy but now that it was off, and the pressure of it was no longer against her skin she felt almost lighter than air.

“I bet.” Xena gently riffled her fingers through Gabrielle's disheveled hair. “Thanks, by the way. You nailed the little bastard outside.” She untied the laces on her undershirt and loosened it, then pulled it over her head, leaving Gabrielle in her leggings and wraps.

She took a step back and looked down, then stopped, a thrum of shock going over her skin as she sharply inhaled. “Son of a bitch.”

Gabrielle looked around, then down at herself when it was obvious the sentiment was directed at her. “Oh.” She regarded the marks on her skin. “Ow.”

Xena felt like the air had been sucked out of her, seeing the spiderweb of lurid, red stripes, as though Gabrielle had been whipped over every inch of her body. "Oh." She echoed her lover. "I'm sorry, sweetheart." She sighed. "Stay there. Let me get my kit."

Gabrielle was glad enough to comply. She could now see herself in the mirror, and the marks were almost scary, red and raw looking. She touched one with her fingers and the sting made her pull her hand down at once. She remembered, once, being hit in the barn, after... what had it been? Dropping the dinner platter? Or had it been letting the lambs out accidentally?

Hadn't really mattered. She remembered the searing pain and now that she thought about it, the pain of these marks didn't seem that different. Except that instead of being beaten for displeasing her father, she'd gotten thrashed for defending her beloved Xena against a bunch of nasty ghosts.

Gabrielle studied her reflection, and didn't regret the marring.

"Damn, damn damn." Xena, however, seemed to have a different view. She laid her supplies out and pressed Gabrielle down onto the small stool near the fire, dropping to one knee next to her. "If you look like this I don't wanna know what I look like." She took out the cleansing paste and carefully cleaned off the scores, pausing only a moment as her consort lifted her hands up and let her wrists rest on her shoulders.

Xena understood that everyone expected her to be running things outside. She also understood, with almost refreshing clarity, that she didn't care. "Hang on one more minute." She got up and went to the rotunda door, opening it and sticking her head out. "Someone get me hot water for the tub in here."

"Mistress." One of the guards ducked out the door.

"Brent." Xena addressed her familiar. "Take this bastard, and put him in a cell. I'll get back to him later. I got things to take care of right now."

"Mistress." Brent grabbed Metrus by the arm and dragged him out.

That left the outer chamber in peace. Xena waited a moment to see if anything was going to change, and then she pulled her head back inside and shut the door. "There." She walked back over and continued her care. "You and I are going to take a nice warm bath, my love. Then you're going to curl up in that bed with me and get some rest."

"Aren't the Persians coming?"

"Sure." Xena moved around in back of her and exhaled unhappily as she saw the welts across her consorts back. "They'll wait." She leaned forward and found a clear spot, planting a kiss on it. "Squadron of the bastards aren't getting through my gates, Gabrielle."

"You'd let them sit out there while we take a nap?" Gabrielle felt the intense pain starting to fade, now that her clothing was mostly off, and Xena was caring for her. "Really? Won't that get them mad?"

"I'm sure it will but I don't care. I finally learned something the past couple of days." The queen rested her elbow on her knee as she came around the side of the stool, and met Gabrielle's eyes. "I figured out what's important and that's you and me. Not this place, not this realm, not even my army."

Gabrielle felt a little short of breath. "Oh." She uttered softly.

"Surprised?" Xena very gently moved her hair back off her face, and stroked her cheekbones. "I sure am. I never even thought for a minute I'd ever feel like this about anyone."

Her consort let out a breath. "I always felt like that about you." She said. "You've always been everything to me."

"Ah."

"I had nothing else." Gabrielle added, after a moment.

Xena studied her with an intent, quiet ferocity for a long moment. "I'm sorry I left you in the town, that time." She said, finally. "I didn't deserve for you to wait for me, or want me back."

Gabrielle shifted a little, and her eyes dropped, growing bright with tears.

"I talked myself into believing if I took the men and made them chase me, you'd get free and.. " Xena paused. "And it was the biggest lie I ever told." She took a breath. "Biggest moment of cowardice in my life."

"You're not a coward." Gabrielle said, in a soft, raspy tone. "Xena there's no one braver than you are."

"Ahh." Xena let her arms rest on Gabrielle's shoulders, and touched her forehead to her consorts. "You're wrong. I was a coward then, Gabrielle. I was afraid to admit how much I needed you in my life, and how it would hurt to lose you and I hid that by telling myself I was running away because it would be the best thing for you."

"It really wasn't."

"No." The queen sighed. "I knew that. It wasn't even the right thing for me, not with my.. " She winced, and rubbed a spot on her chest just above her heart. "I think if I had stayed on that boat and left that harbor I'd have run into the first spear headed my way after that."

Gabrielle nodded, a little. "Me too." She said. "I wanted to help Brendan get loose but I didn't really care if they killed me while I was doing it." She paused, and looked up into Xena's eyes. "All I could think of was how empty my life would be without you in it."

And Xena knew surely in her heart it was true. If she closed her eyes she could call up the memory of that moment, when she'd driven the Persians out of the gates and turned, finding Gabrielle's slight form still and waiting at the door to the stable, just watching her.

Just needing her, the tension of that so visible to Xena's eyes as she lifted her hand and gestured her over and felt so damned ashamed of herself. She'd felt so small seeing the utter relief on Gabrielle's face, and the aching joy as her arms wrapped around Xena.

"But Xena." Gabrielle spoke up into the somewhat maudlin silence between them. "You did come back."

"I did." Xena admitted.

Gabrielle eased nearer and put her arms around the queen, resting her head against Xena's chest. She felt Xena return the hug very gently in deference to the scores on her back and though it stung a bit, it didn't matter. "Think the bath is ready?"

Xena chuckled softly "Let's go find out." She took Gabrielle's hand and they headed for the bathing chamber, where sounds of splashing water were issuing and the smell of steam was faintly escaping from.

\*\*

A half candlemark later, Gabrielle was washed, and tended, had a cup of herbs to kill the pain already in her stomach, and was curled up in bed as Xena was finally taking her own armor and leathers off near the fire. She picked up a goblet of honey mead on the bedside table and sipped it as the queen unlatched the shoulder straps on her leathers and turned as she loosened them. "Oh."

Xena stopped in midmotion at the sound, and looked enquiringly at her. "What?"

Gabrielle scooted out of bed and went over to her, touching the edge of her leathers with a wide eyed expression. "Oh Xena.. that must really hurt."

The queen looked down and blinked. "Ah." She felt her own eyes widening a little. "Yeah.. so that's why it feels like that." She studied the dark, cruel slashes across her chest, deep gouges puffy and red at the edges right above her heart. It was like an animal had clawed her and now that she saw it, she felt a little faint.

“Sit down.” Gabrielle correctly interpreted the sudden paleness of her face. “What can I do? Can I put some stuff on it for you?”

Xena sat down on one of the chairs near the fire and a flood of pain washed over her. She leaned back in the chair, and closed her eyes, as Gabrielle loosened her leathers the rest of the way and eased them down. “Think I need a cup of what I gave you.” She admitted. “Didn't hurt so bad before I saw it.”

Gabrielle perched on the chair arm and leaned over, giving her a kiss on the head. “Let me see if I can figure out which herbs you used.” She said. “What did that?”

“What do you think?” Xena opened one eye and studied her wryly. “I remember feeling something clawing at me right before it all got dark and I figured we'd..” She took a careful breath. “Well, I figured I'd see you at the gates of Tartarus.” She felt a warm and feather light touch above the gashes and then Gabrielle straightened up and eased past her, heading for the healer's supplies she'd left on the credenza.

That left her alone to study her injury, and she did, not denying the sense of horror at the ugly rending of her flesh. It was as though a huge, hot hand, with sharp nails had grabbed her, sinking into her chest on the way to... Xena touched one of the gouges with her finger, which was shaking slightly. On the way to ripping her heart out.

Ripping her heart out. Xena felt cold. She shifted closer to the fire and curled up a little, drawing her knees up and resting her forearm on them. Except, what had she told them? That her heart wasn't hers to give?

She remembered, or she thought she did, that last moment before the darkness had rolled over them when Gabrielle had thrown her arms around her neck and put her head down on Xena's chest.

She looked down at herself. Had put her head down right where the marks stopped.

Gabrielle came back in the room and brought over a small tray of herbs. “You'll have to tell me which ones, Xena. I'm sorry. I don't remember.” She sat down and looked up at Xena in question, pausing and blinking at the expression on her lover's face. “Are you okay?”

Xena rested her chin on her fist. “Uh huh.” She said. “Just having a life changing moment of personal revelation. Don't mind me.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle studied her. “Wow.”

The queen uncoiled from her scrunched position and focused her attention on the tray. “Take these two and mix them, then put them in the cream stuff in the blue jar and slap it on me.” She pronounced. “If this hasn't killed me yet it probably wont.”

Her consort looked disturbed at that, but she took the tray back with her to the credenza and started mixing the herb. Xena leaned back in her chair and regarded her injury again, this time with less horror as she marked end of the claw gouges short of their target due to her unusual living armor.

Gabrielle had saved her soul. Xena found herself more than surprised at that. She looked up as the blond woman came back over, dipping her fingers into a small bowl and gently daubing the spicy smelling mix onto her skin. Though her own scores were still red and painful looking, she seemed to have forgotten about them in her focus on the queen. “Gabrielle.”

Pale green eyes lifted to hers, as her consort paused.

“Thank you.”

Puzzled, Gabrielle tilted her head a little, then started spreading the herbal rub on the ugly gashes again. “For this? Heck, Xena... you don't have to thank me for that.” She smiled. “I sure wish I didn't have to though. Boy those look painful.” She winced a bit in reflex.

Standing there in her plain shift, the light from the window painting her in gold, there was a depth to her that felt new to Xena's eyes. The words were normal though, and she put a hand on her thigh, watching the faint smile appear on Gabrielle's face as she felt the touch. "Yeah, they hurt." She responded. "But I think they'd have hurt a lot more if you hadn't been there with me."

Gabrielle's smile grew wider, and she looked up at Xena again, with a happy expression. "I'm glad I could help." She leaned closer, using the side of her thumb to spread the ointment along the gash. "Sure is lucky they stopped where they did." She shook her head as the claw marks shallowed out.

Xena studied her. Gabrielle seemed to have no idea that she might have been the reason. "That stuff scare ya last night?"

"Sure." Gabrielle wiped a bit of excess ointment off the queens's skin, and then set the bowl down. "Want to stand up? I can get the leather stuff off." She undid the laces as Xena hauled herself to her feet, easing it off the queens' body and exhaling as the sun splashed over her now bare skin. "Oh Xena." She murmured.

The queens' body was a mottled purple from just under her breasts to her knees, with livid red whip marks much like Gabrielle's but not as visible due to the bruising that covered them. The only break in her skin was the claw marks, though.

Xena regarded her bruised form with a mournful look. "Yeah. Ow." She agreed. "I think I better go lay down." She trudged over to the bed and carefully stretched out on it. "Wanna join me?"

Gabrielle immediately did so. She crawled into the bed from the other side and squirmed over to where Xena was lying, settling on her side and curling her fingers around Xena's upper arm. She put her head down on the pillow and exhaled, glad to be able to relax at last.

She was tired, and everything hurt. Looking at Xena even hurt because she could see all the damage on the queen's body and she could see by the expression on her lover's face she was hurting too. Xena looked as tired as she felt, and she moved a little closer, kissing her shoulder.

Xena looked very thoughtful, as she felt the touch. She turned her head and regarded her consort. "Can we talk about this pirate thing after we take a nap?"

"After we get rid of the Persian, and find out about that treasure thing or before?"

The queen smiled, a wry, loving expression as she regarded her bedmate. "Gabrielle." She burred gently. "Would you lose your mind if I threw you over my shoulder and just rode out of here in the dark of night?"

Gabrielle returned her gaze thoughtfully. Finally she sighed. "I think I'd really really rather just ride Patches, Xena. It would be really bumpy up on your shoulder and it probably would hurt."

Xena laughed, despite that hurting too. "So you wouldn't mind?"

Her consort shook her head. "No. It's been weird and scary here. I figure if we were out there by ourselves, maybe I'd end up having more fun."

Xena kissed the top fo her head. "You have a true heart, my friend. A far greater treasure than anything I could hope to find off any damned map."

Gabrielle snuggled closer and gave Xena's arm a little squeeze. "Yeah I didn't do to bad for a shepherd's kid from the sticks."

They both exhaled, then paused, as the sound of footsteps coming up the back stairs from the kitchen caught their attention. Immediately, Xena's ears pricked and she stiffened. "That's not your little cat."

The steps were heavier, and sounded booted. "No." Gabrielle murmured. "Not Mestre for sure." She eased away from the queen as she felt Xena start to move, and pushed herself upright.

There was no attempt at stealth. Xena got out of bed and went to the press, throwing a tunic on over her head and removing her sword from it's sheath. The blade was still dinged and scored

with black streaks from the previous night, but she figured with her hand behind it that wouldn't matter.

Barefoot, she went over to the inner door to the passageway, and waited, just to one side, so that when it opened whoever it was wouldn't immediately be able to see her. Then she went still, and seemed like a tall, disheveled looking statue, the point of her sword tucked along her thigh.

