

Not a Christmas Carol

The night air was stiff with cold. The snow lay inches deep and the sky was a vast black void. Snow had fallen, and more snow was forecast. The palace stood gaunt and forbidding in the light of the burning torches. At the foot of the tower room, standing in the freshly-fallen snow, was the Warrior Princess, Destroyer of Nations.

The bloody fields were almost quiet. Xena dismissed the bulk of her army, and ordered an extra watch around the palace's most vulnerable areas. She paused to examine the treaty offered up by her bleeding enemy, laughed at it, threw it aside and then took the time to cut off the supply of blood to the head of a lieutenant who had made the mistake of grinning lecherously at Xena as she passed by. When she restored the oxygen to his system he had to be carried away by two of the palace guard. Xena watched his exit without much interest: maybe she should have returned the blood-flow a little sooner, but he was no great loss. She looked across the valley at the little dots of black on white that indicated where the bodies of her enemies lay like broken toys. They were hardly a loss, either. She'd lost few of her own force. Her army had better weapons, better training and better motivation. And they had her to lead them. That made them pretty much unstoppable.

Xena began the climb to her room. Since invading the land and taking the palace by main force, Xena had appropriated the tower-room for herself. She liked looking down over the land she was conquering. Also, the sense of the smallness of battle was pleasurable. Not as keen a sport as fighting and killing, but pleasurable all the same.

Xena grinned as she reached the top of the steps and gained the room. A fire was burning in the hearth but she did not immediately move toward it. Indeed, for some time she made no move at all. Standing before the fire, her back to the fire, stood a tall blonde woman dressed in leather armour much like Xena's own. The stranger's hair, long and fair, half-concealed a face that was striking, and angular. The blonde woman's eyes were dark, and as they settled on Xena's face, they seemed to burn with a manic fire.

"No, don't do that." Xena's hand had gone automatically to the chakram. Her visitor shook her head. "You don't need that with me. Or rather, that will do you no good with me. Cast it out into the ether if you so wish, but you'll only be wasting your time."

Xena let the chakram fly. It sliced through the air and returned to her outstretched hand after passing through the only apparently corporeal body of her companion. Xena shrugged her shoulders and reattached the chakram to her belt. "So you're a spirit," she said, unimpressed. "Just what I need to find in my room after a long day of killing people. Well, I need some sleep,

because I intend to go on killing people tomorrow. So let's get this over and done with: what do you want with me?"

"A little of your time, Warrior Princess."

"That's the one thing I can't spare you. Spit out what you want and go. Did Ares send you? If that's the case, don't let the door catch you on the way out. I -"

"I'm Callisto," said the spirit. "And although I realise I don't seem it, I am flesh and blood. But I exist in another dimension that will one day collide with yours."

"And you want a little of my time. For what?"

"To take you on a journey."

"Look, Callisto, I'm tired. I could use a bath. I could use a meal and a rest; it's messy, tiring work, killing people. And as tomorrow I plan another long, bloody battle, perhaps you could take your spirit self the hell out of here. The only place I'm going is back to the battlefield."

"You might die in tomorrow's battle not knowing what I wanted you to see."

"If I die in tomorrow's battle it won't matter to me either way. Go."

"I can't." Callisto pulled up a chair. Xena found the residual impression of the chair in which Callisto sat showing through her body a little off-putting. "And you can't make me go, either. You can ignore me, and you can try to get some sleep, but I'm not leaving. It's just the ways things are. So if you don't mind, I may as well make myself comfortable."

"Fine." Xena snarled out the word. "You're comfortable. That makes me feel so much better." She sat down opposite Callisto and shrugged off her cloak.

When Xena's servant arrived with food and wine for the warrior princess it was immediately clear that he could not see Callisto. When Callisto reached over and took the flask of wine from the servant's hand, Xena was amused by the expression of terror that appeared on his face.

"Enough of the party tricks," said Xena, irritated, as the servant fled from the room. "Can I eat and drink, or are we packing up a picnic?"

"Eat, drink and be merry," said Callisto, cheerfully. "For tomorrow you may... Oh, let's get going. You can eat later." She leant forward and seized Xena's hand. "Let's see what the past has to tell us." Her hand felt like ice around

Xena's own. It seemed to Xena that a little of her own strength faded as the walls around them seemed to fall away, leaving the two of them in a kind of nothingness through which they drifted until they came to a city.

