

A Time Travelling Story for Halloween

“The Circle is Open.”

Gabrielle thought that Xena looked a little like an angry raven, sitting perched on a rock, surveying the countryside. Xena had put up the soft collar of her long dark coat to stop the rain from trickling down her neck. “Great countryside, isn’t it, Xena?” Gabrielle tried to keep her tone cheerful. “Beautifully green.” Xena stopped turned a very cold gaze on Gabrielle.

“Gabrielle, I hate this place. It hasn’t stopped raining for four days. Any more of this and I’ll start growing gills.”

“That’ll be nice.”

Xena’s gaze grew colder still. “Gabrielle, tell me just one more time... Pretend I’m hard of hearing. Humour me. Whatever. What in the name of Hades are we doing here?”

“You don’t like Albion?” Xena slid to the ground and straightened up to her full height. It was a trick she used to good effect, especially if Gabrielle was feeling apologetic. Gabrielle felt herself shrinking beneath the weight of Xena’s physical presence as the warrior asked, “What’s to like?”

“It’s thought to be a very beautiful country.” Gabrielle was hoping to prevent Xena from taking out her chakram and razing Albion to the ground, tree by tree. “You haven’t seen it at its best, is all.”

Xena snorted. “I don’t believe it has a best,” she said. Her tone became colder still. “And while I’m impressed by your ability to change the subject, I say again, why are here?” Gabrielle sighed.

“You know why: the gales sent the ship in the wrong direction and as we’d ended up in Albion, I thought it would be nice for us to visit my cousin.”

Xena said heavily, “Gabrielle, much as I hate to call you a complete and utter liar, I’m about to. So we’re here because this is the where the ship that was meant to be taking us back to Greece harboured. Alright. And the weather was awful, agreed, and we were caught in gales that blew us off course. Yes, I might have believed it was all coincidence, were it not for one small point.”

“Which is?”

“You bribed the captain.”

Gabrielle stared. “You saw me?”

“No.”

“And you waited until now to tell me? And how did... Oh, I get it: I just told you. Well, then, yes. I bribed the captain.”

“With what? You have no money. Did you promise him not to read from your scrolls if he brought us here?” She glanced out into the middle distance.
“Would have worked for me...”

It took time and energy to wind Gabrielle up to a state of spitting fury, but Xena had time and the inclination. Xena was feeling irritated, and winding up the bard allowed Xena to forget for a short time what she hated about Albion: namely, the fact that every time she visited the place, it was raining. Besides, Gabrielle looked really attractive when angry and in the wrong. She was at least as commanding as the Amazons they’d met on their travels. Grudgingly, Xena supposed that Gabrielle made a fair Amazon queen.

Gabrielle drew a scroll from her bag and threw it at Xena, who put out a hand and caught it. “Oh, goody,” said Xena, dryly. “A scroll.” Her tone was making the hairs on the back of Gabrielle’s neck prickle: she set her teeth against an angry response. She needed Xena on her side.

“That’s why we’re here. And as to bribery, I told the captain that if he helped me, and brought us to Albion, you wouldn’t steal his ship.”

“Fair point.”

“That scroll reached me at the harbour, when we were about to board the ship. You must remember my telling you before that I had a cousin who left Greece to live in Albion?”

“No. I would have remembered you mentioning anyone choosing to live in this rain-infested dump.”

“Calypso grew up in a village near to the sea. I’d told her about you, obviously, which is why she sent that...” indicating the scroll, “to me.”

“Why did she choose to live in this godforsaken place?”

“She fell in love with a sailor from Albion: his ship called at the harbour near her home. She was so in love with him that when his ship left Greece she smuggled herself away in the ship’s hold.”

Xena raised an eyebrow. “How tenacious of her,” she said. “She reminds me of someone else who got a hold and wouldn’t let go. Can’t recall the name...”

But you'd know her if you met her... Short blond hair, always talking, carries a staff, writes endless scrolls..."