Gabrielle listened to the footsteps getting louder, then she scrambled out of bed and squiggled into her own tunic, grabbing her staff and moving soundlessly across the carpeted floor, she joined the queen, flattening her back against the wall on the other side of her.

The bed, a bit mussed and pillows askew, stood mutely bathed in sunlight across from them.

Outside the door, the footsteps stopped. Xena put her hand out in front of her, ready to stop the portal from slamming back into them and listened, hearing steady breathing and the shift of a body inside leather clearly. She saw the latch start to move and took a breath of her own, shoving all the pain and discomfort past her as her blood surged and her body got ready to fight.

What idiot was trying to make their way into her chambers though? Anyone who'd come from the kitchens knew better.

Abruptly, the latch stopped and returned to its original position. Then, after a moment, there was a gentle scrape and the sound of cloth against stone, and the footsteps started again, this time heading away from them.

Xena turned and looked at Gabrielle, who shrugged.

"Hmph." The queen waited for the steps to get to the turn below, and then she slipped to the otherside of the door and eased it open, hoping like Hades the joints wouldn't creak any louder than her own were. After another moment of silence she started down the steps herself.

Gabrielle followed, making sure to keep her staff away from the walls so as not to make a clatter with it. Since she and Xena were both barefoot their advance was far more silent than their visitors and in a moment they were both at the turn and starting down to the lower levels.

They could see a dark shadow in front of them, the steps echoing up past their ears.

The torches were out in the stairwell. Xena felt her spine prickle at the oddness of that, and the fact she could not smell any pitch which meant they'd been out for a while. She could feel how cold it was too, and suddenly she wondered if sneaking down a dark stair in a shift with no boots on was entirely a good idea.

She felt Gabrielle's hand touch her back and only barely stifled herself from jumping.

Slowly, her steps went still and she merely watched as the dark figure reached the bottom of the steps and the passageway into the kitchens. She waited for the outline of the door to appear, and the sounds and smells from the lower level to waft upward, but the dark remained, and after a moment, the shadow was gone.

Xena understood that she was a brave woman. There was no doubt of that in hers, or anyone else's mind. But she turned and nudged Gabrielle back up the steps, and felt that cold tickle up her spine right up until her consort pushed the door to their quarters open and they were back in the light.

The queen closed the door behind them, and after a pause, leaned against it.

Gabrielle stood quietly across from her, hands clasped around her staff. "That was creepy."

Slowly, Xena nodded. "That was creepy." She confirmed. "Pirate ship is sounding better and better every damn minute." She sighed and walked over to the garment press, setting the blade down and flexing her hands. "Tell you one thing. You're not leaving my sight."

Gabrielle blinked in surprise.

"Not for a minute."

\*\*

The sun was turning a rich gold and slanting across the floor, a spear of it painting Gabrielle's thigh as she added a dusting of herbs to her stew pot and stirred it.

The smell of the bubbling concoction filled the room, a thick golden brown mixture full of beef and harvest vegetables, giving Gabrielle a focus that wasn't creepy shadows or Persians kings.

In a chair nearby, Xena was sprawled, studying some scrolls Jellaus had brought her. She was dressed in a thick, soft robe and had her indoor boots on, her freshly washed hair loose around her face.

Gabrielle turned her attention to a small pan of apples, already cored and filled with nuts and spices. She added a little water to the pan and set it into the fireplace, near enough to the flames to roast nicely.

She was sorry she hadn't gotten a nap, but the creepy visitor had knocked the sleep right out of her, and out of Xena too, and relaxing like this was about the best they could hope for until word came from the pass on their visitors.

At least the herbs Xena had given her, and taken herself, had eased the pain and now it was just a dull throb she could almost ignore.

The castle seemed very quiet. The nobles seemed to be resting after the previous day's party and around them Gabrielle could sense the normal activity of their home, the sounds of carters and merchants drifting up through the windows and below them, the brush of leather armor against stone as soldiers kept watch.

A soft knock came at the outer door, and Gabrielle looked up, glancing at Xena in question.

"Brent. Who's knocking?" Xena called out.

They heard the door open and Xena's ears cocked slightly as she lifted one hand off the parchment and let it rest on her newly burnished sword's hilt.

"Tis Brendan, Mistress." Brent came to the door and bumped it all the way open. "News from the outpost."

Brendan entered and touched his chest with his fist. "Persians, for sure." He said. "Made camp just this side of the pass, looks like they'll stay put through the night, yeah?" He pulled off his mail coif and ran a hand through his grizzled hair. "Go to meet em?"

Xena rested her elbow on her chair arm. "Twenty horse, twenty foot. Block the road before dawn, and escort them here." She ordered. "No one gets hurt."

"Aw." Brendan frowned.

"Let's hear what they have to say before we kill them." Xena said. "Ya never know. We could get surprised."

"Never liked surprises." Brendan grumbled.

"Persian ones never seemed really nice." Gabrielle turned around from her task, and eyed the queen. "Especially all that poison and stuff."

Xena shrugged in acknowledgement. "Tell them they're an escort of honor." She said. "I don't want trouble before they get here. Maybe we can try diplomacy for a change. That should shock the codpieces off everyone."

"Aye, Mistress." Brendan nodded in confirmation, and then turned to leave. "Get them on the road." He disappeared into the outer chamber and Brent closed the door behind them both, returning their private chamber to peaceful quiet.

"What do you think those guys are coming here for?" Gabrielle stirred the stew, poking a chunk of meat with her knife and grunting in satisfaction at its softness. "I mean really?"

"I don't really know." Xena lifted a mug full of cider and sipped it. "If it's the old coot himself, it can either be really good or really bad news. If it's good news, I'm buying you a whole stable of new ponies. If it's bad news... well, that's why I sent a dozen men down the road to Philtop's digs to see if they're full of soldiers waiting to attack us."

"Hm." Gabrielle mused. "Xena, I'm not sure what I'd do with a stable full of ponies. I think I only need one." She gave the stew another stir. "What are we going to do if there really is a Persian army out there?"

"Fight them." Xena had gone back to her scrolls. "Again."

Gabrielle sighed. "Yuck."

"Not up for another war, hon?" Xena asked. "We had so much fun in the last one."

Her consort ladled out two bowls full of stew and brought them over to the table between the two chairs facing the fireplace. She set them down then went back and got a loaf of freshly baked bread and brought that over too along with her cup of cider. "You're making a joke, right?"

Xena gave her a droll look. She set the scroll down and turned her attention to the gently steaming bowl at her elbow, picking up the spoon dunked in it and sticking the resulting portion into her mouth. It was rich and delicious, and she chewed it slowly in order to savor it.

Same ingredients as they used downstairs, but Xena was convinced she could taste Gabrielle's love in every single bite of it because the taste was completely different than anything her cooks produced.

Really truly. She picked up a piece of the bread and dunked it in the dish, chewing it with quiet absorption. "Yes, I'm making a joke."

"If we already beat them." Gabrielle had her legs pulled up crossed as she sat in the chair next to Xena. "Why do they want to get into more trouble with us?"

"Because we beat them." Xena responded promptly. "No one likes being beat – especially by a smaller force, with less gear and fewer men."

"Ah hah." Gabrielle poked her bread into the stew. "But.. wouldn't they figure out that they'd just get beaten again?"

The queen chuckled softly under her breath. "Nah. The old goat probably figures I tricked his spawn into something or took advantage of her. He'll never assume his men – his big ass army – just lost to me."

Gabrielle considered that as she ate her snack. She remembered the war, and how really the whole thing had revolved around Xena's cleverness and her seeming to know exactly what Sholeh was planning and also what to do to stop her. It was amazing, really.

Even when Xena had been hurt, and hurting, and even when they thought they were going to be in big trouble in the city and even...

Gabrielle exhaled. Even when Xena left her there. Even then she'd turned it around and made everything work out.

"Hey." Xena reached out and poked her knee.

"Huh?"

"Something wrong with that bowl? Mine's great." The queen studied her face.

"No.. I was just thinking of that war." Gabrielle explained, plunging her spoon back into work.

"And how you just fixed everything up so it all came out right." She looked at her companion. "It was really amazing, Xena. You're so smart."

An almost adolescently rakish grin appeared on Xena's face. She was used to Gabrielle blowing her actions out of proportion, but in the war with the Persians? She hadn't had to. Though in some

moments of it she'd wanted to gut herself, it had all turned out in the end and there wasn't much she had to protest over.

That's why she enjoyed listening to Gabrielle tell stories about it – because she'd really pulled off something special in beating those bastards. Of course, she sighed inwardly, that had led directly to her being in this situation but... “Thanks.” She leaned on the chair arm. “I sincerely hope I don't screw it up so bad this time that you forget how it was then.”

“Xena.”

“Hey, every day's a new chance to do something stupid.” Xena swirled her cider in her cup and took a swallow. “So we've got a nice long night ahead of us. Got any ideas for entertainment?”

Gabrielle produced her own rakish grin.

The queen chuckled. “First, I gotta do a tour, and set the watch. I got a gut feeling we've got trouble on the way and not just Daddy Persian”

“Can I go with you?”

“Didn't I tell you you're not going to leave my sight?” Xena scraped her bowl empty. “Wasn't kidding.” She licked the spoon. “Let's get the leather and iron on, and go be kickass.” She watched her consort look up at her through slightly shaggy but adorable bangs and grinned. “Long as I have you around, it's gonna work out, Gabrielle. Count on it.”

\*\*

In the end, she convinced Xena that her sword was enough to protect her since her skin was just too sensitive to put all that scale armor on. So she had a light tunic that fell to her thighs on, and a woven belt around her waist that at least let her walk and move without grimacing.

She had her staff though, and hanging from her belt was the knife Xena had given her. She was tucked behind the queen's tall form, as they crossed from their tower to the main hall where there was a lot of bustle going on.

Xena of course had put her armor on. She had her sword on her back and her chakram at her hip and a beautifully lined cloak over her shoulders that swept the floor as she crowd parted for her.

For them.

Gabrielle stuck tight to the queen's heels as they went past the banqueting hall and further into the stronghold. The torches were up on the walls, and the light was fading outside. As they went into the lower hall two soldiers removed torches from sconces and followed them.

Xena didn't seem to notice. She turned at one corner and went down the steps, going to a locked wooden door that the soldiers hurried to open for her. “Thanks boys.” She continued into the long hallway past that, which went under the courtyard and ended up in the army barracks.

Gabrielle had been in this tunnel once. She had followed Xena in much this same way on her first days in the stronghold, when a fellow slave had been taken and used and the queen had taken severe exception to that.

Had killed because of it – in Gabrielle's very first experience of someone standing up for those weaker when there was no apparent reason for it.

Standing up for a slave, who ended up being part of a plot to overthrow her. Celeste her name had been. Even after what Xena had done in her behalf, she'd ended up part of the rebels, and she'd been thrown out of the gates in that cold winter storm.

Life did stink sometimes. Gabrielle kept at the queen's back as they passed through the big iron gates on the far end, then up the steps into the long buildings her soldiers lived in.

There was a lot of bustle in there too. Soldiers were working on gear and weapons, and several were in a corner fashioning arrows by the fire. They all looked up as the door opened, and scrambled to come to attention, their eyes lighting up as they recognized their visitors. “Majesty!” One of them bawled. “Majesties!” He corrected himself a second later, as Xena held up a hand.

"Evening, boys." Xena went to the worktable at the front of the barracks, where a long burned in outline of the stronghold was laid out. "Gather round."

The soldiers didn't have to be asked twice. They clustered around both Xena and Gabrielle, careful not to bump into them but clearly excited by their presence. Even a few of the Persians, now mingling with Xena's men, were edging closer to hear what the queen had to say.

It made Gabrielle wonder, again, about what they would do when the other Persians came. She watched them out of the corner of her eye, but their attitudes were just like the rest of them, and she didn't sense that they were hiding anything or were anything but happy to be with the rest of the soldiers.

They all leaned in a little as Xena started to talk, her fingers moving across the map burned into the top of the table. "Okay, so here's the deal." She glanced up as Brendan wormed his way through the crowd with Brent at his back. "Legion go out?"

"Aye." Brendan nodded briefly.

"Good." Xena said. "As I was saying here's the deal. We have a small.. shall we call it envoy heading here through the pass from the port city. Watch says they're Persians."

Lakmas nodded. "Standard they are bearing marks them as being from Cambyses, he who was the father of Sholeh, and also of the bastard they called Heydar."

"Ah yes." Xena mused. "The Bullshit of Persia. I remember him well."

Lakmas muffled a laugh, covering his mouth with one large hand. "You knew him well, Majesty." He remarked, with a faint bow. "Heydar's mother was his majesty's senior concubine, and he wished the throne for himself."

"No, really?" Xena's blue eyes rolled. "You know he's the one who killed her, right?"

Lakmas nodded. "I would have." He said, frankly. "And he as well, to lead us all into ruin as they did. Was their egos, alone they pandered to. Cambyses did wrong to send so many of us with them on this campaign." He shook his dark, handsome head. "He planned to disgrace her in any condition and take control over the army."

Xena nodded. "He tried to get me to go head to head with him. Figured he could kill me and get the Persians' reputation back."

"He tempted your majesty's own ego." Brendan remarked dryly. "Thinking to draw ye."

Xena smiled. "No temptation for me that time." She picked up a bit of chalk and marked on the table. "Okay. So here's the direction the Persies are coming from." She sketched in the outer road and the pass. "The guard made their number as a hundred, about twenty various royalties and the rest men at arms."

