

~ Gladiator ~

by Aurelia

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Specific Disclaimers:

VIOLENCE WARNING/DISCLAIMER:

A general violence warning, after all we are talking about Xena in a gladiator arena. There is also rape mentioned on one or two occasions but not graphically depicted. My apologies to those upset by this but I felt it was important to the plot.

SEX WARNING/DISCLAIMER:

This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. Sexual content is nothing more than PG-13 here. There are adult concepts.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This is an alternate timeline story, changing direction from "Destiny". The Warrior Princess and the Destroyer of Nations did not exist. Nor did Lao Ma, Borias or Hercules take part in moulding this particular Xena. And Ares can't get her out of this one either.

THANKS:

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FEEDBACK: Any positive feedback is appreciated at http://www.aurelia_fan@yahoo.com.au/
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Chapter 1

Today had been a hot day, especially this early in Spring. Xena had been working hard for the last half a candlemark keeping her opponent from skewering her with his trident. Beads of sweat lay across her back and she could feel one of them trickle down, its path brushing against the fine hairs on her back and starting an annoying itch that she had no time to scratch. She shifted the armour in the hope that it would brush away the errant moisture, but it didn't alleviate the sensation.

It was only a matter of time before she would triumph, she knew that, and the heat was to her advantage. She could see her opponent struggling under his own weight and the weight of his

armour, so she kept him moving, using up precious energy trying to stay with her. While he was a competent fighter, he was not in the same class as her.

She didn't like to think of herself as vain, but a fact was a fact. She had stayed alive this long by knowing what her capabilities were and using them wisely. Confidence in her own abilities didn't hurt either.

A cheer went up from the crowd in the hope of spurring one of them into action, but Xena was not going to be rushed. Rash actions usually ended in disaster. *Just a little longer, Xena.*

The roar of the crowd had been deafening and she had been grateful for the heavy helmet she had been wearing to dampen the sound. The cloying heat was beginning to take its toll. Beads of sweat rolled down her forehead and into her eyes, making them sting in protest. A behemoth of a man stood before her, trident and net in hand, watching her carefully for an opportunity to end her life. Xena circled her prey, swinging her short sword in tight arcs to keep her opponent at bay. The sun beat mercilessly on her bare back and she could feel the familiar tingle of sunburn.

This had been her life for the last ten years. And every moment she cursed the day she captured a young Roman named Julius Caesar and tried to ransom him. In the early days of her slavery she had even cursed him for changing his mind about crucifying her and sending her to Rome instead to fight in the gladiator ring. Every day was some new horror, whether it was the constant life and death battle in the arena, the beatings or guards and gladiators alike trying to jump her.

While death and sex were no strangers to her, she didn't like it when it was happening to her twenty-four candelmarks a day. It took her back to her early days with her first army where she had to prove herself both physically and mentally capable of leading them. At least in those days she was able to eventually surround herself with men she trusted.

Here, she could not afford to let her guard down for one moment, for that was all it took for someone to rape you, beat you or gut you. There were no friendships here. You didn't know from one day to the next who you would face in the arena. While she wasn't the only woman gladiator, she did not enjoy the indiscriminate sex and a chance to maim and kill at will in front of an appreciative crowd the way the others did. She only wanted to survive.

Escape had not been an option. Caesar kept a close eye on her every move. She knew she was dead as soon as she left the gladiator quarters, and no one was prepared to help her. Not until three years ago.

Antillia Maxima. Her benefactress and protector. This middle-aged patrician woman, for some reason unknown to her, became her guardian angel and her life improved dramatically. This woman came from one of the oldest and most respected families of Rome. She had lost her husband, a general in Caesar's army, in a recent overseas campaign and as the only surviving member of her family's fortune and power she took it upon herself to rescue Xena from her imprisonment.

She used her considerable influence to buy Xena from Caesar and move her into her household,

but was unable to free her from her gladiatorial obligations. He may have needed the money but he was not about to give the woman up that easily. Caesar saw to that. And Antillia was not about to cross political swords with one of the most powerful men in Rome.

Besides, Caesar argued, Xena's popularity had grown to such an extent that had she refused to fight it would have been a huge affront to the populace of Rome. It was her duty to serve Rome in this capacity. He appealed to Antillia's patriotic nature to let the woman continue in the arena.

Sense of duty! Bah! Xena mentally spat at him. The bastard still wanted to bed her and watch her fight without having to pay to look after her, and get an obscene amount of money for her in the bargain. She could never understand why Antillia agreed to those ridiculous terms anyway. She certainly wouldn't have.

Antillia reminded Xena of her mother in a lot of ways and treated her, and other slaves within her household, with an amazing amount of respect. Because of this small courtesy all her staff, including Xena, were very loyal to her.

Xena focused on the man in front of her. They circled around each other, each waiting for the other to make a fatal mistake. The crowd was getting impatient. While both of them were covered in cuts and nicks, no substantial amount of blood had been lost. Their skimpy outfits would show any cuts in all their bloody glory but one of them had yet to inflict a mortal wound. The crowd would not be happy until the blood flowed free from a gaping gash, a cut-off limb or ultimately a death.

I've let this go on long enough. Time to end this. Xena was sick and tired of waiting for her opponent to make a move. She made a swift move towards him, side-stepped at the last moment as he was committed to his move with the net and brought her sword down, carving a deep crease across his back. He dropped the net and grabbed for his back, leaning on the trident for support. A roar went up from the crowd as blood dripped down, pooling on the dusty ground.

The gladiator drew up his remaining strength and grabbing the trident with both hands made a frontal assault on her. He was losing blood fast and he knew the end was near. Xena easily moved past him and drew more blood with another cut across his back. Dropping to his knees, the giant was unable to continue. She threw her sword skyward, facing Caesar for his decision. *C'mon, you bastard, surprise me.*

She knew which way his thumb would go even before she faced him. The crowd went silent as they awaited this man's command. As expected, his thumb went down. She ended her opponent's life quickly and efficiently, glad it was all over for another day.

Raising her arms to the crowd she took in the exultant cheers, all yelling her name. "Xena! Xena! Xena!" She removed her helmet and armour, leaving it in a pile on the ground. There she stood, six foot of feral fighter. Xena, Gladiator of Rome. Her muscular body was on full display in her miniscule outfit. Her long, raven hair, braided down her back, dripped with perspiration and her sky-blue eyes surveyed the masses of people all crying in unison.

Glad for the small breeze that sprang up, she felt the cool air glide over her overheated and overstressed body. Closing her eyes for a moment, she could nearly feel herself standing on her vessel, the cheers dissolving into the cries of overhead seagulls, the floor under her feet rolling with the ocean waves and her young stowaway singing her song of woe. Damn, she missed the sea.

She approached her benefactor, lowered to one knee and bowed her head in respect. She rose and turned towards the dais where Caesar sat and stared at him, her cerulean eyes cooling to chips of ice. As always, her anger rose at the sight of him. He was torturing her and she knew it. And he enjoyed it that she knew what he was doing to her. *Smarmy bastard*. And tonight would bring what she had come to loathe... him. Antillia's protection only went so far.

She had been so tempted to just let her opponent win and be done with it, but her fighting spirit wouldn't let her do it. She had not gotten this far by giving in, so she would bide her time and do what had to be done to survive. This man sitting in front of her was arrogant, sneaky and above all ambitious. He would stab his best friend in the back if it benefited him. After all, that was how she ended up here, wasn't it? She only hoped that she lived long enough for Rome to discover what a snake he was and took its revenge.

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Xena returned to her quarters at Antillia's household, soaking in a hot bathtub readying herself for the ritual visit by Caesar. It galled her that he didn't do it for love, or even lust, but it was just another form a torture he used to subdue her fire. He kept taking what was hers - her life, her fighting arm and her body, and she was unable to say 'no'. Why didn't she just kill him there and then? She didn't fear death. She could follow right behind without fear.

Ideally, she wanted to beat him with a sword, one-on-one, but she knew that he would never let that happen. So she did nothing. She continued to let him take and take. She didn't want to bring shame on Antillia's household, and she knew that it wasn't only her life at stake here; she had others to consider. If she so much as twitched, Caesar's punishment would be swift and vicious not only on her but on Antillia and perhaps even her household as well. At this point, all she could do was hope that Rome itself would destroy him. The last thing she wanted was for him to be remembered through the Ages as an honourable man.

She looked up from her reverie to see Antillia entering the bathing chamber. She rose up and bowed low. "Mistress."

"Xena," Antillia placed a hand on her shoulder, motioning her to continue her bathing. She could feel the young woman's muscles twitch under her fingers. *Even after three years her body is still edgy*. Antillia couldn't begrudge Xena her razor-sharp reflexes as it had kept her alive for those seven years in the gladiator pit. "You pleased us today."

"I am glad, mistress." It was like making her mother happy.

"Leave us please." Antillia dismissed the other slaves in the room until they were alone.

"I'm sorry, my dear, about tonight." All pretence dropped. "If I could spare you this, I would."

"Why Antillia?" Xena was the only slave who had been given the courtesy, but only in private.

"Why?"

"Yes, why? Why do you treat me so well? After all, I am but a slave."

Xena had asked this question many times but she had always managed to not answer it. Maybe it was time.

"You were never *just* a slave, Xena. "I..." Xena grabbed the older woman's hand and saw the tear-filled eyes track up to her own. A tentative smile came unbidden to those full lips in understanding. "I had a child once, a beautiful little girl. Dark hair and blue eyes. She was my joy." Xena now made the connection.

"What happened?"

"She became sick and died not long after that. I had known her only four short summers, but my love for life withered and died that day... until I saw you."

"I had seen you fight on many occasions and that first time you removed your helmet... I can't say... it struck a chord within me. I had feelings that I thought had been long dead. When I heard of your lashing, I couldn't stand by and do nothing any longer." Xena knew that Antillia was the last of her line.

Xena winced at the memories of that fateful day which changed her life forever. She had finally had enough of one particular brute continually harassing her for sex. He had her cornered and was pressing his case when she finally snapped his neck. That earned her twenty lashes and whatever the guards wanted to do with her. If it wasn't for the intervention of Antillia she would have probably been begging for death a day or two later.

Antillia took her home, bathed her wounds and nursed her back to health. After considerable political and financial manipulation, she made an arrangement with Caesar. It was not ideal, especially the fighting and the ritual bedding of her after it, which Antillia secretly thought barbaric, but it was considerably better than what Xena had survived in the pit for the last seven years. Caesar had surmised that her need to save Xena was greater than his own need for money.

She didn't fully understand her overwhelming need to save Xena. Was it the uncanny physical resemblance to her own child? Was it finally a chance to save the daughter she was unable to save all those years ago? Or was it just a lone voice crying out to her for help that she was unable to ignore?

Antillia gently traced the scars on Xena's back, fresh tears scudding down her cheeks as she surveyed the damage done by Caesar's justice. "I'm so sorry."

"For what? It's not your fault."

"I should have done something sooner."

"Please. You have done plenty already. You have given me a home and a haven. It's probably better than I deserve."

A strong hand grabbed Xena's chin and pulled her face up to eye level with Antillia. "Don't you ever talk like that!" There was a tinge of anger in her voice. "You DO deserve better, and more."

Xena searched the hazel eyes glaring back at her. Had she gone too far? "I'm sorry for angering you, mistress."

"Xena, Stop this! It breaks my heart to hear you talk like this. Where is all that fire and spirit? Are you so whipped that you don't have the fight in you any more?"

"I have plenty of fight, Antillia, but I save that for the arena. I cannot afford it outside of it. Caesar is just waiting for one sign of insolence to punish me." Xena knew there was plenty of fire alright, but there was a time and a place. She had learned the important lesson of patience against opponents bigger and stronger than she was. It was only a matter of time for her opportunity to come and until then, her fire burned bright inside her.

"Let's make a deal. While we are alone you can be your arrogant opinionated self." That reply got a small smile from Xena. "Of course, around others we have to be careful and you will have to treat me with proper respect. But then I know you will do that anyway." Xena bowed her head in acknowledgement. This was an unexpected turn of events. "No one must suspect, Xena. Otherwise I will lose my position in Roman society and you will lose your protection."

"Understood... mother."

A fierce answering glow burnt in Antillia's eyes. She never thought she would ever hear that word again.

"Well done... daughter."

Gentle laughter echoed through the chamber. For the next candlemark quiet murmurs and soft splashing was all that could be heard.

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As usual, Caesar kept her waiting. This time it was over a candlemark before he made an appearance. Xena was silently amused by all these little "mind games" he thought would break her down. They were so puerile. She saved her strength for the battles that mattered; those in the arena and in the bedroom. To cope, she had come to accept them as trials in her life she had to overcome and move on. She had learned over time that what was done was done and she gave

them no further thought. Life had too many obstacles for her in the present to worry about the old ones of the past.

Caesar's eyes raked over her attire, which was barely more than a see-through sheath. This was his choice designed to make her feel worthless, make her feel like nothing more than a whore. In the silence of her own room she did feel that way but she never showed her heartbreak to anyone, not even Antillia, but she suspected the older woman knew.

"Well Xena. I see you survived another day." He plastered a fake smile on his face like he cared.

"Yes Lord Caesar. The Gods were on my side today."

"The Gods? It must have been your Gods. My Gods would never have supported a heathen like you." He knew he had won a point when he saw her bristle.

Let it pass Xena. You know his games.

"Well said, my Lord. I'll take whatever help I can."

"Well, heathen. I'm here for my tribute." *Trust him to cheapen the act even more.*

"Yes my Lord. This way." Xena braced herself for the ferocity she was about to endure.

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Antillia came to her room after Caesar left four candlemarks later. While Xena said nothing, she knew he had been particularly vicious tonight. She could hear it even through the thick walls of her house. She had never witnessed such a persistent and prolonged attack on a person in all her days in Roman society. And she had seen a lot. Xena had never discussed her history with Caesar but even she could guess that whatever she had done, he was determined to make her pay for it over and over again.

"Let me help you." Antillia knew that Xena had been hurt. The young woman rose stiffly from a nearby chair, buckling over in pain.

Antillia went to the door and called for help. When she had everything she needed she sent the servant away and they were alone again. Xena laid quietly, not a sound passing her lips, as she tended the torn flesh, noting bruises and bite marks liberally covering her body that weren't there when she bathed earlier. *That bastard!*

"Why does he hate you so?"

Xena was afraid to tell her. She didn't want to disappoint this woman who had become so important to her.

