

THE EMPTY THRONE

ovel by Ru Emerson based on the hit television es created by John Schulian and Robert Tapert



A novel by Ru Emerson

Based on the Universal television series created by

John Schulian and Robert Tapert



This novel is entirely a work of fiction.

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Join Xena as she forsakes her dark past and joins the battle against the forces of evil!



The exciting exploits of Xena: Warrior Princess

THE EMPTY THRONE
PROPHECY OF DARKNESS
THE THIEF OF HERMES
THE HUNTRESS AND THE SPHINX

Acknowledgments

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To Doug.

For Roberta,
who did her furry darndest to keep me
from getting it done.

And to Lea Day,
who suggested a certain quasi-mortal character
and a certain line.
I'm still laughing, lady.



1

"...I'm not asking for miracles! You know? Just—just a little respect!" Gabrielle shook her head sharply, sending the long, blond hair flying. She glanced sidelong at her companion. "You're not laughing at me, are you?"

Xena shifted her grip on her horse's bridle and caught the corners of her mouth between her teeth to hold back a smile. "Of course not. But even a *little* respect under the circumstances—well, it sounds to me like you want a miracle."

"I—all right." Gabrielle sighed. "Not respect, just a few basic manners! I know we were in a tavern, I understand that isn't the same as the Oracle's Grove at Delphi, or the Academy in Athens, and of course I can see that even some of the same men could behave differently in all those places. Still, I was minding my own business, I wasn't even talking to any of them, and I certainly wasn't acting like a—like one of those women, and I just don't see why being in a tavern means a man doesn't need to behave himself around a woman who isn't behaving like a strumpet, do you?"

"Of course not." Xena turned the horse into a narrow, grassy ravine that meandered north. The afternoon was turning hot, and the last water had been left behind at midday. Gabrielle scrambled along the rocky, brushy wall to ease past them and take the lead. "But, Gabrielle, it isn't realistic to expect men like the ones in that tavern to show any kind of manners anywhere—except bad ones. You come from a village, Gabrielle, and you've traveled with me for long enough to know that some men..."

Gabrielle sighed as she walked up the slope. "All right, I know how things are, I just can't see why they have to be that way! And you'll have to admit that for once, I was doing exactly what you said for me to do, I was on the far side of the building with the innkeep's wife!" She cast her companion a dark glance, her hazel eyes stormy.

"And some soldier who just got back from Sparta and was burying the dust of the road in a large mug of mead came over to get another mugful from the innkeep's wife—and pinched you." Xena's ice-blue gaze was briefly not at all amused, though her voice remained light; Gabrielle, her own attention all for the increasingly rough way ahead, didn't notice. "Next time, do the other thing I told you. When someone lays hands on you, yell. Then, even if the damage is done, he won't try anything again, with you or anyone else. Unless he thinks about it first."

The sigh was more exasperated this time. "Oh, Xena, you know how it is—I just hate to feel that you need to take care of me all the time!"

"I know that. I don't take care of you all the time, though; you've talked yourself out of some serious situations all by yourself and you've helped me out of a few. Remember what you said a while back, 'You fight and I'll talk'? You talk just fine, especially when fighting won't work. Everyone has something he or she does best."

"And you fight." Gabrielle's voice sounded flat.

Xena tugged at her long skirt. "So? The mannerless clod who pinched you knows how to fight, almost anyone can fight. I'm better at it than he is, but it's still the same thing. Nearly anyone can learn how to kill—that doesn't take talent, skill, or anything really important. You do something a little more unique, Gabrielle. You create."

"I don't really." The girl paused a moment to eye her companion, before turning her attention back to the ground in front of her. "I take the stories everyone knows, that's all—"

"Not true. Not everyone knows them, or maybe they've heard them before, but the stories didn't have much to do with them. You can take a story like that and make it important to people, make them care. You're every bit as good as that boy we left at the Athens Academy. The one who closed his eyes when he chanted."

"Homer," Gabrielle said promptly, and sighed; one hand remained briefly above the branch before she shook her head, grabbed for the hold, and moved upward. "Except he was going to change his name to Orion. I can't think why; Homer's a nice name. You know, I wish he could've seen Ilium—Troy, sorry—and Helen. I think he'd have made a wonderful story of all that. You know, the war, the men who came to fight it—all that."

"Maybe. Maybe you'll do a better story; you could've had his place at the Academy if you'd been more selfish, you know."

"I was more selfish," Gabrielle asserted rather breathlessly. "I wanted to stay with you. Besides, I can learn more tales out here—not just the ones you and I live but the ones we hear, doing all this traveling—than I'd ever get in the Academy."

[&]quot;I suppose."

"Sure." She jumped from rock to rock; Xena found a way along the damp, muddy ravine that her horse could manage, and slowly fell a little behind. Gabrielle drew a deep breath and finally went on. "But I wasn't just being selfish that way—I mean, wanting to stay with you. I guess it's all right for some people to get their tales secondhand at the Academy, and then apply their own way of telling to make them fresh. I just like being out in the real world, learning stories from the people who lived them, or living them myself. Besides, Homer will be truly happy there. He'll fit in properly, and he won't have to spend half his life arguing with his father about how he should tell his stories, will he?"