"Fine, Xena. Forget it. Let's just sit here in the rain until we either rot or take root." Gabrielle folded her arms and leaned back against a tree.

The silence stretched on. Xena had pushed Gabrielle just a little too far. The bard never sulked, but she would be as mute as one of the trees around them until Xena made an effort. The rain fell steadily. Gabrielle squeezed water from her sleeve-cuffs. Xena took off a boot, poured water out of it and put it back on, with an expression of supreme distaste. She repeated this process with the other boot, and then said, "Alright, Gabrielle. I'm sorry. Tell me all. And take your time over it: I can't imagine anything better than standing in the rain, listening to one of your stories."

"Enough, Xena. Look, my Calypso married the sailor but something went wrong and she ended up alone. Then she moved inland to a village on the edge of this forest." Xena shut her eyes, began to snore. "And then she joined up with this group who are in trouble. She says that they urgently need our help.."

"A group. In trouble. In the woods. Our help." Xena nodded. "Great stuff, Gabrielle. This could become my favourite story. What sort of group has she joined?"

"The outlaws."

"The outlaws," repeated Xena. "Very catchy name."

"One of their leaders is a man called Wood. He and his followers have been fighting on behalf of the poor for several years. The peasants think of Wood as a kind of demi-god. They were starving, and he gave them food. They were robbed of their money by the sheriff of this area. The sheriff has no interest in whether the peasants who serve him survive. Those that rebel against his demands are mutilated, imprisoned or killed. Wood and his followers have been taking back the money the sheriff's men have stolen from the poor. They then give that money back to the peasants."

Xena had been more interested in the fact that the rain was slowing up, but by the end of the tale Gabrielle had won her full attention. She said, "Don't these people have a king? I thought that everyone here answered to a monarch."

"That's the problem. They do have one, but he's gone off to fight in the Holy Wars."

"What are the Holy Wars?"

“I have no idea.”

“Where are the Holy Wars?”

“Uh...”

“Alright, so you don’t know that, either. And while the king’s away, the poor are being oppressed, right? Isn’t there someone standing in for him who’s supposed to be looking out for the peasants?”

“Yes. His brother, Prince John. Xena, he’s the one who began the idea of robbing the peasants. Most of the money taken from the poor of Sherwood goes to him.”

“And your cousin’s working with the people rebelling against the tyranny?”

“Yes.”

Xena looked critically at Gabrielle. “If you’d said all that in the first place we could have chosen to come here without you bribing captains...”

“You’d have come if I’d told you all this?”

“Of course. Well, I think so. You know how much I love Albion...”

“Last night I sent a message to Calypso. This morning I got a note to say that we should wait here for her.”

“Did she stipulate us meeting in the wettest part of the forest? I must thank her for that.”

“Very funny.”

“Yeah. I thought so.”

They fell silent. Xena narrowed her eyes and surveyed the scene around them. She had become aware of a change in their surroundings, and dropped her hand so that it rested on the surface of her chakram. “Gabrielle, watch out,” she whispered. Gabrielle glanced behind them as a dozen men and women stepped from behind the trunks of the trees. They wore dull shades of green and brown and their camouflage was almost perfect. Xena raised the chakram, but Gabrielle grinned.

“Calypso!” she called.

“Gabrielle!” The cousins hugged, each talking over the other. For a moment it seemed to Xena as though the potential warfare was about to lapse into familial babbling.

Xena flicked her chakram up into the air and caught it again. She was interested to notice that all the new arrivals were armed with bows and arrows, and that some of them were already prepared to shoot. Xena grinned: arrows were fine. Arrows she could deal with. She walked over to the bard and landed a heavy hand on her shoulder. Gabrielle came promptly back to earth. “Gabrielle, are you going to introduce us?”

“Of course. Calypso, this is Xena. Xena, meet Calypso.” Xena put out a hand.

“Gabrielle’s cousin, huh? Nice to meet you.”

“We’ve heard all about you, of course. Gabrielle told me all about you. It was because of your battle skills that I sent the scroll. I’d talked it over with the others, but I never thought that you’d come...” Calypso’s voice trailed off.