"It's not a pretty story."

"Tell me." There was silence. "Why do you always hesitate?"

"I'm afraid of what you'll think of me."

"Let me make that decision, daughter." Xena was still not convinced. "Don't make me spank you!" She tried to bring some levity to the situation.

Xena couldn't help but smile. "It began about ten summers ago. I was raiding a Greek village and captured a young Greek soldier. I didn't know who he was back then and could only see the dinars I would get." She stopped to see Antillia's reaction. She saw none. "They paid and I released him. In the time he was with me we had become lovers. We made a pact and he betrayed me. I was going to be crucified and he changed his mind. He sent me to Rome to fight in the arena instead. You know the rest."

"But why does he have such hatred for you? Why not end it all on the cross?"

"I have asked myself that every day for the last ten years. I think I am his example to Rome, warning others not to become an enemy to him. I know his ego was bruised and he is a proud Roman. He doesn't like a woman beating him - he's that kind of a man. He is making me suffer over and over again until my dying day, not quite killing me but making me wish for death."

Antillia suspected there was more to it than that. A woman like Xena wouldn't let herself be subdued for that length of time without a reason.

Xena looked up to the hazel eyes quietly watching her. "There's more to this story, isn't there?" Xena hung her head. She had never told anyone her secret.

Antillia could see her struggling. She shifted until she was kneeling in front of the stricken woman and gently trapped her chin in her fingers. "You've known me long enough to know I will not use it against you. Tell me, daughter. Perhaps I can help you."

She so wanted to hand over this convoluted problem to the older woman in the hope that she could produce a miracle and make it all go away. The secrecy, the lies and the mental and physical torture of Caesar were all slowly wearing away at her resolve. She needed a friend, even if it was only someone to talk to.

"I found out I was pregnant on the way to Rome. Caesar seemed excited by the idea of having a child and I thought my fortune had changed."

A child! Xena had a child!

"He waited until the child was born and I had bonded with her. My beautiful baby daughter!" Tears came unbidden. "That monster took her away from me! His own child and he was using her as barter to get me to do what he wanted! What sort of a sick man is that?" She could feel the tears running in tiny rivulets down her cheeks.

Antillia opened her arms, welcoming the young woman into her embrace. Xena let ten years' worth of tears come in the safety of the older woman's arms.

"And every three moons he brings her to me so that I am now forever bonded to her. He knows I will do anything to ensure her safety." Xena barely could speak over the constant hiccuping the crying had caused.

No wonder he is so arrogant. There must be something I can do ...

"Why haven't I seen the child before, Xena?"

"Because he brings her to the Coliseum just before I fight. I only hope he doesn't keep her there to watch me. It wouldn't be surprised if he did. One more nail in me as I lie bleeding on my own personal cross."

"You should have trusted me child." Xena lowered her head without answering. "Why haven't you escaped and taken her with you?"

"Because I don't know where she is; only Caesar knows and he brings her himself when he can. Sometimes its months on end before I see her because he is overseas. He gives me about half a candlemark with her at a time and I can't follow because of the fight. He holds every card in this, Antillia."

"I have never met such a cold, callous human being in all my life... and I've seen a lot of human trash." Xena felt only despair. "I wonder if he would have been so casual about using his child as a bargaining tool if it had been a boy ..."

Yes indeed. If only the rest of Rome had this sort of insight into the man grooming himself to be Emperor. May the Gods help Rome ...

"Antillia, if I may speak frankly here, I grow weary of this battle with him. I hate having to bow and scrape to him - it's not in my nature - but I'm very close to just letting my opponent win in the arena. Ten years is enough. I don't know if I have the fight in me anymore."

"A little while longer, please Xena." A thought began to form in Antillia's brain. "When he is due to bring the child again?"

"In a few days when I fight, you know that. Why?"

"Tell him to bring the child here to this house." Xena looked puzzled. "In fact, I will approach him myself and tell him I am agreeable to the child being brought here. If you talk to him, mention one word - Gaul."

Xena wasn't sure if Caesar would agree to a change of venue but she could try. This would change the dynamic of the meeting and put him at a disadvantage. She glanced over to the older

woman and received an enigmatic smile in return. *What was she up to?*

"Maybe Clonus knows the right man for the job..." Antillia went back to her scheming.

"What are you thinking? I won't risk my child Antillia."

"Well, with some luck she won't be hurt again." She saw the look of hope shine out of those piercingly blue eyes, watching her for some hint of what her plan would be.

"I'll try to get someone to watch Caesar and he can follow him to the child. We'll plot that snake's downfall at a later time. Do you think you can resist him a little longer?"

Antillia silently watched the woman in front of her, gaining strength from the possible end to her misery. "He won't be happy until I'm prostrate at his feet begging. I don't want to give him that satisfaction. Give me something to fight for, Antillia. Nothing would please me more than to rip out his ugly heart and hold it beating in my hand." The last statement was said with an air of finality.

There's that fire! Antillia silently cheered the stubborn streak in the young woman. She was pleased that Caesar had not broken her, and knew that her spirit still soared within her young soul.

"C'mon. Time for you to get some sleep. Drink this. It will help with the pain." Xena didn't argue; she was sick and tired of life for today.

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Chapter 2

Antillia decided to take her young charge with her down to the markets for some fresh air. Xena was quieter than her normal self and she knew what would cheer her up. *If only you knew to what lengths I would go to make you happy, my dear.*

"Xena, would you accompany me to the markets? I am in need of a bodyguard today."

"As you wish, mistress." Antillia could see her get up stiffly. They had decided on a more demure outfit to cover the bruises and marks from Caesar's visit.

Leaving the confines of the courtyard, they entered the sea of humanity heading down the hill to the markets. It wasn't long before someone recognised Xena and the crowd jostled around her trying to touch their Champion.

Antillia stood back and watched. She could see Xena trying to hold back her reflex to throw someone against a wall, but soon she relaxed and enjoyed the adoration of the masses. She looked up to where Antillia was standing and an understanding passed between them. She had

made the trip out for Xena to bathe in the glory of being the hero of the common man as a salve for her battered soul. She nodded her head in acknowledgment towards the older woman and a smile finally touched her face for the first time that day.

They wandered aimlessly, inspecting the huge variety of food available for purchase. Without much forethought they ended up at the slave market. Antillia had more than enough slaves and was not interested in another one, but watching who was buying and who was not was very interesting. She had seen a next-door neighbour buy a strapping young lad and was secretly amused at what his position in that household would be.

She surreptitiously glanced over Xena's shoulder and spotted the two guards assigned to follow them by Caesar. There were always guards; out of sight they thought, but she always found them. A gasp beside her brought her back from her introspection. She studied Xena who seemed to be awestruck by something.

"What is it?" Antillia looked around but could not see what Xena was looking at. She looked back at the young woman. "What's wrong?" All Xena could do was point. *Was she pointing at the podium?*

"Xena, speak to me. What am I looking for?"

"Th... Th... That woman."

"Which woman? Xena, there are five women on that podium. Which one am I looking at?"

"The blonde."

Before her stood a woman of short to middling height, her long unkempt hair hanging over her bowed head. Ragged slave's garb covered her slim body. Antillia faced Xena again, wondering if the young woman had lost her senses. She grabbed Xena's face and brought it round to face her own.

"What is going on with you? What about the blonde?" The azure eyes facing her had a look she hadn't seen before. She turned once more to take another look at the slave, whose face was now visible. *Rather pretty for a slave.* She knew what that meant; her duties were mainly performed on her back. She again faced Xena but found the eyes were once again tracking to the podium. *She's smitten... well, well.*

"Go and inspect her." The blue eyes shot back to her own hazel ones in confusion. "You have my permission to inspect her more closely."

"Yes mistress." Xena couldn't help but smile. Antillia watched her go, noting her muscular grace as she walked up the stairs to the slave master. She was very proud of Xena. Here was a woman of exceptional beauty whose masterly control over her own body showed in every powerful move she made. No wonder she drove Caesar crazy. He would never really subdue her but he kept on trying anyway. She could hear the murmurs around her as the crowd recognised her.

Xena approached the little slave, who barely reached Xena's chin, and tipped her chin up until their eyes met for the first time. Eyes the colour of a spring meadow met her own and she felt something ethereal click into place, and she saw them soften in their regard of her.

Her eyes turned towards Antillia and nodded. Receiving a nod in return, Xena approached the slave master and made the deal. The crowd separated like parting waters as Xena and her slave walked down the stairs towards a waiting Antillia.

What am I going to do with another slave? She had more than enough and didn't have the heart to put them back on the block. In a strange sort of way they were all family. To the world she was the mistress of the house and they were staff, but behind closed doors they looked after each other - a warm, tight-knit group of people against the rest of the cruel world.

Slaves were a normal part of Rome and she had known them all her life. She had been very fond of one or two of them when she was a child, often filling the roles left vacant by parents who were too busy with their own social lives to notice a daughter. She had discovered very early that they were people too and not just possessions, and she found out very quickly that treating one's slaves with kindness very often resulted in being rewarded back tenfold.

As she contemplated what to do with this new slave, she didn't notice the two sets of eyes in the shadows taking in this new complication in her life. "Xena, let's go home."

"Yes mistress." Xena grabbed the arm of the blonde and dragged her along up the hill through the milling crowd.

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Back home, Antillia ordered for the new slave to be properly bathed and clothed while she and Xena indulged in lunch.

"Xena, why did I just buy a new slave?"

Xena was rather dumbfounded by the whole situation. *Why did she just buy a new slave indeed?*

"I don't know mistress. Why did you?"

"Because you wanted me to." She left it at that as if that explained it all. Maybe it did.

"But why Antillia? Why do you do these things for me?"

"Because it makes you happy, daughter. Who else can I make happy? I have no one else left in this world, child. Just indulge me."

It was moments like these that were beacons of light on a sea of despair. This was what made the suffering all worthwhile and her spirits steadily rose under the older woman's regard.

She extended her hand across the table, taking her mentor's hand in her own and giving it a gentle squeeze. Tears came unbidden to her eyes as she silently thanks the Fates for her unexpected saviour who had made the last three years bearable, enabling her to go on. Someday, somehow she would pay this woman back for her kindness. *Daughter*. Maybe she had unwittingly already had.

"You know very well that I have no need for her services. Do you?" The question was punctuated with a raised eyebrow.

"Er... no?" What could she say? They both knew what this young slave's duties were, but could she honestly say that she didn't want her services? One look in those pale green eyes and she had felt a jolt slam into her guts. Not want her? *Be honest Xena. You want her with every fibre of your being.*

"Well, I'm assigning her to you. You will instruct her in the rules of the household and you will have to train her in a new position. Understand?"

"Yes mistress." *You mean I have to be around her all day? And you thought I was being tortured now!* She looked over to see Antillia's lips turn up in a subtle smile. *You wicked woman you!*

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Once properly cleaned, clothed and fed, the young slave was returned to Antillia's presence. "Now slave, what is your name?"

There was no reply. "Answer me, young one. What is your name?" Still no reply.

"Let me try mistress." It had been ten long years since she had spoken her native tongue and it sounded foreign even to her own ears. "What is your name girl?"

Sullenly she replied, "Gabrielle."

"Gabrielle." She rolled the name over her tongue, tasting the texture of it.

"Where do you come from Gabrielle?"

"Nowhere you'd know." Xena glared at her until she finally replied, "Potadeia."

"I know Potadeia. I came not far from there myself. I'm from Amphipolis."

"I've heard of it." Gabrielle seemed unimpressed about meeting a close neighbour so far away from home.

While this conversation went on between her two slaves, Antillia quietly observed the girl whose face and hair had been newly scrubbed and brushed. She was actually quite beautiful, which had

her wondering why she had been on the block in the first place. That was until the blonde turned around.

Oh boy! Now she knew why. The small tattoo on the inside of her wrist meant only one thing - trouble, lots and lots of trouble! It was the mark of a troublemaker.

Antillia studied Xena's body language and could see that she was getting angry. *Serves you right, child!* Maybe this was what she needed to get her mind off her own troubles.

Trouble. Even Antillia could now see the storm approaching. Like most of Rome, she had been under Caesar's charismatic spell, but now she could see it all. With Pompey and Crassus now dead, Caesar was about to make his move. But not all was going Caesar's way of late, she suspected. His "visits" with Xena were getting more and more violent, taking his frustrations out on a woman he despised and admired at the same time, who was unable, by circumstance, to repel his advances. He obviously drew great enjoyment from his domination of her, especially as he knew she was restraining herself from retaliating. It galled Antillia every time he left with that sickening look of pleasure on his face.

She focused again on Xena and... *what was the girl's name again? Oh yes, Gabrielle.*

Staying alive was becoming more and more tenuous for Xena, she could see that as well. While she may be a hero to the masses, Caesar's patience was starting to wear thin and her chances of surviving in the arena were going to start dropping dramatically.

Xena was due for her training tomorrow. She would have to have a quiet word with Clonus, Xena's personal trainer. Firstly, she needed to organize for Caesar to be followed to find the child. Next, with circumstances changing quickly, it was now time to add some secret training to her normal one. She was going to need a few surprise moves if she was going to survive the battle to come.

"This is your mistress, Antillia Maxima, and my name is Xena." She saw a jolt of recognition. Whether it was a good sign or a bad one only time would tell. "You've heard of me." That was not a question.

"The slaves talk of you like you are some kind of a Goddess." *Not a good sign.*

"As you can see, they exaggerate." *Please, don't tell me I've lost her before I've even had a chance to plead my case!*

"Xena, what is she saying?" Antillia's Greek was very rusty and could only pick up a word here and there.

Should I lie to her? Never. "It seems I may not need her services after all, mistress."

It took all of Antillia's strength not to laugh at the crestfallen look on Xena's face. *Poor dear.*

Caesar could learn something from this small blonde about how to defeat the unquenchable spirit of her proud warrior. One look and she had her whimpering.

"I want you two to get to know one another. Her training will begin tomorrow. Show her to the slaves' quarters." With that, she dismissed them. Xena bowed low and Gabrielle stood in defiance. Grabbing her arm, Xena pulled her out of Antillia's presence and towards the new home.

"Rule One. You will always show proper respect to our mistress." She was angry with the small blonde for her impudence. She had yet to realize that this woman had saved her from further mistreatment, and she would make sure that she knew how lucky she was.

