

~ XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS - APOCALYPSE ~ BOOK 1 - NEMESIS

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THE BETA BAND: Last, but in no way least, I'd like to send out one million and one "Thank You's!!" to my fantastic Beta readers---without which this story would never have been finished (or if it was, it would be full of the kind of gawky and geeky grammar that is present in my disclaimers section---which they never got to look at...) Their patience and enthusiasm are greatly prized and appreciated by yours truly. Thank you: Alydar, Beta Barb, Cybernana and Xenasbard!

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*The light of memory, or rather the light that memory lends to things, is the palest light of all. . .
. I am not quite sure whether I am dreaming or remembering, whether I have lived my life or
dreamed it. Just as dreams do, memory makes me profoundly aware of the unreality, the
evanescence of the world, a fleeting image in the moving water.*

--- Eugène Ionesco, *Present Past-Past Present*

PROLOGUE - Palatine Hill

Countless in the surrounding darkness, the sounds of night were carried to Her one at a time, naked in the still air. She closed Her eyes allowing each to pass through Her.

Insects set up a steady drone with their chattering; a foundation upon which other sounds layered themselves. Soon softer, subtle timbres added their tones to the darkness: a dripping cistern, a stable door's rusty hinge---each one identified, processed, and situated by Her ear in the hazy summer night.

Somewhere, just beyond the quiet copse of trees where She was hidden, an old man stood, sneakily eating a sweet. The dessert had been simple to identify---layers of a honey-soaked pastry peeling with an unmistakable sound. The grinding, guilty gnawing of rounded teeth had betrayed his Secret and his age. She almost smiled at his startled jump when a female voice called out for him.

Further away, a child sobbed at an open window. Sniffles trailed off into the trees above his home. The shift in their pitch indicated when he had cast his eyes to the star-filled sky above. His tiny fingers creaked as they clenched tightly into a fist.

She began to regulate Her breathing, focusing it in the abdomen. Standing with eyes closed, She flexed muscles into readiness---one by one filling them with blood. Her ears continued to pull sounds from the air as if from a ball of thread, weaving them carefully into an image.

She could hear someone, most likely a Senator and one of his slaves using a nearby stable. The grunting of their rough and practical lust was easy, though unappetizing to visualize. It was upsetting the horses---they pawed the ground and swished their tails with a nicker.

She opened Her eyes.

The town house lay still in the night, though not silent. She had been focused on it most of all---centering Herself. Through the din of the arid night, the sounds emanating from this stone building had been louder than the blood in her ears.

She glided silently from Her hiding place, breaking into a steady and controlled jog. Padding closer, She drew Her sword. Carefully synchronizing Her movements to fall in time with the rhythms and melodies of the evening, She made no sound.

The cedar door was unlocked---She had heard it gently tapping against its frame. There had not been a steady breeze in Rome for more than a month; the faint tap meant a presence in the room beyond. Quietly inhaling, She pushed on the door and entered.

She found him just on the other side of the portal, as She knew She would---an older man in a simple gray toga, slicing a cold leg of lamb. His back was to Her, an added advantage, but one She didn't require. There was the smell of unwashed hair and burning tallow in the air. She moved towards him.

Detecting the open door, the man wheeled around---a blank look on his stupid face. She swung Her blade---so gently, so easily that his eyes did not register pain. The blood sprayed first---strong, horribly red and in time with the heart. She checked Her swing slightly---ruining everything useful in his neck, though sparing him from a quick death. Her Master had not wished it, and had asked that the man die knowing who had ordered his death. She watched him, wondering if he did.

His hand went to his neck, foolishly hoping to stem the flowing incarnadine. She looked into his eyes as he

feebly attempted to speak. The man's face danced in a flurry of emotions. She wondered if he could see the complex look on his face reflected in the polished silver of Her mask, or in Her helmet. Could he see his eyes become glassy and blank?

