

The Colosseum: I

The day's killing was done. The air was thick with the smell of blood.

The warrior stood over the body of her enemy, panting. Her dark hair was heavy with sweat and it was only the dregs of adrenalin still coursing through her body that kept her from falling to her knees; the hand that held the blood-marked sword was trembling.

High above the arena, in the seat of honour, the empress clapped her hands. A vanguard of Roman soldiers responded by entering the arena to take Xena's sword from her. Even after two years, she was still considered too dangerous to be approached by less than five soldiers. Xena dropped her sword with an expression of dismissal and disgust, and a soldier reached down to rescue it from the ground. They gathered behind her to escort her from the arena: the guard might have seemed an accolade of sorts, but the crowd knew better. She marched in a direct line from the arena, back to the cages, back to bondage. The crowd cheered and applauded, and let the brightly coloured streamers in their hands catch the breeze in silent tribute to the most famous and deadly of the gladiators.

The Colosseum emptied by degrees. The last to go watched as the body of the dead woman was unceremoniously dragged away: the one-time Amazon reduced to fodder for the arena's beasts. On her way to the gladiators' enclosure, Gabrielle stared at the trail of blood left in the dead woman's wake, and blinked the useless tears away.

Those who had survived the day's sport and were still standing, or who had by luck or mischance not been selected for Empress Alti's entertainment, stood in silent tribute as Xena walked past them on her way to the bathing room, and solitary confinement.

Inside the bathing house she began stripping off her bloodstained armour. Any of the bathing-house slaves would have been pleased to help her, but it had been long clear to everyone that the warrior princess wanted no-one's help. So in some degree of privacy she stepped out of the uniform of the gladiator, and then, once she'd sluiced off the filth and blood, into a plain tunic.

On the days when they fought, the gladiators won a few graces beyond the wind-borne streamers. Alti had put these in place. Once bathed and changed, Xena was returned to the solitude of her cell, and a simple evening meal with a flagon of red wine. And later, when she had digested the uncomplicated dishes that were served the gladiators, she would be allowed the reward of a night's entertainment of a sexual partner.

When the keys turned in the lock and the door to her cell was opened, Xena didn't even look up. "Whoever it is, I don't want them," she said growled. When the door was not immediately closed, she glanced up, and into the face of the pale-faced young woman the guard had brought to her. "Didn't you hear me? I don't want any company."

The guard laughed shortly and said, "All the more for me, your highness." The grin on his face was pure appetite. Seeing it Xena hesitated, and looked again at the girl in his hands. For a single moment she stepped away from her own thoughts to absorb the look of fear and anger in the young face. The guard's possessive, lecherous expression sickened Xena. She had seen enough sacrifices for one day.

"Forget your appetite, Roman. I think that perhaps tonight I am a little... hungry for companionship after all." The guard swore shortly, shoved the young woman forward so that she stumbled and fell to her knees, and left the cell. Xena shouted after him: "Don't wait up. By the time I'm finished with her, there'll be nothing left for you."

Xena waited until she had heard the sound of the guard's footsteps die away and then bent down to help the young woman to her feet. "I'm not going to do anything to you, don't worry. I just didn't much like the idea of you spending the night with that... pig."

"Thank you." The girl stood up and pulled her tunic straight. She looked directly at Xena, "I had to do a lot of favours for a lot of people to get to you." She shrugged back the hood of her cloak and Xena saw for the first time the good clean lines of her face.

"I'm honoured," said Xena, her voice heavy with irony. "But I'm afraid you're wasting your time. I don't fuck slaves. Everyone knows that."

"You make that sound as though there's a difference between us, but you're just as much a slave as I am." said the woman. Xena considered this.

"Fair point. Do you have a name, or shall I just continue to call you 'slave'?"

"Gabrielle. I need you to teach me how to fight." Xena blinked.

"Why not just stick to what you're good at?" she asked. The girl went red, and clenched her hands.

"Is this all you are? I heard that you were the warrior princess. I heard that you headed an army that was only ever beaten by the Romans." Xena scowled furiously.

“I was betrayed. Alti had spies everywhere and I made mistakes in who I could trust. Now I know better: I don’t trust anyone.”

“You can trust me.”

“I don’t even know you. You could be another of Alti’s spies, though the Gods know what you’d be hoping to learn. I don’t have an army now, I don’t have anything. I’m good for pulling and pleasing the crowds, and that’s all. And you look nothing like a soldier. Do you even know one end of a sword from the other?”

“I know what a sword can do. Alti took my family from me. Then she took my village. There’s nothing left there now but ash. She kept me alive for the same reason she always does... There’s nothing worse than knowing that everyone you love is dead.” Xena poured out a cup of wine and offered it to Gabrielle. Surprised, Gabrielle accepted it. Xena shook her head.

