

Harargi

Gabrielle sat in the doorway of the empty cabin. The year was fading: the air smelled of autumn. Back home they'd be building up the wood-piles, and making sure that all the roofs were sound, in a pattern so familiar and comfortable that Gabrielle was sometimes surprised at the ease with which she'd been able to leave. Until she thought of Xena, of course. After she'd met Xena, village life hadn't stood a chance.

Gabrielle had always known that her destiny lay elsewhere than in Poteidaia, but of late she'd found herself at an impasse. She and Xena were long past the unevenness of their early days together, and Gabrielle felt that she'd done a pretty good job of eclipsing the image of the untutored girl she'd been when Xena had reluctantly accepted her as a companion. Xena had taught her how to fight, and Gabrielle was in better shape than she'd ever been. If she could only get past the painful desire she felt for Xena and move on, Gabrielle was sure she'd be more useful and perhaps... less vulnerable.

There, Gabrielle told herself: it's that simple. You must get past this feeling. Xena's had lovers by the score but, to the best of your knowledge, none of them were women. You're wasting your time, and breaking your heart.

Sometimes it really did feel as though Gabrielle's heart was breaking.

A sound drew her attention. Xena had returned with an armful of firewood. Xena scowled. "I thought you were going to start a fire, Gabrielle. That's why I went to fetch all this." She dropped the wood onto the ground, freeing up a cloud of dust that sent her off on a sneezing fit.

Gabrielle smiled. Xena saw and looked pleased. "At last! The first smile of the day. I'd begun to think you'd shrunk Argo again, and were afraid to tell me. But Argo's fine, so I know it's not that." She reached out and to rest a gentle hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. It was only a friendly caress, but Gabrielle found herself drawing away from it.

"Sorry. Leave the fire. I'll said I'd do it."

"*I'll* do the fire. Gabrielle, you're all over the place." Xena's tone was kindly dismissive.

Gabrielle watched as Xena stacked up a small pile of dry twigs and grasses, struck the flints together and captured a flame.

“I... I think it’s still warm enough to sleep outside.” Gabrielle said, laying down a blanket on the ground. She looked through her bag for something to eat.

“I thought you wanted to spend a night inside.”

“I did... Then I changed my mind.”

“You’d rather sleep with me beside the fire?”

Gabrielle flushed. “That must be it.” Then, “We don’t have much food left.”

“It’ll be enough. Tomorrow we’ll find a village and buy some more.”

“Oh, right.”

Xena was surprised: normally Gabrielle enjoyed their domestic ventures. “*Oh, right?*” she repeated. “Gabrielle, imagine it – a village. An inn. We could have a proper meal. You know, the sort you haven’t had to cook, and I haven’t had to pretend I liked...” Xena was teasing, but Gabrielle did not seem to notice.

“Fine,” she said. “That reminds me - my boots are full of holes. I don’t think they need replacing, but I need a blacksmith to nail me on some new soles.”

Xena reached out a hand – moving quickly as ever – and grabbed Gabrielle by the ankle, in order to check the soles in question. She was meant to make Gabrielle smile, but failed. The bard tottered, almost fell over, and said, “I think I’ll walk down to the river. You go ahead and eat: I’m not very hungry.”

The bard not hungry? Gabrielle, are you sickening for something? Xena was beginning to worry. Something of this concern must have shown on her face, because Gabrielle added, “I’m fine, Xena, honestly. Stop worrying. I won’t be long.”

Xena tended to the fire. When it was going well she glanced through Gabrielle’s bag of supplies. The bard was right: an apple,... two apples. Was that all? A tattered bit of scroll and some oatcakes. And she couldn’t eat the scroll... A veritable feast... Xena dug deeper and found two of the vine-leaf parcels, one of which she put aside for Gabrielle. *Why wasn’t Gabrielle hungry? Was she ill?*

As she ate, Xena picked up the scroll. Perhaps Gabrielle had a story that wasn’t working. Gabrielle was never secretive about her scrolls: Xena was always free to read them, but she never did. Whatever... Xena glanced down.

There weren't many lines, but halfway down the scroll, Xena exclaimed, and the dolma dropped unnoticed from her fingers.

"...liked some of the men she's been with. Not Ares, of course. He's always going to make my temper rise. But he is attractive: I can see what Xena sees in him. And Marcus,... He and Xena made love on the other side of the fire from me. Perhaps she thought I wouldn't mind.

Sometimes I feel like Demeter, but it's not my daughter, it's my heart that's been stolen. Could I could do a deal with Hades, and get it back for half the year?

I wish I could reason it away, but I can't. I just have to look at her... I keep thinking that it must show, that she'll see my feelings. But what if she was shocked, or... Or anything. It's getting harder to bear. If - "

The scroll ended there. Xena thoughtfully rolled it up again and replaced it at the bottom of the bag. She would never willingly have invaded the bard's privacy, but at least now she understood the reason for Gabrielle's mood. Gabrielle was trying to work out her problems on paper...