Xena eyed her companion's back thoughtfully. Gabrielle often came across to outsiders as a chattering, silly young girl, but there were unexpected depths to her; she was kind and honest. And perceptive. The warrior shook her head. Let's not get all weepy-eyed, here. She's a nice kid and also a good cook; you'd have starved on your own by now. "Well—I'm glad you feel that way about it. It's never a good idea to want something you can't have, especially if you deliberately turned it down."

Gabrielle turned to glance down at her; she was smiling faintly and her eyes seemed amused. "Oh—I know that."

Silence for some moments, except for the jingle of harness, as the two women clambered up the ravine; Xena's horse came placidly at the end of his rein, but all at once he whickered restlessly and nudged her shoulder.

Gabrielle glanced down at him, a frown creasing her brow. "Um—is he trying to tell you there's someone, or a bunch of someones, hiding up there, waiting to jump us?"

"I doubt it; why would anyone hide at the head of a ravine in the middle of nowhere, just in case someone decided to drag a horse up it? More likely, he smells water. I've only been in this part of Ithaca once before, but I seem to remember a well not far from here." She pressed her companion gently to one side. "Wait here; we'll check things out first, and I'll let you know."

"Ah—great! I'll—ah—I'll be right here," Gabrielle replied cheerfully, but her hazel eyes were dark with worry.

Xena gave her a reassuring smile, then forged on. The horse was definitely restless; but it wasn't the kind of behavior she'd expect if there were other horses around—or men. He was right behind her, urging her on, butting her shoulder with his head whenever she slowed to check her footing, or the trees and brush ahead. She climbed the increasingly narrow and steep ravine, ears tuned for the least sound that didn't belong in a sleepy summer afternoon in open woodland; both her steps and her mount's were padded by the thick grass, though Xena's footsteps would not have made any sound no matter what was underfoot. Unless she wanted them to.

After one final clamber between enormous boulders, she stepped warily onto level ground, eyes moving swiftly, one hand on the horse's muzzle to keep him quiet. Nothing. Four more long steps brought her out of the brushy tangle and into the open.

There was a small grove to her left—but the young trees were wide-spaced, making it obvious at once that no one could be hiding among the trunks or in the branches. And within the grove itself, she could clearly see the matted, furry-leaved herb that had been planted all around the trees, as well as the narrow, well-tended path that led to a shrine of some sort. She crossed the open ground to the very edge of the rowan saplings. "Ah. Midwife's shrine to Artemis." Such places were unmistakable: here an oak branch supported a small set of stag antlers that had been wrapped

with a long garland of pale blue flowers. All around the antlers lay the usual kinds of offerings: a woven grass bowl of young apples, a branch sprouting leaves and tiny, hard green olives, wheat still in bud—anything that represented youth was acceptable to the goddess as thanks for ease in labor. Two small crossed arrows with bright fletchings—Xena frowned at that briefly, gave it up. It made no sense to her, but it wasn't important that she understand it.

The shrine meant the village they were seeking was quite close. Though it required a grove that was not directly in the path of most of the village life—playing children and men with the herds particularly—any midwife worth her salt would make certain the shrine and its grove were near enough to be properly tended. Village women didn't have time to waste in long walks through the woodlands.

Somewhat relieved, Xena turned away. It was most unlikely that any man would attempt to hide anywhere near a grove dedicated to Artemis. Goddess of childbearing, goddess of the hunt—the goddess who seldom showed favor to any man. Her blessing on these trees and this ground would make most males feel uneasy at best.

At worst—if such a man sought to damage the grove or the shrine and its offerings, if he dared hunt here—Artemis herself would appear to turn him into a stag and loose her dogs on him, Xena thought; a smile curved her lips as she studied the rest of the flat ground before her. Serve him right, too.

A vast open park ran in all directions for some distance: a lawn of knee-high grass spotted with wildflowers and lightly shaded by a few thin, young rowan trees. To north and west, enormous old olives edged the grassy area, gradually giving way to old and wild woods in the east. Behind her, the ravine, and another tangle of woods, which almost at once dropped sharply downhill.

A path went in a straight line from the ravine to the grove and beyond the grove to the west it meandered through the grass before vanishing among the olives—the village must be that way. Another path cut through the grass bearing roughly north, wandering as though wild beasts had worn it down. Just short of a massive olive, she could make out a circle of dressed stones that must be the well. Satisfied, she turned and called out, "It's all right, Gabrielle, he smells the water; come on up."

An hour later, thirst slaked, the two women walked the narrow, winding path that skirted the shrine grove. Gabrielle paused to look at the offerings; she smiled and pointed at the arrows. "Someone's just birthed twin sons—healthy ones, too!"

Xena gazed at them, eyed her companion. "And how did you know that?"

"Because—that's how it's done, at least it was in my mother's village. Arrows because Artemis is the huntress. Two crossed; that's for twins—fletched for boys; for girls, the tips would be painted red. And then, a very bright color like that, the dye they used on the feathers?"