Someone was coming down the hall. She turned to Her left and met the gaze of a shorter, older woman carrying a basket of laundry. Dressed in a coarse, simple shift the woman was probably the man's housekeeper. A terrified and angry look played across the woman's face when she saw Her standing over the bleeding man.

The strike was quick and probably painless---so quick that the woman's arms rose to protect her neck an instant after the sword had done its work. Blood began to stain the clothes spilled across the floor.

An angry shout erupted from a young throat, and She almost rolled Her eyes. A young man, most likely the housekeeper's son had emerged from the cold cellar and had watched his mother's corpse slump to the ground---arms raised. He now advanced vengefully, a kitchen knife in his hand.

Such a good son---so brave, and so young. He held the crude blade clumsily in his calloused hand. She adjusted Her stance only slightly against Her new opponent. This would not be the first time She had killed a young man, or a brave man, or someone's son.

She shut the door, sliding silently back into the night. The humidity pounced upon Her, sticking to the skin beneath Her armor. Sheathing Her sword She paused just in front of the home. A gentle breeze played in the tops of the trees and with the crimson drapery of Her cape.

Once again, She let Her ears sketch out the unseen. The child, the old man, the master and his slave---gone now---the absence filled with softer sounds lispig like silk swatches in a gentle breeze. The Palatine Hill rested easily against the warm darkness. She passed softly back into the night. Behind Her the house laid mute, silent, not betraying the darkness She had composed within its heart.

PART 1 - Odio Roma

CHAPTER I. *Are we there yet?*

The girl stopped to wipe her brow. Even sheltered in the shade of the woods, the day's heat managed to wrench sweat from her body. She sniffed at herself. It was making her stink, too. She put her light pack down, unstopped the water skin she carried and gulped its contents greedily.

"Phew!" she exhaled. The heat and still air of the forest were making her eyes unbearably heavy. Eating that extra bowl of stew at the last tavern probably didn't help, either. She wiped a tendril of damp hair from her face and surveyed her surroundings. They seemed perfect for an early afternoon nap.

Plenty of shade, soft earth---the path wouldn't move parallel to the main road for a while yet, so there would be no chance of strangers happening upon her. Unless someone decided to use this old path...But who would? It was considerably overgrown, therefore neglected---and she was a light sleeper, so a person's footfalls would be easy to hear. Of course, if they were some kind of warrior or soldier, they might move silently through the underbrush and...

What was she doing to herself? She needed a nap, and a nap she was going to have. Warriors, strangers, soldiers be damned!

From her pack she rounded up her bedroll and set about finding the softest patch of earth to lay it upon. Not too close to the younger trees, whose roots would poke out of the earth and into her back. Stay away from ditches, too---moisture tended to collect there. Although, considering it hadn't rained in a long time, that might not be a problem. Eventually, she found a soft and mossy spot under an old elm, and began smoothing out her space.

That's when the feelings of guilt set in. *Funny*, she thought, *I don't remember unpacking those*. She sighed, shaking her head. Always distracting her from what she really wanted, she had promised herself that she wouldn't listen to those feelings anymore. It was a promise she could never seem to keep.

She nodded as she made some calculations. There would still be plenty of time to get to where she had to, a little nap couldn't hurt---she was still a growing girl of eighteen, after all. Sure she had promised to get there on time, but it's not like she would be hours late, right? Maybe an hour or two---but no more than three. She lay on the bedroll, smiling approvingly at how soft and comfortable the spot she had chosen really was---as though the gods themselves had picked it for her. *And who was she to argue with the gods?*

Covering her head from the light of midday, she was soon fast asleep.

She was just beginning to dream when a twig snapped ominously somewhere nearby.

"Damn it Lantro!" a hushed voice exclaimed. "It's always you what goes and snaps the twig, ain't it?"

She poked her head from under the covers. There was nothing to be seen in her direct line of sight. She began to turn slowly around in her bedroll to get a better look.

"Sorry," the other voice apologized meekly. "I have big feet for my size. It's not always easy for me to..."

"*I have big feet for my size*," the first voice mocked. "Not a big brain though, eh? All that work for nothi..."