"See that?" Callisto indicated a series of shadows on the ground beneath them. They slowly floated to the ground. Xena felt the harshness of stones beneath her feet. "Remember anything?"

Xena looked around. "I think I know this place..." She stared upwards at the ruins of the city wall. "Of course I know it. I took my army through here. We took the entire town in a single day."

"They had invited you in," said Callisto.

"It was still a victory!" Xena shot a poisoned glance at Callisto. "They still fought us."

"Oh, yes. They fought. Once they'd realised that they'd invited in and entertained their enemy, they did try to fight you. And what marvellous, mature soldiers they were, too," Callisto grinned at Xena. "This one here... Such a fine example of soldiery at its finest. I can see why you'd be proud of such a conquest."

Xena turned to regard the body of a young woman. The body lay on its back, blind dead eyes expressionless. Her body had been savaged by the blade of a sword, and the bright colours of the clothes she had been wearing were soiled with blood. "Carnival clothes," said Callisto. "Holiday clothes. This was the time of festival for these people: they celebrated the shortest day with a bonfire, and a feast. A time when their faith bid them welcome strangers and treat them as friends. How sweet. And how prepared they must have been for battle..."

Xena stared coldly at Callisto. "What are you trying to say? Do you want me to be sorry for the girl? She was my enemy. So she died. So someone mistook her for a soldier."

"Someone?" Callisto took Xena's hand and forced it down until Xena's fingertips touched the cold skin of the dead girl's forehead. As the touch burned through Xena's body, she saw herself, half mad with blood-lust, sword in hand, cut down the child and kick away her body without another thought. And she'd probably smiled as she'd made the kill. The slightest suggestion of a shadow flickered across Xena's face.

"Alright, so she was one of mine. Your point?"

“Oh, no point. Just a little exercise in history. After all, it wasn’t just her, was it? Look over there.” Xena followed the direction in which Callisto was pointing. By the wall, near the girl lay the body of a woman. In death the woman’s hand lay on the dust, close to the girl’s body. “In reaching out for her body, even though she must have known that she was dead, she ripped his wound beyond endurance. Love made her bleed to death.”

“Were they family?” Xena didn’t want to ask the question but there seemed to be no other option.

Callisto looked at the blood that covered Xena’s hand, and said, “Why ask? You don’t care. Besides, I doubt that your mother would try to reach for your hand if she was dying beside you, even if she knew you were dead. From what I’ve heard about her feelings toward you, she’d probably not bother.”

“So it was a mother and daughter.” Xena felt a flicker of some emotion she could not identify. Perhaps it was just the night chill. She gritted her teeth.

“Or lovers, or sisters. Who cares? You certainly don’t. Tomorrow you’ll be hard at work, cutting down men, women and children by the dozen.”

“Or the hundred.”

“You seem proud of the idea.”

“I’m a warrior,” said Xena, through her teeth. “It is something I’m proud of.”

“And killing children?”

“There are always accidents. It couldn’t have been helped. Besides, she might have grown up to fight against me.”

“Ah, yes. She might have become an Amazon. She might have taken to warfare as happily as you did. Oh, and Xena, have you noticed anything about the woman? Oh, I’ll make it easier for you: she has no weapons; she’s blind. Her daughter was leading her to the celebrations when you cut them both down. Still, never mind.” Callisto grinned at Xena. Xena looked away.

They continued through the city. The dead lay all around them. A cold wind blew through the plundered rooms, through the dust that was splattered with blood, through the food that lay on the tables. The air stank of blood. Xena shivered.

“You’re cold?” Callisto pulled a face of mock concern. “Perhaps you could go back and pick up the blanket the girl was carrying to her mother, to put around her shoulders.”

“I’m fine,” said Xena. “I don’t feel the cold.”

“Nor do the dead. It’s something I imagine they don’t miss.”

Xena made to grab Callisto, but her hands closed on air. “Sorry,” said Callisto, grinning, and not looking sorry in the least. “You see, I can touch you, but you can’t touch me. It’s just one of the rules.”

“What rules?”