“Drink. But you’re wrong. There are worse things. The worst of all is to have no hope. Once hope is gone, there’s nothing left to live for.”

“When why do you still fight?” Xena appeared to consider the question.

“Because I still haven’t lost the will to live, I suppose. Maybe it’s just because I don’t like losing. Now what is this insane idea about your learning to fight? I’ve got to tell you, you’re hardly built for it. A strong gust of wind would knock you over.”

“I could fight if you taught me.”

“Or die trying?”

“I’d rather die on my feet than live on my back.” Gabrielle had spirit, Xena had to admit the fact. And she was attractive... For the first time in months Xena felt the touch of an emotion that wasn’t anger or hatred. “If I can fight, I have a way out. Otherwise I’ll die here. I’m Greek, like you, and a long way from home. I want to get back there.” Xena laughed out loud.

“Oh, so you think you can last a hundred fights in the arena and gain your freedom? I’ll give you this, Gabrielle, you haven’t given up. But you’re a fool. If you went out there with a sword in your hand, you’d be dead within an minute. Probably less.” Gabrielle shook her head.

“Not if you taught me! Xena, you’ve lasted longer than anyone. You’re becoming a legend.” A rapping noise at the door and then the guard’s voice again.

“You finished with her yet?” Had he seen Xena’s expression at that moment he might have died on the spot. Gritting her teeth the warrior managed,

“Finished with someone as sweet and young as this? Come back in the morning.” The guard laughed out loud. Xena indicated the pallet bed on which she slept.

“He’s still outside, listening. We need to convince him,” she whispered. “He can’t see the pallet from the door but I think he’s got an ear to the door. Now, when I say moan, you moan, alright?” Gabrielle’s eyes were huge and scared but she nodded. “Alright,” Xena added. “Over to the corner, now, and moan.” They moved over and lay down. The warrior automatically moved to shield Gabrielle from the guard’s view. “Right,” she whispered. “Moan. And moan in a good way.”

Gabrielle’s performance might have fooled a more intelligent audience; she’d heard enough fake moans to manage a few of her own. Xena hid a smile. After a few minutes she said, “I think that worked. But we’d better stay here a bit longer.”

“Will you teach me how to fight? If you put in a word for me they’d put me into the cells here. We could train together. You could show me – “

“Wait! Wait... I haven’t said anything about helping you. Why should I even bother?” Gabrielle shrugged off the cloak she wore.

“Because I don’t think you want to die here, a slave. And because I don’t think you’ve fully given up hope.”

“You think I’ve lost hope?” Xena’s voice was ragged. “You don’t even know me.”

“A little, I do. I’ve seen you out in the arena, I’ve seen you fight. And I know that you’ve never dragged out any kill you’ve had to inflict. And sometimes, when you think no-one’s looking, I’ve seen another expression in your eyes.”

Xena wasn’t happy with idea of being watched so closely; it smacked too closely of Alti and her spies. Her anger increased. “Oh? And what do you think you’ve seen? You’d better make it a good answer, or I’ll give you back to the guard.”

Gabrielle looked her straight in the face. “Despair,” she said. “And pain.” Xena almost shook her.

“What right have you to say that?”

“I thought that perhaps I could help you.” At that Xena grabbed Gabrielle by the shoulders and did shake her, and fury ran through her like a fever.

“Help me? What possible help could you be to me, you... little... whore?”

The moment the last word was out, Xena’s fury passed. She flung Gabrielle away from her and retreated to the far side of the cell. For a moment Xena could not even see - her eyes were blind with tears.

Gabrielle hesitated for a moment before saying, “Yes, I am a whore. Now. And you’re a slave. I please whoever I’m sent to, you please the audience in the arena. Are we so different? I’ve heard them call you the warrior princess. But you’re a warrior princess in chains... Alti’s broken us both. Perhaps we’d both be better off dead.” She stood up. “I’m sorry. I really thought that you might help me.” She moved toward the door. “Don’t worry. I’ll call for the guard.”

Gabrielle’s hands were on the rough surface of the wood before Xena spoke.

“Don’t.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Don’t... call him.”

“Alright.”

“I’m sorry... for what I called you.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve been called a whore.”

“No.” Xena sought about for the right words and couldn’t find them. “You’re right. We’re both... Alti’s tools. But, Gabrielle, I don’t know if you could ever make a fighter.”

“If you don’t try to teach me,” Gabrielle spoke simply, “then neither of us will ever know.” She heaved a deep breath. “Anyway, there’s nothing else to discuss and...” her tone changed. “I’m here, after all. Do you want me?”