* * * * *

Damn, this girl is stubborn! For the tenth time in a candlemark she tried to carry on a decent conversation with Gabrielle but the young woman was having nothing to do with her. Xena could see the stubborn streak a league wide in her and knew she was going to have her hands full with this one. *Why did I have to fall for this hellion?* A nice buck-toothed, overweight, plain, docile old crone would have been preferable at this point.

"Gabrielle, for the last time, listen to me. You can't just walk out the gate. You know that." She tried logic this time, as bullying had no effect on her. "How far do you think you're going to get, eh?"

"I'm no slave!" She was frustrated, angry and sick and tired of her current circumstance. "I just want to go home."

"We all want to go home Gabrielle, but it's just not possible. You wouldn't get two blocks from here without being assaulted and raped and you wouldn't get out of the city before being killed."

"Then, for argument sake, what if... and I'm talking a big IF here... what if you actually made it home, which is deep in Greek territory, what will your family say? You think they'll welcome you home with open arms when they find out what you did as a slave? That their little girl was nothing more than a whore in some Roman's bed?" She could see the girl's eyes close and tears trickle from the corners.

Xena moved closer, placing a long arm around her shoulder and giving her a squeeze. She gentled her voice, "I'm sorry for being brutally honest, Gabrielle, but you have to accept that, for the moment, you are here and that's the way it is."

She saw the girl's shoulders slump and it broke her heart. She had been at that point many years ago and could still remember how that realization had hurt. There were times in one's life when sometimes circumstances were beyond your control.

"C'mon." Xena stood and grabbed for her hand. "Let me show you around your new home."

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After her initial act of defiance, Gabrielle finally calmed down long enough to realize that this household may not be too bad. She could see that it was orderly, that the slaves of the household looked well fed, well groomed and in good spirits. What cheered her the most was that there was no master of the house. Her only worry at this point was the looks that Xena kept sending her way. What was worrying her even more was that it was affecting her more than she was prepared to admit even to herself.

Xena approached Antillia and asked for a minute of her time. "What am I going to do with her, mistress?"

"That's your problem Xena. You wanted her, you find a job for her."

"But mistress!"

"Don't whine, Xena. It is so unbecoming." She was so close to laughing in her face. "How about she be your personal slave?"

She jumped for joy at first but then her logical mind presented all the problems that would ensue. "I don't think that is a good idea, mistress."

"And, pray tell, why not?"

"She would become a target for Caesar, mistress. If he thought I cared for her, he would use her to get to me. I couldn't bear the thought of an innocent being hurt by him because of me."

"Hmmm. Good point. I didn't think of that."

"Perhaps she could be your personal slave?" she asked hopefully. *Don't make me have to pick, Antillia.*

"Now you know I can't do that to Astira. She's been my personal slave for over ten summers now. That wouldn't be fair."

"I know. I just don't want to have to make the decision, that's all."

"Look," Antillia began, "How about Gabrielle become your personal slave within these walls where Caesar cannot see? Explain to her carefully the circumstances. Make sure she understands the importance of secrecy, for her safety and yours, and emotional detachment outside the walls."

"That may work, mistress. But I don't know if I can leave my emotions at the gate with this one."

Antillia leaned forward to Xena's ear and whispered, "Love becomes you, my dear." Xena couldn't stop the blush starting up her neck to her cheeks. Her gaze fell to the floor as she

shuffled her feet nervously. *What can you say to that? Lie? Deny? Acknowledge? Scream it to the Gods above to hear?*

Antillia chuckled as Xena bowed, then turned and walked away, no clearer in her mind about what to do with Gabrielle than she was a candlemark earlier.

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Xena found her charge had been taken in hand by one of the older women who had arranged some spare clothing for her, had shown where she was to sleep and found a few rudimentary personal items for her personal care. She watched as it was explained to Gabrielle, in Greek, the rules of the household which, by Roman standards, were very fair and equitable. She was expected to take care of her personal hygiene every day, hair brushed, face washed and fresh clothes. One of the slaves had been assigned solely to do the laundry for the household, including slaves' uniforms, so there was no excuse for a dirty toga. Gabrielle seemed unaware of her scrutiny and while unnoticed, Xena indulged in a long, hard look at the girl.

Well, she was older than a girl, but not by much. If she had to guess, she would have said about 17 summers old. *You cradle robber you.* But she was quite beautiful, scrubbed clean and without the constant scowl on her face. Xena felt a lurch in her heart. *Damn!* Those full red lips beckoned to her and she was swept away by her imagination. What would it be like to taste those lips? To have those small hands wrapped around her in an intimate embrace. To have those beguiling emerald eyes look deep into her soul?

She hadn't noticed that Gabrielle's instruction had finished or that the young woman in question was watching her, taking the opportunity to have her own look at this legend of Rome. Her imposing figure was impressive even by Gabrielle's standards, blessed by the Gods with a body in perfect proportion and symmetry, with a muscular form designed for work and not for show, presenting a woman who was not pretentious but one of heroic stature and grace.

Despite herself, Gabrielle felt herself falling for this woman. Sky-blue eyes tracked to her own and held her in their soft regard. *There it was again.* She didn't know what was happening but every time those eyes met hers she felt a fluttering in the pit of her stomach. That had never happened before. As Xena drew closer, Gabrielle knew only one thing - she was in deep, deep trouble.

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Chapter 3

Gabrielle was torn between her head and her heart. She had understood everything Xena had said, but no one had ever told her straight out what she was before and it hurt. She had a burning need to go home, despite her head telling her all the things that could happen in that endeavour.

She could stand it no longer and got up out of her bed. Shuffling through the house she stepped out into the cool night air, taking a seat in the garden. Looking up she could see the night sky winking back at her, and she contemplated her next move. *What to do? Xena was right, it's not too bad here. But do I give my dream to see my family again?* Deep in thought, Gabrielle didn't notice the tall figure watching her from the shadows.

Xena knew that her young charge was fighting an internal battle and let her be, waiting until Gabrielle found her. It was so hard just to stand by and not help her through this but it had to be her decision. She knew the best place for her at the moment was here, in this household. It was a safe haven, but she had to come to that conclusion for herself.

Breathing deeply, Gabrielle smelled the jasmine on the night air. She looked around and saw the movement in the shadows. A lone figure stepped out to be recognised and she released a breath she didn't know she had been holding.

"It's you." Why was she not surprised that Xena was there?

"Hmmm."

"What are you doing here?"

"Just checking that you're alright." Xena could see the lines of tension in the young girl's face.

Gabrielle looked up at the stars. "You know, it's out here that I feel closest to home. Looking up at the sky I can nearly imagine my dad calling me in for bed. My sister and I used to lay outside and just look up at the stars."

"Yeah. When I was at sea, the night sky became my friend. Many lonely nights I used to play a game with myself."

"You were a sailor? That's unusual isn't it?"

"Well, um, I suppose you could call it that."

"What would you call it then?" Gabrielle was confused by Xena's cryptic answer.

Do I tell her? She's scared enough Xena, but if you don't tell her she'll hear it from the others.

"I, um...", she hesitated. She didn't want to see that light in Gabrielle's eyes die.

"It can't be that bad."

"Oh, yes it can, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle silently waited. On a big sigh, Xena spoke. "I was a pirate, Gabrielle." She looked into those pale eyes for judgement. There was some reserve but no anger. "I captured Caesar and

ransomed him back to Rome. That's how I ended up here."

Gabrielle thought long and hard, trying to reconcile Xena as a terror of the high seas with the woman standing in front of her. They seemed like two different people. Maybe they were - two different people in one body. The pirate half she would have detested, but considering her current status as a gladiator, it was probably that part of her that kept her safe in the arena. The woman in front of her was a gentle and caring woman, reaching out to touch her own heart. She suspected not many people saw this side; Xena couldn't afford to let anyone see the gentler side of herself.

She looked up to the stars and pointed to a constellation. "You see those stars up there?" Gabrielle laid her head against Xena's arm to get a line of sight.

"Ah, yeah. The one that looks like a ram?"

"Now, to me it looks like a cow." Xena was immensely happy that Gabrielle was prepared to play.

"A cow? No way. Can't you see the horns there? And that little bit at the bottom? That's his beard." She waved her arms in childish glee at the pleasure of just enjoying a simple game.

"No way! That's not a beard." They chuckled as they watched stars into the night.

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Xena couldn't stand it any longer. "Why do you want to leave? It's me, isn't it?"

"You?" Gabrielle knew the answer but she wanted Xena to say what was in her heart.

"I'm scaring you, aren't I?"

"A little. But not for the reason that you think."

Xena was now truly puzzled. "Then tell me." *I have to know if I have a chance.*

"Maybe it's more of a case that I'm scaring me. All I ever wanted to do from the moment I was captured as a slave was to get back home. Being here ... with you ... I don't know what I want any more."

"That may not be a bad thing."

"I know that but it's happening so fast that life is passing me by in a blur."

"I know what you mean." There was an expectant silence.

"Tell me about your home." *A nice change of subject, Xena.*

"Potadeia? Not much, just a small farming community. There was my mother and father, and my sister Lila." She paused. "I wonder if they're still there?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Our village was raided by Draco the warlord and all the girls rounded up for sale. That was about, er, a year and a half ago I think. I don't even know if the rest of my family is alive, but I have to know Xena." She looked up pleadingly into intent eyes. "I have to know."

A large hand covered her small one in comfort. "One day, Gabrielle..."

"Yes, one day..." She had had enough of contemplating what had happened. "What about you? You come from Amphipolis, right?"

"Originally, yes. I haven't been there for many years." There was a long silence and Gabrielle thought Xena would add no more to that statement. "My mother owned an inn there."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

A deep breath, "I had two brothers. One is still alive I think, I don't know. The other ... well, the other died in an attack by Cortese."

"And he captured you?"

"No ... I raised an army of my own to hunt him down." *Your own brand of justice, eh Xena? And look what happened to you - you became him.*

Now the smaller hand squeezed the larger one in sympathy. They both had sad tales to tell; of lives disrupted by powerful, despicable men intent on profit and mayhem.

"C'mon, let's go inside. It's getting chilly out here."

She pulled Gabrielle to her feet a little too hard and Gabrielle stumbled into her. The moonlight bathed the young woman's face in an eerie light, her viridian eyes had deepened to a deep hazel in the semi-darkness, framed by unruly blonde locks. Xena's eyes missed nothing of the young woman's face - full soft lips, pert little nose, high arched eyebrows and flawless skin.

Gabrielle held her breath under Xena's gaze. Large thumbs gently caressed her cheeks, as if physically mapping them. She looked into the bluest eyes she had ever seen, now darkened to midnight blue, reminding her of those deep cool pools whose water was chill to the skin but held dark secrets in their hidden depths.

She knew Xena was a dangerous woman, her reputation avowed to that, but she was helpless to

stop the attraction that was growing between them at an alarming rate. Her brain gave up all thought as the hand caressing her face slipped around her neck and brought her closer until they were sharing the same air. Xena silently asked the question and she was helpless but to reply.

By mutual consent they both moved those last few inches, soft lips meeting and touching for the first time in gentle exploration. Gabrielle pulled back, a confused look on her face. *This is not supposed to happen! By the Gods she is a good kisser!*

Those eyes that had drawn her in were now studying her with keen alertness. Gabrielle knew what Xena was asking, but was she prepared to give her heart at this early stage? She was learning quickly that this woman did nothing by half, and knew in this regard she would not change her stand. It wasn't a matter of whether Xena asked for everything but whether she could stop herself from giving it.

She dove in for another kiss, a little more urgently this time. Despite both their better judgements, they both wanted more. "Come," Xena whispered, leading her back inside.

Slowly, hand-in-hand they wandered through the house to Xena's room. There was a moment of hesitation and Xena held her breath awaiting Gabrielle's decision.

All it took was one look from those vibrant blue eyes for Gabrielle's fears to evaporate. Her seduction had commenced even before an item of clothing had been removed. No one had so lovingly held her before and she was finding it hard not to cry from the tenderness of it.

In her short life, she had only known brutality and selfishness and she was totally unprepared for the wave of emotion she felt for this woman who was a walking contradiction. Xena could kill at a whim, yet in her presence she worshipped her, asking and not taking like so many before her. She had not expected that she would surrender so easily as she did.

Xena had to keep a tight rein on her emotions as they were set to spiral out of control. She wanted so badly to totally consume this woman but knew that the greater prize would only be won with gentleness and consideration. Having only known the master and the whip, special consideration was needed if Xena was to have any chance of winning Gabrielle's heart.

As it turned out, it was so easy between them, which surprised Xena, like it was meant to be. It was a slow, sensual voyage of discovery that went long into the early candlemarks of the morning.

* * * * *

Antillia had not seen Xena for breakfast and went in search of her wayward charge. She knocked on Xena's door and opened the door quietly, unprepared for the sight she found. *She didn't waste any time!* She gently cleared her throat three or four times before Xena awoke.

"Wha... What? Antillia!" It took her a few seconds to realise that she wasn't alone. *Woow.* Her

sudden movement shook Gabrielle awake. The look on Xena's face made her look around. *Oh Gods!* Standing there was Antillia looking at the both of them ... together. She could get a flogging for this.

"Please come to breakfast when you are dressed." Antilla turned on her heel and left, neither of the stunned women seeing the smirk on her face. *Let them worry...*

After the older woman had left, they looked at each other, the morning after now made even more awkward. "Everything will be alright Gabrielle."

"No it isn't. I'm going to get punished for this."

"No you won't. Everything will be fine."

"Xena. Are you crazy? This will mean the lash."

Xena knew Antillia wouldn't punish them for this. *After all, she pushed me into this, didn't she?*

Xena leaned in for a good morning kiss and ended up with Gabrielle's cheek. The poor girl was in a state of great distress. She pulled Gabrielle's face around and kissed her firmly on the mouth, which distracted Gabrielle long enough to melt her resolve and apply herself wholeheartedly to the task of a good morning kiss. Which inevitably led to another and then another. Soon all thoughts of breakfast and a waiting Antillia were forgotten.

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Some time later a subdued Xena arrived with Gabrielle in tow for breakfast, which had become nearly lunch. Antillia had long given up on seeing either of them for some time and went about her daily business.

"My apologies, mistress", Xena was suitably humble and bowed low. Even Gabrielle's earlier hostility had been replaced by her lying prostrate on the floor.

"No need to apologise, my dear. I'm glad you finally found someone. But please, please be careful. Caesar would take advantage of this if he found out."

Gabrielle spoke to Antillia for the first time. "Please forgive me, mistress!"