"Shut up, the two of you!" a third voice barked. "There's nothing for it now. C'mon!"

She finished turning and immediately saw where the voices came from: three surly-looking types, each with poorly kept, though no-less dangerous looking swords.

Well, here goes... She sat up and flashed her best grin---which, she had to admit, was not too shabby.

"Hi!" she chirped.

The lead scumbag flashed his best grin---it didn't amount to much.

"Well hello there, little girly," he cooed. "What is it that yer doing out here under the trees, all alone-like?"

"Uhm... just taking a nap."

The man's filthy smile widened, "Some beauty sleep, is it?" The other men chortled. "Not too much I hope, or we'd have to poke out our eyes from gazing upon such a wondrous sight," he laughed.

Trying hard not to roll her eyes and groan, the girl feigned bashfulness instead, and slowly rose to her feet. "Right... Wouldn't want *that* to happen..."

"What's yer name little lamb?" the brigand asked, advancing with the other two moving towards her as well.

"Mira," the girl responded. This was it; he was going to grab her.

He did, just above the wrist.

"Well Mira," the man licked his peeling lips, sprouting them into a twisted leer. "Nap time is over..."

"Really?" Mira asked, quickly wrenching her wrist free of the man's grip with a push forward, knocking him off balance. She spun, planting a solid roundhouse kick to his jaw, sending him to the ground. "Then why are you lying down?"

Probably prompted by the shock of the situation, the one with the big feet, Lantro, made a really stupid noise. Mira would laugh when she would recall it later---a cross between a nervous titter, an uncontrollable snort of surprise and something entirely of his own design, it sounded a lot like "Shnorph-um!"

The other one, the largest moved towards her with terrible purpose. She would have to eliminate him as quickly as possible, or stay away from him at all costs. Never one to avoid a challenge, Mira chose the first option.

Running straight at him, she managed to land several blows to his legs and groin area knocking the big man to one knee. He reached with his meaty hand and grabbed hold of her shirt. She quickly double-chopped his temples, making his tongue loll out and his grip weaken. Back-flipping away from him, Mira spiraled out of his grasp---and into the leader's vice-like bear hug.

"Yer not going anywhere, girly," he chuckled into her ear.

She could smell the teeth rotting in his mouth, and hear the sticky inhalation from his broken nose. He began to squeeze harder. Mira's breath was wrenched from her lungs, stars appearing before her eyes. As her head grew lighter, she felt as though her body was leaving the ground.

Snapping out of it, she realized she really was above the ground. The leader had lifted her over his head with both hands. She hadn't the strength to struggle---her head dizzy, her vision blurry. With an air of brutal finality, the leader slammed her to the ground with crushing, violent force.

"There!" he said. "That's how it's done."

Mira was not unconscious, but could not move. It was not so much that she was paralyzed---just suffering an amount of pain substantial enough to make motion an appealing, though unobtainable possibility. Her head spun out of control, her stomach lurching with every turn.

"What's the point of bein' a big man Andros if ye let little girls beat up on ye?" the leader asked.

"Ssssurprised..." was the best the wheezing Andros could do.

Lantro found this pretty amusing, and began guffawing uncontrollably.

"And you," the leader growled at the large-footed man. "Yer as useless as tits on a bull."

Surprisingly, Lantro found this equally hilarious and continued to guffaw.

"Ah shaddup!" the leader spit, to no avail. He moved towards Mira. "Well now girly," the man grinned, blood trickling from his nose. "As I was sayin', yer not goin' anywhere---not until we're finished with you, at least."

Andros had gotten up and approached from where he had been kneeling. Lantro continued to laugh, his giggling taking on a more sinister tone.

Mira tried to move, to breathe and wasn't getting very far with either. Well this was it, she thought. This is what happens when you take a nap instead of just walking like you were supposed to.

"Hey boys," a steely female voice introduced itself. "That's no way to treat a lady."