Xena drew in her breath. In the two long years she’d spent as a gladiator she had never made use of the young women sent in to her as a reward for a fight well fought. She had never wanted anyone. So why did she want this one? What made Gabrielle different? Because she was Greek, like Xena? Because talking to her made Xena remember a wider world, a better world that she’d almost driven from her mind? Because she felt oddly comfortable in

Gabrielle's company? Xena didn't know. All that she was aware of was a wash of passion that made her heart pound and she didn't know what to do. Gabrielle must have understood something of the dilemma Xena was facing, because she walked slowly toward her, took the warrior princess' scarred hands in her own and gently kissed them.

At the touch of Gabrielle's soft lips, the wall of restraint inside Xena broke down. Xena growled. She took Gabrielle's shoulders in her grip, pushed her across the cell until she stood with her back to the wall in the corner by the pallet. She bent her head and kissed Gabrielle, running her tongue over the surface of Gabrielle's white teeth, then pressing inside the warm, welcoming mouth. She tore open the tunic Gabrielle wore and pressed her hands against her breasts, feeling the nipples grow erect beneath her palms. And Gabrielle didn't back away, but pulled Xena closer still.

Xena bent her knees and lifted Gabrielle to the ground. She lay half across Gabrielle, one of her hands in Gabrielle's short hair, the other running down across her breasts to her soft, smooth stomach, and then to the tops of Gabrielle's thighs. They kissed again, and this time Xena's tongue found Gabrielle's. She felt Gabrielle's hands in her own hair, pulling her impossibly closer.

Gabrielle could feel Xena's needs as clearly as if they were her own. She ran her hands inside Xena's clothes, over the high breasts, the lean, flat stomach and then without hesitation reached inside her.

When she felt Gabrielle's fingers inside her cunt Xena shivered convulsively, and came with a jolt of wild sexuality that dizzied her. Seeing the effect she was having, Gabrielle held the contact, sliding her fingers in and out of Xena's cunt until Xena came for the second time, and then fell back on the pallet bed.

But Gabrielle couldn't stop. She swung her body across Xena's, their bodies so close that the two heartbeats might have been one, and kissed her again, feeling the rising warmth of Xena's body. She ran her tongue down from Xena's lips to her breasts. And Xena put out her hands and pushed Gabrielle upwards, until the girl was sitting across her. She cupped Gabrielle's breasts in her hands, then she ran her hands along Gabrielle's thighs until they reached her cunt.

Xena caught Gabrielle up and swept over onto the bed, holding Gabrielle's legs with her body, reaching into Gabrielle's cunt with slim, strong fingers. They couldn't stop kissing, and throughout the embrace, Xena maintained the merciless motion of her fingers. Their skins grew sticky with sweat. Then she pulled Gabrielle over onto her back on the pallet and began kissing her cunt, pressing her tongue inside Gabrielle as she continued to fuck her.

Some time before dawn they slept, Gabrielle held tightly in Xena's arms. Xena could not understand how such a contrived meeting could have become an erotic delight, but she couldn't bring herself to regret a moment of what had happened. She pulled the blankets over them with her left hand. Her right arm pillowed Gabrielle's head. She had thought that Gabrielle was sleeping, but the girl whispered softly, "You will teach me how to fight?"

Xena pressed her cheek against Gabrielle's hair, ran her tongue lightly round Gabrielle's ear and whispered back, "Alright, Gabrielle, I'll teach you how to fight." She wasn't entirely sure, but she thought she heard a muted "Thank you," from the girl. Xena closed her eyes and for the first time in two years, slept well and without dreams.

II

"How interesting." Alti looked oddly satisfied. "After two years of solitude, this..."

She dismissed the guard without another word, and then went to stand by the tall window that overlooked the arena. Since she had beaten Rome, and become its leader, she took more satisfaction in the Colosseum than in anything else. Being in control of the Colosseum was better than holding a thousand deaths in the palm of her hand. The battles she ordered to be staged, and the partnerings she demanded, left her feeling closer to godhood than anything else she had done. Seeing Xena fight was always a pleasure, but for two years she had failed to see Xena lose control. She had seen Xena fight with skill, with tenacity, with muted anger, but never with... passion. But at last the warrior princess had finally given Alti what she'd always hoped for: a tool. So the princess had taken one of the whores under her wing, and was even teaching her how to fight... Had she not been told this, she would never have guessed at it.