“The rules. Xena, I don’t know who makes them. All I know is that today they sent me to you. Tomorrow I could be anywhere. It all depends. But they chose me because one day I’ll meet you for real.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Oh, so forceful, so dismissive. So strong. Very attractive... Yes,” said Callisto. “Oddly enough, I can’t wait, either. I hope we’re on opposing sides.”

“Why?”

“No reason. Just hoping. Plus I’d really love the chance of killing you.”

They walked on through the city, past the broken walls and burned-out spars. Callisto said, “I’m here to show you what has been. I should add that I’m not your only guide. There will be three of us in all. After I leave you, you will have an hour’s peace. Then you may expect your second visitor.”

“And who is that likely to be?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait and see, Xena.” And Callisto was gone before Xena could spit out a response.

Back in her room and thankfully alone, Xena found the fire still burning, the food still waiting. It seemed that she had been absent for no time at all. She poured herself a cup of wine and drank it, but her appetite had gone. For an hour she sat and stared into the middle distance. If she half-closed her eyes she could see demons in the fire. She dozed for a few minutes, and woke to see Ares in the chair opposite her own. He had taken her cup of wine. As he drained the cup he grinned at Xena and said “A good day’s work, I’d say.”

“I don’t remember asking for your opinion, Ares.”

“No, but, lucky you, I give it all the same. Ah, Xena, I’m so proud of you. You stride about the world leaving devastation in your wake. Every stream of blood you set flowing is like an adrenalin rush for me.”

“A what?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not the time. That’s the problem with being in this job... you never know where you’re going to end up. Having yourself used as a figure in someone’s dreams isn’t onerous but it can be a nuisance. One day it’s Greece and you; tomorrow I could be watching someone patent a weapon that kills people but leave buildings intact.” He frowned. “Can’t see the point of that one, personally... Anyway, I’m your second visitor of the night. So, my warrior princess, are you going to take my arm?”

“I’d happily take off your whole arm at the shoulder, except that apparently I can’t. Don’t tell me, you can take my arm, but I can’t take yours. Right?”

“You learn so quickly.” Ares bowed to Xena and then said, “Princess: your servant awaits.”

“Save it,” Xena growled.

Ares grinned. “You say the sweetest things...”

“Just get on with the show.”

Again the sense of buildings melting, time spinning. And the aftermath of another war. Silently Ares and Xena surveyed the battlefield. The bodies of the dead went on forever. There was no patch of grass or dusty ground untouched by gore. Even the sky seemed bloodstained. The sun was beginning to sink. The battle was pretty much over: several of Xena’s warriors went about among the fallen, sword in hand. If they found anyone beyond help they delivered a quick, twisting and savage stab to the heart of the dying. Xena watched as one face after another blurred from anguish to absence. Kites circled above the field: soon they’d be less cautious, and begin the process of rendering down the dead. There were jagged edges and open wounds enough to satisfy the most demanding.

“It’s odd,” said Ares. “There’s meat enough for them all, but they still squabble over the remains.”

Xena raised an eyebrow. “Is there meant to be some deep, dark symbolic meaning to that remark that’s meant to make an impression on me?”

Ares grinned. “Xena, all I know for certain is that it’s my delightful duty to escort you about a battlefield, once the fighting is over. Callisto took you back

a year, and I take you forward... a day, or a week, or possibly even a year. Who knows? Your third visitor - oh, but that would be telling... However, as Callisto may or may not have said, they send us out to various people without telling us why. Frankly, I don't much like being an errand boy, but the job has perks - being with you again, for one. And there's always pleasure in seeing a battlefield, especially one over which you've been so victorious."

"So I won?"

"Looks like it." Together they walked across the valley floor. The air was warm but the hint of evening made itself felt in the growing shadows. Ares looked about him. "You really did a job on them," he said, casually kicking the arm of a dead man. Xena frowned.

"Don't do that."

"Don't do what? Oh, this?" Ares rolled another corpse out of the way with his foot. "Surely that doesn't bother you, Xena?"

"It's... unnecessary, Ares. The man is dead."

"And consequently feels nothing. Xena! Who cares? There are probably a thousand bodies lying across our route. Am I supposed to step round them all?"

"You can be such a bastard, Ares."

"And you, my sweet, can be the most exquisite hypocrite. You didn't care about any of these people, living. What makes you begin to care for them once they're dead?"

"It isn't necessary to defile the dead."