The men spun around---well, two of them did. Instead of turning, Lantro fell to the ground unconscious, never even catching a glimpse of who had struck him with a well-placed blow to the back of the head. The leader growled, Andros' jaw hung open, and the newcomer stood, staring them both down.

She was a small woman, but judging from her muscular build and hardened stare it wouldn't matter. Her hair was golden blonde and cropped short, framing a beautiful face and intelligent green eyes. Dressed in sleek armor and battle leathers, and armed with a dangerous-looking sword, she was an impressive sight.

When they were able to speak again, Andros and Morvan (the leader) would argue over her age. Both men placing her near thirty, but not agreeing on which side. It was a common argument for the woman did not look all of her thirty-six years. Her age rarely showed, and then it was only when you carefully looked in her eyes, and only at the right moment.

Andros attacked first. It was not that he was especially brave---and while not a prime candidate for Plato's Academy (or even for some of the less distinguished Community Academies)---he wasn't especially stupid either. The big man was simply what people would call a 'basher'---a guy you paid a couple of dinars to if you wanted someone's face bloodied. Morvan, or anyone else for that matter, couldn't blame him for being predictable.

The woman simply sidestepped the charging hulk, using her foot and Andros' misplaced momentum to throw him to the ground. He crumpled loudly in a susurrus of fallen leaves. A quick and powerful blow to the back of his head rendered him unconscious.

The woman straightened into a relaxed battle stance, sword at the ready. Her eyes calmly met Morvan's.

"That's quite a sword you've got there," she said, not too wryly---motioning to the glorified kitchen knife Morvan was brandishing.

"It'll do me fine against the likes of you," he spat. "I'm not as dim as my friends."

"I'm sure," the woman said, smirking.

Mira had snuck up behind the pudgy leader with a rather large rock---the woman seeing this, decided to extend the usual period of taunting a little and wait for the inevitable. As soon as Mira was in position, she raised the big rock slowly above her head. Licking her lips in anticipation she aimed for a vulnerable, and slightly pimply portion of Morvan's skull.

That's when the twig snapped under her foot.

Morvan wheeled around with a surprised yell, swinging blindly with his blade. The girl's close proximity to the man saved her life. Instead of impaling her with his rusty knife, Morvan clubbed her with his meaty forearm---throwing Mira to the ground, a surprised look on her face.

The bloody-nosed man made to stab at the fallen girl, when suddenly there was a whoosh of air and a loud clang. Morvan fell face down into the dirt beside Mira. There was a nasty looking welt on the back of his skull. The blonde woman, standing where she had been all along, held a dangerous-looking metal ring in her hand.

Mira smirked, "Took you long enough."

Gabrielle winked, placing the chakram back onto her belt. "A dramatic entrance is an essential tool of the trade."

Mira grinned as she dusted herself off. "Almost had him," she rolled her eyes. "Stepping on a twig is so cliché."

Gabrielle offered the girl a hand, "Though very much a part of being a sidekick, I'm afraid." The woman smiled warmly as she lifted Mira to her feet. "Trust me, I should know," she said.

After Mira had collected her things, they began walking. It was now mid-afternoon.

"How did you know I would take the path?" Mira asked, diverting her eyes.

"You mean beside the fact that I asked you not to?" Gabrielle smiled.

The girl blushed, fidgeting with her pack. "Yeah, well..."

They continued along in silence for a bit. The forest was alive with all manner of birds and bugs and Mira was glad for the noise, hoping it would cover the sound of blood rushing uncontrollably to her head in embarrassment. She pushed a lock of brown hair behind her ear.

Feeling she had let the girl simmer nicely, Gabrielle turned. "One puzzling thing, though," she asked. "What was your bedroll doing out? Those mean men didn't try to steal it, did they?"

"Well, uhm...they grabbed for my pack...and uhm...you know how I'm always telling you that I've been having trouble with that strap...uhm...right? Well I guess it came undone and the roll...uhm..." Mira's voice became very tiny. "Just popped out." It was unconvincing, even to her.

"And neatly unfurled itself underneath that shady elm?" the older woman finished.