The older woman looked up at Xena, her brow raised in amused enquiry. She addressed Gabrielle. "So you do speak Latin then Gabrielle?"

"Yes, mistress. Please forgive my impudence."

"Understand one thing, girl. In this household, the key word is respect. Respect for me and respect for each other. If you can do that then we will get along fine." Her point now made, she reassured the quaking girl. "Now get up off the floor."

Gabrielle should have believed Xena. She had said that everything would be alright and she had not lied to her so far.

"So, how did this happen?" Antillia turned her questioning to Xena.

"Umm." It was all that Xena could manage. How could she explain what she didn't understand herself? "Happen?" Xena marshalled her thoughts. "I had not intended for it to happen, mistress."

Antillia raised an elegant eyebrow. Xena continued, "Well, not so suddenly, but she was so close and those eyes and..." Xena was lost for words. But her face told Antillia what her words couldn't. She was something as pedestrian as a woman in love. The Champion of Rome had finally been bested in battle.

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"Gabrielle, one moment please."

Xena was finding it hard to concentrate with the young woman so near, but this needed to be sorted out before a fatal mistake was made.

"I need to discuss your role in this household." She could see Gabrielle thought she already had her job. As much as she would like to have this lovely piece of slave at her beck and call, she wanted their love to be a partnership not an arrangement.

"Mistress has asked me to assign you to your position. She has suggested that you become my personal slave, but I want you to understand the dangers involved before you accept or refuse."

She was confused. She was being asked if she wanted the position? A slave was told what her position was. There was no choice.

"I was Caesar's slave up until three years ago when Antillia brought me here under her protection. But I am not completely free of him. I still have to fight in the arena and he has my... services... every time I win." Gabrielle understood perfectly. A distasteful job at best. She was intimately aware of those types of arrangements.

"If he knew I cared for you he would use you to torture me. He seeks every advantage over me to break me. I couldn't stand the thought of you being hurt Gabrielle." A single tear scudded down the lean plane of her cheek, caught on its downward journey by a small finger.

Tear-filled eyes tracked up to the emerald eyes watching her. A small nod was her answer.

"Within these walls we are safe. But outside you do not exist to me. Do you understand? I cannot acknowledge you Gabrielle and you must not show any emotion. I'm sorry, my love..." a small half-grin appeared on Xena's face, making Gabrielle smile in return.

"No one... and I mean no one... must even get a hint that we are together. It would mean certain death for both of us."

Now the hard part ... "If you feel you cannot do this then I will assign you to the kitchen and we will stop now. It's all or nothing, Gabrielle. I will give you time to think about it."

She turned to leave, but stopped by a small hand grasping her own. "Yes". That was all that Gabrielle said. "Yes." Their lives were now in the hands of the Fates.

* * * * *

Clonus arrived to find Xena ready in her gladiator attire. He was struck dumb every time he saw her in her fighting attire, what there was of it. The skirt was barely more than a series of leather strips sewn together at the waistband to form a skirt of sorts. The top... well the top hid very little. It was nothing more than a strip of leather across her chest with two straps to stop it falling down. Trying to fight a beautiful woman with lethal skills in barely nothing at all - one day he was going to lose his manhood in an fighting accident.

Xena warmed up with two of the young soldiers he brought with him. As he watched, she quickly disarmed both of them, sending them sprawling into the dust. She turned her attention to the next two victims, a low chuckle escaping her parted lips.

The soldiers were mere puppets against her superior skill, her blade weaving around them like a steel net. Clonus could see the woman thoroughly enjoyed fighting, not for the blood and the death, but for the sheer joy of it. To her, it was like breathing - another element in the fabric of her life.

"Clonus, a moment of your time." The older woman distracted him from his observation of the young woman who was the master of her sword. In his experience, he had never seen anyone her equal. Given the chance, whole civilizations would fall at her feet.

"Certainly, madam."

"Antillia if you please Clonus. We've known each other for many years. While we're alone, drop the formality."

"As you wish... Antillia." The name rolled off his tongue, its taste sweet.

"My friend, I fear we are approaching dark times." He nodded in agreement. "I am worried about Xena. Her time is running short. Is there something... special... you can teach her that may give her the edge in a fight?"

"I know one or two tricks, Antillia, but I think she could teach me more than I could teach her."

"Probably, but we have to give her every chance to survive."

"I agree. I'll see what I can do." He turned away to return to the training. A hand grasped his forearm, its warmth sending shivers up his spine. *Not now Clonus...*

"One more thing. Walk with me." He followed a step behind as Antillia moved away from the courtyard where the training was taking place. "I have a matter of a delicate nature to discuss."

"You have my loyalty madam." She smiled as he slipped back into formality. *Probably from his military training.*

"No one is to know what I am about to tell you, understand?"

"Implicitly Antillia"

"What I am about to ask could be considered treason, Clonus." She carefully watched his face for a reaction. "Now is the time to stop if you do not wish to proceed."

He moved to a nearby bench and sat down. "Antillia, I had the greatest respect for your husband. Tiberius Maxima was a greatly-loved general who always held the good of Rome in his heart. He never disappointed me and I pledged my life to him. I hold his wife in the same regard. Ask your question." Antillia looked into his eyes and saw something unexpected. *Oh my ...*

"Xena is in need of our help, my friend. She had a child by Caesar and now he holds the young girl as collateral in exchange for Xena's cooperation." She saw Clonus's face harden. No one liked to see a child abused. He had no great love for Caesar but this new complication made his blood boil.

"Only Caesar knows where she is. We will need someone to follow Caesar's every move to find her location. He is due in a couple of days to bring the child to Xena for a visit."

"It will be done Antillia. Don't you worry." He placed his hand over hers and their eyes met, two lonely people seeking comfort in a simple touch.

"I must get back to training."

"Thank you Clonus. My husband would be proud of you."

Antillia studied the man who had been her husband's second-in-command for many of his overseas campaigns, including the one that resulted in his death. He was several years younger than her late husband and more solidly built. He had close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and his grey eyes held a youthful gleam. She was sure of what she saw in those steely depths and she felt an answering tug in her heart. *Maybe after this is all over ...*

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While Xena trained, Gabrielle had been assigned to being the serving girl for a gathering of Antillia's social friends. She moved quietly and efficiently amongst the guests, handing out

refreshments. From what she could see of the household, every slave had a job to do. If one was busy another one would fill the void, allowing the household to run seamlessly.

And if the household was running well, Antillia was happy. She allowed each of them some free time during the day to use as they wished. After finishing her duties, Gabrielle couldn't help herself; she had to see Xena fight.

Gabrielle was spellbound. When Xena fought... well... well, it was sexy. She thought that might be a bit crude, but she was. She could tell Xena loved fighting, by the posture of her body, the sparkle in her eye and the very sexy chuckle she emitted from time to time.

She watched in idle fascination as Xena went through her exercises, her muscles bunching and flexing with each thrust and parry of her sword. The scars on her back were plainly visible in such small clothing. She had noticed them last night and suspected there was a sad story attached to them. One day she would ask... but only when the time was right.

As the sun beat down on the courtyard the fighters were getting hot and tired. While Xena stopped for a drink, Gabrielle wanted *sooo* much to be that bead of sweat that was trickling down Xena's muscled abdomen. *Gabrielle, get your mind out of the gutter! No emotion, remember?* She looked again and felt herself beginning to melt. *No chance of that...* She turned away and returned to the house to make preparations for a hot bath for her "mistress".

The afternoon had been productive. Xena felt her body fall into a familiar rhythm as she fought. Blood pumped through her in a slow pulse and her breathing continued its slow, steady pace. She felt really good.

Clonus had sent away his men and faced off against her himself. He felt a bit like a deer being hunted by a big cat, and was decidedly nervous as she paced around him, deciding on the best angle to launch her attack. She had been, by far, the best fighter he had ever seen and she usually ended up beating him. Today, she was about to learn that the old dog had some new tricks.

After a few testing parries, Xena launched a serious attack. She swung her sword time after time again but he angled his sword to deflect her thrusts. *How did he do that?* She tried to watch his sword as she hit it but he was so quick that the movement was over before she could focus on it. Her ego kicked in and she wasn't going to allow him to win this match, but the harder she hit him the easier he deflected it. He was barely out of breath and she was dragging in great gulps of air. She stopped, breathing hard, and watched a slow, teasing smile touch his face.

Finally, defeated, she asked, "Show me." And so he proceeded to teach her every move he could think of.

"This is our secret Xena. Show no one. Call upon them when you need them most."

* * * * *

She was hot, tired, sweaty and stank like a barn, but Xena beamed with happiness. She had finally perfected some of Clonus's moves, she was in a home filled with love and she had truly found the love of her life. Some days, life was just so sweet.

She detoured to indulge in a long hot bath to soothe her tortured muscles and stopped short. *Oh, by the Gods!* She had never seen anything so seductively beautiful as Gabrielle laying in wait in her bath. Suddenly she wasn't so tired any more.

Gabrielle watched Xena approach under long lashes. Now she knew how a rabbit felt being stalked by a huge jungle cat, whose sinewy muscles rippled with every sleek movement. She was going to be devoured and she didn't care in the least.

"So," Xena's voice was low and sensual, "What has my little slave been up to this afternoon?"

"Well, my mistress," Gabrielle lips turned up in a teasing smile. It was a fine line as to who was the mistress and who was the slave. The dynamic seemed to change from minute to minute. Not that either of them minded. "I have been serving at Mistress Antillia's social gathering. The rest of the time was my own."

"Really? Mistress Antillia, eh? Why the sudden change in attitude, little one?" Xena couldn't seem to stop the string of endearments flowing from her mouth. Gabrielle had the ability to bring out the playfulness in her.

Gabrielle understood her comments. Wasn't it only yesterday that she hated the woman and wanted to go home? But last night changed everything. She was happy for the first time in a long, long time.

Lifting her head, those green eyes darkened with desire and captured the startled blue ones, saying without words everything that was in her heart. "Do you want your back washed?" To illustrate her point she held up a wet sponge.

Move your feet, Xena. You have to move you feet if you want to get to the bath. Try as she may, her body just wouldn't listen to her. Those green eyes held her own in a seductive web, making any other thought difficult. Finally her feet moved and she discarded her brief clothing as she went, leaving a small trail of leather from the door to the tub.

Her body sighed in relief as it hit the warm water, her muscles already absorbing the heat to heal her bruised body. Her mind, however, was solely focused on the little blonde, whose wet body was awaiting Xena's sensual touch. *Ah yeah, life is so sweet!*

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Chapter 4

"Xena, for the tenth time, you look fine." Antillia was highly amused by Xena's impatience.

Xena paced nervously around the room liked a caged cat. *Where is he?* It had been way too long since her daughter's last visit and she was fearful that he may have finally followed through with his threat.

"My lady," the servant's voice shook her from her reverie. "Lord Caesar is here."

"Show him in, please." Antillia glanced over to the young woman, seeing her tense in anticipation of his arrival.

"Madam Maxima." The greeting was openly hostile. He threw visual daggers at the lady of the household, not appreciating in the least her manipulation of the situation. Antillia knew that she had made a dangerous enemy today. His eyes immediately found Xena who was waiting to see her daughter. "You have a candlemark." A young girl, nine summers old, appeared shyly around his toga. "Mother!" she squealed and ran into Xena's waiting arms.

"How are you, little one?" This was a whole new side to Xena that Antillia had never seen before. A mother caring for her child. She felt a pain in her heart, remembering back to a familiar scene all those years ago. She felt a bit of a voyeur watching and decided to leave them to what time they were allowed.

"One moment, please!" She paused in mid-step. "Antillia this is my daughter, Marina. Sweetheart, this is my mistress, Antillia Maxima. You can address her as madam."

Shyly, the little girl gazed up at her, electric blue eyes watching her with the razor sharp intelligence of her mother. An unruly mop of midnight black hair framed a curious face. "Marina you can call me Antillia. Xena, she is beautiful - just like her mother." She reached out and gently patted her cheek. Xena's shy smile imitated her daughter's.

"So, what have you been up to since I last saw you?"

"I have been learning my letters. I can write my name. Do you want to see?"

"I would love to see that, sweetheart. Let me get something for you to write on."

The child beamed with happiness at the thought of showing her mother something new. If she didn't know that the child missed her terribly and the constant threat of danger, she wondered if it were better for her to stay where she was. Whoever was looking after her had done a good job, despite Caesar's interference.

It would break her heart, but for the good of Marina she would do whatever was necessary.

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Caesar waited in the vestibule while the child visited her mother. He was not about to go too far away in case they did something stupid. The old woman had outsmarted him this time. Obviously her husband had talked on one of his visits home. He was going to have to remedy this oversight. His thoughts turned to Xena whom, he felt, had become rather docile in the last few moons and was becoming a bit of a bore. His interest in this woman was about at an end.

He spotted a young blonde woman cross the foyer. *Now her, on the other hand, would be a nice diversion....*

"You there, slave." A young boy approached him.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Who was that young girl?"

"Who, sir?"

"The young blonde."

The lad tried to remember something mistress said about talking about Gabrielle, but he couldn't remember what it was. "That is Gabrielle, sir. She has only been here for a couple of days."

"Gabrielle, eh?" *Yes, very tasty indeed.* "And what position does she hold?"

The boy hesitated. "Answer me boy." Still a pause. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, Lord Caesar."

"Then answer my question. Who does she serve?"

"Xena my Lord."

Xena! Sooo.... His mind started putting all the details together.

"My Lord, how about some refreshment while you wait?" Antillia's arrival cut short his interrogation of the young lad. She motioned to the boy to fetch some drink.

A sly grin appeared on Caesar's face and she was immediately fearful of what the boy may have inadvertently said. She vowed not to leave him alone until the visit had finished.

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Gabrielle brought in some refreshments for Xena and her child. She was struck by how much of Xena was in the little girl. This was how she would have imagined her lover looked as she grew up. She would have been so cute as a child, all fists and fire. *Yep, she would have been adorable.* She felt her heart lurch again, a feeling she seemed to be experiencing on a regular basis in the

last few days, especially around Xena.

"Gabrielle, one moment. Let me introduce to you my daughter, Marina. This is my... friend, Gabrielle." *Well, what could you say to a young child? This is my lover? Not likely.*

"I am pleased to meet you Marina. Xena, why don't you take her for a walk in the garden? The weather is beautiful out there and the smell from the flowers is quite extraordinary. I will inform mistress where you are."