Xena considered the situation. If she was honest with herself, from their early days together she'd there'd been an element to their relationship that went beyond friendship...

But Xena had no time for further contemplation as Gabrielle walked back across the clearing and sat down on the edge of the blanket. Xena hoped that she wasn't blushing. To distract herself, she picked up her food again, only to find it covered in dust. Irredeemably so. Xena sent her discarded supper into the bushes. The ants could feast.

"Hardly a compliment to the cook," said Gabrielle. "Here's another. You have it."

"Gabrielle, it's been a long day. You need to eat."

Gabrielle loosened her clothes, reached for another blanket and lay down. "I'm just tired, Xena, that's all. I don't need food, just sleep." She turned away and closed her eyes. Xena sat and watched her.

Almost from the beginning – *how could she have missed so much?* – it had been their habit to share a pallet, or blanket, or other makeshift bed. Xena enjoyed the warmth of the bard’s body, and when she was sure that Gabrielle was asleep, it had become Xena’s habit to wrap a protective arm around the bard. Would she like more than that, if more was on offer? Xena considered the question. Yes, she would. Was it any more complex than the equation of warm bed/warm body? Xena frowned. When she thought about it, there hadn’t been many men in her recent past. They’d become less important to her. In her more *distant* past there had been plenty of men, but no-one had mattered to her the way that Gabrielle did. Xena didn’t have Gabrielle’s talent with words... How should she approach the subject? She looked across at Gabrielle, who was lying too completely still to be honestly asleep. Xena banked the fire and took off her boots. Then she loosened her armour and lay down on her back beside Gabrielle. For a while she watched the stars, smelling the sweet wood smoke and the citrus scents that rose from the lemon grove nearby.

Xena remembered meeting Athena, remembered the cold respect in Athena’s appraising glance at her. She remembered too, the young warrior who was then Athena’s favourite. She’d been impressed by the obvious strength of their bond, but she’d never thought further about it ...

Gabrielle’s breathing changed, and her body relaxed. Without hesitation, Xena turned and tucked Gabrielle’s sleeping body against her own. The bard’s hair tickled Xena’s nose, and made her smile. Yes, she loved Gabrielle. It was just that simple. She thought about the rare times she’d woken later than Gabrielle, and been immediately on the alert, looking out for her. Xena closed her eyes and drifted, one arm beneath her head, the other wrapped around Gabrielle.

The next morning Gabrielle was quieter still. She’d woken to the new day in Xena’s arms and breaking free of that embrace *hurt*. “Just an apple for breakfast,” she said, apologetically. “You’re right: we do need a stores.” Xena nodded, absently, her thoughts elsewhere.

“So, which way are we going?” The warrior seemed oddly preoccupied.
“Xena...? Which direction?”

“I’ve just remembered. It was seeing the hill up there. We’re near the Harargi gorge.”

“Harargi? I haven’t heard of it. Is it special? What’s there?”

“Wait and see.” Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. She could wait. She was just a little surprised by Xena’s new plan: normally it was business as usual, and a fixed path. Now they were going sight-seeing... “Come on, Gabrielle. Let’s get moving.”

They spent the greater part of the morning moving slowly uphill, through the olive groves in their bed of red earth. Toward the middle of the day they found a village, bought food, and moved on. Early in the afternoon Xena said with satisfaction, "Yes... We go downhill now. Be careful, Gabrielle, the path's steep."

It was steep, and the red earth beneath their feet was littered with small rocks. When Gabrielle stumbled, Xena caught her up, and then seemed to magically forget to let her go. Gabrielle's heart thumped painfully at the contact, and for some time said nothing, not wanting to break Xena's mood, or to do anything that would make her release the warm fingers that firmly enclosed Gabrielle's upper arm, "When were you last here?"

"Years ago. I must have been about eight or nine."

"It must have made quite an impression on you."

"Wait and see. Maybe you can use this place in one of your scrolls." At the word scroll Xena thought she detected a tremor run through Gabrielle's body.

"Maybe I can."

They reached the bottom of the valley and the path levelled out. Xena's eyes shone as she looked around. "It's just as I remembered it. Come on."

Harargi. The sky above them was a brilliant blue, and the greens all around were tinged with the colours of late summer. Soon they were in the valley proper. Gabrielle stopped dead, and put up a hand to her mouth. "Xena," she said, "It's wonderful."

Xena grinned. "And it gets better."

Where the stony path had ended, a path of slatted boards began. Gabrielle stopped and took off her boots to feel the rough embrace of sun-warmed wood. Maidenhair fronds trailed in the water. Distantly Xena and Gabrielle heard the sound of cascading water.