Mira bit her lip. "Yes?"

"Mm-hmm," Gabrielle smirked.

"Hey, I changed the plans a little, so what? It was your idea to split up and let them follow me," the girl narrowed her brown eyes slightly. "You know, sometimes I like to do things *my way*," Mira couldn't stop the words from leaving her lips.

Gabrielle looked into the girl's eyes. "Listen, you don't get to change the plans, got it? That's just another part of being a sidekick you'll need to get used to."

The warrior's gaze remained focused, unwavering in intensity. Mira's mouth hung open---try as she might, nothing would come out. The girl wasn't used to this side of the older woman.

"I... I'm sorry," was the best she could do.

Gabrielle's green eyes softened somewhat. "Look, I know you do a pretty good job of taking care of yourself," she started. "It just makes it easier for me to help when you are where you say you are, right?"

"Right..." Mira mumbled.

"I should thank you for one thing, though," Gabrielle smirked.

Mira raised her eyes. "Huh? For what?"

"The look on your face when that twig snapped made my week." Gabrielle bugged out her eyes and made an "o" of her mouth, in imitation. Mira burst into peals of grateful laughter, followed by Gabrielle. The two began to walk along the path once again.

Gabrielle had not meant to sound so harsh. She had always assumed the girl would change the original plan. Traveling the main road was hot and tiring, so it was obvious to the warrior that Mira would leave the dust and grit and seek the shade. Mira was also stubborn and adventurous---a dangerous combination.

Reminds me of someone I know, Gabrielle smirked.

Growing up on the streets of Corinth, the girl could handle herself under most circumstances and that was why Gabrielle had tolerated her presence originally. It was why she found herself taking the girl under her wing.

So why am I so upset?

Gabrielle looked up into the sun-tickled tops of the trees as they walked along---she adjusted her pack and sighed. She knew what was upsetting her.

It had started right as Mira snapped the twig behind the big leader. Gabrielle knew what would happen next--the leader would swing wildly, stabbing at Mira with his knife. She had known what would happen; yet had still reacted too late.

By the time the chakram had left her hand, the brute had hit Mira and she was falling. For a brief second Gabrielle thought he had stabbed the girl, and her heart sank. She realized soon enough that her friend was

unharmd, but the initial shock never left. That shock had become misplaced anger, and eventually transformed into the miasma of doubt currently buzzing around the warrior's head.

Doubt was nothing new to her. It had always been part of her life---a nagging in the back of her head. When you were a girl from a simple farm-town who would never be happy with a simple farm-life, doubt was the voice that pleaded with you to give in and accept what the Fates had presented you with.

When walking the path of the warrior, doubt became a monster she was forced to defeat everyday. Even as a veteran of countless battles, Gabrielle still felt the same degree of fear she had felt in her guts from the first time her life was in danger. She had just become better at dealing with it---forgetting about it. She had never been afraid of dying---especially after doing it and coming back a couple of times. The numerous close calls, various demons, gods, warlords, and all around cutthroats that threatened her pretty much everyday had often numbed her to the constant threat.

So where was this coming from, then?

The sun beat heavily down upon them as they left the woods and took to the main road. It stretched like a snake's shed skin, parched and dusty into the horizon. A milestone gleamed brightly in the midday sun, just up ahead. Gabrielle sighed and shifted her pack. Mira looked over at the sullen face of the older woman.

"Gabrielle?"

"Hmmm?"

"This sun is something else, huh?"

Gabrielle was still lost in her melancholy. "Yes. Yes it is," she answered quite absently.

"Do you mind if I walk under the shade of your furrowed brow?" Mira asked dryly.

"Huh? Oh..." Gabrielle smiled warmly, despite her mood. "I was just remembering..." her voice trailed off.

Mira wasn't sure if she was supposed to bite, but she did anyway. "Remembering what?"

Gabrielle squinted as they walked side by side down the road. "Oh, just things," she sighed. "Like how much I hate where we're going."

"Why?" Mira asked. "Outside of the usual reasons of course."