Two of the other outlaws were moving forward. A woman with fox-bright eyes, and a tall, thin man. The woman said, “Xena, Gabrielle. You are both very welcome to Sherwood. We should take our conversation into the forest.”

Xena blinked. “You don’t consider this to be forest?”

The woman smiled. “The heart of the forest, where no-one dares go but us. So far,” she added, suddenly.

“So far?”

“That’s what we need to talk to you about. I’m sorry: I’m Marian, and this is Wood.” The man stepped forward and took first Xena’s and then Gabrielle’s hands.

“I was afraid that you might both have been a figment of Calypso’s imagination. It’s a relief to find out that you’re real.” Xena smiled, and Calypso blushed.

“I guess that the capacity for imagination runs in their family,” Xena said. Gabrielle nudged the warrior hard in the ribs.

The party moved briskly through the forest, only stopping when they had reached the outlaws’ camp, and sat down at a rough, broad table within a circle of ancient trees. “These are mostly oaks, I think,” said Xena, “but this one I don’t know.”

“They call it a capon tree.”

“Oh.”

“Here,” said Marian. “Food. And wine.”

Xena glanced up at the canopy of branches and leaves above them. The leaves had begun to fall; indeed the air was full of twisting gold and brown shapes, but Xena could see that there was something different about the design of growth above them. A tapestry of greens and golds and browns that would give protection all year round. Marian saw Xena looking and said, “It took years to create, and we’re patching it and replacing parts all the time. We built cabins when we came here, but the tapestry can be let fall if we have to conceal ourselves. Of course, for the sake of secrecy we must cook and light our fires beyond this area, but we’re used to adapting. Once you’ve been here long enough, the old existence begins to feel like a dream.”

Xena and Gabrielle looked around them at the low-slanted roofs of the cabins, at the barrels that held water and apples, and at the false sky above them.

Once they were seated at a table, and food and wine had been provided, Xena glanced meaningfully at Gabrielle, who tried to swallow her wine too quickly, and ended up coughing hard. The slap Xena gave Gabrielle to loosen up her breathing knocked all the air out of her. At length Gabrielle managed to say, “Can you tell us exactly what’s happening? Calypso’s scroll wasn’t... precise.”

“It’s All Hallows,” said Marian. She was clearly the main spokesperson for the outlaws. “It comes at the night of - ”

“The last night of October, the very beginning of November,” said Gabrielle, eagerly. “I’ve read about it. It’s a very important night here, isn’t it? Aren’t the dead supposed to walk?”

“I think that Gabrielle may have had a little too much wine,” said Xena, but Calypso interrupted.

“No, it’s true. Well, not that the dead walk.”

“So far as we know,” said Wood, leaning back and fixing his gaze on the sky. “But I wouldn’t deny any possibilities. For all we know, the dead may walk. If they do walk, it might be useful to us.”

Xena glanced at Marian in unspoken appeal, warrior to warrior. Marian smiled at her.

“Sorry, Xena. In a nutshell, this is the situation: we’ve been living here for the last ten years. I think that there were people here who lived as we do now,

people who'd rejected the corrupt laws that have been thrust upon us. But they died out, and we took over their old camps. Because the forest is as deep as it is, we've managed to stay safe. The sheriff's men won't come this far in: they've been brought up on stories of ghosts and demons. We steal from the rich, and the corrupt, and we do what we can to administer a real justice. We do our best to look after the poor and the helpless. And until recently, we had achieved a kind of balance."

"But now the sheriff has gone appealing to our king's brother for help in rooting us out," said Wood. "We were lucky, we intercepted some letters that told us all we needed to know. It's been fear and lack of men on their side that's allowed us to maintain a balance, but that is about to change. Prince John has agreed to provide soldiers to help the sheriff. They intend to take us, hang us, and destroy the forest."

Xena stared at him. "How do they propose to do that?"

