

Lost in the Red World

She was lost, had been lost for time beyond measure. The ground was rough beneath her bare feet. The wind had beaten down the grass. The trees had been so blasted by the elements that they had grown stunted, misshapen. In the early evening light, with the sky lowering, she came to a halt, and looked around for a any place that offered at least the suggestion of shelter.

When the night came down like a great wave, she leaned against a tree-trunk. She was so tired that sleep was an impossibility, but she closed her eyes all the same. And night grew greater and darker all around her.

She finally slept, and she dreamed. The dreams were the hardest part of all. And then dawn would come round again, and the cycle would start afresh.

Sometimes she saw people, but they ran from her. And whenever she reached any sort of habitation, she'd be run off the land. Sometimes the people threw stones. And every day the heavy red sun rose and was eclipsed by the storm clouds. And every night she lay down in a different place.

There was always the sense that she was going somewhere; something motivated her to keep going even when her feet bled, or when her stomach groaned from the lack of food, but each day that sense became a little harder to believe in.

One morning she woke to the red sun shining down and thought, this time I can't do it. This time I can't get up again and go on. And she stayed where she was on the ground, and curled up tighter than before. A terrible chill ran through her, despite the sunlight, and she shook until her teeth chattered.

The one-time warrior lay still on the hard earth without noticing the day pass and the night come on. The moon shone like silver then hid behind the clouds, and the wind sprang up again. Xena's eyes dulled.

"Where is she now?" Gabrielle paused for a moment in her pacing. "Can you tell me that? You say that she's out there somewhere, so you must have some idea. What can I do if I can't find her?"

"While the body lies unmoving, the soul can journey into unknown worlds," said the healer. "Perhaps she has some destination you do not know of."

"I know that she's suffering. I know that she's..." but Gabrielle couldn't make herself finish the sentence: enough that they both knew.

“It is her journey. You can do no more than to watch over her physical being. She has gone as far as she can go: there is nothing more that you can do.” Gabrielle had once thought the healer’s voice to be lulling and peaceful; now it rang out like the cries of wild dogs. She fought to maintain control and to keep a modicum of civility in her reply.

“I don’t believe that. It may have been like that for others but not for Xena. I know her too well. She’s always fought. She’d never just give up! I don’t believe it. I don’t believe it of her.” The healer looked at Gabrielle with a greater interest.

“She is very important to you, this warrior?” Gabrielle stared. “You would do anything to save her, no matter the cost to yourself? It is madness.” The healer wandered around the prone body of the warrior princess until she stood opposite the bard. Her eyes appraised Gabrielle. “It may be that she is lost. It may be that she never finds her way back.”

“Then I must go to her and help her,” said Gabrielle, simply. “She has to come back.”

“And if you’re lost on the journey? Such a thing is impossible: you are not strong enough to follow her. Even if you found her, how could you bring her back?”

“I’ll find her,” said Gabrielle, shortly. “And if I can’t bring her back, then I’ll stay with Xena, wherever she is.”

Gabrielle had given up on all conventional treatments: whatever poison had been introduced by the jagged sword cut Xena had suffered in the battle was wracking her body and her mind in a way Gabrielle didn’t understand. Day after day she tended Xena, whispered stories to her, and at night slept in bits and pieces on a pallet near Xena’s own. Day after day she waited for some improvement in the warrior’s state, breathing words of affection and encouragement. Now, after days of watching Xena’s frame racked and drained even Gabrielle was beginning to lose hope.

“What would I need to do?”

“Madness.”

“I don’t care,” said Gabrielle. “Call it madness, then. Just tell me what I need to do.”

“What if she dies while you’re there? What can you do for her then?”

“Go with her,” said Gabrielle. “She would do the same for me.” She could not bring herself to think about the days before the battle, days when the princess had begun to realise how she felt about her companion. In a way it would have been less painful had Xena simply died in battle: then Gabrielle could easily have followed her, either by putting herself in the way of an enemy sword, or by her own hand. Just when she’d seen that Xena could stop denying the feeling between the two of them, and admit that she loved Gabrielle, she’d seen Xena cut down. That was bad enough: she’d fought her way through the other forces as though they were young corn. She’d throw herself over Xena’s body to stop further hurts, and the wound should not have been mortal. But there had been poison on the blade, and even as the blood stopped flowing beneath the pressure of Gabrielle’s hands, Xena’s body had begun to convulse. It had taken four of them to carry her off the field and to the house of the healer.