Gabrielle glanced sideways at the younger woman with an enigmatic and not entirely mirthful smirk.

"Because it's sort of where I died once."

She continued down the road, leaving the stammering girl in the dust.

They had traveled along for a few more hours when the younger woman decided to make her move.

"So," Mira probed half-teasingly. "Do I finally get to read 'The Scrolls'?"

Gabrielle crossed her arms in mock admonishment. "Not after that shortcut fiasco."

"Aw c'mon!" Mira pleaded. "Half the people we run into talk about how amazing your stories were---at least the half that isn't running away from you, or who need your help with something."

Gabrielle smirked at that. "Anyone who remembers my stories couldn't run away *unless* I helped them."

Mira snickered, "So? The point is they still remember your stories."

Gabrielle's shoulders fell with a self-effacing shift, as though she was shrugging off a mantle that had made her appear much larger than she truly was. "Still," she said quietly. "I haven't written or told a story in years."

"You don't forget how to do that sort of thing," Mira said. "Not when you're a natural."

Gabrielle looked at the thin girl skeptically. "A 'natural'," she said. "And how would you know I was a 'natural'? I just told you I haven't told a proper story in years."

"Not a 'proper' story, no," Mira said. "But just the way you talk about your memories---where you've been, what you've done, who you've known..."

This last part she let trail off, realizing she may have entered dangerous ground. She needed to react quickly. "Besides," Mira continued. "I know a natural when I see one." She flashed her very charming little grin.

Gabrielle remained unconvinced, though obviously under the spell of the girl's smile. This gave Mira all the momentum she needed.

"Hey! Even that old Homer guy up in Athens said you were a 'natural'," the girl said, grinning. "Said you were even better than him."

Gabrielle blushed slightly as she remembered her old friend's compliments.

"Wouldn't be hard, though," the girl continued. "That story he told us put me to sleep!"

Gabrielle shook her head. "*The Iliad* put you to sleep?!?"

"I meant almost," Mira quickly tried to recover. "*Almost* put me to sleep."

"What part was it: the decade of brutal fighting, the intervention of the gods, or the forbidden love that almost destroyed *two* nations?!?" Gabrielle asked incredulously.

"I don't know," Mira said. "It was too long, that's all." She rubbed the back of her neck. "Epically long," she added.

Gabrielle shook her head and laughed.

Mira waved a finger at the warrior, "Hey, don't change the subject on me!"

"I wasn't." Gabrielle raised her hands as a look of almost angelic innocence crossed her face.

Mira scowled. "I'm reading those scrolls!" she stated.

"Fine, fine," Gabrielle laughed. "If Virgil hasn't burned them to make it through a long winter's night, you can read all you like."

The girl smiled triumphantly, walking with a newfound spring in her step.

"That *is* why we're going, isn't it?" Mira asked. "Writing, I mean?"

Gabrielle looked towards the hilltop they were about to crest.

"That's right," she sighed.

Mira suddenly realized something and turned.

"Say, Gabrielle, why *did* you stop..."

"Mira," the warrior cut her off. She leveled her green eyes at the young woman, "Don't."

Mira blinked. "But..."

Gabrielle maintained her sea colored glare. "*Enough.*"

Mira relented, but made a secret pact with herself to keep chipping away on that one. There had been a number of times when Gabrielle had marked certain of her memories off limits---but with some well-timed questions and just the right pout or grin, Mira had managed to learn quite a bit about the often laconic blonde warrior.

While she thought about this, a sad look passed over the young girl's face. She maintained the same brisk pace as her older friend, moving a little closer to her.

It soon became obvious that Mira wanted to speak but was maintaining a painful, though respectful silence. The girl began to wring her hands and tap them against her thighs impatiently. Sometimes, she would turn her head slightly, barely parting her lips before thinking better of it and continuing along quietly. Other moments would find her moving various items between the myriad of hidden pockets in her leather vest and her forest-colored tunic.