They came to the first deep pool and stopped to stare into the clear water, against which the rocks shone jade-green. The irregular ground was busy with scented plants. Gabrielle was not as good at botany as Xena, but she still managed to recognise the fragrant five-pointed leaves of the Agnus castus, and the rounded, pale-veined Carob leaves.

Xena picked a leaf from a young lemon tree and rubbed it between her fingers to release the rich scent of lemon oil. "The Chaste tree," she said. "I've never

picked any of the leaves myself, but I've heard that you'd give it to your daughter if you wanted to keep her... well, chaste. Some women give it to their husbands when the men go off to war, to keep them out of mischief..."

Gabrielle picked a leaf of the Chaste tree and slipped it, unnoticed, into her pack. Perhaps it might help.

The path snaked upwards and minutes later Xena and Gabrielle stood at the foot of the Harargi waterfall, where the limestone rocks had split into a v-shape, seventy or eighty feet high. Water burst out from the right in a rainbow of colour where the sun hit it, and the pure white of the waterfall cascaded down from three rock throats. The pool at the base of the waterfall seemed to go down forever, and Gabrielle watched as fresh-water crabs scuttled away from the shadows cast by her and Xena. Low-growing willows surrounded the pool with a ring of perfect green.

Xena dropped her weapons to the ground, and began undoing her armour, and Gabrielle's fingers had gone to the fastenings of her skirt. The jade and turquoise pool had hypnotised them both.

Xena reached the water a moment before Gabrielle, and plunged in. Gabrielle dived in too, then surfaced, gasping. The water was liquid snow and the temperature shocked them both. But the cold was empowering: Gabrielle felt clear-headed for the first time in days. Xena swam by, and would have ducked the bard, had Gabrielle not dived beneath her.

It was hard to leave the pool, hard to leave the incredible clarity of the water, and hard to get a handhold on the limestone rocks. Xena put out a hand to Gabrielle. That morning Gabrielle might have chosen to decline the help, but now she was grateful. They shook themselves dry, blood pounding. Gabrielle said, "I'm glad you brought me here, Xena. I will try to write about it. It's a wonderful place."

"I didn't want to tell you about it, in case it had changed. There are rock-falls, after all. The path might have gone. But it was always a special place for me. If you use it in your scrolls, that'll give the place a kind of immortality."

"Do you want me to change the name?"

Xena considered the question. "I don't know. *Should* you label magical places?"

Gabrielle smiled. "You don't often use that word."

"I don't often think it. But I always thought there was magic here. As a child I wanted to dive to the bottom of that pool. It's only now that I realise it may

well be bottomless.” Hungry from the swim, Xena reached for some lunch. “Gabrielle, I hope we bought enough. This’ll do for me, but what are you going to do?” Gabrielle saw that Xena was teasing, and she smiled back at her.

“I should have told you about the waterfall before. I didn’t even remember it until we reached that break in the hills.”

“Thank you for bringing me here.”

“It’s good to be here with you.” Xena’s gaze was fixed on the blue waters. Gabrielle looked at her with surprise. The remark was unremarkable, but Xena never said such things. Xena picked a leaf from a nearby plant and traced an invisible pattern on the bard’s forearm before adding, “It’s good to be anywhere with you, Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle looked in amazement at Xena, and her heart pounded when Xena stopped tickling her palm and kissed it instead.

When Xena opened wide her arms, Gabrielle stepped eagerly into the embrace. For an instant nothing else existed for either of them. Gabrielle had her eyes shut; all that she cared about was the strong warm body of the woman holding her.

When Gabrielle opened her eyes again she saw in Xena’s loving smile almost more intensity than she could bear.

They walked in silence back along the slatted boards and up the steep path that led to the town of Harargi. Gabrielle was aware of a new feeling flooding through her body, a blend of nervousness and anticipation. Without discussion or hesitation, Xena took a room for them for the night, and when Gabrielle went through the bath house, Xena disappeared.

When Xena came back she smiled at Gabrielle and said, “Argo’s happily stabled. I think we all could use a short holiday.”

Gabrielle looked around her. “Xena, where are my boots?”

“Your boots, Gabrielle, are being re-soled. I told the blacksmith you wouldn’t need them for a couple of days. In fact,... I don’t think you’ll be needing any clothes for the next few days. Unless, of course, there’s somewhere else you’d rather be.” The delighted smile that flashed across the bard’s face allayed Xena’s doubts. Had it not, the hot, demanding kiss that they then shared would have done as well.

Gabrielle stepped out of the bath and Xena reached to wrap a towel round her, using it to pull Gabrielle close. When Gabrielle's warm, damp body came into contact with the warrior the bard shivered. "Your armour's cold!"

"So help me take it off."

Early the next morning, having slipped with the greatest reluctance from the warm embrace of Xena's arms, feeling tired and aching and drunk with happiness, Gabrielle walked over to the window of their room and quietly drew back the shutters. She opened up her hand and let the warm wind take the leaf she had picked. She wouldn't be needing it after all.

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