It would not be difficult to ascertain the facts just given to her, but in her heart Alti knew it would be unnecessary. She had always known that Xena's trust was what she needed most badly to destroy. When they had met in battle Xena had been half-mad with the assault on her forces, an assault that had been made possible by Alti's spies. When Alti had had Xena's forces slaughtered, she had made sure the princess stood in chains before the scene. Xena had gone half-mad, trying to escape, and the scars on her wrists would remind Xena of how powerless she had felt... until she fought her final battle, lost, and died. For the first time Alti envisaged how Xena's final defeat would be. Clapping her hands she recalled the guard. He looked at her with fear, so she smiled, thus chilling his blood still further.

“Make sure Xena has what she wants. And more. Do it grudgingly, though, or she’ll doubt your motives. Make the girl her fighting partner. Make the girl her cell-mate, too. Oh, and one thing more...” She indicated to the guard that he was to approach. He did so with obvious fear. “If you hang about their cell again, I’ll have you skinned and fed to the hyenas. Do you understand?” The man was so frightened that he forgot to wait for Alti’s dismissal, almost running from the room. How had the witch known that he was hanging about the warrior’s cell?

“Gabrielle!” Xena’s voice was harsh. “Again. And this time, keep your eyes on me. You have to see not just what I’m doing, but what I’m going to do. You must be able to see where the next blow will come from. Unless you can do that, you won’t be ready for the arena.. And if you’re not ready, you’ll get yourself killed. Now, again. And this time, don’t lose control. Keep your emotion at arm’s reach. I’ll come at you and you keep me off. Right?”

It was morning, bright and clear, and in the exercise yard Xena and Gabrielle went over their paces, wooden swords in hand, time and time again. The sun rose overhead, and in the shadow of the Colosseum, a sand-coloured cat suckled three sand-coloured kittens.

During a break from practice, Gabrielle dropped to the ground by Xena’s feet to watch the other gladiators going through their training. Her breath came quickly, and the perspiration was running liberally down her spine. Xena had pushed them both very hard in the exercise yard. And Gabrielle was tired, for the night before, Xena had pushed them both very hard in far more pleasurable ways. It seemed unlikely, bruised, gasping and exhausted as she was, but for the first time in over a year, Gabrielle found that she was almost happy.

For the first time since she’d been captured, Xena had some sense of direction again. Before she’d been used to training armies, now she had just the one pupil. But the partnership that was springing up between Xena and Gabrielle was communicating itself to the other gladiators. When Xena put Gabrielle through her paces, beginning with the stretches and exercises that would give Gabrielle a fighter’s mobility, she had noticed that Gabrielle was not the only one following her training.

Xena was proud of Gabrielle’s dedication, but she would never have thought to tell her so. She was impressed by Gabrielle’s tenacity... it reminded her of her early days. And each time she disarmed Gabrielle, knocking her down, or knocking her sword from her hand, she watched the bard get back to her feet.

The bard... Xena had only learned that title by accident. She had not known that Gabrielle was better known for her story-telling than any of her other skills

(which surprised Xena a little). That night she asked Gabrielle about the stories.

“I was walking past the other day when you were talking to the children,” she said. There were always children hanging about the Colosseum, hoping to see the lions, hoping to see the gladiators. She had seen Gabrielle seated on the dusty ground on the other side of the bars, narrating some or other history to them. “They looked to be eating from your hand.”

“It was what I always wanted, in the old days, to be a bard. I’d heard all the famous stories and although I was happy to re-tell them, I always wanted to write my own. Then Alti came, and everything changed. It’s been a long time since I told any new story to the children.”

“It’s not just the children,” Xena remarked. “I’ve seen the other gladiators listening in, the soldiers too, sometimes. What was today’s episode?” For several moments Gabrielle said nothing. Xena raised an eyebrow. “Gabrielle? What was the story?”

Gabrielle took a deep breath before saying, “I was telling them about the warrior princess.”

“You were telling them about me?”

“Yes.” Gabrielle looked levelly at Xena. “Is that so bad? I told them about the army you led.”

“I wish you hadn’t,” said Xena. “I’m not wholly proud of that time in my life. And besides, I lost, remember. That can’t make for much of a story.”

“Who says that’s the end of the story?” Gabrielle’s colour rose. “Just because you’re here, now, who says that that’s the end? Think about the heroes who suffered but finally were freed. Sometimes you make me think of Prometheus.”

“Who was he? Another warlord?”

“No. He stole the gift of fire from the gods and gave it to us. When the gods found out what he had done, they chained him to a rock in the wilderness. And Zeus was so angry that he wouldn’t stop there... He sent an eagle to tear out Prometheus’s liver, day after day.” Xena envisaged the suffering Prometheus must have felt and compared it to her own servitude. She scowled.

“Is he there still?”

“No. At last even Zeus took pity on him, and sent Hercules to kill the eagle. Do you see what I mean, Xena? Even something that awful can finally end...”