"Good idea, thank you Gabrielle." Xena stood up and took the girl by the hand. Gabrielle nearly laughed at the absurdity of seeing the tall woman leading the small child out the door, their height difference a sight to behold.

* * * * *

"So, my Lord. How goes Rome?"

"Madam, you know as well as I do that you have no interest in the affairs of Rome."

"I do, my Lord, but perhaps not the same things that interest you. And how is Egypt, my Lord?"

Rumour had spread through Rome about Caesar and the young queen of Egypt, Cleopatra. He had all but openly claimed the woman as his concubine to all of Rome, shaming his wife and his household. It made her sick how this man trod over slave and patrician alike, with a complete disregard for the consequences of his actions.

Caesar shifted uncomfortably. "Egypt is well, Madam."

"And Cleopatra, my Lord." She knew she was treading on thin ice with him but she wanted him to feel some of the embarrassment he was putting the rest of Rome through.

"She is well, madam. Not that it is any of your business."

Antillia acknowledged that the subject was closed with a nod. This was as far as he was going to let her push it.

Gabrielle approached Antillia and whispered in her ear before leaving. Antillia caught Caesar's frank appraisal of the blonde and didn't like what she saw. *This could be trouble.*

"My Lord, Xena and the child are in the gardens getting some fresh air."

He flicked his hand in dismissal, his mind still thinking of the small blonde he saw moments before. He couldn't help it but he thought of Xena and Gabrielle together, images flickering through his brain making it decidedly more difficult to concentrate. If he didn't move soon his arousal would become apparent even to the woman across from him. He excused himself and stood out in the courtyard until it was time to take the brat home.

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"Mother, when can I come and stay with you?" Marina asked this same question at every visit and Xena could only reply with the same answer.

"Soon, my sweet. I'm sorry that it can't be now, but it will be soon."

"But you always say that! When?"

Never, Xena's brain screamed with the uncertainty of their lives. She was so tired of this game. How could she explain this to her daughter when she barely understood his motives for this charade herself? She truly hated this. Using a child like a pawn in a game of chess - expendable if it meant capturing the queen. She had never met a person like him who had so little regard for human life, especially his own flesh and blood.

"Aren't you happy where you are?" Is she being treated badly? She wouldn't put it past him to put her in a home where she was being mistreated.

"Yes. They're alright, but they're not you." *Awww*. Xena felt her ego preen at the compliment. *Enough is enough. I have to do something about this, and soon.*

"I'll really try to get you to come stay with me, but in the meantime you have to do what they say, OK? They only have your best interests at heart."

"But I miss you." Tears rolled down the tiny face, nearly breaking Xena's heart.

"And I miss you too, sweetheart." Her own tears responding to the child's distress.

"We have a little time left. How about we play a game?" The child's spirits picked up, her sadness from the moment before forgotten.

Xena wished she could change moods as easily as her daughter did.

* * * * *

Antillia managed to hide Gabrielle from Caesar for the remainder of his stay, but she could tell he was eager to see her again. He showed cool disinterest when Marina was distressed at leaving her mother, crying and wailing as he dragged her out the door. She had never seen anyone so cold to the emotions of someone so upset, especially his own daughter. It was nearly as if her distress brought him pleasure. That revelation made her see it all now - Xena's pain was his pleasure.

"Xena, if you have a moment."

"Yes, mistress." Antillia led her to her private quarters.

"I think we may have trouble. Caesar spotted Gabrielle and I think he has taken an interest in her."

"I'll kill him!" Her anger flared out of control. *Where did that come from?*

"Calm down. We just need to keep him away from her. If worst comes to worst, I will send her away."

"I'm sorry, Antillia."

"No need, child. I know she means a lot to you. But you have to control yourself. Your anger will only put both of you into greater danger."

"I understand Mistress."

"I must say Xena, your daughter is such a sweet girl... just like her mother. One question - why the name Marina?"

"Because that was where she was conceived - at sea." Xena blushed and Antillia couldn't help but chuckle at the flustered woman.

"Go on. Go and spend the evening with Gabrielle. Take this time while you can. I don't want to see you two until the morning."

"Thank you Antillia." She bowed low and left.

* * * * *

With Antillia's permission, Xena organised for their dinner to be delivered to her quarters, intent on spending as much time alone with her young slave as time would permit. She was finding herself becoming addicted to Gabrielle's undivided attention.

They availed themselves of the sunken bath and took a long, leisurely soak, exploring soapy skin for dirt that had long been removed. Neither of them had ever had such a decadent bath where they floated in a sensual haze until cold water and wrinkled skin forced them to move their immersion in each other to another venue.

After a delightful session of dinner fed by hand, they retired.

They lay on the bed in silence. Gabrielle rested on her side, one hand supporting her head, as she ran a finger lightly over Xena's back, tracing the thin lines with interest. She saw Xena turn her head on the pillow and look at her.

Her eyes went back to the finger running up and down her back. "What happened?"

There was a long pause and she thought Xena was not going to answer. The digit continued its exploration of the skin on display in front of her.

Xena felt herself slipping into a lethargic state. "About three years ago, one of the fighters thought he had a right to my body. I said no in the only way he would understand. I was lashed for killing him. That's how Antillia rescued me. If she hadn't intervened I would probably be dead now."

Now Gabrielle could see why Xena was so protective of Antillia. She was a woman who believed one good turn deserved another.

The lone finger that traced the scars on her back was gentle and hypnotic. Xena noticed one or two spots where she didn't feel anything and it confirmed the nerve damage from the lash that she had suspected years ago. *Damn them!*

In the dim candlelight, Xena gazed into her partner's emerald eyes, easily getting lost in their intense regard. In barely a whisper, Xena spoke, "I love you." Green eyes widened in surprise, but there was no reply. Her long fingers slowly ran down the soft cheeks in front of her, eliciting a gasp in return. She leaned in and placed a soft kiss on those full lips that had occupied her every waking thought.

"How do you know if it's love?" Gabrielle was perplexed. She felt something very strongly for this woman but she had no experience in the matter. She had only known men who took what they wanted with no regard for her wishes. Here was a woman who worshipped her, both physically and emotionally. *Was this love?*

Xena thought for a moment. "Love is when her needs are more important than your own; that you want to protect her from harm with your life; that you want to be by her side for the rest of your life. That is what love means to me."

A silent tear rolled down Gabrielle's cheek. *Oh Xena.* The woman had laid out her heart with such honesty and sincerity. *How can I not love you?*

Her small hand, grasped in Xena's large one, came up to be kissed on the palm with reverence. She kissed the tattoo on her wrist. "My little troublemaker." She watched silently as Xena's lips moved slowly up her arm, stopping every now and then to explore soft skin. One particular nip caused a ripple of pleasure, and Gabrielle could not help but close her eyes in reaction.

Candles burnt long into the night as soft sighs and slow whispers were all that broke the silence.

* * * * *

Chapter 5

The next bout was two days away and she felt good about it. She would not know who her opponent was until she entered the arena. Not that it mattered. She went there to win, and she now had so much more to fight for.

"Hiya!" her sword came up in defence as her young opponent swung his weapon down in an overhead arc. Taking the force of the stroke, she let her knees bend to take the shock and used it to push her attacker off. She swung her sword in a tight figure of eight, letting out a low chuckle. The young soldier moved around her, looking for an opportunity to launch another attack.

The sun overhead shone brightly, its heat forming a haze over the courtyard. A gentle breeze blew over her sweat-slicked skin. She was in her element and fighting was the core of her. This was when she was truly in touch with herself, body and mind working as one.

Gabrielle indulged herself a few moments from her chores to watch. She never got tired of seeing this woman, whether it was in dim candlelight as they had made love like last night, or in the light of day when she was revelling in her swordplay. Her heart was well and truly lost.

Knowing that she would be fighting for some hours yet, Gabrielle gave Xena one final look before returning to her duties.

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"I found her, sir." A rather short, slim man, sporting a scar across his right cheek, addressed his former commander.

"Good. Show me." Clonus set off after the short wiry man as he made his way down the hill.

"Salus, to my home first." He felt that a little subterfuge and a military uniform may be needed to free the child into his custody.

It had been a few months since he had worn it and it still fitted, although a little snugly. He patted his expanding stomach. *I'm going to have stop eating those sweet cakes.*

Clonus struggled to keep up with the little man who seemed to dodge in and out of the milling crowd with an amazing amount of speed and dexterity. He was glad for all those days of long marches, where the Army moved at a swift trot for candlemarks on end, otherwise he would have been left by the wayside before even reaching the markets.

They moved out from the markets towards the area that housed the middle classes. Despite what the patricians thought, these were the people who ran Rome - the merchants, workers and

craftsmen who kept the commercial prosperity of the city on track.

Interesting ... Clonus hadn't really thought about where Caesar had kept the child. Knowing how much Caesar hated Xena, it wouldn't have surprised him if he kept the child in the poorer section of the city just to spite her. But the little girl seemed well looked after from the glimpse he had caught of her yesterday.

Such a pretty little child... He couldn't help but smile at thought of Xena having a miniature version of herself, a child who absolutely adored her mother even though she only saw her occasionally.

He was going to do whatever it took to see that little girl happy. He felt a twinge in his heart as he thought about his own circumstances. He had never known the love of a family - a wife or a child. He was married to the service of Rome, and by the time that service had finished, life had passed him by and it was now too late.

Now Antillia was a woman who had occupied his thoughts a lot lately, but he felt guilty about increasing the contact from anything but casual. He had too much respect for his general to make a move on his wife. But still... what a woman.

He let out a gentle sigh as they trotted along roads filled with modest homes, moving further and further away from the Hill where the wealthy and powerful lived. Suddenly, the little man stopped and pointed.

"Wait here." Without another word, the soldier squatted against the wall, prepared for the long wait. "Stay ready in case we need to grab the child quickly." He nodded confirmation and drew his sword and laid it across his knees.

* * * * *

Clonus put on the persona of a military man like a cloak, drawing it around him in comfort. *Been a while ...*

A sharp rap on the door alerted the woman of the house to her visitor. "Good day to you, madam." Clonus dropped his voice to give it any air of authority. "I have come to collect the child for Lord Caesar."

An openly hostile look greeted his request. "Caesar comes himself."

"Madam, if Caesar had not sent me how would I know about the child?" The woman was not convinced. "The child's name is Marina and my Lord needs her now. He is unable to come himself so he sent me in his stead."

The woman refused to budge, clearly not believing his story. "Madam, if you do not get the child now I will be forced to take her. And believe me, Caesar will know of your failure to comply

with his orders." He could see the woman waiver and pressed his case. "Salus!" He called his companion at the top of his voice.

The sight of the soldier trotting up with sword drawn was enough for the woman to fetch the child. She returned with the child who hid behind her skirts. *Awww, will you look at that...* Clonus's heart melted at the sight of the little girl whose sharp blue eyes observed him with keen interest.

He grabbed the child's hand. "She will be returned to you tomorrow." The woman didn't answer and closed the door in his face.

"C'mon little one." The big burly soldier held the hand of the tiny child and led her back towards the Hill, and her mother.

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"Xena, may I have a moment." Antillia interrupted.

"Mistress, have you seen Clonus? I can't find him."

"He's been sent on an errand for me. He should be back soon." She paused, awaiting Xena's focus on her. "In fact, that is what I want to talk to you about." Antillia walked over to a nearby bench and sat down. "He's fetching your daughter."

"What??" She didn't know whether to be elated or fearful. *What will Caesar do when he finds out?*

"You and Gabrielle are getting out of here with Marina, tonight. Now, no arguments."

"I can't let you do that Antillia. This has put all of you in great danger."

"That's a risk I'm willing to take."

"Well, I'm not. I could put up with things the way they are for a little longer. This is way too dangerous."

"It's too late, daughter. Clonus should have her by now if all went well."

"What on earth made you do this?"

"I saw you with her, Xena, and I couldn't stand you two being separated any longer. The child should be with her mother." Xena knew that to be true, but things could go horribly wrong and the child could be without a mother, permanently. This changed everything.

She sat down on the bench with unnatural clumsiness. *What to do?* There was a little bit of time

to organize their escape. Travelling with a child was fraught with danger and being hunted by soldiers of Rome was going to make the journey very dangerous indeed.

She looked up at Antillia. "I will organise the supplies and horses for you. Back to Greece and your homes if you can make it, Xena. You both go with my blessing, daughter." She dropped her voice down to a whisper. "I have kept your winnings from the arena and you are welcome to them." She had not wanted to broach this subject but if things did indeed go wrong, someone had to know.

"Listen carefully, my child. Should something happen..." She could see the storm-tossed eyes growing darker in anger and frustration. She began again. "If something should happen, I want you to know where the papers and money are hidden."

"I don't want to talk about this. Nothing will happen." But she was not convinced of that statement.

She grabbed the woman's chin, "Xena..." The head wrenched out of her grip. She grabbed it again and spoke more forcefully, "Xena! Now listen! If I don't do this, my fortune could end up in the wrong hands. I want it to go to the people I love and I trust you to carry out my wishes, child."

What could Xena say? She nodded in acquiescence.

"I have drawn up papers, a will of sorts, signing over all my property and wealth to you to distribute as you see fit. There are a few codicils but the bulk of it is for you to use."

"Antillia," Xena tried to gentle her voice despite the urge to yell at her. "I am Caesar's main nemesis. Do you think it's wise to leave it to me? I'm likely to die before you do. If it pleases you, madam, can I at least inform Clonus of these arrangements should anything happen to me? Do you trust him enough to carry out your wishes?"

"Clonus would be fine, my dear, but don't sell yourself short. If Caesar hasn't succeeded in killing you in the last ten years, then I think you have a pretty good chance of surviving until you are old and grey."

In a whisper Antillia told Xena all her secrets, trusting the young woman to take the information to her grave. It was so strange to place so much of her family's heritage and wealth into the large hands of one from another land, but despite her violence and anger, Xena had proved over the last three years to be a good woman who had wormed her way into an old and lonely heart.

"One final thing. There is also another paper within the documents that releases you from my service Xena. You are a free woman." She kept her silence for a moment to let the statement sink in. Startled blue eyes just stared. A lone tear trickled down the younger woman's cheek, and she couldn't help it, but an answering tear leaked from her own eye. "I will go and write a similar document for Gabrielle so you can take them with you."

Xena stood and drew the smaller woman into a hug. "Thank you." Those two words seemed so inconsequential compared to what the woman had given her - her life, her love and now her child. She knew she could never repay her for this.