"That is usual." Lakmas said, without prompting. "If it is truly Cambyses, they will be his elite guard with him. They give no quarter. Even warriors like myself fear them as they are to my eyes, mad."

"Ah huh." Xena said. "So he's coming with wagons and flags and pomp." She studied the road. "He knows we know he's coming by now I'm guessing or will soon, so the question is, is he the focus or just the distraction."

"Mistress?" Brendan leaned his knuckles on the table.

Xena straightened and ticked off her fingers. "Philtop shows up, men start dying. He pitches me on his bad harvest, I agree to send two legions and my best captain down there to take charge. He does his damndest to distract me, right up until he gets gutted in my chambers, and then I find out his people can't even say what about the harvest was so bad."

The men and Gabrielle digested this briefly in silence. "That's a lot of weird." Gabrielle finally said. "Do you think it was all about the treasure?"

“I think he made a deal with the Persians and this whole damn charade was to keep our attention from an army surrounding us and intending on wiping us off the face of the earth.”

Xena's voice was calm, and her face was calmer. “I think they're here.” She drew in the areas to the west, making marks at two big folds in the hills that rolled through that part of her land. “I think they're waiting for a signal to come down and take the valley here, and then continue on and besiege us.”

Brendan looked at her. “Bigods.”

“Gabrielle said it.” Xena indicated her lover, who blinked in surprise. “She asked the Westlanders why their harvest was so bad, if everyone else's wasn't. I think it was because it went to feed the Persians – and he was banking in getting it back when they took over this place and finally.. in his rotten mind, put him in my place.”

“He would do that.” Brent said, in a quiet tone. “His father was one of my father's bastards.”

Everyone stared at Brent, except for Xena, who chuckled dryly. “Heir to the old throne.” She pointed at Brent. “He inherited all the brains in the family apparently.”

“So what are we going to do?” Gabrielle asked, after a long pause. “Are we going to fight all those guys again?”

“We kinda have to. They blew their chance to get rid of me when old daddy out there bribed his god to open the gates of Hades in my tower chamber and it all ended up with his little witch losing her bid to make good in front of him battering uselessly against a pair of sappy tributes to Aphrodite who didn't have the sense to stay clear.”

Gabrielle studied her “Us, you mean.”

“Us, I mean.” The queen agreed cheerfully. “Daddy got word his little plan didn't work, so he drew his last card, and decided he had to do this the hard way. Not a stupid man. If you can get what you want without killing a thousand people more props to you.”

“So he's coming here with all his soldiers to kill us?” Her consort clarified. “Because we beat his army?”

“Yes.” Xena said. “So.” She studied the map. “Now we just have to figure out what to do about it.”

“Could you appeal to your gods?” Lakmas asked. “I do not know them, but if a payment to them in blood will bring victory I am willing to make it.” His soft voice remained calm and steady, despite the shivering reaction in the room. “I have chosen my side. I will die fighting to win or in agony in loss so if it serves you to spill my life to your deity, I offer it.”

Xena juggled the chalk in her hand. “Nice.” She finally said. “If I thought it would do any good, I'd take you up on it.”

Lakmas bowed and pressed his hands together.

“Unfortunately I already turned the only useful god I know down so we have to find another way.” Xena went back to the map. “But thanks.” She glanced up at him, and smiled, winking at him when he met her gaze. “I like your style.”

Lakmas grinned back and folded his brawny arms across his chest, gathering in the only partly grudging looks of admiration from the rest of the soldiers.

“What's the weather like outside, Brent.” Xena was studying a part of the map intently.

“Cold, mistress. Bitter cold tonight, I ken.” Brent said. “Might get more snow, most didn't melt up in the highlands. Heard some of the nobles here, and here..” He touched the map with his fingertips. “Talking about sending patrols back.”

“Uh huh.” The queen grunted. “Let's do that. Send a patrol... twenty maybe... out along the western road and make sure the holdings are secure.” She traced a path. “Use the high path we used that last time, and stop right around here.” She pointed at a spot.

Brendan frowned. "Only there, Mistress? If we go up along here we can see down into Philtop's lands. Could find something interesting."

"Just to here." Xena said. "I don't want you finding anything interesting in the Westlands. Yet." She looked around the room. "Sometimes, you just kick ass." She said. "Sometimes, in order to keep your ass from being kicked, you gotta use something other than this." She lifted her hand and made a fist. "And hope for the best." She added with a rakish grin. "G'wan. Get moving. Don't waste the last of the daylight. The rest of you – get ready to fight."

Brendan moved off, shouting orders and pointing at men, as Xena folded her arms over her chest, watching the shifting bodies as they dispersed to their bunks, most of which already had the marching rucksacks they commonly carried when in the field.

Gabrielle eased closer and leaned against Xena's tall form. "What are we going to do?" She asked, in a whisper.

"I don't know." Xena whispered back. "I'm making it up as I go along."

"Really?"

"Really." Xena kissed the top of her head. "There's no school for this, my love. No one tells ya what to do when some stupid bastard wants to burn your castle to the ground."

Gabrielle exhaled. "At least we're not the ones going out there to find the bad guys."

"Not this time." Xena agreed. "Tonight you and I are going to enjoy our bed with complete randy abandon because after that, who the Hades knows what's going to happen. Let's go." She guided her consort back toward the hallway that led into the castle "But first, I want to visit your little circus friends."

Gabrielle really truly would have rathered they went back up to the tower, and climbed into the aforementioned bed. She was tired, and she was hurting, and it seemed that the next day was going to be a return to scary and bloody just when she was hoping to get some rest from all that.

But Xena was already heading the other direction, clearly expecting her to follow and so she did. At least she might get a chance to see the cat, she reasoned and they could maybe stop by the stables and say hello to Patches and Tiger.

Cheered up, she caught up to Xena as the queen reached the inner hall and turned to the right to head down into the tunnel. "Hey Xena?"

"Hey Gabrielle?"

"You know what?"

Xena glanced at her. "I'm about to." She said. "Let me guess, you don't want to visit the dancing hall, you'd rather just go up to bed."

Gabrielle smiled and blushed a little. "That's true." She admitted. "But you know what else? I kinda miss you calling me that muskrat thing."

The queen stopped, and hopped forward as Gabrielle plowed into her from behind, not expecting that. She turned and faced her consort, ignoring the crowds of nobles and servants still milling around. "Say what?"

Gabrielle hitched her thumbs into her belt and took a breath. "I didn't mind you calling me that. I liked it."

Xena blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah"

"You liked me calling you a small furry rodent with big teeth? Really?" Xena asked, in a somewhat astonished tone.

Gabrielle nodded. "I mean... " She glanced around. "It made me feel special."

Xena reached up and rubbed her eyes. Then she reached over and gently patted Gabrielle on the cheek. "Okay, muskrat." She said. "Whatever makes you happy. Let's go line up some circus troops, and then we can take ourselves off to bed. Okay?"

"Okay."

Xena started off again, muffling a laugh. Despite all the crappy things in the wind, she felt good, and light and happy, and she was damned determined to stay that way.

\*\*

The dancing hall was relatively quiet, and as they entered the doors and crossed the threshold they surprised one of the tumblers curled up asleep on a pile of straw.

He uncoiled and bounded to his feet, then exhaled and relaxed as he recognized the two of them. "Your majesties." He swept his arm down in a bow. "A good day to you."

"Not so much." Xena said. "Maybe tomorrow. Where's your guy in charge?"

"Sleeping, ma'am. We practiced late last night and had a hard run through this morn." The tumbler said. "Want me to bring him to you?"

Xena opened her mouth to respond, then paused. "Sure." She settled herself on a box and folded her hands. "That would be great. Thanks."

The tumbler beamed, then trotted away, ducking between some of the gear set up near the performance area.

Gabrielle went over and joined the queen, leaning slightly against her and sighing.

"Sit." Xena patted the box next to her. "Help me practice being nice."

Her consort settled next to her. "You're always nice to me. You don't have to practice that." She protested, stifling a yawn.

"Heh." Xena chuckled deep in her throat. "That's because I'm head over heels in love with you. Everyone else gets my bad side."

"I don't think you have a bad side." The blond woman observed, masking another yawn as she rubbed her eyes.

"Hang in there." The queen said. "We'll be in bed soon enough." She drummed her heels a few times against the box. "I'm trying out being nice to everyone else for a change."

"Why?" Gabrielle let her head rest against Xena's shoulder.

"Why not? I've been a bitch all my life, time to try something new for a while."

"You're not a bitch."

"Oh, Gaaabbrrielle." Xena let out a long, mock aggrieved sigh. "Of course I am!"

"You can't be. You don't have a tail." Gabrielle craned her neck around to observe her companion's behind. "And you don't have floppy ears, or a cold nose." She inspected Xena's ear intently. "So you can't be a bitch." She concluded.

Xena considered this for a brief moment, then she opened her mouth and let her tongue extend, making a panting noise and ending with a short, sharp bark. "You sure?"

Gabrielle chuckled softly "I love you."

The queen smiled faintly. "I love you too." She responded. "Ah, here comes the boss." She stood up as the circus manager came hurrying out, very obviously just woken out of a deep sleep. "Sorry about that."

"Majesty?" The man pulled up short, a confused look on his face. "Did I displease you?"

"Not yet." Xena remarked. "You've still got time though." She leaned back against the box. "So here's the deal. The King of Persia's heading this way with a pack of crazed death warriors."

"Ah. Is that so?" The man clasped his hands together. "What is it you wish of me.. of us, Majesty?" His face was anxious.

"Nothing you don't do naturally. I'm going to greet his high Poobah of pomposity like a long lost friend, and I want to show off my spiffy circus to him." The queen burred. "So I want you to be ready to perform your little hearts out tomorrow. Can ya do it?"

The circus manager had been puffing himself up visibly as Xena spoke, as though he was a brightly colored bird fluffing feathers out to catch winter sunlight. "Oh yes, your Majesty we certainly can!" He burst out when she finished. "We will give you the best show ever."

Oh. Gabrielle watched him with interest. She hadn't known what Xena had meant when she'd said she was going for circus soldiers, but this made more sense than giving the big sticks and rocks. She gave the man a smile and he beamed back at her.

"Good." Xena said. "Whatever ya got you haven't showed us yet, get on it." She said. "Put the cat in a dress. Set the tumbler's ass on fire. Whatever ya got."

The man bowed low. "Your majesty, in honor of you and the generosity you have shown us, we will entertain your guest as none other could."

"Good man." Xena patted his shoulder. "The Persians'll be here tomorrow morning. Make sure everything's ready for a show after lunch. Got it?"

"Yes." The man smiled. "Thank you, your majesty."

Xena pushed off from the box. "Don't thank me yet." She said. "Wait until we're all knocking back a few ales after it's over. Then thank me."

She peered past him to where the tumblers were now warming up, all of them keeping at least one eye on her. Then she winked at the manager and strolled off towards the door, with Gabrielle limping after her. "That's good." She muttered as they walked back outside.

"It is?" Gabrielle asked, gamely.

"Yes." The queen slid an arm around her. "Let's go, my love. It's time to put you to bed."

"Don't we have stuff to do?"

"Yes." Xena felt an unusual sense of peace in her. "We have to rest, and heal, that's the stuff we have to do, Gabrielle. You and me." She slowed her steps and studied the castle around her, noting the clean look of the slate, and the splash of sunlight on the flagstones they were crossing.

"Okay." Gabrielle was more than glad to agree with her. "Yeah, I'd really like to rest." She said, after a pause. "I feel crummy."

"Me too." Her lover agreed mournfully. "I feel so crappy I'm going to let my soldiers and captains be soldiers and captains and let them protect me tonight."

"Wow."

"Mm."

\*\*

So there were soldiers everywhere. Gabrielle hadn't see so many of them around their quarters in the entire time she'd been at the stronghold, there was even a couple in the back stairwell down to the kitchen, and that door was open with torchlight pouring through it.

It was dark outside, and they had shared a light dinner before the fire, both of them quiet as they sipped on cups of honey laced mint tea aware of the preparations for war below them.

The soldiers were making ready. Xena was seated with her legs extended towards the fireplace, a warm, thick robe around her and her freshly washed hair drying in the quiet warmth. She was writing something on fresh parchment, the scent of it, and of the ink drifting into Gabrielle's awareness as she sat nearby.

Soon they would get into bed. Gabrielle was looking forward to that moment, but the couch she was curled up on was comfortable and she felt secure with all the soldiers around and Xena's close presence.

"Okay." Xena finished her writing and got up, going to the small table in their tower bedroom and setting the ink and quill down. She fanned the parchment to dry it, then walked over to the door between the bedroom and the outer chamber and opened it.

The soldiers inside braced to attention, and Brent stood up from his stool near the outer door and approached her. "Mistress?"

Xena folded the parchment, then handed it to him. "I want this done before the Persians get here tomorrow." She told him. "Make sure it happens, Brent, then get some rest." She reached out and clasped his arm. "Tomorrow's gonna be a day."

"Mistress." He touched his chest with his fist. "Will you be getting some rest yourself?"

"I will." Xena didn't even feel a twinge of irritation at the question. "I sure didn't get much last night."

"Nor we." Brent acknowledged. "But all's quiet tonight."

"For now." Xena released his arm and turned, making her way back to the bedroom and closing the door behind her. She found Gabrielle already climbing into bed, and she followed her with a sense of relief so intense it surprised her. "Hey, wait for me."