Xena said nothing, but later that night when they lay down together on the pallet bed she took Gabrielle in her arms, and kissed her, and held her until she was sleeping. Xena lay with her eyes open long after Gabrielle was sleeping, envisaging Prometheus in agony, thinking about her fallen armies, thinking about Alti holding her there in chains, watching the destruction. Zeus might have sent Hercules as an emissary, but Xena would have to tear her own chains out of that rock.

Alti... Xena had heard of the witch long before they'd met. She'd heard of the dark magic that Alti employed. On the day that Alti defeated Xena, Alti had brought down the black clouds upon the army. The black clouds concealed the loathsome forms of Alti's dead warriors. They stabbed at Xena's forces from above, and their swords were steeped in poison: Xena had seen her followers writhe and die in agony as the poison ran its course, their faces contorted and blackened. There was some faint satisfaction in the knowledge that Alti had had to call upon the dark forces to defeat Xena, but that had not helped Xena to witness such destruction without losing some part of her own soul.

When she had been condemned, not to a quick and merciful death but to the ranks of the gladiators, Xena had only succeeded in surviving because she had deadened her feelings to her opponents. She had known that she could not afford feelings, which was why her growing affection for Gabrielle was such a two-edged sword. If Alti knew about the new partnership... Xena shook her head. Of course Alti would know. And Alti had not prevented the bonding, must have encouraged it. For the first time in two years Xena was aware of fear. Not fear for herself, fear for Gabrielle. Xena would have to be careful. In some respects she had already gone too far. She closed her eyes and tried not to let the hideous image of Gabrielle chained and bloody that had risen inside her thoughts extend into her dreams.

III

The slaves of the Colosseum were hard at work.

It was still early, but already the air was hot. The sky was a brilliant blue above the Colosseum. The broad supporting pillars seemed to sprout from the dusty sand. The vendors of wine, honey, olives, bread and sweetmeats were already preparing their stands, and the scent of their wares mingled in the morning air.

The sense of anticipation pervaded every level of the Colosseum and Xena lay motionless on the pallet, Gabrielle's warm sleeping body pressed against her.

By eleven o'clock that morning the gladiators would know who (or what) they would be facing when the day's performance began. Xena knew that she would be fighting, because she nearly always did; but she was relieved to know that Gabrielle was still too inexperienced to be let loose before the Roman crowds.

Gabrielle was shaping well: Xena had never known anyone (herself excluded) who had devoted themselves to martial training with such dedication. Every day she had to look away so as not to flinch when Gabrielle undressed, showing a body so set about with bruises that it brought unwelcome tears to Xena's eyes. For her own part she was almost unmoved by the long march to the arena; she had walked the path of the dead too many times. She was possibly nearing her final appearance, when the one hundred fights were over... but she had always accepted that every fight before the arena's crowds had the potential to be her last. Xena sat up and regarded Gabrielle's sleeping body. Gabrielle's face bore the faintest trace of a smile. She was gently stroking the fair hair back from Gabrielle's brow when she heard a babble of voices rising in the distance.

Xena crossed the room and stood at the door. The voices were a muddled intrusion, but bit by bit the words she heard became separate and their message clear. She heaved a deep, painful sigh, and for a moment shut her eyes. But denial would not do anything to improve the situation, and the situation was immutable. She sat down on the bed beside Gabrielle. As usual, the young woman woke in slow stages, but the expression on Xena's face penetrated the furthest recesses of sleep and she sat up, alarmed. "Xena?"

"I don't want you to worry, Gabrielle. There must be some mistake. And if there isn't a mistake, don't worry, I'll be there beside you." All the colour ran out of Gabrielle's face.

"I'm to fight in the Colosseum?"

"That's what it sounds like." Gabrielle swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

"Then I suppose that's what I must do." She stood up and went to the barrel of washing water in the corner of the room. She splashed water over her face, over and over again. Then she turned to Xena. "I wish..."

Xena's voice was gentle. "You wish what, love?"

Gabrielle's voice was uneven. "I wish I wasn't so frightened."

"You'll be fine once you get out there," Xena lied. "The anticipation is the worst part." Inside her head unwanted thoughts charged around... Of course

anticipation wasn't the worst part. Pain was the worst part. Pain and fear... Oh, and death, of course. "And remember, Gabrielle: today will provide great material for your stories." She smiled at Gabrielle, choking back her fears. "We'll go through the moves again. It's always better to be doing something." Anything would be better than that, she thought.