"They'll use vats of pitch and fire to take out the main part of the forest. Because of the recent rain,..." Gabrielle avoided catching Xena's eye, "it'll be harder for them. But with enough men, enough pitch and fire, sooner or later they'll do it. Those of us left, if any of us survive, are unlikely to be numerous enough to begin this work again. And the myth of our work, the strength of which is greater than any of us, and which ultimately counts for more, will be gone.

"Xena, Gabrielle, we are not fools. We all know that we are part of a system of magic that cannot survive much longer. The cunning women know how we feel; and that if we go, they're probably next on the list."

"The cunning women?"

"The witches," said Marian. "All Hallows is an important night for them, too. On that night they celebrate what they call the Lady of Reaping..."

"Cerridwen. The Dark One. Keeper of the ancient way. Of course," said Gabrielle. "I've heard of her.

"It's a blend of rites for them. On the one hand there is Cerridwen, the female part, and on the other there is - "

"This one I think I know," said Xena. "Cernunnos, Horned One, lord of winter." She glanced at Gabrielle. "We Greeks have something similar in our beliefs."

"All our gods are connected," said Marian. "But yes, for the purpose of the cunning ones, it is Cerridwen and Cernunnos that matter most to them at this

time of year. They are concerned, always, with balance. I think that is why they have tolerated our presence in the forest: they understand that we are trying to right the balance, while King Richard is far away. At first we couldn't understand why the sheriff planned to stage this attack on the night of All Hallows..."

"Then it all made sense," said Wood. "Our enemies know that half the women in the village will join with the cunning ones in their ceremonies, and they know how sacred All Hallows is to the peasants. It is the time when the veil between the worlds is weakest, and the power of the cunning ones is at its height. If we can be beaten on that one night, of all nights, the sheriff's men will not only have proved to peasants and soldiers alike that there is nothing within the wood that cannot be beaten, they will have undermined the faith of the people in things unseen."

"It looks like it's going to be a significant time all round," said Xena, "Especially if we're going to have the cunning ones weaving their circles while the sheriff and his men try to torch the forest." She looked at the trees around them. "Some of these must be five or six hundred years old."

"Many are more ancient still. There are yew trees nearby that are a thousand years old."

"And they intend to destroy it all?"

"They have cartloads of salt," said Marian, grimly. "They have been collecting stores for months, but we had not understood what their intention was. The letter we intercepted explained it all: what ground they cannot burn they aim to poison."

"Right," said Xena, emphatically. "Gabrielle and I will help you in any way that we can. What plans do you have in hand?"

Gabrielle followed Calypso through the trees. The rain had stopped, and the silence about them awed Gabrielle. It had been her decision to reach Albion, but she was homesick for Greece, kept looking up for a reassuring glimpse of blue sky. Xena had stayed behind, talking battle plans with Marian and Wood. She had taken Gabrielle aside after the first discussion. "Gabrielle, if we are going to stand a chance in this battle, we will need as many allies as possible. I don't think we stand a chance without our attack coming from two separate groups."

"I know what's coming. You want me to go and talk to the cunning women."

“Exactly. Gabrielle, you’re an Amazon queen. Your beliefs and theirs may be very similar. Tell them exactly what is planned for the forest and then ask for their help. They will give it willingly or not at all. Do your best. I think their aid would be invaluable.”

Calypso had agreed to take Gabrielle as far as the edge of the forest, near to where the cunning women met. Gabrielle found herself strangely excited and a little frightened, too. She had only ever thought of magic as an entirely uneven science. When she thought of Alti, she always thought of her as The Witch. But according to Marian and Calypso, both of whom had joined the rituals of the cunning women, there was nothing evil or dangerous in their work within the Craft. “They believe in the existence of a female deity,” said Marian. “She is all things and ages, Maid, Mother and Crone.”

When Calypso left Gabrielle, the bard went on nervously, trying to walk silently, trying not to appear afraid.