"Sure." Gabrielle had pulled the covers back, and now they climbed under them together after Xena shed her robe and dropped it to the ground at the side of the bed.

There were candles, long burning, hard wax ones, lighting the chamber and Xena made no move to blow them out, settling with Gabrielle in the center of the bed and pulling the covers back over them.

"This feels so good." Gabrielle snuggled up next to her, but didn't throw her arm over the queen's stomach in deference to her whip marks.

And also, her own.

Xena half turned and let her head rest against her consorts. "It sure does." She murmured.

"Except my back hurts." She eased over onto her side and exhaled. "That's a little better."

"Mm." Gabrielle was already closing her eyes. "Mine too but f..." Her voice trailed off as she tumbled into sleep, her body relaxing against the queens.

Xena let a gentle, affectionate smile appear, as she put the stinging and pain out of her mind. Then she let the thoughts of what was going to happen in the morning follow them and released herself to join her consort, chasing her quickly into slumber.

\*\*

It seemed like she was in a dream. Gabrielle looked around at the sweet smelling grass she was sprawled in, reaching out on all sides to a gentle hilly horizon.

The sun was warm and she could hear birds singing, but she had no inclination to move or go anywhere as she lay back on the soft surface and watched light, puffy clouds drift by.

It was peaceful and she felt at peace, even when she heard the unhurried sounds of someone approaching. A moment – or – maybe a long time later – a robe enclosed body settled at her side crosslegged.

Gabrielle slowly turned her head, to find a hooded head regarding her, the face obscured by the shadows from the sun behind the figure. "Hello."

"Hello." A voice echoed back. "Don't worry. It really is a dream."

Somehow, Gabrielle knew that. This wasn't the fog of uncertainty she'd known before when she'd heard that same voice. "I'm really glad. The last time was scary."

“Sure.” The voice answered. “I tried to make it a lot less scary this time.” There was a very faint note of gentle amusement. “Since you were so brave, and offered up so much in your last past while.”

“That was scary too.” Gabrielle admitted. “But we got through it.”

“You did it.” The voice said, gently. “It was your love that protected you both and I just wanted to let you know that, because I asked you to be true, and you were.”

“Oh.” Gabrielle somehow wasn't very surprised to hear that. Maybe she'd known, after all. “Well, Xena was too, just like you said.” She moved her fingers in the grass, feeling the warmth on the living stalks. “She was brave, too.”

“More than you know, my friend.” The voice said. “To trust yourself to love, and not to the sword, is one of the most courageous things someone like her can ever do.”

Gabrielle studied the shadowed figure. “Do you know her?”

“That's a complicated question.” The figure said, with a obvious smile in her tone. “Let's just say, I've known someone like her for a very, very very long time.”

The truth was there, Gabrielle felt, hearing the note of warm, gentle devotion in the words that she could hear the echo of in her own mind. “Well, I'm glad it ended up okay, at least this time.”

“Ah.” The figure shifted a little, resting her elbows on her knees and plucking a stalk of grass to play with. Her hands were visible, and Gabrielle could see that they looked strong, and there were a few scars on them, one curved one on the area between her left forefinger and thumb. “So here we come to really why I decided to come visit you.”

“Uh oh.”

The figure laughed suddenly, a light, happy sound. “Someone would say at this point, that even in the afterlife I still manage to cause trouble, I guess.” She admitted. “But no, this time I just want to let you know that the Persian king coming tomorrow is going to ask a very strange thing of you.”

Gabrielle considered that. “Okay.” She said, after a pause.

“If you can, do it.” Her visitor stated. “The Persian is in a lot of trouble with his gods. I know what that's like.”

It seemed simple enough. “I'll try.” Gabrielle agreed. “We met a god the other day and he was pretty scary.”

A soft chuckle sounded on the wind, drifting past them.

“Oh, he's not so bad.” Her visitor put the grass down. “There's definitely worse around.” She reached over. “We won't meet again on opposite sides.”

Gabrielle took the hand offered, and felt strong fingers clasp hers, as for the barest moment, she saw past the shadows into a pair of twinkling eyes that somehow seemed familiar.

Then the clasp was gone, and the figure was fading back, and she was left in peaceful quiet and sunlight. She felt no desire to think about what she'd been asked, instead, she just lay there in comfort, enjoying the warmth and the sweet smell of the grass and the earth around her.

It was comfortable and she stretched her body out and re-settled herself, then she let her eyes close, and slowly, easily, the sounds of the meadow faded out as she let the dream drift away from her and went back into the murky realms of sleep.

\*\*

Xena became slowly aware of the space around her, moving from a wash of sleep into the present of her bedroom in a gentle, easy way. She could hear the faint, soft flutter of candle flame, and in the distance, the morning sounds of the castle fading in.

She kept her eyes closed for the moment, and cautiously explored how she felt, flexing her hands and tentatively stretching out her body. The soreness was still there, but the sense of exhaustion had gone, and the rasp of her shift against her back didn't result in harsh agony.

Better than expected.

The queen opened one eye and regarded the thickly muffled window, seeing bright light around the edges that washed out the candles and explained the sounds she was hearing around her.

Well after dawn. She opened her other eye and regarded the still sleeping body tucked against hers, noting the faint smile present on Gabrielle's lips and the pressure of the hand her consort had wrapped around her shoulder in a light grasp.

A bit of light was splashing on her face, and Xena lay there for a minute, just pondering how the light seemed to bring out the beauty rather than the always present cuteness of her.

She was growing up, the queen realized. There was a woman emerging from the kid she remembered saving and she found herself wondering what difference that was going to eventually make in their relationship.

Then she remembered, again, that it had almost been a moot point such a very short time ago. That she had almost lost the opportunity to find out what maturity was going to do for Gabrielle because she'd almost lost her in this very same spot.

But she hadn't. Xena regarded the body nestled against hers, glad to see her consort resting comfortably, apparently untroubled by the beatings she'd so recently taken. She reached over and gently moved aside the hair from where she'd gotten hit in the stable, and found the injury almost faded, swelling gone completely down.

Lucky.

She felt Gabrielle shift, and then take a deeper breath, then she opened her eyes and looked back at Xena. A smile appeared at once on her face and she rubbed her face against the queen's arm. "Good morning."

"Mm.. not bad so far." Xena agreed. "How're ya feeling?"

Gabrielle rolled onto her back and stretched. "Pretty good." She wiggled her toes, then put her hands behind her head. "I had a lot of kinda strange dreams though."

"Me too." Xena rolled cautiously over onto her own back, relieved when she only felt a bit of pain from the pressure. "I was in a barn, petting a cat, and a haystack started talking to me."

After a brief silence, Gabrielle hiked herself up on her elbow and peered at her bedmate. "What did it say?"

"Dunno. Didn't understand it." Xena stifled a yawn. "Glad we got some rest, anyway."

"Me too." Her consort scooted out of bed and got up, going to the window and pulling the heavy drapery aside and peered out. "Oh. Its earlier than I thought it was." She remarked. "I forgot the sun comes in here sooner than our window downstairs."

Xena hauled herself out of bed and joined her. "Yeah." She agreed. "Hungry?"

"Starving." Gabrielle concluded. "Should I go get you some breakfast?"

"No." The queen walked over to the door and opened it, causing a rattling stir in the outer room. "Morning, boys." She leaned on the doorsill. "Get grub up here for everyone. Any word from Brenden?"

Brent went to the window in the outer room and opened it, flooding the room with light. There were four men standing watch, and the rest were bunked on the floor, now rolling over and blinking. "Good morning, m'liege." He said. "Escort's just coming through the inner pass, be three candlemarks or so to the gates."

"And from the upper pass?" Xena asked, folding her arms.

"Nothing since early watch, Majesty." Brent reported. "They stopped where you told em – didn't see nothing coming over from t'other side yet."

"Good. Let me scrub this ugly old carcass and throw some clothes on." Xena retreated back into her bedroom and closed the door. "So far so good, muskrat."

Gabrielle was already over near the fireplace, heating some water for tea. She looked over at Xena, with a bemused expression. "Hey, Xena?"

"Yees?" The queen wandered over.

"Why do you always say you're ugly?" Gabrielle asked, carefully adding herbs to the cups on the hearth. "You really aren't."

"I know." Xena came over and watched her bring over the honeyjar. "It's how I feel sometimes I guess."

Gabrielle paused and turned her head, peering at the tall darkhaired form behind her.

Xena folded her arms over her chest and regarded the stone floor. "Sometimes.. " She commented softly. "I look in the mirror, and see what I look like coming off the battlefield, Gabrielle. All covered in blood and dirt, with chips of bone stuck to me." She looked up and met her consort's eyes. "Never seems too attractive." She added, with a self deprecating smile.

No, that was probably true. Gabrielle retrieved the water pot off the hearth and poured the steaming liquid over the tea leaves. "I think the guys like that part of you." She said, after a long pause. "And I just love all of you no matter what you're doing so it doesn't matter to me."

Xena came up behind her and put her arms around her consort, giving her a gentle squeeze. "Yeah Somehow lately I've been seeing less gore, and more half assed heroism. Your fault."

Gabrielle smiled.

"Do me a favor today?" The queen whispered in her ear. "Dress up with me for this meet up." She watched Gabrielle mix the honey into the tea. "Let's show off our pretty side for a change."

Gabrielle turned and handed her a cup. "Um... Okay." She agreed. "Anything for you."

Xena grinned and kissed her head. "Gonna be an interesting day."

\*\*

It was high noon by the time the watch on the walls sounded the horns that meant someone was approaching. Xena ducked out onto the parapet outside their quarters and stalked over to the wall, resting her arms on the stone and peering over it.

The winter sun was laying nicely on the stronghold, peeking out from behind lazily drifting clouds that promised in the near future further snow. The wind was cold, but only blowing gently and Xena was glad to stand for a moment just breathing it in.

She could see the gates, and beyond them just clearing the bend past the river where once she'd grounded a makeshift raft was the road that was bringing her about as much trouble as she figured she was destined to handle.

The Persian was approaching. She could see his cortage, and ranged on the outside of the soldiers surrounding him were two long thin lines of her men.

Even from where she was, she could see the casual confidence in their stances, the pride with which the first of them carried her banner, and the black and yellow tabards that bore her mark on them.

It made her feel, suddenly, a little humble. She realized abruptly that it could have gone all wrong, and the Persian could have decided to attack and maybe kill her men instead of letting then escort him and his horde of bloodhounds to her. But it hadn't occurred to them to refuse to do her bidding, their trust in her was absolute.

Absolute.

Xena regarded the oncoming group with a pensive expression. "Do I really deserve that?" She asked herself out loud, feeling the rough stone under her fingertips.

"Hi there."

She turned, to find Gabrielle at her back. Her consort was freshly bathed, and had on a thick robe and indoor boots as she emerged into the sun and held her hands out to it. "Hey there yourself." She turned and leaned on the wall. "Here they come."

Gabrielle peered out. "Oh." She said. "You can hear them."

"You can." The queen agreed. "How many you figure, a hundred?"

The blond woman shaded her eyes. "I can't tell. They're all behind each other." She said. "But .. there's a lot less of them than there are of us, right?"

Xena watched as a line of her troops emerged from the barracks, fastening shields and armor as they headed for the gates. "In that bunch, sure." She told Gabrielle. "But you and I know he's got more where that came from."

"That's what you said, sure." Her consort agreed. "But then, how come he didn't bring them all and just start fighting with us?" She asked. "Him coming here with those guys is sort of like you going into Sholeh's army with your guys, isn't it? Why would he do that?"

Why would he do that? Was it a deliberate parallel, to prove he was her equal in boldness? Or stupidity? Xena regarded the gates. "Now that." She rested her hand on Gabrielle's back. "Is a damn good question, my love."

Gabrielle smiled. "I really like when you say that." She told her companion "It makes me feel special."

"You are." Xena turned. "C'mon. Let's go get gussied up." She left her hand on her consort's back as they walked back to the tower door, pausing as the guard opened it, letting them back inside. "Thanks."

"My liege." The guard answered softly, putting his hand to his chest.

The queen patted his arm, and moved on, re-entering her chambers and going over to her dressing case to study the contents. "If you were a Persian king, what would piss you off the most to see a woman wearing, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle pondered the question. "Your pretty armor and stuff." She admitted. "I think if you wear a fancy gown he might think you're a sissy."

Xena chuckled, deep in her throat. "That's probably true." She acknowledged. "But this guy never thought a woman could really fight, did he? Do I play into that, or do I just cut to the chase and prove otherwise? What's he looking for?" She leaned against the wardrobe case. "No, I think my first gut instinct was the right one. I'm gonna be a queen tonight, like I consider him my equal."

"No one's your equal." Her consort stated mildly. "But I like that dress on you." She pointed to a embroidered silk gown in a rich purple blue. "Especially if you put your hair up."

"Hmm..." Xena ran her fingers over it. "That with my pointy hat?" She asked. "And that spiffy new cloak, you think?" She indicated the fur lined item. "I can hold it closed with that horse pin."

"Can I tell you a secret?"

"Uh oh." Xena turned and faced her, with a wry grin. "What?"

"It doesn't really matter." Gabrielle whispered. "You look beautiful in anything." She looked around. "Or nothing."