"You better go break the news to Gabrielle. You still have an hour or two before Clonus returns. Go clean up."

On what should have been the happiest day of her life, Xena had a sense of foreboding. She always paid attention to that little voice for it saved her life on many occasions.

* * * * *

Xena found Gabrielle in the kitchen helping prepare dinner for the household. "I'm just borrowing her for a little while." The older slave gave Xena a nod in acknowledgement.

"Come on." She led the younger woman out into the garden. "Sit." Pushing Gabrielle down to sit on the bench, Xena knelt in front of her.

Where to start? "We're going home... tonight." She saw Gabrielle's eyes widen to an almost comical degree. If it wasn't such a deadly serious matter, she would have laughed.

"I don't understand."

"Antillia has done something that has made it impossible for you or I to stay here any longer."

"What? Don't keep me in suspense, Xena. What is it?"

"She sent Clonus to fetch Marina. We have to go... tonight. When Caesar finds out no one is safe."

"What about Antillia?"

"I don't know. Perhaps she has friends in high places that can protect her. She didn't say and she didn't seem too concerned about the outcome for her. I only hope that this doesn't get us all killed."

"Why didn't you stop her? Xena, this is foolish."

"DON'T YOU THINK I KNOW THAT?" Xena had never raised her voice to Gabrielle before and she could see the fear in the young girl's eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. I have to tell you, Gabrielle, I'm really worried about this. If his guards outside the walls get wind of anything happening, he'll be here before we're ready to escape."

Xena rose to her feet and paced along the pathway, back and forth, trying to come up with a feasible escape plan. "Alright, start packing your things Gabrielle, now. Don't tell anyone. If they

ask, say you're doing something for Antillia. They won't question that."

"Why don't you just go without me, Xena. Caesar's after you not me."

"Not anymore. When he was last here, Antillia saw him watching you. He knows you're here and you could become his next target. Besides, didn't I say one day you'd be going home? Well, here it is."

"But I'd like to go home without all of Rome on my tail."

"I have to tell you it won't be easy, especially with Marina along, but I will defend you both with my dying breath, Gabrielle, I promise you."

A sweet smile graced her lover's lips. "What more can I ask for?"

"Antillia is organising horses and supplies. Go and pack and I'll get a quick bath before we leave. Find me when you're finished."

They parted with a quick kiss, each heading in opposite directions in the house.

* * * * *

It was late afternoon by the time Clonus, Marina and Salus once again reached the markets. The girl had been very quiet, which had been understandable. She was being taken away from her home by a stranger who claimed to be working for her father. *I wonder how she feels about him?*

"Marina, isn't it?" The child nodded.

"That's a very pretty name. Did your mother name you that?" Again, a nod.

"I know your mother." That piqued the girl's interest. "She is a very lucky woman to have such a pretty girl as you." A slight blush graced the girl's face. She looked up shyly through long lashes. *She's going to be a heart breaker when she grows up... if she grows up.*

The three pushed their way up the hill towards home, battling through the bustling throng trying to get to their own homes for the evening. Clonus led them around to the back of the estate where there was a hidden entrance. "Salus, my friend, thank you for what you have done. I won't forget it." He gave the older man a soldier's handshake and watched as he sprinted off into the milling crowd.

"Now, are you ready to see your mother?" For the first time the child smiled.

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Xena didn't waste too much time in her bath, as much as her body wanted to soak in it after the day's rigorous exercise. Events were happening at a rapidly increasing rate, and her mind was struggling to keep pace with it all. She was finding it hard to go from worrying about the next fight in two days' time one minute to the quickest way out of Rome in the next.

As she busily scrubbed the dirt away, she tried to map their route for the next few days, avoiding any kind of civilisation until they were far enough away for immediate news to travel. Having been a slave for so long, she wasn't sure what the countryside held for them. She could only hope that she was ready for it.

What on earth possessed the older woman to do such a crazy thing? As much as she appreciated the gesture it was an impulsive move that may cost them everything. Because when Caesar finds out what is going on, the cross is going to be the least of her worries. There were far nastier and slower ways to die and she was sure Caesar was going to use them all.

* * * * *

Caesar could not get the image of the little blonde out of his head and on impulse visited Antillia's. Maybe he could buy the girl off the old woman. What would she want with a body slave anyway? She was there to be at the beck and call of a man, who could use her as he saw fit. She was certainly wasted in a household of women, boys and old men.

He was left standing in the vestibule while the slave who answered the door found the mistress of the house. He certainly wouldn't mind living in this house. It had a nice position on the Hill, extensive grounds, well-stocked livery and a good view overlooking the city. Yes, he liked that. Looking down on Rome. *As it should be.*

"Mistress!"

"What is it?"

"My Lord Caesar has turned up. He's in the vestibule." The poor slave was nearly in a state of panic.

"Calm down. Go tell Xena immediately."

Calm down? She felt her own heart rate pick up at the thought of that man in the same house just as Xena's daughter was about to arrive.

* * * * *

Chapter 6

Caesar couldn't believe his luck. As he stood there awaiting the arrival of Antillia, he saw Gabrielle coming down the hallway.

"You! Girl! What's your name, girl?"

Gabrielle knew she had no choice but to answer. "Gabrielle."

"So you are Xena's body slave?" She could hear the sneer in his voice.

"No, Lord Caesar. I am Xena's personal slave not her body slave."

"Oh, come now. Are you telling me that she has no interest in you at all?" Caesar seriously doubted that Xena could keep her hands off the girl.

"Yes, Lord Caesar." She bowed her head.

Antillia had been informed of Caesar's arrival and that he was talking to Gabrielle. She moved quickly through the house and spotted them talking in a quiet alcove. Thankful that her husband had shown her the secret passages hidden behind the thick walls, she quietly approached until she could hear them talking. She did not think Gabrielle would betray Xena but she had to be sure for Xena's sake.

"I seriously doubt, knowing Xena's sexual appetite, that she could stop herself from bedding you."

Antillia felt herself bristling at the tone of his conversation. He was trying to taunt Gabrielle into betraying her lover.

"My Lord. Xena has done nothing but show me respect." Gabrielle glanced up through her long lashes and saw him visually molesting her body, his gaze sliding over her skin like a pair of rough hands touching and squeezing her skin. A shiver of disgust ran through her. Now she knew what Xena meant. She could see it in his eyes. This was a man who expected and got everything that he wanted. He was ambitious, devious and a sexual predator. *Xena, where are you??*

Caesar stepped closer until the top of Gabrielle's head touched his toga. He could smell her now and he so wanted to take what was Xena's.

"Well, I think you could serve Rome better under my care, don't you think? I should offer Antillia some recompense for you so that you can offer your services to me."

Oh Gods! Xena, please I need you now! Gabrielle's mind swam with all the worst possibilities she could think of and knew that he was capable of them, and would most likely do to her out of spite.

Caesar wanted to stamp his authority all over this woman; to make her truly understand who the master of her destiny was. Just as he was about to act on his thoughts Antillia entered.

"My Lord. I was only just informed of your arrival. Excuse my tardiness."

"Madam Antillia. Your little slave here was keeping me company."

"Thank you, Gabrielle. You are excused." She glanced over to see the grateful look on the girl's face.

"What may I do for you, Lord Caesar?"

"Well I had come to see Xena, but Gabrielle has piqued my interest. I would like to purchase her from you for my household."

"My Lord, you know that I would do anything for Rome, but the girl is at present busy helping Xena prepare for her next fight in two days' time."

"And how is she helping Xena? Improving her wrestling techniques?" He laughed at his own little joke.

Antillia mentally rolled her eyes. "Very funny My Lord Caesar. She is handling all of Xena's chores so that Xena can mentally prepare herself without distractions."

"I see. A noble cause I'm sure."

At that particular moment Xena arrived, dressed in a short revealing toga. "My Lord Caesar." She bowed low and the neckline gaped, giving Caesar a most pleasant view.

"I was just asking Madam Maxima here about purchasing Gabrielle from her. What do you think? Would she be a worthy addition to my household?" He waited with interest for her reaction.

Xena bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from ripping his throat out. "I'm sure she would be My Lord, but she is otherwise engaged at the moment."

I'm sure she is. Caesar couldn't help but run his eyes over Xena's tall muscular form. Oh how he wanted that woman. *And I bet she's a wild one between the sheets, eh Xena?*

"Never mind. I'm sure I can convince your mistress of the error of her ways." He kept pushing and pushing, waiting for Xena to break.

He leant over and whispered in her ear, "And I will take her again and again Xena. I will make her regret every moment she has loved you."

She could stand it no longer. Grabbing his sword from his scabbard, Xena held the blade to

Caesar's throat. "You will not touch her, you scum. You understand me? I will die first before I let you touch her."

"That's what I'm planning Xena." He grinned at her with a look of triumph.

"My Lord. This has all been a mistake." Antillia was trying to get some control over the situation before it ended in tragedy.

"Oh, no mistake, Antillia. Xena has threatened me with a sword. That's punishable by death."

"Xena, give me the sword." She could hear the snarl coming from the young woman and had to physically grab her chin to turn her around. "Xena?" The dark-haired woman barely looked cognizant of her surroundings. Gentling her voice, "Xena, give me the sword."

Vibrant blue eyes finally focused on her and she saw the gentle warmth within them.

Xena had not been prepared for the push from behind by Caesar, sending the blade deep into Antillia's chest. "Oh by the Gods!" She hadn't even realized she was screaming.

Dropping the sword she fell to her knees and cradled the older woman in her arms, sobbing hysterically. A wrinkled hand came up and touched her face, its movement slowly calming her raging spirit. "Xena." Antillia's voice was barely a whisper. Xena had her hand over the wound, Antillia's lifeblood seeping quickly through her fingers despite her best efforts to stop the flow. "I love you daughter."

"And I love you too mother." She was unaware that the room had filled with people. Gabrielle has come and stood beside her, her hand resting in comfort on her shoulder.

"Arrest her. She murdered Antillia Maxima." Caesar's voice held no emotion at all. This unexpected turn of events making him smile. Two guards stepped in and pulled her from the fallen woman.

"No!" The woman had not yet died and he was leaving her to die alone. "Not yet, please!"

"I swear by the Gods, you pig of a man, that you will die by my hand for what you've done." *No more. I have played long enough by his rules, now he will die by mine.*

He waved his hand, pleased that he could deny her this one request. "Remove the slave called Gabrielle as well. Take her to my residence." He would now have Xena and her little blonde as well.

He leant over the dying woman and whispered. "Gaul will die with you, old woman." Things just didn't get any better than this.

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Little did Caesar know that Clonus had arrived moments before with Marina to deliver her to her mother. In that brief moment, he saw Caesar push Xena's arm, sending the sword into Antillia. It took all his strength not to run to her while the chain of events played out in front of him.

After Caesar had left he ran over, pushing through the bewildered slaves and cradled the still breathing woman in his arms. Hazel eyes fluttered open and a slow smile spread over her face. A bittersweet smile appeared on his own unbidden.

"Antillia..." He couldn't finish.

"Clonus... I know." His eyes widened in surprise as she brushed her fingers over his lips. "Me too." He placed a gentle kiss on her fingertips.

"I have to tell you, Xena did not do this." She was dragging in ragged breaths as she tried to push air into lungs that were slowly collapsing.

"I know. I saw him."

"The Council has to know."

"They will know. I swear it."

"Look after my household if you can. They are all good people. Just like you." She closed her eyes and her shallow breathing stopped, her body finally giving up the mortal realm. Clonus paused for a moment, sending a quiet prayer to Pluto to judge Antillia well. He sent the slaves away, holding Antillia's lifeless body in his arms, shedding a silent tear over the loss of a wonderful woman and what might have been.

* * * * *

Xena existed on a plane where she felt nothing - a deep emptiness that had shattered her soul. After ten long years he had finally won. The one woman in all of Rome who had meant anything to her had been taken away by him. He had broken her.

She spared a thought for Gabrielle and hoped that her death would be quick. All the young girl had wanted was to go home and now she was going to die in a foreign land at the hands of a madman. It was no life for such an innocent soul as her lover.

She was back at the Coliseum in a cage barely big enough for her long legs. No one had said, but she suspected her death would be in the arena. Caesar would want all of Rome to see his final victory. Another day and night of contemplating her life, Antillia's wasted death and Gabrielle's torture...

* * * * *

Gabrielle was now in real fear, not for the ending of her life but for the continuation of it. She

was truly terrified of what he was about to do to her.

Caesar sat back, sipping his wine, as he watched the young girl quiver. He absorbed her terror like a sea sponge. He revelled in her misery. He had ripped off her clothes and left her standing there naked to contemplate what he was going to do to her. Let her think he was going to kill her. But he had other plans for her in two days' time.

"Come here Gabrielle." She was too slow to respond. "Now!" he bellowed.

Try as she may, Gabrielle's feet would not move. Xena could not help her now.

As she approached, he gave her an evil smile, "Now let's see why Xena gets so hot and bothered over you." Gabrielle prayed to Zeus to strike her down with a thunderbolt.

* * * * *

"My Lords, thank you for seeing me at such short notice. I know that your time is precious but I have promised to right a wrong." He paused, waiting for the Senate's complete attention. "Lord Caesar has arrested Xena for the murder of Antillia Maxima."

"We are we aware of Xena's arrest, Clonus. Caesar has informed us of the events leading to her death."

"My Lords, I am in a difficult position here. If I speak I may be arrested for treason and if I don't then an innocent life will be sacrificed. What will you have me do?"

"Guard!" Clonus's heart leapt into his throat, thinking he was arrested before he had said a word. "Send for Brutus."

"Clonus, you were with Caesar's army were you not?"

"Yes, my Lord. I was Tiberius Maxima's second-in-command for many of his foreign campaigns."

"Ah, yes General Maxima. A fine soldier and one of Rome's staunchest supporters."

"I agree, my Lord, he was a great General and a good friend."

"You may tell us your tale then, Clonus, without fear of arrest."

"I was there, my Lord, when Madam Antillia was killed. I saw what happened." The men in the room shifted in their seats. "Lord Caesar said some things to Xena to cause her to react. She was about to hand over his sword to her mistress when he pushed her from behind, causing the blade to..." He found it hard to finish.

Gaius Trebonius held up his hand. "No need to finish. I think we understand the situation."

Brutus entered the room. "Brutus, were you present at Xena's arrest?"