Late that day, before the light had dimmed, Xena, Marian and Wood drew out their battle plans in the soft earth of the forest floor. All around the circle, the outlaws worked on the preparation of arrows. Xena heard the sound of approaching footsteps first and spun around, a hand on her chakram. Into the circle walked Gabrielle and the leader of the cunning women. Xena put out a hand and the woman bowed deeply. “Gabrielle has told me everything,” she said. “And although I realise that this work will put us at great risk, that risk is as great to us all. My sisters and I agree that we have no other choice but to join with you.”

Xena bowed in return. “Thank you,” she said. “I hoped that you would come.”

“Your friend is very persuasive.” Xena raised an eyebrow at Gabrielle, who blushed very deeply and kicked at a patch of earth. “And I understand from her that you and the others are sympathetic to our cause.” She looked among them, saw Marian and smiled. “Sister,” she said.

“Sister,” Maden replied.

Marian hugged the witch. “I hoped you’d come to us.”

“I had not realised how strong the tide of tyranny had become,” said Maden. “But I should have done. This is a busy time of year for us, but I cannot let that stand as an excuse. We have become too involved in our own way of life to pay full attention to what has been changing on the far edges of our world, though our readings have of late held warnings of a threat from the outside.”

Xena decided that the polite talk had gone on long enough. “If you join with us, I don’t mean for you or any of your followers to fight. While Wood, Marian and I will lead the archers, I need you to go ahead and hold your Samhain ceremony here.” Maden looked searchingly at Xena.

“Don’t exaggerate our capacities, Xena. We will do the best we can.”

“I don’t,” said Xena. “But I have a lot of faith in the power that you may be able to harness. And we’ll need all the power that we can get. It’ll take more than one kind of magic to win this particular war.”

“The others have already gone in search of the horses,” said Wood. “They’ll come back under cover of darkness, leading them. If need be, we’ll go out again tomorrow.”

“Good,” said Xena. “And everyone who can move is making arrows.” She looked again at Maden. “I know that your followers are skilled in the uses of herbs and flowers. We’ll need that skill, together with all the woven cloth that you can lay hands upon. We’ll need a lot of dye, too.” She turned back to her battle plans. Gabrielle raised an eyebrow.

“Dye?”

“Dye.”

“I’m not going to ask. Fine. Dye, and lots and lots of cloth..”

“Go make some more arrows, Gabrielle.”

That night Xena and Gabrielle spent in one of the wooden cabins. They lay down in an unexpected privacy amidst the light of several candles. Xena glanced at their illumination. “Have you decided to swap sides, and light the fire from inside the forest?” asked Xena, amused. Gabrielle, who was sitting at the makeshift window, looking up for a glimpse of the moon, shook her head.

“I’m a little scared, I guess. I shouldn’t be; after all, we’ve faced down enemies by the dozen. But this feels so alien. Here you and I are, miles and miles from Greece, about to go to war again, and all I can think is that I’m...”

“Homesick?” Gabrielle sighed.

“Yes. How did you know? Isn’t it crazy? Yes, homesick. And yet we’ve got nearly everything we’d have in Greece...”

“Except for Argo.”

“Which is a major loss.”

“And good weather.”

“Another major loss.”

“And Joxer.”

“Less of a loss,” Gabrielle admitted. “Though it would cheer me up to watch him trying to make arrows.” Her own hands ached from that activity, and were liberally scratched. “He’d probably sever both his hands at the wrist.”

“Probably. Gabrielle, come to bed.”

“I’ll never sleep.”

“Who said anything about sleeping?” Xena reached out and caught Gabrielle round the waist, wrestling her gently onto the bed. She bent over Gabrielle’s stomach and kissed her softly. “Why would we want to sleep? It’s not as if we’d spent the day doing anything very involved.” She began pulling open the bard’s leather shirt. She bent her head over Gabrielle’s breasts, and Gabrielle moaned softly.