"Good health," Xena finished dryly. They walked on, entering the tangle of aged olive trees that must have once been part of an impressive lord's holding. Now they'd gone wild; what ripe fruit there was unpicked, or pecked by birds, branches broken by winter winds and not properly pruned. It was cooler under the trees, and the light breeze that suddenly ruffled the horse's mane bore the tang of salt water. "I'm not certain I understand why that's all necessary, though; surely the goddess knows who was just born down in that village, doesn't she?"

"Well, of course she does! But anyone who goes by that grove knows about it now, too. And our grove also served

a village just across the hills from us. So it was a way to let the women there know. Hardly any of the women my mother's age could write, and nobody had spare time to just go and trade gossip."

"There never is. I grew up in a village, too, remember?" "Sure. It's the honor thing, too, though. The offerings." They walked in silence for some time, the only sound once more the muted clink of the horse's fittings; down a slope and across a dry wash, up the far side. The ground here was dusty, the wind a little stronger, the trees now interspersed with brush, wild rowan, young oak. One ancient olive tree lay across the trail; its inadequate roots still tangled with clods of dirt and its leaves withered. Someone had attempted to cut through the massive trunk to clear the path but had only been partially successful; a new path led around the root ball and past a bramble thicket before rejoining the ancient way.

Gabrielle turned to look at the fallen giant. "It always makes me sad to see an olive tree die," she said wistfully. "They're so important and they're just so—majestic. You can see why the gods have always cared for them. This place needs more men and women to tend it."

"Too many lands are like that just now," Xena reminded her. "Too many men gone to war in the north or the east and not enough of them returning. Too many women with too many duties to manage for themselves and their men, and their families."

"True." Gabrielle looked sad; probably thinking about that farmboy who'd been pledged to her in her home village, so long ago, Xena decided. Not that Gabrielle had wanted the boy then; he'd been a nice, ordinary farmer and she'd wanted—well, just what she'd gotten: adventure, excitement, danger. It was Greek luck at its sardonic finest that had brought her together with that boy at the fall of

Troy. Some god or goddess must have been laughing uproariously over the situation: a boy who'd changed from a green youth grieving for his betrothed into a great warrior who'd helped the two of them salvage what little could be rescued from the wreck of Troy. And now he traveled with the legendary Helen. Gabrielle had been as surprised as anyone, how much she'd come to care for this new man he'd become, how deeply saddened when the boy—the warrior—went his own way without her.

"Ithaca..." Gabrielle was pursuing her own, vastly different thoughts. "Isn't that where that one Greek captain—I can't remember his name—the Trickster, the Trojans called him? Isn't Ithaca his home territory?"

"King Odysseus," Xena replied promptly. "These are all his lands, though he actually lives on the isle of Ithaca. And Trickster's a good name for him. You'd like the tale about how he almost didn't go with the Greeks to attack Troy."

"D'you know it?"

Xena smiled faintly. "I won't tell it as good as you can, but I know the details. When King Menelaus discovered Helen was gone, he sent word to all the other kings and princes who'd also courted her; they'd all vowed to—"

"—to aid whoever actually won her, if someone kidnapped her," Gabrielle broke in, cheerfully impatient. "I know that part, Helen told me, remember?"

"I didn't know—I should have suspected she'd confide in you, though. Anyway, most of the other kings put together armies, built ships, and headed for Sparta, but Odysseus didn't. And when Menelaus sent someone to find out where he was and why he hadn't answered the summons, Odysseus pretended he was mad. He put on filthy, smelly rags, then went out into his peasants' fields with a team made up of an old lame ox and a wild ass and somehow he managed to till up a few rows with them. But instead of seed, he began sowing them with salt."

"Oh! Of course! Then King Menelaus' messenger would think he'd lost his mind and go away without him!"

"Exactly."

"Well, it sounds pretty clever—but it obviously didn't work, because he was there, at Troy, wasn't he?"

"His queen had just presented him with a son, his first child," Xena went on after a moment. "He was happy at home, his lands and his people were doing well, everything was peaceful. The last thing he wanted to do was leave all that behind just to fulfill an old vow made to King Menelaus from back when they were both vying for Helen's hand and her dowry. But King Menelaus knew his old friend fairly well, so the messenger he sent was the cleverest man in his household. The man watched this foolishness for a while, then had the Trickster's baby son brought from the palace. He set the child in one of the furrows, just ahead of the plow—"

"Oh, that is clever!" Gabrielle laughed and clapped her hands. "So, of course, the Trickster would have to stop the plow or turn aside, the messenger would know he wasn't mad, and he'd have to go, right?"

"Exactly," Xena replied dryly. "Which of course meant that not just King Odysseus went to war, but so did most of the men in his guard, and the men in the villages around his castle and grounds."

"Oh. Of course." Gabrielle's voice was flat, her eyes distant. "Just imagine being a man in one of those villages, a—a farmer or a herder like one of the men from my village—except it's been peaceful for so long, you'd forget there was such a thing as war—and then being dragged off to travel overseas in a ship, to fight in a land you never