Far away from the cells, far away from the preparations for the fight, Alti held the chakram in both hands. It was a wonderful thing, a work of art as much as a weapon. When she had taken it from Xena, when Xena had been chained up and was helpless, she had seen real pain in the eyes of the warrior. It was an inflicted wound that Xena would never get over. And she'd seen the devastation that Xena could wield with the chakram. There was a symbiosis between weapon and warrior. Alti had begun the process of breaking Xena by letting her watch the destruction of her army; she had consolidated that process by taking the chakram from Xena. Today she would exercise her will in inflicting a final wound, and by the end of the day the warrior princess would be dead or broken. Alti grinned with a kind of mad joy. Then she took up a cloth and polished the chakram until the metal seemed to shine from within.

Handbills detailing the day's activities were everywhere, posted to the walls, blowing in the wind. Gabrielle, on her way to the armoury, picked one up. Xena had already read a copy, and ripped it to pieces. Now Gabrielle read in clear, concise print the details of the day's fights. Things weren't good, of course, but the Gods knew, they could be worse. Gabrielle shook her head... It wasn't possible to dismiss her fear, whether it be fear of dying and being taken from Xena, or of fear of letting Xena down. The two of them were to face an unknown enemy. She would be given a staff to fight with, and Xena would have a sword. At least they would be fighting with weapons they were used to.

Xena joined her, already in armour. "Here," she said, selecting a staff and tossing to the bard. "That's the right fighting weight for you." Gabrielle balanced the staff in her hands. "Chalk on your hands, then you won't find your grip slipping. Oh, and don't eat anything more before you go in."

"I shouldn't have eaten anything at all, Xena." Gabrielle's composure was slipping just a little. Xena grinned sympathetically.

"Been sick?" Gabrielle nodded. The words did not seem to equate with the half-hour of painful retching that had assailed her once she'd finally accepted that she was about to fight in the arena. "That's best. Saves you from entertaining the crowds by throwing up when we get out there. You're not the only one," she added. "It happens to everyone first time. To some it happens every time." She had made Gabrielle feel slightly better. "Come on, the first time you related one of your stories to a crowd, didn't you feel bad?"

Gabrielle cast her mind back to that other world and tried to remember. Yes, she had felt nervous, but there had been a heady anticipation, too, that was nothing like this grinding ache. She lied bravely and said, “Yes.” Then she hesitated and said, “Xena, before we go out there, there’s something I want to say to you.”

Xena raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you don’t want it to wait until we get back to the cell?” It was hard to tell which of them was lying more sincerely. Gabrielle managed a smile.

“Yes...You’re right. It’ll wait.” She drew in a deep breath and suddenly the words came tumbling out, unbidden, unwanted. “Xena, you have to know now. I’m so afraid of letting you down, getting you killed. You matter more to me than life.”

“And you don’t think I feel the same?” Xena reached for a sword and made a few practice swings with it. She reached for a second sword. Then she turned to Gabrielle. “It doesn’t matter. You were right in you what you first said to me. I was in chains. But then Zeus sent you with a bow and arrow to shoot the eagle that was feeding on me. You’ve given me back a sense of purpose, Gabrielle. You’ve given me hope.” She relinquished the swords and then wiped the two unwanted tears that were beginning to run down Gabrielle’s cheeks. “Now, pick up your staff and let’s go see what they’ve got for us today.”

Together, as the gate was raised, Xena and Gabrielle walked out into the white blaze of the arena.

IV

Alti sat, her hands resting on the ornate arms of her chair. To her right and left stood her bodyguards. Before her on a low table stood a flagon of wine and a goblet decorated with precious stones. Alti had explored to the very depths the supply of treasures that Rome’s previous leaders had collected and enjoyed. Her dark clothes were edged in gold and her hands were heavy with rings. She rather enjoyed the contrast between her own decorated person and the stark simplicity with which the two gladiators were dressed. She watched with interest the combination of light and dark, strength and composure. She could not take in the expression on Xena’s face from such a distance, which frustrated her. She clapped her hands. “Bring the warrior to me.” Surprised, the guard set off on the errand. Delays of this sort were rare, but Alti knew the crowd’s appetite would only be increased by anticipation.

As Xena approached the royal stand, Alti walked down to the edge of the arena wall to greet her. “Xena,” she purred. “It’s been a long time.” Xena raised an eyebrow as she took in the exaggerated glamour of the witch.

“Not long enough, Alti,” she said. Her tone was light and mocking. Alti saw a hatred for her that ran through the warrior’s entire being. “Any time you feel like picking up a sword and meeting me in the arena, you have only to say. But I suppose such hands-on activity would be beneath you now that you’re dictator of Rome.”