Days after the injury, days after the battle, Xena should have been almost well again: her capacity for recovery had always awed Gabrielle. But the poison was a potent one, and although Xena’s body could fight a mean battle even on its own terms, Gabrielle could see that this struggle wasn’t a fair one.

“You would need special herbs. You would need to recite incantations.” Gabrielle looked around her, at the mass of bubbling potions, at the strong-smelling plants that hung from the ceiling, at the straw-strewn floor and felt a new composure spreading through her.

“Then tell me what herbs to fetch and what words to say. If you won’t help me, I swear by the gods that I’ll open one of my veins and let the poison in that way.” So saying the bard drew one of her short knives and pushed up a sleeve. The healer squeaked in horror and shook her head.

“It is not for me to stop the mad. If you want to follow her, I will help you.”

“Fine,” said Gabrielle. “What do I have to do?”

The sky was blood-red. The trees looked black in the light. The trees threw no shadows onto the ground. The warrior lay silently. She had no idea of who she was or where she was: there was no world, none, than this nightmare place. In the distance, black mountains rose against the sky. She could remember battles in abundance, could recall to mind the battlefields, littered with the bodies of the dead. If she held her eyes shut such sights were all that she could see... And herself one of the dead.

Gabrielle drank the potion. It tasted bitter. It tasted like blood. It made the sweat stand out on her forehead and it sickened her. It made her blood run heavy and cold: she could feel it creeping through her body. She felt every aspect of her body from the pulse beating at her throat and in her wrist to the hairs on her head growing. The potion she’d taken became the world, and the

world became a nightmare. Gabrielle staggered, put out a hand to save herself, failed, then crumpled up onto the straw-strewn floor of the healer's house.

The healer, muttering and complaining, dragged Gabrielle up onto another pallet at the side of the room. If the villagers knew what she was doing, they'd have stoned her: there were some magiks too deadly to be practised. She would have to be careful. But she was true to her art: she covered Gabrielle's body with a blanket then turned to the warrior. If she lost them both... She shook her head, angrily. She must not fail. But... She had only agreed because of the passion in the young woman. She had seen that Gabrielle was entirely ready to open up her own veins... The love between the two of them must be a thing of wonder. The healer had never felt so passionate about another being, and she looked from one of them to the other without comprehension, shook her head, muttered, put up the bolt on the door and began brewing a fresh potion.

The red sky, the red ground. The world was coloured in shades of blood. Gabrielle shivered: the wind swept down across the plain and struck at her. She looked about her, confused, lost. She felt entirely unprepared for this new world and she for a moment she felt so acutely alone that she almost dropped to her knees, with her head in her hands. Her hands... She looked down at her hands. Both were clenched, and there was something held within each.

In one hand... In her right hand she held a lock of black hair. In the other hand she held a flower. The lock of hair glowed, and the flower – she lifted it up – she recognised as thyme. She inhaled the slight, sweet perfume. She closed her eyes and she could see banks of it growing. She opened her eyes again, and the feeling of hopelessness that had almost crippled her faded away. She knew who she was, and she knew why she had entered this barren red world. She began to walk.

“How did you know where to find me?”

“I didn't. I don't know. I just knew that I would find you, so long as I believed that I could.”

“You brought me back. You saved me.”

“We seem to have a habit of saving each other.”

“I wonder why that is. You'd think that one of us would have learned better by now.”

“I know you don't like to talk about these things, but I'd say that a blend of love, affection and friendship might be why.”

“You’ve just condensed the motives behind a journey through the red world into a single sentence, Gabrielle. I’m impressed. And I find it hard to believe...”

“Don’t worry. By the time I chronicle it in my scrolls, it’ll be a bit longer.”

“At last, something I can believe.” Xena put a hand gently onto Gabrielle’s arm. “Thank you for coming after me.” She took the flower from Gabrielle’s hand. “This is lovely. Of course, if I say that you’re lovelier still, I imagine you’ll think me still a little delusional.”

“Just a little delusional? I’ve always thought...”

“Gabrielle, stop talking and kiss me.”

“I can do that.”

© Jaye Morgan, October 2005