"No. But it can make such an impact. It wasn't necessary for Achilles to drag Hector's body round and round the walls of Troy, but he still did it."

"I imagine you gave him the idea." Xena's tone was scornful, but Ares wasn't offended. He only grinned.

"You flatter me... But yes, it was my idea. And it worked marvellously, better than anything I could have anticipated. With a single action, Achilles undermined the entire fabric of the Trojan society. He went against their every rule for honouring the dead. It granted him immortality of a sort. No-one will ever remember the story of Achilles without seeing the ruined corpse of Hector. That and the whole ankle thing," he added, vaguely. "And you worry about me

kicking a corpse... Xena, I never imagined you could be so squeamish.” He gave the last word a disgusted twist.

“I’m not,” said Xena, furious. “I don’t destroy things just for the sake of it. I fight wars. I’m not interested in if the world remembers me.”

“No?” Ares smiled. “Well, in that case, I shan’t worry about how you’ll feel when you see your next treat.” He nodded toward an area just beyond the edge of the battlefield. “In fact, you’ll probably enjoy this.”

By the same magic that had already taken her so far, Xena blinked and suddenly she and Ares stood within the main room of a small house. At a table by the window a young woman was writing onto a scroll. Other scrolls lay on the table and on the floor. Ares bent, picked one up and unrolled it. He grinned. “This one’s convinced she can write. Someone’s been telling her the stories of the great Xena. She’s never seen you, but she thinks she knows all about you. Who knows, maybe one day you’ll get the chance to kill her, too. She’s got a long way to go but I think she shows promise. Listen, Xena, I think you’ll like this one.” He read aloud,

““After the battle, when the blood had poured over the valley like a sea of death, the Destroyer of Nations walked about, smiling to see the contorted faces of the dead. No sign of compassion touched her face, but no-one sighed to see such callousness: the Destroyer of Nations had long been said to have only a stone where every other being had a heart. It was said by the children of the village that the Destroyer feasted that night on the fallen bodies of her enemies, and that when the moon rose high over the wreckage of the city, her face was held up to the whitened moon, and the blood ran down her lips – “”

Xena put up a hand to silence him, but Ares didn’t stop. “This is great stuff, Xena. You should try reading it yourself some time. Now, where were we? Oh, yes,... ‘And the blood ran down her lips and marked her body so that she resembled nothing so much as a fiend. Even the bacchae would have fled from the path of the Destroyer. Achilles in his most bloody triumph was as nothing compared to the horror wrought by the Destroyer; it was said that even snake-headed Medusa would have turned away her mortal smile from the face of Xena.’”

Ares grinned again. “A little heavy on the alliteration and a tad fantastical, but the style ain’t bad. I’d say she shows promise. And it’s nice to know that you made such an impression, eh? When you’re dead and gone, they’ll still remember you. Oh, but that’s not in my remit.” Ares lifted Xena’s hand to him and kissed it. Then he winked at her. “Even Medusa, huh? Some accolade, Princess.”

Xena watched the girl as the young bard wrote. After a few moments she said, “Worse than Medusa?”

“You have to have standards. I think that’s pretty good. Mind you, I’ve never been keen on bards. Too wordy.”

“Read something else.”

Ares shrugged his shoulders. “More stories? Alright. Just one more and then it’s straight to be.” He grinned. “It’s your funeral, Xena. Ah...” He fished about among the scrolls and selected another at random. “Oh, this one’s great. I think you’ll like it.

“‘Surely the girl had had as much right to live out her life as even the poorest inhabitant of Greece, but it was her great misfortune to have been handed as mere chattel to the Destroyer, Xena. It is said that once the Destroyer had exhausted the girl’s sexual favours Xena happily slew the girl in order to enter the land of the dead and return again to the land of the living. The Witch and the Destroyer returned from the land of the dead, and the young girl’s body was cast into a shallow pit where the kites might feed upon her. Surely it was from such nightmares that the rumour that the Destroyer was indeed the first vampire to walk upon the earth took hold.’ Nice going, Xena. I just love your work. No wonder you make my heart beat a little faster, every time we meet.”

“Who are the other scrolls about?”