Alti forced herself to smile. “But of course, human warfare isn’t your choice, is it, Alti? You’d prefer to hide behind your ghostly minions. You’d –“ she broke off, seeing for the first time that Alti wore at her side Xena’s own chakram, and felt the words she had wanted to speak dry in her mouth. Alti followed Xena’s gaze.

“A nice toy, isn’t it? I’m surprised that you gave it up so easily. Perhaps it doesn’t mean that much to you.” Xena forced a shrug.

“I’m getting by without it,” she said.

“And the story-teller, will you lose her as easily?” Xena frowned. “She’s a pretty little thing: I can imagine how she’s enhanced a one-time warrior’s lonely nights. And now like a lamb to the slaughter... I’ve been imagining how bright her blood will look when it spills. A little like a freshly-cut flower. An anemone, perhaps. Or a field poppy.” Alti laughed. “Go back and play, Xena. And perhaps when she’s dead, I’ll have her head hanging from the spikes outside my palace.” Xena spun around and began walking away. Perhaps she half-expected Alti to have her stopped, but she heard no barked orders as she strode, only the witch’s crackling, filthy laughter.

She rejoined Gabrielle. All the way back to her Xena had smiled, hiding as deep as she could the images that Alti had conjured up. Something must have shown, because Gabrielle said, “Xena, what is it?” Xena shrugged.

“It’s nothing. She wanted to show off the fact that she’s wearing my chakram. It means nothing. She only wanted to gloat. She’s good at that.”

“Your chakram. Xena, I thought you said that it had been lost.”

“No. She took it from me. When she took it, it was as if she’d severed one of my limbs. It was easier to imagine it lost. Sorry, Gabrielle. I wasn’t entirely honest with you about that. Now,...” looking out across the arena, “get ready for anything.”

Three fighters approached them. Two were armed with swords, the third with an ugly, jagged trident and a net. Xena snapped out the words: “Gabrielle, watch out for the net. Don’t let him get that close. Take one of the others. And remember, you’ve had a pretty good teacher. I know you won’t disappoint me.” There was a smile on her face as she faced down their opponents. One was a Roman she remembered meeting on the battlefield. She had given him the scar that ran across his face.

“The mighty warrior princess doesn’t look mighty now,” the man snarled. Xena grinned back.

“And you’re still in bondage to the witch. And that scar makes you almost pretty. Perhaps when I’m done with you, they’ll send you out as entertainment for the troops.” As they were intended to do, the words inflamed the man, and he rushed at Xena. She let him come on, and at the last moment leaped right and up, swinging her sword at his head as she flew. The ugly voice was cut off as the ugly head fell. Xena grinned again. “One down, Gabrielle,” she called. “Looks like they’re palming us off with the blind and stupid today.”

“We’re just the first,” snapped the man with the trident and net. “There’s another twenty armed and behind us. We’re just the warm-up. But I don’t think they’ll need more than us, Princess.” He swung the net at Gabrielle, who jumped nimbly backwards, remembering Xena’s instructions. As she side-stepped him, she aimed a blow with her staff at his wrist, and the sound of the bone snapping echoed round the arena. The crowd roared their delight, and the fight began in earnest.

Paralysed in one arm, the Roman swung the trident toward Gabrielle, and would have buried it in her side had Xena not thrown her sword, effectively shearing off the head of the weapon. Gabrielle ran forward and dealt the man a disabling stroke across the side of the neck. He plunged, unconscious, to the ground.

Xena was already fighting up close with the other swordsman, and the first of the other twenty the Roman had warned them of began running in from the Colosseum’s dozen gates. Xena and Gabrielle were fighting back-to-back. Xena had grabbed a second sword and now fought two-handed again, one sword lifted over her head for the killing-stroke, the other slashing viciously at waist-level. Gabrielle’s staff spun in the air, leaving one man gasping, another weapon-less.

Blood began to leak out across the arena floor, and as it spread, the roaring of the crowd grew louder still. But neither Gabrielle nor Xena were aware of anything but the battle before and around them. Twice Gabrielle kicked out as Xena had taught her, catching one man in the lower stomach and sending him sprawling, catching another in the back of the knee, effectively hamstringing

him. Xena was constantly on the move, the blades of both swords awash with blood. She caught a cut to one shoulder, another to the calf, and felt the warm blood running. She grinned at the first man to injure her, and threw her sword at him, sending him flying backwards until he landed, pinned to the ground. She grabbed a short dagger and spun around to catch the man who had come in under the sweep of Gabrielle's staff.

A soldier hooked his sword under Gabrielle's staff and sent it flying, and for the slightest moment the bard was unprotected. But when the sword swung over her, in a stroke that would have cut her throat, Xena grabbed Gabrielle and swung her free. Gabrielle rolled over onto the sand and came up gasping, but with the staff back in her hands. The crowd cheered.