"No my Lord, Caesar never takes me along when he visits Xena."

"I wonder why that is, Clonus?"

"I think, my Lord, that he doesn't want anyone with any authority to see what he does to that woman."

"What do you mean? I always understood she had been treated well."

"My Lord, Antillia Maxima treated her very well. Caesar, my Lord, has a long hatred of Xena and she has suffered for it every time they meet, even under Antillia Maxima's protection."

There were audible gasps around the room. While Xena was a slave, she had become a well-loved icon of the arena. They could not believe that she would give Caesar just cause for punishment.

"Brutus, how well do you know this citizen?"

"My Lord, I served with him on a number of occasions and I have found him to be a brave and honourable man."

"Thank you Brutus. One more thing, could you please inform Caesar that the Senate wish to see him?"

Brutus and Clonus left together. "Thank you, my friend, for getting me in to see the Council."

"What happened?"

Clonus hesitated. "Do you really want to know? You may wish you hadn't asked."

Brutus contemplated his answer. He had heard Caesar's name. Did he want to know? Of late, he himself had begun to question some of Caesar's more bizarre orders. "Yes." He had to know.

"I was there when Madam Antillia died. Xena did not stab her."

"Then Caesar...?" Clonus nodded.

Knowing what he knew now, Brutus knew exactly where Caesar would be. He changed direction to the Coliseum.

* * * * *

Her back was in serious pain now being bent over in a tiny cage. Xena looked up at the sound of

approaching footsteps. "What do you want?" her voice held no emotion. "Go away." He laughed long and hard as he looked down on her, finally at his feet.

"Come on, Xena. It will be all over in a few candlemarks."

"You've had your look now leave me alone in my misery."

"Don't you want to know how your precious Gabrielle is?"

"Dead by now, I imagine."

"In fact, no, she is very much alive." He saw her face lift at the news. *Now for the fatal cut to make her heart bleed to death.*

"You were a lucky woman, Xena, to have experienced such a woman as Gabrielle. Such a sweet body, don't you think? There were some gaps in her instruction though and I have taken great pleasure in teaching her... over and over again."

He heard her growl and laughed even harder. She slumped back defeated. Out of the corner of her eye she saw movement in a dark corner.

"What is to happen to me?"

"Well, I think I will enjoy see you being hacked to death tomorrow in the arena."

"Sounds about right." She paused. "Why Antillia? What did she do to you?"

"She was taking too much of an interest in you Xena. I can't have that. Don't you realize by now that I can take away everything you care for, your mistress, your lover and your little girl? I made sure old woman's secret died with her so there is nothing to stop me. You are nothing. I am everything."

"The Senate will not let you get away with this."

"The Senate. That bunch of worthless old men? They are but dirt under my feet. In two days' time they will not even be that. Rome... the World... will be mine to rule."

"Caesar, you are completely mad."

"That may be, but who are they going to believe? Their Lord Caesar or some woman sentenced to death for murder, eh? Ten long years, Xena, I have waited for this moment."

"You should have nailed me to that cross way back then. It was the only chance I gave you to kill me. Now it will be my turn to kill you."

"And missed all the fun I have had since? You must be joking! I think you overestimate the

situation here, Xena. You're in a cage about to be chopped into little pieces. Now I have to leave you but I must get back to Gabrielle. Time for another lesson I think. I'm sure she has been attended to since our last lesson."

He turned on his heel and left, chuckling as he went.

I'm so sorry, my love. I warned you that it was dangerous to love me. Now it has come to pass.

As she contemplated Gabrielle's fate, a lone figure stepped out from the shadows and without a word he left.

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Chapter 7

Xena was brought into the arena, bound in chains, each arm held out and secured by a guard. A murmur arose around the Coliseum from plebeian and patrician alike. Standing before Caesar she looked up into his smug face.

He raised his voice "Citizens of Rome! Your Champion is standing before you awaiting sentence on a charge of murder." The murmur rose to a swell of disbelief.

"Because of her popularity amongst you, I felt it fitting that her execution be witnessed by all."

Xena raised her head a notch in an act of pure defiance. There was a commotion behind her and she turned to face the sound. Gabrielle had been dragged out, kicking and screaming, and tied to a post on the other side of the arena. Two large tigers had been chained down facing her.

Xena returned her gaze to Caesar who smirked openly at her. "What is she doing here? This has nothing to do with her. It's between you and me."

"Everything has to do with you Xena. She will die along with you."

Xena glanced across to the Senate and saw their interested looks in the passing conversation.

"Are you telling me she is going to die because she is with me?"

"Either you are with or against Rome, Xena."

She heard a cry behind her. She swivelled to see blood dripping down Gabrielle's leg, a soldier standing by with a bloodied sword.

"Hear me Rome!" she cried as loudly as her voice would carry. "Do you want to know about the man who is leading you?"

Caesar whispered to a soldier beside him who raised his bow and fired. Xena could hear the arrow but could not stop it from hitting her forearm. She dropped to her knees, clutching the wounded limb. She grimaced as she pulled out the arrow, blood dripping from its tip. The bowyer raised his weapon to fire again but his movement was stopped by Brutus.

"Are you disobeying my instructions, Brutus?"

"No my Lord, but the Senate wish to hear Xena."

He directed to the Senators, "Are you standing in the way of Roman justice?" *Not much longer. Rome will be mine soon enough.*

Marcus Tullius Cicero, as designated speaker for the Senate, rose and spoke. "Xena, you may speak your peace before sentencing."

"Why are you letting this woman speak? Xena is a troublemaker and has nothing good to say. She is only a slave my Lord." Caesar was getting a little desperate about what Xena might reveal.

"Xena became a slave of great interest to the Senate, Caesar. Her rise to champion of the masses has been greatly admired by all of Rome. She has always carried herself with honour and great courage. She will have her say." He finished with an air of finality. Caesar was not going to stop her speaking, not without losing a lot of favour with the people of Rome.

Xena faced Caesar, a small, sexy half-smile gracing her lips. Caesar's eyes narrowed in anger and in warning.

"Citizens of Rome, firstly I thank you all for your support over my years in the arena. I will remember this to my dying day." She paused and smiled.

"But heed my warning. This man cannot be trusted." She looked up to see Caesar's knuckles turning white as he held his chair in a death grip.

"Ten years ago I had captured him in a skirmish in a distant land and ransomed him back to Rome. They paid and in good faith I released him unharmed." She could hear the gasps around the arena. "He and I had made a pact and he betrayed me. He sent me back to Rome to fight in the arena. Upon my arrival I found I was pregnant with his child."

She glanced to the Senators and saw their open looks of enquiry. "This man who leads you used his own child to keep control over me. His own child!" The looks had changed to ones of incredulity. "He has used and abused me for ten long years, each day threatening me with the death of our child."

She looked over to Caesar who was quickly whispering to a guard. "No need, my Lord Caesar." She spat out his name, like she was trying to get the bitter taste out of her mouth. "She is safe." She nodded to the patrician stand where she could see Clonus bring the child out for all to see.

"She means nothing to me. She is a bastard."

"She may well be, my Lord. But she is still a child. An innocent. And she is still yours."

"So, people of Rome. Here is a man who is so ruthless, cunning and ambitious as to use his own flesh and blood to his own ends. He is worthy of your trust?" She glanced at the members of the Senate as she uttered the last sentence. She received a tiny nod in return, unseen by Caesar who was totally focused on the woman in front of him.

"You are nothing but a slave. You are here to serve me as I see fit."

"I seem to recall, my Lord, that Antillia Maxima is my mistress, not you. You sold me to her three years ago."

"Well, she is no longer here, is she? I now claim you."

"I do not belong to you, Lord Caesar. Antillia Maxima gave me my freedom two days ago. If I have to belong to anyone, I belong to Rome."

"Rome?" he bellowed. "Rome? I AM Rome."

Caesar didn't even realize what he was saying. This woman had been a constant thorn in his side for ten years and even at her moment of death she was still tormenting him. Why wouldn't she just die?

"Careful my Lord, your laurels are showing."

"Well, today I will be rid of you once and for all, you and your little bedmate." Caesar was mentally frothing at the mouth.

"So Gabrielle is going to die because she is my lover, is that it? Are you that petty, my Lord?"

Caesar waved his hands and six well-armed gladiators approached the dais. "A thousand gold pieces to the one who brings me her head." Xena could feel the men surrounding her bristle. For that amount of money they would have gone to Greece to get her.

"What, my Lord? No weapon for me?" He gave her a sneer. *I'm gonna die, but I'll take you with me.*

In one final act of defiance, she yelled, "Beware the Ides of March, my Lord!" She only hoped the Senators caught the meaning of her warning of Caesar's impending grab for leadership.

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Gabrielle had no idea what was going on, from the moment the Roman guards grabbed her along with Xena to this moment in the arena. She fought as hard as she could, but to no avail. She was

going to her death and someone had yet to tell her why. Her hands were roughly and tightly bound behind a post. She saw Xena across the arena talking to Caesar in the stands. She cried, begged and shouted to any God that would listen to her, but there would be no answer today.

Her eyes widened in terror as two large cats were brought in and chained just out of striking distance from her. *I'm going to die.* Tears scudded down her face and she cried for a young life that was about to be dramatically cut short.

Pain lanced through her leg and she looked down to see a large cut across her thigh, blood pouring out liberally to the sandy ground of the arena. She looked up in shock at the guard standing there, bloodied sword in his hand. He turned to Caesar and raised his weapon.

The animals, having now smelled her blood, were getting agitated. It was only a matter of time before they broke through their bonds.

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Xena knew she was running out of time. She spared a glance over to Gabrielle and could see the tigers straining at their chains to get to her. *This is going to have to be quick.* The six hulking men circled her, their helmets hiding their confident grins. They had one woman to beat who was weaponless and had no armour. It was only a matter of who would kill her first.

Xena gave them no time to think. She pounced on the one with the sword and applied the "pinch". She had never used it before in the arena and so they were quite taken aback by its immediate result. The man went down, clutching at his throat, trying to get some circulation to his exploding brain. She quickly grabbed his sword and backed away, leaving him to his inevitable death in the dust.

They hesitated, their confidence now shattered. She took the moment to prepare herself before they regrouped and attacked her as one. It took all her experience and strength to keep them at bay and she needed to get them separated.

One of them went down when her fist connected with the bottom of his jaw peeking out from under his helmet. She barely had time to bring up her sword to block a mace swing, which tangled in her blade. The sword went skittering across the ground, leaving her defenceless. Her large, booted foot connected with a solar plexus and another gladiator went down. She grabbed his weapon, fighting off the men to get to another sword.

"So who's going to get this coin, eh? Only one of you can get it." They looked at each other. Who indeed? One of them decided to improve his chances by stabbing the man next to him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Caesar's face was beet red. She was doing it again. She was at death's door and she was telling Hades to go away. "Kill her, you idiots, not each other!"

Xena moved in and claimed her second victim, slicing through his mid-section with powerful force. She didn't bother watching his organs ooze out of the gaping wound; she was too busy facing the three that were left. Xena spared a quick glance at Caesar and gave him a full smile. She thought she could hear him snarl.

She tried to keep the three of them in her sight as they circled her like lions trying to bring down their prey. As they moved in as one, she somersaulted over their heads, bringing her sword round in an arc and cutting off an arm of her nearest opponent. She quickly grabbed his weapon. Pushing the pain from her arrow wound to the back of her mind, she focused on finishing this battle quickly. The tigers behind her were very agitated and Gabrielle's screams were getting more panicky.

A chant went up around the stadium. "Xena! Xena! Xena!" Caesar scanned the crowd. They were actually cheering her on! He whispered to the soldier again. Brutus watched the soldier disappear and quickly followed. The young man had found a vantage point with a clear view of the arena. He carefully notched his bow and took aim. Just as he fired an arm came into view, spoiling his shot.

Xena heard the whine of the arrow and braced herself for the hit. She saw one of the two remaining opponents go down, an arrow sticking out of his back.

Facing Caesar, she yelled, "See, Rome? He has no honour!"

The remaining gladiator attacked before his courage failed him. She back-flipped over him, this time releasing a harsh battle cry. "Yiyiyiyiyi!" She drew strength from this burst of energy and launched her own attack. The hunted now became the hunter. A slow predatory smile crossed her lips, developing into a low, sexy chuckle. "Well it looks like no one's claiming the reward today." She used her sword and axe to good effect, keeping her agile opponent at bay.

By the sounds behind her, time had just about run out. She made several back flips to a fallen spear. Picking it up, she threw it at the tigers, hitting one of them clean through the heart. She turned and just brought her weapons around to block an overhead attack. Sliding down to one knee, she moved her sword and in the blink of an eye she pushed it through his chest until the hilt was touching his skin.

The crowd rose in one and cheered their Champion, but Xena had no time to receive their praise. She ran as fast as her long legs would carry her, bloodied sword in hand, across the distance to cut off the beast from eating her lover.

Gabrielle stood in frozen horror at the carnage taking place in front of her. She had never seen Xena fight in a life and death situation before. She was both terrified and mesmerized by the athleticism, grace, beauty and sheer ferocity of the woman as she fought. Never had she seen anything like it and she was simply swept away along with the rest of Rome. She had fallen under the spell of the Champion of Rome. It wasn't until she saw Xena frantically trying to get to her that she realized she was in deadly danger. Her eyes swivelled around to the remaining

animal who had, by now, gotten free and was slowly stalking her.

She closed her eyes and offered a silent prayer to Aphrodite to protect her lover and to ask forgiveness for all the mistakes in her life. If she survived this, she would love Xena with everything that she was. She knew that now and she would never doubt their love again.

The beast was free and making its way to the restrained young woman. Xena's last few steps launched her into a flying leap across the remaining space into the jaws of the tiger. The sword was knocked from her hand and she had to resort to wrapping her hands around its windpipe. The beast lay on its back, Xena pressing all her strength and weight into her fingers, willing them to close tightly around its neck. Claws flailed wildly, scoring her shoulders and arms with deep gashes. Ignoring the pain, she held on with her dwindling strength until the creature lay still beneath her. She took a moment to just lie quietly as the pain and exhaustion crashed over her like a wave. It was over. Now it was up to Caesar whether all of this had been for nothing.

Rising to her feet, she walked over to Gabrielle and loosened her bonds. They stood there, blue eyes connecting with green, as two halves of one soul finally found one another.

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Xena and Gabrielle approached the dais hand-in-hand to find out their fate. If they were to die, then they would face death together, as it was meant to be. They were surrounded by Roman guards, spearheads pointed in their direction.