“The other scrolls? Xena, they’re all about you. This girl really has you on her mind. And on her scrolls. Xena the Destroyer, Xena the Vampire. I rather like that idea: very darkly erotic. Very sexy... I can see why you’d turn down my offers of immortality when you’ve someone like this around... Xena the Eater of Children. My! It looks like you’ve already attained as much fame as anyone could handle. You’re well on your way to becoming the figure mothers use to frighten their children with: hurry home or Xena will get you... I can just see your image drawn showing a child’s bone between your teeth. A good thing you’ve never had any children yourself.”

“I – I...” Xena’s voice faltered. For a single moment she thought of the child she had given up, and something twisted inside her. Sternly she fought the unsteadiness she felt. “What should I care what I’m remembered for, Ares?”

“Quite. I mean... As good to be remembered as a monster than as anything else. Medusa will never be forgotten: in years from now when we gods are nothing but print on a page, she’ll be there, too. And so, my love, will you.” He frowned. “And just what is a vampire, anyway?”

Xena tried to shrug off the feelings that were beginning to eat at her. She had been a warrior for so long that she had forgotten all other ways of life. Seeing that young woman sitting so quietly at the table had unnerved her. There was no time for writing when there were wars to be won, battles to be fought. The world was out to get you, it was just a matter of who moved first. Xena watched the words appearing in black ink on the parchment. I had to become a warrior, she thought. I had to fight to save my home. Someone had to do it. If you don't fight, you lose. And if you're weak, you die. Suddenly on fire with frustration she kicked her way out of the dream house and into the open air. Nothing fitted: once outside the sunlight-filled house she was back on the battlefield with Ares still beside her. "You're implying I had a choice, aren't you?"

Ares looked outraged. "A choice? Xena, you were meant to become what you are now. As I see it, you were destined to live out your life thigh-deep in the blood of your enemies. And with me by your side forever, can't you imagine how glorious it will be?"

Xena considered the image. For the first time, it struck her that perhaps it wasn't exactly the fulfilment of a dream. She looked back toward the little house and the writing woman, but both were gone. Ares hadn't finished. "The weak perish, Xena! They always do. And the strong succeed! And there's nothing you can do about it. Your destiny is to be my companion. I have never known a woman I wanted to possess as much as I do you, and believe me,..." Ares' voice was both honeyed and complacent, "There have been plenty of women before you."

Xena looked him squarely in the face. "How attractive: a well-tested god. And it's my destiny, huh? Nothing I can do will change it? Tomorrow I go out and fight and then it's you and me from there on in?"

Ares beamed. "You took the words right out of my mouth. Every step you take over the bodies of the dead brings you that much closer to me. When you've beaten down those last few hesitations, you're home, and mine. And once mine, you'll never want to be anywhere else."

Xena took a few steps back, rested her hands on her hips, and scowled. "Why is it that I'm not finding this dream as enticing as you do?"

"Probably because you're weak," said Ares, with an eye for Xena's psychology. "Those last few humanitarian impulses. But they'll fade with time. Oh, and talking about fading..." his image became blurred, "Looks like I've had my time for tonight. Sweet dreams, Princess. I'll be seeing you in mine." The battlefield faded as it was supplanted by the very real walls of Xena's room.

The Destroyer of Nations watched as Ares' image twisted into little pockets of light and then vanished altogether. "Don't count on it, Ares" she growled.

She waited for her third visitor. This time her hour of peace dragged on. She had no desire to sleep, and no appetite for food or wine. If she closed her eyes all she could see were the bodies of the dead. All the dead. All the men and women she'd despatched since beginning her existence as the Destroyer of Nations. She hadn't meant to become a monster... Somewhere along the line it had happened. The great space that separated the woman who had become a warrior to serve and save her village from the single-minded warlord who viewed killing as something akin to sport had gone: there was nothing left of her old self. Ares wanted her as his partner, and Callisto wanted to meet Xena in combat so that she could kill her. Some blonde kid who fancied herself as a bard was writing Xena's history so that she sounded like some kind of madwoman, sick with bloodlust. Her stomach twisted and something inside her shrank away from what she had become.

And the time went by. Outside snow fell, covering the bodies of the dead with a sympathetic, if useless, blanket. Xena looked out at the changed world. At some point, she thought, there's going to be another one turning up. What this time? More comment on my past? No... I've had the past, I've had the present, or thereabouts. I don't think I want to see the future.