Xena ran her hand down to the fastenings of Gabrielle’s skirt and began to loosen them. Gabrielle moved to put her arms around Xena but the warrior shook her off. She swung round until she was sitting over Gabrielle, Gabrielle’s wrists caught in one hand. With the other she stroked Gabrielle’s face. Gabrielle tried to catch the moving fingers, to kiss them, and Xena said, “Gabrielle, how exactly did you get Maden to join us? What was it that she said? Something about your being very persuasive...”

“You think I did something with Maden?” Gabrielle was taken aback. “Xena, you know that I’d - ”

“She is very attractive, after all.” Her hand ran over Gabrielle’s breasts, then dipped down lower. Because of the difference in their heights, Xena could easily hold Gabrielle’s hands and at the same time, run her other hand lightly over Gabrielle’s cunt, tracing designs in the soft hair. “I can imagine the two of you together...”

“Xena!” Xena let go of Gabrielle’s hands and slid down the bed until she knelt between Gabrielle’s thighs. She stroked the skin and then bent forward, at the same time sliding her hands beneath Gabrielle and lifting her up. By the time she tugged Gabrielle firmly toward her and had buried her tongue inside Gabrielle’s cunt the bard had entirely lost track of the conversation. Xena, on

the other hand, had not. She lowered Gabrielle, slid two fingers inside her, and grinned wickedly.

“I can just imagine her doing this. I wonder if those long nails would scratch. Of course, I suppose she’d be gentle with someone like you, an Amazon queen, all fingertips and lips. Not...” She grinned, “knowing what you like best, Gabrielle.” And she pressed a third finger inside, at the same time stretching out over Gabrielle so that she could kiss her, her tongue snaking across the bard’s lips before pressing inside. Gabrielle was too caught up in Xena’s demands to argue the point. Whenever the warrior was close to a battle, it was as if her sex-drive went up a notch. Gabrielle didn’t feel the same – she was either too busy or too worried about what might happen to Xena during the battle to have any positive feelings – but Xena’s appetite for Gabrielle awakened complementary desires in the bard.

“I think I can remember what you like best, too,” said Gabrielle, trying to work free of the warrior’s embrace to demonstrate. But Xena kept her held, and kept fucking her, until Gabrielle shivered, moaned and kissed Xena back so hard that Xena felt as if her blood was on fire. The kiss went on and on, each of them so involved in the moment that the forest could have burned down there and then, and probably neither of them would have noticed.

Fortunately, it didn’t.

All Hallows smelled of mud and blood and smoke. In the surrounding villages, decisions had been made over which animals to keep alive, for purposes of breeding in the coming year, and which to kill. The carcasses of the animals slaughtered were preserved in salt. The smell of blood and smoke reached Gabrielle as she bound twine round the neck of yet another arrow. It turned her stomach a little.

In the forest proper the atmosphere was that of alertness and low-burning fury. Xena’s mood seemed to have infected everyone. Gabrielle looked up at the warrior and smiled to herself. In her memory she could see Xena’s face as it had been in the candle-light, her eyes wild and her mouth hungry and demanding. Perhaps it was not entirely appropriate to think this and feel herself grow wet between the legs as she worked, but when Gabrielle saw Xena go marching by (with a sudden, unexpectedly sweet smile at the bard) she decided it was pretty much acceptable. After all, by dawn they could all be dead.

Gabrielle thought about everything that lay ahead of them, and tried not to worry. She finished the arrow and began working on another.

Maden had invited Gabrielle to participate in the ceremony of the cunning women and Gabrielle felt torn between factions. She mentioned the fact to Xena. “My, you really did a job on her,” said Xena. Then she leant over, kissed Gabrielle very hard and said, “You should go with them tonight. I’ll miss you at my side, but I need you to be with Maden and the others.” She began to walk away and then spun round, went back and kissed Gabrielle once more. The outlaws working in the area by Gabrielle were pleasantly diverted by these kisses. “Just to stake my claim,” said Xena. “Don’t make me have to come get you back when it’s all over.” Gabrielle grinned broadly, and watched the warrior stride off across the forest floor before returning to her task.