The queen burst into laughter. "Whyy Gaaabbbrielle." She burred. "You racy little sweet talker." She folded her arms around her consort. "Thank you." She added. "Can I tell you a secret? You make me feel beautiful." She kissed Gabrielle and then hugged her.

It felt strange to be saying that, and thinking what she was thinking. Xena had a sense that she was on a path she had no understanding of and no vision of where it might end and she could care less. “Love you.” She concluded, releasing Gabrielle.

Gabrielle grinned, a touch bashfully. “And um..” She held a hand out. “You could wear this with it.” She added diffidently. “It’s another present from me.”

Xena slowly let her hands drop to her sides, her eyes widening as she stared at the necklace resting in the palm of her consort’s hand, the ends draping down between her fingers. “Gabrielle.” She got out, on an indrawn breath.

“Yes?”

It was simple, and beautiful, lacy filigree of silver with a tracing of sapphires and pearls alternated along the neckline, and a carved black onyx hawk’s head set against a gold background in the center. Slowly, she reached up and took the gift, feeling the weight of it against her fingers as she turned into the light from the window and the gems picked up the light’s brilliance. “Oh wow.”

Gabrielle smiled hearing that soft whisper “I know you don’t really need more jewelry and stuff but you’re always giving me presents so I thought I..” She let the words trail off as she saw the tears on the queen’s face. “There’s really nothing I can give you that..” She paused again. “Anyway, I hope you like it.”

Xena closed her eyes and the tears squeezed out from them, scattering into the sunlight as she drew a breath in and released it. “I do.” She finally said, blinking a few times. “I love it.” She sat down on the garment press and admired the gems, turning her hand to show them off to the light. “Damn, that’s pretty.”

Gabrielle sat down next to her, a big smile on her face. “Really appropriate for you then.” She felt Xena’s arm wrap around her shoulders and pull her close, and then the pressure of the queen’s lips against her head. “Feels so good to give something.”

“Something?” Xena’s voice sounded a touch ragged around the edges. “What you’ve given me can’t be bought at any price, do you know that?”

She did know that. Gabrielle returned the hug and savored this quietly sunlit moment of joy, glad she’d decided to have the necklace made after all. She’d wondered if Xena wouldn’t maybe think it was a little silly – after all, she had jewels upon jewels upon jewels, but no, she thought her lover really liked it.

People gave Xena gifts all the time, and usually, the queen just rolled her eyes about it. But after she’d really liked the horsehead cloak clasp.. yeah. Gabrielle looked up at the taller woman, seeing the grin on her face, as she glanced down at the necklace. It was nice to give. “I love you.”

“Oh yeah. I sure as Hades love you too.” Xena chuckled. “Let’s get dressed and go jump on that raft on the River Styx, muskrat. Dare that Persian poopbag to do his worst.”

\*\*

The audience chamber had been cleaned meticulously. Xena noticed that as soon as she entered, pausing to look around as she smelled the crisp, fresh scent of new rushes on the floor, and the distinctive aroma of wax and soap that erased any vague sense of old oil or pitch in the place.

Brendan spotted her and ambled over, already dressed in his black and yellow tabard over freshly polished armor. “Mistress.” He touched his chest in respect. “Just comin in the gates, they are. Told Brent to bring a few of em in here with the old man.”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate that.” The queen remarked dryly.

Brendan smiled. “Nothing can beat us, Xena.” He said. “Been through what we been through, was the anvil of the gods. Don’t care nothing for no Persian king.”

And that, Xena thought to herself, was probably the truest thing she’d heard in a while. She had been through so much and beaten the odds so often that she was hard pressed to even be nervous

about facing down the old man. "Let's get settled." She guided Gabrielle towards the raised platform her throne was on, letting her eyes scan the room as she walked.

The room had been cleared and the tapestries that hung against the wall were draped again in her colors, the steps leading up to her throne draped in cloth of gold, and the throne itself had a beautiful pristine sheepskin softening its contours.

She caught sight of her reflection in one of the mirrored panels and paused, regarding it. "You're right." She commented to Gabrielle. "This thing does look nice." The color looked good on her, she decided, and the cut of the gown accented her body and didn't make her look freakishly tall or angular like some of them did.

Even the cape was the right length, for a change, and didn't stop at her kneecaps. Xena watched her own lips move into a self deprecating grin.

There was her new necklace too. Xena mused as the light glistened off the stones that draped across the front of her throat, a counterpoint to her crown and the bracelets around her wrists. She actually looked like a queen today, and more unusually, she was starting to feel like one.

"You look beautiful." Her consort responded. "Really really beautiful, Xena."

"Thank you, my love." The queen held her hand out. "Let's go sit on our comfy chairs, eh?"

They walked up onto the dais together. Xena circled her throne and touched the hilt of her sword that was slung across the back of it, and waited while Gabrielle took a seat in the chair next to it, letting her hands rest on the comfortable padding. "Like it?"

"Yes." Gabrielle squiggled back in her seat. She was dressed in a silk gown in shades of red, and all the signs of her recent trials had faded. "It's really nice."

"Mm." Xena came around in front of her and paused, studying her. "Missing something."

Gabrielle blinked. "I am?"

"Just some sparklies." The queen reached out and tilted her head, fastening something to Gabrielle's ears. "I was gonna make you pierce em, but I figured you'd rather not have me poking holes in you tonight."

"What are they?" Gabrielle reached up to touch the unaccustomed constriction of the cuffs her lover had put on her sensitive ears.

Xena reached over and drew her sword, turning it flat on and providing Gabrielle with a reasonable if deadly mirror.

"Oh." She smiled in delight, seeing hammered metal curled around the outside of her ear, and a piece of jade dangling from the bottom of it. "It's so pretty!" She looked up at Xena. "Thank you!"

Xena returned her sword to her sheath and took a seat, extending her legs and crossing them at the ankles as she leaned on one arm of the throne and watched the last preparations being made. "If this doesn't all go to Hades in the first half candlemark, maybe you'll tell us all a story later."

Gabrielle wiggled her feet in contentment. "I'd love to."

Soldiers were pouring in. All of them in armor, and tabards, all of them scrubbed to a painful degree. They were fully armed and they went to line the walls, swords slung across backs, spears resting in casual display in the crooks of their arms.

Lastay came in. He had a ermine lined cloak on, over his family colors and he strode up the cloth of gold mounting the steps and coming to her side. "Mistress." He put a hand over his heart, and for once, there was not a single twitch of pretention in the motion. "My lady wife asks if she can attend you."

Xena regarded him. "Of course." She answered quietly. "Your family's earned the right to camp up here all over the top step if they want."

Lastay smiled, and bowed. "I will go fetch her."

Gabrielle was just quietly watching, reaching up to touch her new decorations from time to time. She could see how ferociously proud the soldiers were, and she had the sensation of her heart swelling larger inside her as the last of the armored figures entered with all the Persians among them.

All of them in Xena's colors. All of them armed and with their heads held high as they took up stations among the other troops.

Lakmas broke with them and approached her, dropping gracefully to his knees on the bottom step of her dais and crossing his arms over his chest. "O my mistress, may I have the honor of standing guard for you, where all may see me?"

"Where our guests can see you?" Xena asked. "That's gonna piss them off."

"Yes." Lakmas lifted his head and met her eyes. "I want none to misunderstand where my heart lies."

The queen's eyes twinkled a little. "Yes, you may." She said, deciding on taking the chance that the big Persian wasn't part of the plan, and destined to plunge a sword into the back of her throne.

Anything was possible. But something in her. Xena glanced furtively around. Something in her heart told her what she saw in Lakmas' eyes held a truth that bypassed the schemes of kings.

At least, she sure hoped it did. It would certainly suck to have all the Persians turn on her in some big plot that ended up with blood all over the newly cleaned, nicely polished floor.

Lakmas got up and continued up the steps, moving past the throne and taking up a spot in the rear, across from the station Brendan would end up in, and behind the already stolidly waiting Brent.

The fourth corner would be taken up by Gerard when he arrived with their guests, and the two seats to the other side of Xena would hold Lastay and his wife.

The room was starting to fill with nobles, and it was evident from the start everyone was dressed to impress, with jewels and circlets winking everywhere as her court entered and moved into place.

Brent came over. "Westlands watch reported no sightings of anyone save three goatherds and an escaped sheep, my liege."

Xena nodded. "Good." She said.

"Majesty, should we send them over the ridge?" Brent lowered his voice. "It's hard, turning backs on danger."

"I know." The queen leaned on her throne arm and lowered her own voice. "But see, if we see them, or they see us, we both gotta do something about it and I want this to come down on my terms and my time, not be forced into acting or having them forced into attacking us before we're ready for it."

Brent remained quiet for a moment, then he regarded Xena with a wry, respectful look. "Majesty." He bowed and touched his chest, then moved over to take his place in the guard.

"Hm." Xena leaned back. "Maybe I should try explaining my half assed ideas more often."

"Did you say something?" Gabrielle turned to her, from where she'd been talking to Jellaus.

"Nah." The queen shook her head. "Just having another moment of personal revelation." She observed the filling room, charmed to see so many of her nobles there all gussied up. Even the ones she knew were Bregos supporters, and the ones she really knew hated her with undying passion were there.

Interesting. She hadn't put out a call for toadies. In fact, she hadn't really put out a call for anyone other than her soldiers and a few of the nobles she grudgingly liked and was reasonably sure weren't going to join the Persians in an all out attack on her pedestal when they came in.

And yet, here they all were.

Had they had a change of heart? Xena studied the nearest of them, one of the landholders who had sent tribute to her former general and financed his campaign to unseat her. "Gabrielle, do me a favor willya?"

"Anything." Her consort responded.

"Go ask that tall guy in blue and gray to come over here for a minute." Xena indicated the noble. "Ask him nicely."

Halfway in the midst of getting up, Gabrielle paused, and eyed her.

Xena slapped the side of her head. "What am I saying? You never ask anyone anything but nicely." She smiled at her companion.

"Except when I'm biting them in the face." Gabrielle's pale eyes took on a hint of mischief. She got up and walked down the steps, easing her way between milling bodies that immediately recognized and cleared a path for her.

Xena watched, smiling a little at the obvious pride in her consorts bearing, the lift of her head and the gentle sweep of her hand as she gestured back towards where the queen was sitting. In her well fitted dress, she had lost, in Xena's eyes, most of those peasant rough edges and there was a quiet elegance about Gabrielle newly appreciated by her.

The noble looked wary, but no more as he followed Gabrielle back up to the throne, bowing with reasonable grace before the queen. "Your majesty?"

"Karas." Xena responded, keeping her hands folded on her thigh and her body relaxed. "Just wanted to ask you a question."

"Yes Majesty?" He relaxed too, putting his hands behind his back and clasping them, leaning forward a trifle in attention to her as Gabrielle resumed her seat. "What information may I offer you?"

"What do you want out of this meeting, with our friends the Persians?"

Karas cocked his head to one side a bit. He had grizzled red hair, and an even more grizzled beard and moustache, and dark blue eyes. "What do I want?" He seemed surprised at the question.

"Yup." The queen said. "I know your loyalties laid with Bregos. You have no love for me. So what is it you're hoping will happen here?" She paused, watching his face. "You can tell me the truth. I just want to know. I'm not going to do anything to you."

Karas studied her intently. "My loyalties laid with Bregos because he was easily molded, and you are not." He said, with surprising honesty. "I wanted him to enter into treaties with our northern neighbors, where my lands lie so that I might expand my holdings. I have sons to settle."

Xena considered that. "Ever think of just asking me to do that?"

"Then? No." Karas said. "Now? I might." His lips twitched. "You were not approachable then, your Majesty. All my requests for an audience were rejected."

And so they might have been. "Might have been useful if I was less of a jackass and you'd had more balls." Xena responded mildly. "But you haven't answered my question."

He glanced aside briefly, then back at her. "I want the Persians chased from here in shame and defeat, as their army was." He said. "Bregos could have never done that. His desire for you blinded him, and he thought nothing of the consequences when he lured them here."

"That's true." Xena said. "They would have taken us like virgin milkmaids."

"And you could have let them." Karas said, boldly. "I heard what you said, in the hall, Majesty. That you could give up this place and take nothing with you but your lady love." He ducked his head in respect at Gabrielle. "I believe that. But you did not."

Xena smiled. "No." She agreed. "Because under all the besotted by love insanity, I am, still, a homicidal maniac who doesn't appreciate someone pissing on my turf."

"Just so." Karas nodded. "We, those of us who backed the General, cannot hope to defend the realm from a Persian army. Or any other kind of army. We are not soldiers. We are not homicidal maniacs." He bowed a little. "Your majesty now represents safety, and security."

"Instead of crazed drunkenness and random murder?" Now Xena's eyes were definitely twinkling. "See what you did for me muskrat? You made me respectable." She glanced past him to the doors, which had acquired a layer of soldiers, and among them she saw Gerard.

"I did?" Gabrielle had been listening with interest. "Just by falling in love with you? Cause I don't think I did much of anything else."

Lastay arrived with his lady, and they quietly took the seats waiting for them. The Duke gave Karas an amiable nod, and twitched his cape straight.

"You did, your Majesty." Karas addressed Gabrielle directly. "Not so much by displaying your heart, but by allowing those of us who had never seen such, to know another's." He bowed to Xena, then took a step back. "Perhaps we can continue the discussion later, Mistress? After our guests retreat."