She shifted in the bed. It was good to have for once a roof above her. Good for once to know that Argo was safely stabled and sheltered from the bite of a Grecian winter. Xena sighed and pulled the bedcovers up higher, to cover her shoulders. "Xena, could you spare just a little bit of blanket? I know I'm not the most significant person round here, but if Argo can have two horse-blankets, don't I at least deserve one person blanket? A Gabrielle blanket?" The surprise was so great that Xena ricocheted into an upright position. Beside her, a blonde head rested on the shared pillow. "Or is this your revenge for my saying I wanted to put off frostbite for just one more season?"

Xena just stared. Gabrielle said, "Ah, don't pull the how much did I have to drink last night and who in the name of Tartarus is this. We've been together too long for that. But I'm glad you're awake: it's about time you and I had some quality time together. Sometimes in the midst of your trying to put the world to rights, I think you forget that that your partner can get to feel a little neglected."

The room was slightly lighted by the candle that burned beside the bed and the candle that flickered by the tightly-barred window. Outside was winter. Sleet striped the shutters and made goose-bumps rise on Xena's arms. "All day long I've been watching you from a distance, hoping you'd see me. Sometimes I think that you know it's me even from miles away. I know that's stupid, and I suppose that you'll laugh..."

Gabrielle twisted in the bed until she was lying next to Xena. She ran her fingertips gently down from Xena's shoulder to the nice curve of her hip. "It's so seldom I see you without your armour that sometimes I forget just how nice you look beneath it."

Xena lifted back the blankets to check that things were as she imagined, that she was stark naked. Gabrielle lifted herself up. Her body looked golden in the candlelight, and the shadows that fell across her showed both curves and finely-muscled limbs. She sat up over Xena, and when she rested herself on Xena's thighs, Xena nearly groaned with pleasure and desire. Gabrielle leaned toward Xena and her kisses landed first on Xena's throat, and then on her mouth. Her weight was insubstantial but Xena would have welcomed more.

When she ran her tongue lightly over Xena's lips and then down to Xena's throat Gabrielle left a trail of sensation that burned in a line to Xena's cunt. Xena felt herself grow damp between the legs, felt a jolt of sensuality that made all her nerve-endings buzz. She didn't know who this woman was, but she wanted to be kissed by her again.

Gabrielle smiled at her. "I love you, Xena," she said. "And just for once I'm not going to let you do all the work." She grinned. "For tonight you can be my prisoner." Xena stared at her. She felt that soft warm mouth as it ran from her throat to her breasts, her stomach, her hips, and then she felt her heart shift a gear as that mouth reached her cunt. Her legs fell open without any command from their owner.

Gabrielle lifted the blanket up like a tent that sheltered them both. She put up her face and grinned at Xena. Then she slid down in the bed and pressed herself in between Xena's legs. Her touch was too firm to tickle, and it awoke every nerve-ending in Xena's body. When she pressed her tongue just inside Xena's cunt, it was all the warrior princess could do not to grab her by that soft blonde hair and hold her in place indefinitely, but when Xena felt fingers inside her and that tongue just sliding across her, over and over, she gave up the unequal struggle and fell back against the pillows. What the hell... She said out-loud, "Just please never stop doing that,... Gabrielle." Xena felt the woman slide another finger inside her, and she felt how it made her muscles dance.

Xena's control cracked. The last of her self-possession slid from her as she reached down and bodily hauled Gabrielle up and across the mattress. She covered Gabrielle's body with her own, feeling the softness of Gabrielle's breasts against her skin, the heat of the woman's cunt against her own. Xena was so overcome with desire that the sound that fought its way out of her throat sounded like a growl. She opened her legs around Gabrielle's body and used them to hold her down. She kissed Gabrielle, tasting the sweetness of her

mouth. Gabrielle's mouth tasted like fruit, like sun-warmed grapes. Gabrielle's lips were soft and her tongue danced against Xena's own.