But the greater numbers of the enemy were beginning to tell, and as the fighting group drifted closer and closer to where Alti sat, Xena experienced a moment of doubt. And with doubt came fear. Not fear for herself, but fear for Gabrielle. She swung her sword again, grappled with another soldier, twisted past him and despatched another, before she heard the crowd gasp.

Gabrielle had gone. Gabrielle was suddenly running across the arena as fast as she ever moved. Using her staff to launch herself, she vaulted up into the stand, snatching from Alti's side - before the witch had time to take in her intention - Xena's chakram. She twisted in the air, launching the gold-and-silver circle across the arena, toward Xena. And Xena leapt to catch it, and suddenly everything changed.

The chakram felt like an old friend. Xena saw Alti rise above Gabrielle, a short, ugly knife in her hand. And Xena flung the chakram harder and faster than ever before, and as the crowd groaned and flinched in sympathy, the chakram had severed the witch's hand.

When Alti screamed out, the sound penetrated to even the deepest recesses of the Colosseum, and echoed round the arena loudly enough to deafen the crowd. Gabrielle took her opportunity and threw herself back into the arena, back to Xena, back to the fight.

But now the fight had changed. It was not just the gladiators who had been held fast in Alti's tenacious hold: there were plenty of Romans who were angry and resentful of her rule, and one of the Romans fighting Xena suddenly roared out and sent his sword flying. "She's got the witch!" The words raced through the air, and as the realisation that Alti was, after all, mortal, and could be beaten, could be hurt, hit home. The spell that Alti had cast over Romans, Greeks, gladiators and whores alike had been broken.

With a sound like the earth splitting, all those imprisoned beneath the might of the Colosseum broke upwards and into the bloodstained light of day, tearing

down those troops of Alti's who had not left their empress. Their energies restored, Gabrielle regained her place at Xena's side while the warrior princess's chakram spun around the arena like a second sun, and the enemy went down like wheat before the scythe. For the space of a single moment Xena looked into Gabrielle's eyes and smiled.

Conclusion

"Did you ever imagine, Xena, that all this could happen?" It was the end of the day and the bard and the warrior princess were sitting on a low wall at the mouth of the Colosseum. All around them lay the wreckage of Alti's reign. The witch herself had not been found: only her right hand, the nails like talons, the heavy rings adorning the dead flesh, remained. Xena thrown the nightmare onto one of the half-dozen bonfires still blazing.

Xena shook her head. "I've been too busy not noticing things. I should have realised that no people, Roman or otherwise, would enjoy being controlled by someone like Alti. But to be honest, if you'd asked me this morning what was the most unlikely thing I could imagine..." She gestured around at the mounting debris, the destroyed entrance gates, the broken stalls, the discarded hand-bills, "This would be it."

"You've got your army back," said Gabrielle, looking out over the recently-freed Greeks who were happily destroying what they could of the Colosseum, and who looked at Xena and Gabrielle as if they'd climbed down from Mount Olympus to save them.

Xena smiled. "Those times are over," she said. "I don't want another army. Should they want it, I'll lead them back to Greece, but that's all. Once we're there, they can go back to their homes. I've had enough of armies. And tyranny," she added.

"What about Alti?"

"Gabrielle, I don't think we should ever imagine that Alti won't come after us. I don't think she'd be likely to forgive the bard who showed a city that she was not invulnerable." She grinned, remembering for an instant Gabrielle's spectacular sprint across the arena. Gabrielle looked almost embarrassed.

"I didn't believe I could fight, despite all your teaching, until I had to fight." She looked down at the staff that lay at her feet. "I don't know if I should ever pick that up again."

“Of course you should. You’ve proved that you’re a warrior, and a warrior needs a weapon.”

“What will you do when you’re back in Greece?”

“I don’t know. I think the question is more, what will we do when we get back to Greece? And for all the time after that. Unless of course you want...”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” Xena was unpractised in the art of small-talk. “You tell me what you want.”

Gabrielle said, simply, “To be with you.”

“Good.” Xena managed to hide the blinding relief she felt at the reply. Rather gruffly she added, “We’d better get out of here.” As they walked away from the Colosseum, Xena put a hesitant arm around Gabrielle’s shoulders, then relaxed as the bard leaned into the embrace.

When Gabrielle took a last look at the wreckage of the Colosseum next day, before they set off for Greece, she saw at the foot of one of the broken pillars a sand-coloured cat, suckling her sand-coloured kittens. Gabrielle smiled, then turned away, and went back to her place at Xena’s side, the long journey home and whatever came next.

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