Aw. Xena felt amused, embarrassed, humbled, and chagrined all at once. It made her want to sneeze. "Sure." She waved him back. "We'll talk later."

He cleared the steps and then it was time. Xena motioned Gerard forward, and gave a hand signal to the guard. She waited for her favorite assassin to arrive and noted the signs of travel on him. "Go smoothly?"

Gerard nodded. "They have a translator." He stated, briefly. "Arrogant old bastard, mistress. Thinks he has one on us." He considered. "But he's a crafty one. Keeps his own council. Them men with him crazed for him like we are for you."

Xena nodded. "All righty then." She laced her fingers together. "Let's get this going. Open the outer door and get those bastards in here." She settled back in her throne and put her hands on the ornately carved arms and faced squarely front. "C'mon. Bring it."

\*\*

The Persian entourage entered with as much pompous strutting as was possible, and a dozen of the Persian king's guards made a big show of clearing space for him to walk in.

Xena remained in her throne, one elbow resting on the chair arm and her head leaning against it. She watched the guards closely, seeing their reactions on seeing some of their countrymen in the room, dressed in enemy colors. Behind her, she could hear Lakmas chuckling softly and she crossed her ankles, waiting for the show to end.

Then it did. The guards stood at attention and the inner line of them moved forward, revealing four big men supporting a beautifully carved, ornate cupola which they placed dead center in the room facing Xena's throne. Then three of them knelt, and the fourth went and opened the hatch of it, dropping to his knees and bowing his head.

A short man with dark skin, and a pointed beard emerged on the other side. "All bow for his greatness, the King of Persia."

The Persians who came with him all bowed. The ones that Xena had succored stayed where they were, backs braced. Naturally, none of the nobles or Xena's troops budged an inch.

A beautifully dressed, elderly man emerged from the cupola and came to stand before it, hands folded calmly over his stomach. He was tall, and very thin, with silver gray hair and a serene, yet cold face.

Xena remained where she was, waiting for him to start the conversation. She was very aware of everyone watching her and she acknowledged the pit of anxiety in her own stomach.

The old man said something in his own language. The translator immediately repeated it. "You are the one they call Xena?"

Xena regarded him, as Jellaus crossed the floor and faced the little man.

"I am minstrel Jellaus, of the house of Thoros." Jellaus said. "You will speak of my mistress with respect, or suffer the consequences."

The little man repeated that, apparently, in his language.

"This is kinda silly, isn't it?" Gabrielle whispered to her.

"Mm." Xena shifted and folded her hands over her stomach. "Probably why I never got into this whole damn royal thing. Don't have the patience for it."

The Persian king said something, with an angry sound to it. The translator faced Jellaus. "His greatness only speaks as an equal to one who is an equal. This creature is none of that."

"He's right." Xena spoke up, having exhausted the little patience she did have. "He's not my equal. So he can take his pointed ass and march it on out of here if he doesn't have anything sensible to say to me." She waited for the translator to unfreeze and unlock his jaw to repeat it, twiddling her thumbs idly.

"I don't think he's going to like that." Gabrielle muttered softly.

"No, me either." Her companion confided. "But we need to get this moving or we'll miss the circus. I want to see that cat in a dress."

The old man held his hand up as the translator got himself ready to repeat Xena's words. "Be still."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere." Xena whispered. "I figured he wasn't as ignorant as he looked."

The Persian king faced her. "I have come to take vengeance for the destruction of my blood."

Xena remained relaxed. "Which blood?" She asked. "If it's your daughter, you have nothing on me for that. Your own kind killed her."

The man watched her, his face impassive.

"If it's Heydar the Bullshit of Persia you mean, then we can talk. He killed your kid, I killed him."

Xena concluded. "But you know, you sent them both here with the intent to kill me and conquer my lands so from my perspective it's all fair game."

"We were invited." The Persian stated. "By those who think the throne of this land should be given to one other than a base bastard peasant."

Xena got up and dusted her hands off. "Stick here." She told Gabrielle. "You too." She eyed Lastay, before she sauntered down the steps and approached her unwelcome visitor.

He was as tall as she was and their eyes were on a level once she'd reached him. "You act like that's an insult." Xena said, in a conversational tone. "To me, it isn't. My mother was an innkeeper. No clue who my father was. All I've got I earned with these." She held her hands up. "So you want it? Come and try to take it because no one ever gave me any of this."

From the corner of her eye she saw his guards stiffen.

"Your accomplishments are nothing on the scales of Persia." The man said. "You are nothing. You are less than a bug on the ground to me."

"Mm." Xena chuckled under her breath. "Yeah that's what your daughter kept saying. Even after I beat her, then beat her again, then took her army from her, and beat them too." She took a step forward, lifting a hand and pointing at him. "After they used gods fire, and poisoned darts, and satchets to sicken us, without a single ounce of honor anywhere to be found. Bug?" Her voice lifted. "C'mere, dunghead.. Try me."

"Do not anger me." The Persian stated flatly. "I have forces in my grasp you cannot comprehend."

“Yeah, I heard about your virgin sacrifice.” Xena's lips twitched. “I walked away from that fight the winner too.”

The silence went on a while longer, his eyes fencing with hers.

“Want to go talk like grown ups now?” Xena suggested. “This is my rule. I'll treat you like a guest if you stop acting like an idiot.”

He was at a decision point. Xena knew she should be sifting out her various gambles but somehow this didn't feel like one, and she stood and waited, aware of the energy of her soldiers, and the steadfast presence of Gabrielle behind her.

The Persian slowly looked around the room, then let his cold gaze settle back on her. “I would speak with you aside.”

Xena regarded him in silence for a moment. Then she smiled. “Sure.” She indicated the door to the antechamber at one side of the room.

He made a hand signal to his guard, ignoring their sudden stiffening as he turned and glided forward. Xena kept pace with him, turning her head slightly to catch the eye of her nearly bouncing in her seat freaked out consort. She winked at Gabrielle, then, without thinking about it, motioned her forward.

The Persian stopped. “I said, with you aside.”

“I know.” Xena waited for Gabrielle to catch them up. “But if you want to hear the truth of what happened to your blood, she's the one to tell it.”

Without a word, the Persian continued forward, and they walked alongside through a crowd that parted before them, bowing and raising fists to chest in respect as Xena moved past. She raised a fist of her own to acknowledge it, lowering her hand and bumping her fist with the last of her men, who had opened the doors and stood back to let them pass.

They went inside, and Gabrielle closed the doors behind them.

On a side table inside stood a tray with a crystal pitcher and cups, filled with a golden liquid. Xena crossed over to it and poured three cupfulls, taking one, and handing one over to Gabrielle. “Want some?” She asked the Persian. “If it's poison, we'll all get poisoned together.” She added, as he hesitated.

He held out a hand and took the cup she offered. “You are not as I was told.” He remarked. “It remains to be seen which the lie is.”

Xena smiled and took a sip of the honey mead. “So.” She leaned against the wall and rested her elbow on Gabrielle's shoulder. “What is it you want, really?”

The Persian walked over to one of the chairs against the wall and sat down in it. “Death stalks me.” He said, bluntly. “You have stolen my future and I have come to settle that account.”

“I stole nothing.” Xena said. “I did not come in search of you. I did not ask your army to invade my lands, didn't ask your daughter to hunt me. If your future is gone, look in the mirror for your blame.”

He nodded. “This is truth.” He said. “But if you had properly governed your land, your people would have not come to me to succor them.”

There was also truth to that Xena knew, but it was a skewed truth.

“That's not true.” Gabrielle spoke up for the first time. “Xena is a great queen. They came to you because she valued all her subjects, not just them. She cared about her army and about her servants more than she did about her nobles.”

The man stared at her. “You are the storyteller.”

“This is Gabrielle.” Xena interjected. “She's my consort, and when everyone's really lucky, she indulges me and tells stories about me cause I'm too bashful to tell em myself.”

"My daughter offered you a position with her troops." The Persian said. "Her last note to me told me of her successes, and your capitulation."

"Xena and ten of us with her went into Sholeh's army camp." Gabrielle said. "Xena told the rest of the soldiers with us to scatter. She knew we probably wouldn't make it. But after your daughter tried to seduce her, and then someone in the camp tried to kill us, Xena decided to make a break for it and we escaped."

"You did not find my daughter to your liking?" There was a twist, and an irony to the man's tone. Xena took a sip of her mead. "I'm taken." She stated simply. "All your brat wanted was to get me in bed, and for that, she risked all your men, your honor, and her own life. She was an idiot."

He took a sip himself. "She was my only true blood."

"You should have kept her at home." Xena replied bluntly. "Little girls shouldn't be given an army and thrown out in the world to prove they have what it takes to be what I am unless you can risk them dying doing it."

He was sitting straight in the chair and now he looked over at her, his eyes narrowing. The tension in the room ratcheted up and Gabrielle could feel the exhausting, inevitable wash of anger and fighting approaching and it got her frustrated and made her want to do something.. anything...to stop it.

She looked at the Persian king, and for a split second he looked at her and she saw into his eyes.

He didn't ask anything and yet, in that moment, Gabrielle knew this was a time, a moment to make a difference. She walked over and sat down next to him, waiting for his eyes to track around and settle on her. "I know what it feels like to lose everything." She said, quietly. "To lose your family, and be all alone even when you're surrounded by other people."

Xena remained where she was, going still, and pressing against the wall and trying with all her might not to twitch at having her beloved so close to that ancient piece of danger who had, in fact spawned the shifty poisoner and backstabber that his children had turned out to be.

She bit her lip on the yell to be careful, trying to slow down her racing heartbeat.

The Persian stared blankly at Gabrielle for a very long moment.

"All she wanted to do was make you proud of her." Gabrielle went on, after that moment past. "She wanted to prove she was your daughter and even though she did bad things to us, it's still sad that it couldn't have ended differently." She reached out and touched his hand, seeing past who he was and achieving a connection to him on a human level. "Can we work it out so no one else has to feel like this?"

He slowly turned his head and looked at Xena, who was standing there with slightly widened eyes and held breath.

"She taught me everything I know about how much harder it is to love than to hate." Xena muttered, after an awkward pause. "But you know, she's right. Let's not spill more blood between us. I've got nothing else to prove, and you've run out of things to lose."

He nodded slightly. "The army I have brought could destroy you." He lifted his hand in token protest.

"If I didn't steal them all from you." Xena said, but smiled to take a little of the edge off. "They seem to like women who can use a sword." She half shrugged. "And I can."

He nodded again. "That I have heard. Are you in truth the warrior I have been told of?"

"Yes." Xena said, simply.

"She sure is." Gabrielle said, at the same time. "You can ask anyone. Even the people who don't really like her will tell you that."

Xena had to muffle a smile.

“Your general who treated with us did not seem to think so.” The Persian said, in a placid tone.

“He found out the hard way he was wrong.” Xena said, then paused. “But I can forgive him forgetting that since I let him.”

He nodded and looked at Gabrielle. “You have powerful words, storyteller. I see in your eyes you also tell the truth. You have known what I have known, though your years are so slight. It is also true that I am a very tired old man, and though I know my warriors are of the finest, I have a fear in my heart that they, too, will fall under her spell and I will end my days in shame as my daughter and half son did.”

Xena now came over and sat down in the chair on the other side side of him. “Between the two... I mean, three of us I'm sure we can come up with a scheme that gets out out of this with our egos intact. “ She said. “Cause buddy, I'm tired too. I'm tired of fighting off spooks, and guys with darts, and creeps, and having to go head to head with gods I got no purchase with. Y'know?”

Now, and for the first time, the Persian smiled. “When your men met us in the pass, and offered us escort, I was hoping I would come eventually to this moment.” He admitted. “It has been a long journey, one I did not entirely believe I would return from, nor did I want to without my people's honor intact.” He looked directly at Xena. “You understand this?”

“I do.” Xena said. “I kicked your entire kingdom in the crotch. Sorry about that.”

The Persian's face twitched.

Gabrielle sighed and scratched her nose.

“Anyway.” The queen said. “Why don't we go have some lunch, and you can come watch our circus. Be the guest my guys said you were.” She held out a hand to him. “Let's not be enemies for a while.”

The Persian studied her for a very long time in silence, then he shifted and extended his own dry and withered hand and clasped hers. “For a while.” He assented. “We can try that.”

\*\*

Hard to say, really, who'd been more shocked when they emerged from the antechamber intact and apparently in conversation with each other.

Xena made a hand signal as she cleared the door, and all over the room soldiers relaxed and seeing that the nobles extracted their coronets from their posteriors and relaxed as well.

The Persians watched their king anxiously but slowly calmed as he continued to talk to Xena, and didn't seem to be going to ask them to throw themselves into battle immediately. They reached the stepped dais and Xena paused, motioning Brendan and Jellaus over.

The Persian called over his captain too, and they stood in the center of the room a moment, a collection of odd personalities.

“Brendan, show our guests troops to a bed and some grub.” Xena said. “We won't be cutting throats or getting this nicely cleaned floor bloody today.”

Her captain muffled a smile and touched his chest with a fist. “Aye, Mistress.”

“Would you like a banquet arranged, your majesty?” Jellaus guessed. “And perhaps I can discover what might please our guest's palate and inform the kitchens?”

Xena closed her mouth and lifted her hands with an expression of wry appreciation.

Jellaus bowed and left the room.

“Listen up.” Xena's voice lifted. “Our royal guest and I have had a talk. We agreed to have another talk. Until I say otherwise, he is my guest and he and his retinue should be treated like that.”