"Now you die, Xena." Just as he raised his hand for the sentence to be carried out, an elderly hand stopped him. "What do you think you're doing? Let go of me."

"What do **you** think you're doing?" Marcus Tillius Cicero answered back. "You may be *dictator perpetuus* but the Senate wishes to express its opposition, Caesar. You gave her impossible odds and she beat them. She fought with great courage and honour. The Senate has freed her and her little slave."

"But she is a murderer!"

"We have some evidence to the contrary, Caesar, which raises the validity of that statement. Besides, you made her sentence a trial by combat and she won. She lives."

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Chapter 8

The arena had been cleared and the people were going home to talk for a long time to come about how one unarmed woman had beaten six of the best that Rome had to offer. It was the stuff of legends.

Xena and Gabrielle appeared before the Senate at their request.

"Xena I would suggest you and your friend leave Rome as quickly as possible for your own safety. Caesar will not stand by and accept this gracefully. Tomorrow is the Ides so I would suggest you don't take too long to leave after that." Gaius Trebonius paused. "What is to happen to your child?"

"I have waited ten years to be reunited with her, my Lord. I know the open road is no place for a child, but I cannot leave her now." She paused. "About Antillia Maxima..."

"Be assured that her body will be given a proper burial, Xena. She was a fine woman and an asset to Roman society. She will not be forgotten."

"Thank you."

"I believe she has left her property to you as she had no surviving relatives. What do you wish to do with it?"

"I will stay in Rome for the next few days to organise her estate, my Lord. If it pleases the Senate, I would like to leave her house to Clonus. He could give a home to the slaves of the household. Antillia would have wanted it that way. Besides, if I ever return it would be nice to have a safe haven again." She thought for a moment. "I have one request."

"What may that be?"

"Gabrielle and I will be heading back to Greece and I will need some weapons and armour if we are to make it home safely." Both of them knew that slaves weren't allowed to carry weapons. Her freedom was not common knowledge and she knew she had little time to wait for the fact to be known.

Gaius Trebonius reached into his toga and pulled out a medallion. "Here, take this." She looked closely at it to see the Senate's sigil imprinted on it. "This should help." He thought for a moment. "Show that medallion and you should have no trouble. I will send my slave in the morning and he will take you wherever you want to go."

A broad smile crossed Xena's face. "Thank you sir. It is very much appreciated."

"Well, what you have gone through in the last ten years, it would be a pity for you to be killed the first day out of Rome by brigands." They both had a chuckle over the irony of that situation.

"I have a question, my Lord. What if Caesar decides to take matters into his own hands?"

"There will be some guards posted around the house for your protection."

"And if he gets by the guards? What am I allowed to do in the protection of my family?"

"Well, firstly I would try very hard to talk Caesar out of doing anything... rash. Avoid trouble if you can. He has been sanctioned by the Senate for his actions and ordered to leave you alone. Should he force you into a situation where you have no choice, then I would make sure you have plenty of witnesses."

"Understood, my Lord. I just wanted to be clear on what action I could take. Am I allowed to take up arms should the need arise?"

He nodded. "I will let the Captain of the Guard know that you have been given clearance by the Council for such action."

"Thank you, my Lord. I hope it doesn't come to that." *But I bet it will.*

"I hope so too. It could be awkward." *But knowing Caesar, he will not leave the woman alone. I better send more guards.*

"My thanks Lord for all your help."

"Please stop in before you leave. I would like to say goodbye."

"As you wish, my Lord." Xena took her leave from the Senate, her heart a little lighter with the medallion in one hand and Gabrielle's hand in the other.

* * * * *

It had been a long, tiring day but it was nearly at an end. Marina had been put to bed and the two lovers were taking a long soak in a hot bath. Xena saw Gabrielle wince as she lowered herself into the water.

"Are you alright?"

"No." Then she started to cry, her sobs breaking the silence of the room. All Xena could do was hold on as the little woman released her pent-up emotions from the last couple of days. It had been traumatic to say the least "Did he hurt you?"

Gabrielle nodded, her head buried in Xena's shoulder. She didn't see the growing anger on her lover's face. "What did he do, Gabrielle?"

She shook her head. A large hand lifted her chin until she was forced to look into blue storm-ridden eyes. "What... did... he... do?"

I can't tell her. She'd hunt him down. "I can't tell you."

"So you want my imagination to fill in the details? I can imagine quite a lot, Gabrielle. Remember I have been subject to Caesar's instruction as well. Maybe even more so that you."

She hung her head in shame. Her head knew that she was not at fault, but her heart could not bear the thought of putting into words what he made her feel. Even for a body slave, she felt dirty and worthless.

"Time will heal everything Xena. Dredging up the past at this point will not only spoil what should be a victorious day but it would only perpetuate the pain he caused." Somehow it sounded hollow even to herself.

Xena's voice dropped to a whisper, "Tell me."

She thought that all her tears had been shed. One lone tear tracked down her face as she dropped her head.

Xena could see her struggling and decided to drop it for now. If she couldn't talk about it then it was bad... very bad. She gently ran her fingers through the golden hair beneath her hand. "Shhh, it's alright. Don't worry, I'm here now and I won't let him touch you again."

* * * * *

Those weak-minded fools. He came away from the confrontation with the Senate burning with hate for that woman. What does it take to kill her? Maybe this matter needed his personal attention.

He organised a small force of loyal soldiers and headed up the hill to find her death and his destiny.

Xena tucked a sleepy Gabrielle into bed. She would not be sleeping tonight. If she knew Caesar at all, he would try something... rash. She found the Captain of the Guard and secured a weapon. Checking that her daughter was safe in the hands of Clonus, she returned to the front door, awaiting Caesar's arrival.

Caesar's forces spread out and fought the Senate's guards. While they were occupied, Caesar slipped into the compound and approached the front door. The Captain of the Guard was about to engage him when Xena hollered, "No! He's mine!"

"Well, Xena what are you doing with a sword raised at me? That's a death sentence you know."

"Been there, tried that." She mumbled. She pulled out the medallion hanging around her neck.

"This look familiar?"

Damn fools! "Doesn't matter. I should have done this a long time ago."

"You don't want to do this Caesar."

"Oh yes I do. I'm going to cut you into so many pieces they'll be picking you up for days." He seemed to forget for a moment who he was about to fight and the fact that she had been training and fighting every day for the last ten years.

"Well, you can try..." She twirled her sword in a few experimental arcs to loosen up her tight muscles. "Centurion, you are witness. I did try to talk him out of this."

"Stop talking and start fighting."

"You're the boss..." she mumbled. He came at her in a head-on attack, intent on overpowering her with brute force. *Idiot*. She took the brunt of the downward force from his sword, letting her knees bend in reflex and then powering back up and shoving him away.

She threw a few testing parries of her own and could see that he was good, very good. She took a deep breath and centred herself for the testing battle to come. This was going to require some solid swordplay and a little bit of manoeuvring to get him in a position for her to press her advantage.

They were in a serious fight now, and were unaware that all fighting had ceased around them, both sides were watching the contest awaiting its outcome. He used short stabbing strokes to force her back against the wall, one or two of them cutting her. She snarled and doubled her efforts, pushing him back a few steps and giving herself some room to move.

He drew on his military experience and made ground on her, forcing her to back up a few steps. Before he could corner her, Xena flipped over his head and pushed him in the back with her foot, sending him crashing into the wall. She let out a small chuckle. This has been her first retaliation in ten years and it felt good. Really good.

Murmurs of approval arose from the Senate guards and the soldiers on both sides became more vocal as the fight progressed. A dagger had mysteriously appeared in Caesar's hand and it nearly sliced open her abdomen. She was eternally grateful for all those hours of painful training which had honed her skills to razor-sharp alertness, otherwise she would be watching her own internal organs spilling onto the floor.

"Xena?" Gabrielle's voice cut through the noise and she momentarily glanced over to her. It was long enough for Caesar to get another nick in with his knife. She could feel the hot trickle of blood roll down her arm. The pain galvanized her fighting skills and she increased the pace of the fight.

"So, Xena, do you think Gabrielle will enjoy being my body slave? She showed a lot of

potential, you know." A snarl escaped her lips as he taunted her with words.

Stay focused Xena. "Well, you'll never know."

"I think you overestimate your abilities *slave*. What makes you think you can kill me?"

"Well, I don't know Caesar. Maybe it's because I'm better than you."

"Better? I don't think so. After all, I am Gaius Julius Caesar. I am invincible."

This man is crazy. Certifiably crazy. "How so, my Lord? Are you a God or something?"

He laughed. "Could be. Maybe I should be getting you to worship me instead of fighting me, Xena. I think I like that idea. Have the world bow down before a God."

Enough is enough. She drew on all her dark energy and started deflecting his sword strokes, causing his swings to become clumsy and slow. Visibly tiring, Caesar made one final rush at her, hoping to get the dagger into her ribs before she had a chance to deflect it.

At the last moment, she dropped to one knee, the dagger passing dangerously close to one ear. She could feel her own sword push through skin and muscle and smelled the coppery tang of blood. Time seemed to stand still for a few moments as the crowd waited to see who would fall.

Caesar's eyes widened in surprise, looking into blue eyes that had hardened to chips of ice. Xena leant over and whispered into his ear, "Now you die."

He looked down momentarily to see the sword sticking out of his chest just before his knees gave way and the floor came up to meet him. By the time he hit the floor, Pluto was there to greet him.

There was audible gasp around the room. Gabrielle rushed up to a heavily-breathing Xena and wrapped her arms around the blood-spattered woman. "Are you alright?" Xena could only nod. Hopefully, this was the end of it. While the Senate agreed there would be no retribution, time would tell if they would keep their promise.

The rest of Caesar's forces handed over their weapons peacefully and there was no more conflict. Xena handed over her weapon to the Captain of the Guard. "I think the Senate should be informed of this as soon as possible."

"I agree," and he quickly sent off a runner up the Hill.

* * * * *

The candles burnt long into the night as the Senators tried to find a solution to this problem.

They could not fault Xena. Caesar had been warned and the Centurion confirmed that she had tried to talk him out of it.

The next morning, Xena was being measured for her leathers and her armour when there was a great commotion in the city square. She suspected she knew what it was about.

"Caesar is dead!" A young man screamed at the top of his voice. The clamour rose until it became almost deafening. There were mumbles of shock, joy, horror and every shade in between at the news.

One voice rang out. "How did he die?" The noise abated, awaiting the answer.

"No one knows. He was found dead in the Theatrum Pompeium with multiple stab wounds."

Voices started accusing the Senate of the treachery.

"One moment." Xena's voice rose above the sound. "You cannot go accusing the Senate of this without proof." A murmur spread around the group as they recognised her. A silence descended over the square. "Just because he was found there does not mean that the Senate did this. He may have been stabbed in the street and his body dumped there."

But the crowd were not convinced and she could hear the rumours starting already.

"No, the Senate were always jealous of his power."

"They want the power themselves."

"Caesar was becoming too popular."

Xena took a deep sigh. The crowd would believe what they want to believe, irrespective of the truth. This was how riots began. She hoped that she, Gabrielle and Marina were out of the city before things got ugly.

With Caesar dead, however, she could change her travelling arrangements. Travelling by sea was now an option and would cut off a considerable amount of time and walking distance off their journey. They would be home sooner than anticipated.

* * * * *

Three days had elapsed and her weapons and armour were ready. Provisions had been accumulated. They were now ready.

"Clonus, a moment please."

"Xena, what can I do for you?"

"It's more what you can do for Antillia, my friend." She saw the quiet glow fill his eyes at the mention of her name. *Thought so...*

"She left a will concerning her property." She handed over the parchment to the old soldier, who read it in silence.

"Are you able to carry out her wishes?" He nodded in silence.

"I will take my wages from the arena plus some spare to get us home. I place the rest of her considerable wealth in your care, my friend. Use it wisely to look after these people here and her memory." Again, he silently nodded. "Hold onto this house as long as you are able. Tough times are coming, Clonus. Caesar's death will cause a void in leadership and until that void is filled things will be a little chaotic. Do whatever it takes to protect this property."

"I understand, Xena. I will do my best."

"And your best is good enough, my friend." She took his arm in a warrior's handshake, bidding a fond farewell.

The crowds filled the roads leading to the Senate so she agreed to meet Gaius Trebonius at his house.

"My Lord, I am sorry to leave you with this mess."

"Xena, Caesar brought this on himself, and I can't say that I'm upset over his death. He was becoming an increasing problem for the Senate to try to keep him under control. He had called a meeting for today and I suspected he was going to make a bid for complete control of Rome. In a way, you have done us a favour."

"But my Lord, the people are restless. They are blaming you for this."

"We will survive."

"Indeed you will, my Lord. I'm sorry to cut this meeting short but we need to get to Ostia quickly before travel out of the city becomes impossible."

"Xena, it has been a pleasure knowing you. I doubt there will ever be another gladiator quite like you. You have the freedom of the city, Xena of Amphipolis - Gladiator of Rome."

Epilogue

The ship left the seaport of Ostia on time with its three willing passengers. Standing at the rail, Xena, Gabrielle and Marina took one last look at the land that had been their home. Xena felt a twinge of regret leaving Antillia's household at such a turbulent time but she could not deny that she was looking forward to going home.

Xena had taken Marina back to her home for the last nine years to say goodbye. It was a comfortable home, not like the ostentatious villas on the Hill, but solid and dependable, like the people living inside it. The meeting had been civil but there seemed to be missing the loving warmth of a family home.

She could see that the child was not going to be missed as much as the coin that had been used to pay for her comfort. Marina had been looked after well but there had been no nurturing of her spirit. It broke her heart that people could treat a child as a commodity. The child gave them unconditional love and they rejected it. Well, it was their loss and her gain.

She looked down to her daughter, "So, little one, are you ready to go visit your grandma?"

"Grandma? What's a grandma?" Bright blue eyes looked up enquiringly.

"Well, a grandma is a person, Marina. She is my mother and your grandmother. And she has lots and lots of cookies for hungry little ones such as you." To emphasize her point, her long fingers searched and found a naked tummy and tickled the available skin, causing the child to squirm and squeal.

Gabrielle watched in silent amusement at the interaction between mother and child and warmed as eyes brighter than the sea they were sailing on latched onto her and darkened as they studied her.

Xena breathed deeply and sighed, "We're going home Gabrielle."

END.