Gabrielle's hands were on Xena's pulling her closer. Gabrielle's breasts were so soft, and her touch was so comfortable that Xena began to lose track of where she stopped and where Gabrielle started. She let her hair flow over Gabrielle's stomach as she kissed the tops of Gabrielle's thighs, and the smell of aroused woman washed over Xena like diving. She closed her eyes, saw nothing but flickering darkness. She gently pulled Gabrielle's legs apart and opened her mouth over the musky-smelling cunt, her tongue flickering in and across until Gabrielle shouted out, and buried her hands in Xena's hair. Xena felt Gabrielle's hands fighting to hold her where she wanted to be, and she smiled to herself. A wash of sexual hunger hit Xena and lit her up from inside. Starting slowly she began to push all her fingers inside Gabrielle, wanting to be a part of her, wanting almost to hurt her, wanting to claim her, and she heard Gabrielle moan and shudder and open up to Xena like a city throwing back its gates.

Oh. Xena lay back on the bed, still fully-dressed, her muscles taut, her blood burning, her heart pounding so hard it hurt. She was dizzy with the intensity of what had just been, and she was entirely alone.

Her third visitor of the night hadn't come with much of a warning. Xena's body ached from the inside out. Unsatisfied desire still burned inside her: her body was damp with perspiration and her head spun. Slowly she sat up, swung gently round and stood up. For a moment she stumbled, and put out a hand to steady herself. She stood up straight and looked back at the bed.

The blankets were a little disordered, but that was all. Xena went to the fire and built it up. She shivered, her skin quickly cooling, her heart returning to its usual rhythm. She said out-loud, "Gabrielle." She splashed her face with water from the pitcher in the corner. The water was close to ice, but it did its work. It chilled Xena, sobered her. Now she knew where she'd seen Gabrielle before... sitting at that table writing horror stories about the Destroyer of Nations.

The fire crackled. Xena dropped to the floor before it, and put out her hands to the growing warmth. She fought the sense of dizziness she felt. "Some night, huh?"

Xena looked up and into Callisto's eyes. "I didn't know that I'd be seeing you again." Her voice lacked fire.

Callisto shrugged her shoulders, sat down on the floor across the rug from Xena. She grinned at the sexual flush that was still colouring Xena's face and

throat. “Looks like your last visitor made a more positive impression than Ares or I.”

“Do you guys get together and draw straws for who gets to do what?” Callisto’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, I don’t mean the whole sex thing... But why all this? You and Ares and... Gabrielle get to play with my head for a night and what’s the pay-off?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Callisto gave Xena a very patronising smile. “Well, for the hard-of-understanding, Warrior Princess, all that I showed you has happened. The battles were real, and the dead are dead. But the events Ares showed you, and the...” Callisto grinned. “The last little sexual odyssey... these are the things that could be. Gabrielle dreamed you; she doesn’t know you. Not yet. But play your cards right and you’ll leave a legend written in other people’s blood on half-a-hundred scrolls.”

Xena sighed deeply. “And if I took another path...?”

“Well, I suppose in that case you get to play with blondie under the blankets.”

“You have such a way with words.” Xena’s spirit was reviving. “But it’s all relative, isn’t it?”

“If that’s how you choose to see it.”

“And if I wanted to make any changes, what would I have to do?”

“Well, it’s not going to be a story of overnight success, Xena.” Callisto examined her nails. “If you really wanted to take that route... You know, the long, boring and winding road... I suppose you’d have to look at this again.” She drew out the treaty proposal from somewhere inside her armour. “But I don’t think that’s you, Xena. I can’t honestly see all that force and fever going domesticated. Really, can you?”

Xena shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. She stood up. “I suppose it’s the choice between a monster and being... I don’t know... something else.”

“It’d never work. Not in a million years.”

“No,” said Xena, softly. “Maybe not. But I suppose people can change.”

Callisto shrugged her shoulders. “You think? Rather you than me.” She stood up. “Parting is such... oh, forget it. One bard in anyone’s life is more than enough. I’m off. Things to do. People to haunt. Oh, and just for the record: whatever decision you make, whatever path you choose, sooner or later, we’ll meet. You’ve already made me what I am. No second chances there, unless

one day we get to meet in hell, and I really can't see that happening." She grinned. "Xena, I'm so looking forward to the chance of killing you. Really. I can't wait." She blew Xena an ironic kiss.

Xena watched as Callisto's form began to dissipate. In the space of a breath Xena was alone again. Only a faint shimmering in the air marked where Callisto had been, and in another moment, even that had gone.

Xena picked up the treaty. Sighed deeply. Began to examine the terms.

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