Lastay was at her shoulder. “Very well, Mistress.”

The Persian king gathered his translator and two others to him, speaking rapidly to them in his language, pausing when he spotted Lakmas appear behind Xena. “Ah so.”

Lakmas merely folded his big hands before him and took up a guard position to Xena's right. "Father of my people, I greet you in peace." He stated in a mild tone.

The Persian king looked at him, regarding the black and yellow tabard before he lifted his eyes up to meet Lakmas. "So you have chosen your path."

"Faith to you was given me at birth." Lakmas said, in a somber voice. "But the choice of my manhood is to give my service to one whose honor is sealed and who I trust in absolute."

The king considered that in silence for a bit. "I take the fault of that to myself." He said, eventually. "But we will speak of it later."

"Let me give you the two dinar tour." Xena interrupted the standoff. "Lastay, cmon with us."

"Mistress." Lastay looked pleased. "Perhaps Earl Karas would like to join us as well?"

Xena took a breath to answer, then paused. "Sure." She motioned to Karas, who had been standing nearby trying very hard to look as though he were merely an uninterested bystander. "C'mere."

If she was going to be a queen today, might as well take it to the limit. "Let's all discuss opportunites." She clapped Lastay on the back and guided the group through the crowd. Two of the Persian guard joined them, trailing uncertainly after their king, while two of her own Persians, Brent and Gerard strolled more confidently after their queen and her consort.

\*\*

Gabrielle sat back in her comfortable chair, listening to all the speech around her as she digested what had turned out to be a little eclectic but nice lunch. It was hard to comprehend, really, how okay things were going versus what she thought was going to happen when the Persian king arrived.

They were in the royal box in the dancing hall, waiting for the circus to start. The Persian king had never seen this kind of performance apparently, though he had said there were similar kinds of entertainment in his land.

"Do you have tigers in Persia?" She turned and asked Lakmas, who was seated in a position of honor guard to her and looking very satisfied about it. "Like the one here?"

"No, beautiful majesty. We have another such type, called a cheetah, which is smaller, and has spots." Lakmas answered promptly. "In the palace, they were raised from cubs and used for hunting. There also they have little cats, like the one you have in your chambers, but with a different color and a different face."

"Is it pretty, in Persia?"

Lakmas smiled. "It has its own beauty, yes. It is dry and very open, and has deserts that I think are very beautiful."

Gabrielle wondered what it would be like, and suddenly, she wanted to go there.

"Hey"

Gabrielle turned to find Xena leaning towards her. Without really thinking about it, she half stood and kissed the queen on the lips, pausing as Xena's eyes widened a little. "Sorry." She wasn't really. "Did you want something?"

"I do now." Xena's eyes twinkled.

A little abashed, Gabrielle sat back down. "Oh. Well besides that." She uttered under her breath.

The queen chuckled. "I was going to ask you if you wanted some grog." She indicated a servant standing near the wall of the royal booth, holding a skin. "It's a little chilly in here."

"No, I'm fine." Gabrielle responded. "I don't want to start hiccuping. I had two cups of that honey stuff before."

Xena folded her hand around her consorts and sat back, as the circus performers started to come out and take their places. "You like horses?" She asked the Persian king, seated in a plush and comfortable chair the equal to hers next to her.

"Very much so." Cambyses said. "The horses of Persia are the most beautiful in the world." He stated, then eyed Xena to see what her reaction to that would be.

Xena smiled. "Ah. We found something we agree on." She responded. "There's hope for us after all. I saw a string of those desert beauties in my younger years and nearly got run over by them because I was too busy gawking to move."

The Persian smiled a bit more naturally. "As a boy, I bred them." He said. "And my royal audience chambers are hung with art in their honor and glory."

"We breed fighters and racers here." The queen said. "Lastay has some of the fastest." She smiled at her heir, who had been listening in. "Pretty ones too."

Cambyses' eyebrows hiked up. "Do you say?" His eyes drifted, and fastened on her cloak pin. "I thought that a mere decoration."

"No." Xena regarded her adornment with a fond smile. "It's a decent rendition of my warhorse." She said. "A gift from my consort." She looked up at the circus performers "Watch em." She nodded towards the stage. "They've got some nice stock, and pretty good tricks."

The old man shifted in his chair and peered out, as the circus horses thundered from the wings, each with tumbler balanced neatly on it's back. "So." He issued a faint, chilly smile. "And so."

Xena rested her elbows on her chair arms, and relaxed, her peripheral vision catching sight of Brent and Girard easing to either side of the front row, and settling against the wall.

There was a Persian guard behind Cambyses and one sitting on the other side of him. Lakmas was seated on other side of Xena. Another of her Persians was behind her.

She was aware that Cambyses was aware of that, and she was equally aware that she'd left her sword behind her in the throne room and that the risk here would seem to be hers.

And yet, she also knew that the most dangerous person in the royal box was the tall chick in the purple and no one was going to grab her fast enough to keep her from breaking Cambyses neck if he tried anything.

It was going to be really interesting to see which way it would all go.

\*\*

The circus troop out did themselves. Xena was leaning forward with her elbows on the railing, almost distracted past watching the area around her as she watched the horses rise up on their hind legs and dance with each other, with only a handler in the center of the space directing them with the tip of a long stick.

It was amazing. They were so graceful and obedient. "Y'know." The queen pondered. "I'm gonna get those guys to train my warhorses."

"Would it seem an advantage?" Cambyses murmured. "They would become a bigger target, I would think."

"Uh uh, look." Xena pointed at the two horses now springing off their hocks and crossing in mid air. "You could jump right over a spear brigade like that, and cut down on them. Right above the shield wall."

Cambyses gazed thoughtfully at her. "It would take an excellence of horsemanship for that."

Xena shrugged. "Not really. Just balance. I could do it."

The Persian's eyebrows lifted. His silent skepticism was so loud, Xena could hear it flapping against the side of her face. "Can't I, Gabrielle?"

“Sure.” Gabrielle was also leaning against the ledge, watching avidly. “I think you actually did that a few times in those big fights last time. Tiger jumps like that.”

“He does, the big bastard.” The queen agreed. “I trained him to try and keep my ass out of trouble.”

The horses finished their dance, and ran in a circle, then disappeared, and the tumblers came out, starting to do somersaults and flips, bouncing across the straw surface towards the hanging bars.

Gabrielle settled back in her chair and folded her hands, watching the Persian king out of the corner of her eye. He seemed to be watching in some content, but then she noticed his hands were on the arms of the big chair he was sitting in, and they were slowly flexing and unflexing against the wood surface.

His guards were watching him intently.

She suddenly felt her heart beat start to pick up. With as much casualness as she could muster, she leaned on the chair arm between her and Xena and reached over, tucking her hand inside Xena's upper arm.

Slowly, the queen's head turned and the torchlight glinted off her pale eyes as she looked at Gabrielle, the faintest hint of a twinkle there as one eye faintly twitched into a wink. Then Xena returned her attention to the circus, and tapped the sides of her thumbs against the wood in an easy pattern.

So what did that mean? Gabrielle left her hand where it was and hoped it meant that Xena knew everything was going to be all right.

Or that Xena knew it was going to be all wrong, and was ready to deal with it.

The Persian shifted, and she felt Xena's bicep tense, even though the queen didn't move. Gabrielle saw Brent's hand fall casually to his dagger and he leaned to one side, clearing his arm away from Brendans as they watched apparently intent on the circus.

“Persian.” Xena said, in a very soft tone. “Don't.”

Cambyes turned his head towards her slowly. “Pardon?”

“I smell the dart. Don't try it.” Xena said, in that same, quiet voice. “For one thing, it doesn't work on me, and for another, hasn't your honor taken enough of a beating without you breaking your own culture's rules on hospitality?”

“You know not of what you speak.” The Persian answered, in an equally soft tone.

“Don't I?” Now Xena turned her head and looked at him. “Try it, and I will have the story of your dishonor spread across every bit of land between this castle and yours. You're under my roof, sandworm.”

He looked very calm. “I am a dead man already.” He said. “And you cannot resurrect my honor, so there is no reason why I should not take my revenge. Say you it will not work? Let's find out of my lifetime of knowledge of this thing refutes that.”

“For what?” Xena uttered back. “What does it get you?”

“It redeems me.” He stated. “Father of my people am I? Yes. But also, father of assassins. Those who were sent here failed in my teachings. I will not.”

Everything started to shift, and then paused as Gabrielle stood up. “Stop.” She said, in a loud voice, putting her arms around Xena. “Don't you touch her.”

Xena's eyes popped wide open and she angled her head so she could look up at her unlikely protector. “Hey!”

The soldiers froze in place, the Persians all with their hands on their weapons, and Xena's guards as well.

"I can resurrect your honor." Gabrielle heard herself speaking the words, but had no real idea where they came from. "I can tell people how courageous and honorable the Persians are, or I can tell them the truth. But if you so much as breathe on her I'll spend the rest of my life telling everyone what a bunch of sorry losers you turned out to be. Your choice."

Cambyzes stared at her.

Xena cleared her throat gently. "Scuse me."

"Remove yourself, child." The Persian said. "You have done us no harm."

"Haven't I?" Gabrielle shot back. "Whose stories do you think turned your army to Xena?" She held on tight, putting as much of her body between the Persian king and her lover as she could. "Just stop it. Enough people have suffered because of you."

Xena went quite still in her consort's grip, the words penetrating into her mind in an unexpected, painful way. How much had Gabrielle suffered, because of her?

What agony had Lyceus felt, as he lay there bleeding to death on the cold, cold floor?

How much pain had Stanislaus been in, dying, all alone there in his rooms?

She remembered the bodies on the floor, up in her chambers. Phantom then, but representing how many of her troops who died in her service?

A memory surfaced. A birthday. Some cookies. Her mother throwing herself in front of those raiders in a stupid vain attempt at protecting them....

*I'm not worth this.* She knew a moment of perfect self knowledge, and equally perfect shame.

Gabrielle could feel her heartbeat racing so fast it was making her lightheaded. She stared at the Persian. "What does dying do for anyone?"

"Little girl." Cambesys said. "Dying with revenge gained will gain me back a place in heaven. " He took a breath "I wish you a long life without THIS ONE!."

He moved.

The soldiers moved.

Gabrielle threw herself over Xena and tumbled across the chair.

Lastay yelled and leaped across her.

Everyone grabbed for Cambesys.

Only Xena remained still, her elbows leaning on her knees, her hands clasped.

And then everything froze in place, and it got very quiet. Xena looked up to see Ares sitting on the sill, regarding her.

"What are you doing?" The god asked. "Looking for an early life retirement?"

Xena exhaled. "Maybe enough people have suffered because of me." She asked. "Ya think?"

"I think you're an idiot." The god remarked. "Whatcha want to die for? You think it's all peaches and cream on this side?" He pointed at the Persian. "He's the one with the problem. He doesn't off you, he ends up in his version of Purgatory. So what are you letting him for? You lose your mind?"

"Maybe I did. Maybe it's best for everyone if I let him." Xena said, feeling suddenly very tired. "All I've ever brought anyone I've cared about is pain and death. What's the damn point?"

"Oh boo hoo. What about her?" Ares pointed at Gabrielle. "What happened to all that love you forever stuff? She sure believed it."

Xena's eyes filled with tears, but she just shook her head. "Especially her. How many times does she have to face death on my behalf before she doesn't care anymore either?"

For a long moment, Ares was silent, then he got off the ledge and kneeled next to her. "Okay." He looked around and then back at her. "Listen kid." He cleared his throat. "I'm not in the business of giving advice, okay? But just this once, just this time, listen to me. Don't do it."

Xena studied his face gravely. "Why do you care?"

The god snorted softly. "Eternity ain't long enough for that story." He muttered.

"What does that mean?"

"Forget about it. Just do what I'm telling you to do just for once." Ares snapped. "Don't let this creep win. You don't want to do it for your squeeze there? Then do it for me." He smiled briefly. "Then we'll be square. Right?"

Xena's eyes lifted again, and met his and there was a moment of silent truth between them. "Right." She finally said, feeling something release inside her. "Yeah, okay."

"Make the most of your mortality while ya got it." He said, standing up. "Okay? One shot."

Then he snapped his fingers and time rushed on with an inblow of yells and scrapes and in the middle of it all Xena exploded into motion and lifted Gabrielle up and over her shoulder as she ducked under the Persian guards arm and stopped Cambesys as his hand was lifting, grabbing his wrist and snapping it in her fingers.

He dropped the tiny pipe and grabbed after it with his other hand, only to find Gabrielle catching it as she lunged forward, plucking the pipe out of mid air and turning it as it fired it's tiny, deadly payload. "No!" He clutched his chest and dropped to the floor of the booth, his body thumping on the ground.

The sound of swords being drawn was almost deafening, but in a moment Xena stood up and held her hands out. "Hold!" She yelled out loud enough for it to be heard by the circus performers and they stopped, startled, and stared at her, just like the rest of the nobles in the room.

Cambyses' breath was rattling in his throat. His eyes found Gabrielle's as she knelt near him, the pipe clutched in her hands. "Tell them." He gasped. "Tell them all how I died with the weapon in my hand!" He reached out to her with his unbroken hand, fingers trembling. "Tell them!"

Gabrielle drew in a quick breath, and reached out to take his hand. "I'll tell them." She said, meeting his frantic eyes. "I'll tell them the truth of why you died."