Marian and Wood had overseen the capture of those horses they had not been able or willing to borrow. There were outlaws who had been brought up around the animals, who calmed them in a manner Xena thought Argo would have approved of. And the dyeing had been done. The fabric had been cut into cloak-size, and was black without and white within. The cloaks wouldn’t be fully dry by the time the riders went into battle but that was hardly an issue: the effect that the cloaks would have would be sufficient, Xena and Marian agreed. Everyone would have enough arrows for the first attack, and there would be new supplies nearby that could be employed. The air crackled. There would be a full moon that night.

“Which is as it should be,” said Maden.

“Which is how it ought to be,” thought Xena. She could smell the imminent battle in the air. Xena’s blood was pulsing almost as rapidly as it had the night before, when Gabrielle had wrestled with her and... Come on, warrior princess, Xena told herself. Get that look off your face. There’s a time and a place, and this really isn’t it... But when she looked around she saw similar expressions on the faces around her. Apparently she and Gabrielle hadn’t been the only ones who’d gone without much sleep the night before. Xena grinned, and hurried on.

The moon rose over the forest. It shone very white and still above the outlaws. Xena was everywhere. Wood and Marian had completed their preparations. Gabrielle had gone to join the cunning women, and had been just a little startled to discover that the rite was to be held sky-clad. Never had she missed the warm nights of Greece quite so much, she thought, taking off her clothes.

The cunning women formed a circle, Gabrielle saw on the ground before her a fine gold candle and a silver one. Maden spoke first. “We are met in the place that exists outside place, in the time that exists outside time,” she said, and at the sound of her clear voice it was as if the forest was suddenly filled with a new entity: Gabrielle could feel it in the marrow of her bones. Suddenly she forgot about being cold, and feeling confused and alien. When the women on

either side of her took her hands, Gabrielle was suffused with a sense of how very much she wanted to be where she was.

“We come together to worship our lady, the Lady of Reaping, Cerridwen, keeper of the ancient way.

The outlaws who had proved best at riding mounted their horses, the light-coloured insides of their cloaks beginning to billow in the wind. As they rode, the cloaks would spread out, and in the light of the moon, with the horses daubed with black, it would seem that they flew.

“We light a silver candle in honour of Hecate, the goddess in her Crone aspect.”

The archers were in their places behind and in the trees. Xena reined in her horse and wished Argo had been with her. Gabrielle, too...

“We light a golden candle in the name of Cernunnos, Horned One, lord of winter.”

The army of the sheriff came forward. The sheriff’s new forces, their voices muted but mocking, approached the forest they intended to destroy. The sky was lit with the brilliance of their torches.

The silver of the moon seemed brighter than the golden light of the torches.

“Now is the sabbat of our new year. We honour the Craft with the rite of bread and wine.”

Xena led the riders. The wind raced past them as they galloped out. The army facing them saw a rush of winged creatures racing toward them. Creatures out of hell, firing lighted arrows into the barrels of steaming pitch, igniting them where they stood.

The arrows filled the sky. The sound of their flight was like the beating of wings.

The women raised their hands to the moon. They broke the bread and shared the wine.

Xena glanced back and saw something that... she would never talk about, even to Gabrielle, though Gabrielle had seen it too, looking up for a second from the ritual held in the centre of the wood. From the depths of the forest came a thing of legend, a thing of dream and nightmare. The Wild Hunt. Led by Herne, the horned god, and followed by a thousand ghostly riders and their horses and a thousand hounds, whose baying filled up the night.

Most of the sheriff's army lay dead, arrows sticking out of the bodies at all angles. Those of the army who had survived the arrows and the spilled pitch fled, screaming and formless. The outlaws let the salt run over the burning pitch, and at some point as the dawn approached, Xena and Gabrielle found one another in the moonlight. They stood very still and very close together.

“The circle is open, yet unbroken. The candles are extinguished. The rite is ended. Dark Mother, Horned One, we give thanks for your presence and ask your protection in this wildest and most sacred of nights.”

“Xena, can we please go home, now?”

“Yes.”

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