With a moan of relief, he dropped back, his head thumping on the floor and his grip growing slack as it pulled out of Gabrielle's fingers.

With a gasp she rocked back herself, reeling back and slamming into Xena's still form. "Oh!"

"Easy, muskrat." Xena caught her. "The rest of you. Put those weapons down or I'll have you killed where you stand." She stared down the two Persian guards. "You've got no quarrel with me. I didn't break your laws."

Lakmas broke out of his frozen state and barked at them in his own language.

Gabrielle shivered. Then she turned and looked up at Xena. "I thought he was going to try being friends." She said. "Why can't that ever work, Xena?"

"I dunno." Xena stood there quietly, wrapping her arms around her consort as Brent and two other men took hold of the Persian guards and yanked them away. "Sorry about that, Gabrielle. Life just kinda stinks most of the time I guess." She let her chin rest on Gabrielle's head. "Thanks for getting all fierce and crazy on my behalf."

Her consort sighed. "I don't even know what I was saying." She admitted mournfully. "I felt like a puppet – someone else was doing all that stuff."

Brendan came over. "You all right, little one." He stepped over the Persian king's body as though it didn't exist. "Buggers."

"Her?" Xena snorted. "She's going to be my champion from now on. Let her fight. I'll talk."

“Xena.”

The queen chuckled, then put two fingers in her mouth and let out a whistle. “Get this going again!” She yelled at the circus. “We’re all fine here.” She added to the shocked and milling nobles, who were up on their feet staring at the royal box. “Siddown!”

Silence fell.

“Please?” Xena tossed the word into the quiet, a faint, rueful smile crossing her face. She motioned for the troops to remove the king’s body and resumed her seat, with a sigh. “C’mere, my love.” She patted her lap and enfolded her consort in her arms when she accepted the offer. “Now it’s over.”

“He was the guy behind the bad guys?”

“He was..” The queen exhaled. “But probably not on purpose. He just made a lot of bad choices, then didn’t want to live with them.” She thought she heard a faint laugh. “Poor bastard.”

Gabrielle remained quiet for a bit. She remembered having the pipe in her hands, and instinctively turning it’s mouth away from her and the puff of the dart emerging. “Did I kill him, Xena?”

“Oh please.” Xena rapped her knuckles on her lover’s adorable blond head. “When you deliberately kill someone, I’ll let you know. M’kay?” She sighed a little. “I know what that feels like better than anyone else here. Even him.” She glanced past Gabrielle, to the regrouping circus performers.

Gabrielle considered that for a bit. “I think I would have.” She finally said. “I wanted to. I didn’t want him to hurt you.” She tilted her head so she could see Xena’s face. “I felt like I was kind of going crazy.”

“That’s okay. I was going kind of crazy too.” Her lover admitted. “For a minute there, I almost..” She fell silent. “Anyway. Glad you jumped in on my side. Maybe now we can get on with our harvest festival.”

Lastay returned, seating himself at Xena’s right hand side. “Well, Mistress.” He exhaled. “Have we an end to this then?”

Xena’s lips twitched. “Until his army gets bored and decides to come over that ridge, I guess.”

Brent came over and knelt down next to her. “Xena.” He looked up at her. “Just got a runner in from the westlands.”

The queen sighed. “I don’t even get to see the end of this damn circus, do I?” She asked, plaintively.

“Tis good news.” Her assassin said. “There is no army there. Only a straggle of Philtop’s landowners, bringing tribute to ye.”

“What?”

“They kept their harvest from him.” Brent was almost laughing. “Wanted you to take them over.”

Xena’s expression was a mixture of confusion and disbelief. “What?” She repeated. “I thought they loved that bastard.”

“So there aren’t any Persian soldiers waiting to attack us?” Gabrielle asked.

“No, your grace.”

“He came on his own.” Lakmas rejoined them, having heard the exchange. “Oh great one, he came only to salvage his face. No warriors came with him, save his bodyguard.” The Persian smiled. “He dared not bring them. They are the weath of Persia and her could not risk losing them to you as well.”

“So he came here just to try and kill me?” Xena’s eyebrows lifted. “What a waste of coin.”

“Honor is priceless, oh my mistress.” Lakmas gently rebutted her. “Else, how would you have won ours?”

Xena thought about that. Then she sighed “Well, glad those half assed heroics got me something, anyway.” She relaxed, at last. “Then let's get this party restarted. If I had to win this and not even get to cut off one head, that's worth celebrating.”

Gabrielle gave her a hug, and grinned at everyone. Lakmas settled into his guard position with an equally big smile, and the rest of the men eased their stances, and settled themselves to watch the show, where the tiger had just come out, and let out a roar.

Xena shook her head and smiled herself, resting her chin on her fist as she propped her elbow on her chair arm. “Never look a gift horse in the ass, I guess, huh muskrat?”

“Why would you want to look any kind of horse in the ass, Xena?”

The queen started laughing,

“I sure never wanted to look at a sheeps ass, that's for sure. Even the nice ones.”

\*\*

It was morning. Winter sunlight streamed into the windows in Gabrielle's room, giving her plenty of light to write by. She looked up at the leaded glass, then smiled and went back to her scribbling

It was very early yet. Xena was still asleep in the next room, sprawled across the big bed as the newly perked fire in the fireplace warmed the room.

Soon, Gabrielle knew, she'd get up and go into the outer room where servants were patiently waiting and order up their breakfast, while Xena called in Brendan to hear her morning report.

It would be nice. It would be normal. It would be what their life had been before the festival and what it seemed to be returning to now that the strangeness and the danger of the Persians had gone.

Gabrielle was very much looking forward to that.

There was still some weird stuff to think about. Xena was still investigating some of the things that had happened. But her realm had settled itself back down to the business of living and Gabrielle was very contented. They had gotten their windows fixed, and their rooms here sorted, and she was glad they were back in them after all the funny things that had happened back up in the tower.

Xena had even decided to move her sparring room, but hadn't figured out quite where yet. Gabrielle hadn't decided whether or not to tell her the troops kept begging her to convince the queen to shift her workouts to their barracks to let them watch.

There was a noise and Gabrielle looked up at the doorway, to find Xena leaning against the edge of it, arms folded, watching her. “Oh, hi.”

“Hi.” The queen sauntered into the room, tugging her warm robe around her. “What's so much more interesting there than our bed?” She dropped into a chair on the opposite side of her consorts writing desk and reached over to pick up her cup of tea. “Hmm?”

“Nothing.” Gabrielle smiled. “I was just putting some notes down. I didn't want to forget them.” She watched the sunlight gild Xena's features, a stray beam catching her eyes and igniting sparkles in them. “I didn't want to wake you up.”

“Why not?” Xena's left brow lifted.

“Because you were sleeping.” Gabrielle answered straightforwardly. “And you looked like you were dreaming.”

“I was.” Her lover smiled. “I was dreaming about you, matter of fact. We were chasing lambs in a field somewhere, naked.”

“Why were we chasing lambs?”

Xena's eyes widened in mock wonder, as she spread her hands out then put them back on her thighs. “You were probably hungry.”

"Probably." Gabrielle heard her stomach growl, and grinned in acknowledgement. "Should I have them send breakfast up?" She got up and put her quill down. "I'm working on the story about the Persian. I want to tell it at the big party tomorrow." She trotted out of the room before Xena could answer.

Xena picked up the teacup and took another sip, content to let her body ease from its deep sleep at its own pace. She could hear Gabrielle talking to the servants in the outer chamber and a faint smile appeared on her face as she registered the tone of confidence in her consort's voice.

It seemed that she would get to see Gabrielle grow all the way up after all. She now had guards around their quarters, and a council she met with, and maybe this whole queen thing really wasn't so bad after all.

"Xena?" Gabrielle poked her head back in. "Brent's here to see you."

"Ah." The queen got up and set the cup down, casually tying the belt of her robe around her as she walked back through the bedroom. She ran her fingers through her hair and paused to slip on a pair of indoor boots before she ducked through the outer door into the large exterior chamber.

Brent was waiting, his traveling cloak still around his shoulders and the evidence of a hard ride on him. "Mistress." He put his fist to his chest. "I have news."

"Mm." Xena pointed to a chair next to the big fireplace. "Sit down." She settled herself in the other seat. "What's up?"

"We did a full search of the westland hills." Brent said briskly. "They will do well over the winter. They have enough stock, save Philtop's manor itself. That is beggard."

Xena's eyebrow lifted.

"He was keeping a number of boys there, Majesty." Brent's face didn't twitch, but it looked like he wanted it to. "Taken from the surrounding nobles."

"Hostages?"

"Perhaps originally." Her assassin said. "But it seems he took his pleasure from them."

Xena's other eyebrow lifted.

"They were cruelly used." Brent finished quietly. "Twas kept very secret, it seems. The nobles didn't know their children were being treated so."

The queen's nostrils flared. "A knife in my chambers was far too rich a death for him." She said, after a brief pause. "Did those bastards with him know?"

Brent considered that. "Mistress truly I don't think they did, or -" He lifted a hand. "Perhaps they knew his highness's tastes, but didn't realize how he persued them. They did honor him. That is no farce."

Xena sat there quietly reflecting, and Brent remained silent, waiting for her. Finally she lifted her eyes and met his. "So we need a new Prince of the Westlands."

He nodded his head and looked aside, watchign the flames.. "Some of the nobles who withheld from him, they're good men." He said. "Raleag, he's got a good following." He paused, and when she didn't answer, he looked back at her to find this bright, clear blue eyes watching him with what might have been her own brand of mischief. "Mistress?"

"I think." Xena steepled her fingers and tapped the tips of them against her lips. "I think I've got a better idea, Brent."

He cocked his head in a listening attitude.

"I think it's time you took your name back." Xena said, in a mild tone. "I think you need to go rule the Westlands."

Brent's jaw dropped a little. "Mistress, I can't do that." He said. "My life has made me a soldier, not a pri..." He stopped, seeing the very droll look on Xena's face. "Xena." He exhaled with a touch of exasperation.

Now, her eyes were definitely twinkling. "Suck it up." She suggested. "And take all the people here who want to go back to the old days with you. Go ahead and build yourself a realm, Brent." Her voice went a little more serious. "With my blessing."

He looked at her for a very long moment, then he blinked, and the sunlight caught the tears as they skittered down his cheek. "You will have no stronger right arm. I swear it." He muttered. "I will do the best I can for you."

"I know." Xena said. "But do the best for you, too." She added. "And take Girard with you."

His head jerked up and he looked at her.

She lifted one eyebrow in as sardonic an expression as she could muster this early in the morning, then gestured at herself. "Takes one to know one, buddy."

Gabrielle came back in, carrying a plate that she brought over to where they were seated. "Hi Brent." She offered him a cup. "Are you okay?" She added, seeing his face.

He exhaled. "Yes, I'm fine. Thank you." He took the cup and sipped from it.

"I just made him a prince." Xena informed her consort. "He reacted about as well as you did to being made a princess."

Gabrielle set the tray down and moved over, giving Brent an awkward hug. "Oh! Congratulations! That's great!" She said. "He's going to take over Stinky Sheephead's place?" She turned and sat down next to Xena. "Wow! Then tomorrow will really be a party!"

Xena nodded. "Yeah." She felt an internal sense of satisfaction rare to her. "Definitely time to celebrate."

\*\*

It was, in fact, a party. Xena leaned back in her seat, almost too stuffed to breathe as she watched the jugglers in the cleared space toss balls to each other in intricate patterns.

Next to her, Gabrielle was nibbling a fruit tart, leaning against the chair arm with her shoulder brushing the queen's, a happy little grin on her face.

Xena let her head rest against her consorts and exhaled in utter content.

She idly picked up a bit of mutton and tossed it to the side, where the big cat was laying, chained to a pillar but looking pleased to be included. He sniffed at the mutton then lapped it up with one lick of his tongue, turning his huge head to regard his benefactor with a wiggle of his big black nose.

Xena grinned at him, and wiggled her fingers.

"He likes you." Gabrielle commented. "Are we going to keep him?"

The queen eyed her. "He'd eat your pony for lunch."

"We're not keeping him then, I guess."

"Nah, that'd be a bummer."

The huge hall was full of her subjects, finally and for once in a collective good mood as they shared platters of food and skins of wine, the Westlanders clustered over in one corner surrounding their new prince who had been a surprisingly popular choice

Or maybe not so surprising. Xena swirled the rich wine in her cup and took a swallow. It was like she suddenly realized there was something past her anger, and her resentment of the people she ruled, and there was this glimmer of light ahead, where she could imagine making allies instead of enemies, at least some of the time.

She would never be a diplomat, just like Gabrielle would never be a courtesan. But if she played her cards right she might end up living longer, loving longer, and what was it he'd said? Make the most out of her mortality.

Yeah.

The jugglers finished and cleared the space, and then Jellaus appeared, to announce the next entertainment. He glanced up at Xena, and she gave him a nod, and he turned, lifting a hand.

“Lords and Ladies, may I present her Majesty, and our great Queen's consort, Gabrielle.” He bowed, as Gabrielle ramble down the steps to join him, the hawkshhead tabard in it's rich black and yellow snugged tight around her body. “She will favor us with her stories!”

Xena lifted her cup to her consort, and received a dazzling smile in return. “Go baby go!”

Go baby go.

\*\*

The End.