Gabrielle managed to hide the grin that threatened to erupt from inside of her. She rolled her eyes and smirked at the irony of history holding up its cruel little mirror to her.

I remember exactly how she feels.

The warrior smiled inwardly, as she often did around the girl.

"Hey there it is!" Mira said. "Rome."

They had crested a hill and could see the great city in the valley below them. It was hard to make out the

details as they approached from the north--the buildings were partially obscured by a thick layer of shimmering haze. Mira shifted uncomfortably and grabbed for her waterskin.

"We're almost there," Gabrielle said. "Virgil should be meeting us well before we hit the gates."

Mira straightened slightly and took a large gulp of water. Squinting down the road, she wiped her lips and gestured.

"Looks like someone's coming."

A small cart drawn by two donkeys was kicking up the dry, loose dust of the road in the distance.

"That would be Virgil," Gabrielle grinned warmly and raised her arm in a happy wave.

Within minutes, the slow moving cart shuddered to a stop before them. Mira could see that the vehicle was one of very good construction and undoubtedly expensive.

The driver was slouched almost drunkenly in the driver's seat, a floppy straw hat obscuring his face. He wore an array of silks that probably kept him cool in the unrelenting burn of the sun. Mira's hand gently brushed the nose of the donkey closest to her.

"Well," Gabrielle stepped towards the cart, gesturing to the donkeys. "I see a writer's salary hasn't improved since the last time I was here," she smiled.

A hand tipped the straw hat from a face that was mischievous and strikingly handsome. The tanned man's grin was roguish and free---like a wild fox playing at the edge of a town, just out of reach. He appeared to be about the same age as Gabrielle but, while not unhealthy, was nowhere as fit as the warrior. Regardless, it was hard for Mira to pry her eyes from the older man's face---suddenly she found the day had become much warmer. The girl adjusted the front of her suede breeches.

He wryly indicated Gabrielle's travel-worn boots, and then smiled at the road-weary and somewhat parched blonde.

"Nor a warrior's, it would appear," he said, smirking.

They both erupted into laughter and Virgil sprang easily from the cart and scooped up his friend in his large arms.

"It's been too long, Gabrielle," he said, obviously with more emotion than he had intended.

They separated, remaining at arm's length, gazing fondly at each other.

"You know it had nothing to do with *you*, Virgil," Gabrielle offered.

"I know," Virgil nodded, sadly. "Now," he brightened and flashed his smile at Mira. "Who is *this*?"

Like an apple tumbling from a bowl and rolling across a table, a smile fell clumsily upon Mira's face in answer. She put the donkey she was absently scratching between herself and the tall man.

Gabrielle smirked knowingly, "Virgil, this is Mira. A good friend."

Mira wasn't sure how she didn't explode from the dangerous concoction of pride, embarrassment, bashfulness and attraction that the combination of Virgil's gaze and Gabrielle's endorsement of friendship had elicited within her.

Virgil floated around the donkey, running his fingers up its nose until he swept up Mira's hand in his own. He grinned at the young girl.

"Mira," Virgil poured the name from his tongue like an oyster might its pearl. He held her hand. "A beautiful name," he purred.

Mira could only manage a breathy, "Thank you."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Virgil, you could charm the mane off a lion," she laughed.

"Maybe," he smiled. "Though one must practice hard when living in such a charmless place," he motioned to the great city behind them.

Gabrielle nodded. "Well," she grimaced. "Let's get this over with."

Virgil helped Mira into the back of the cart and Gabrielle got in beside her. She handed the obviously tired girl the water skin.

"Make sure you drink plenty of liquids," Gabrielle sighed. "This place has a way of sucking the life right out of you."

Soon the cart had turned and was making its way towards the city.

CHAPTER II. *Roman Wilderness*

It was a matter of pride to Mira that she was extremely well traveled for someone so young. That said, she had never seen such a busy place. Even the markets and streets of Athens or Thebes were small by comparison.

Peoples' faces were different, too. The eyes seemed harder, more focused on where they were going, or what they were doing. You got the impression they would walk right over you if you didn't keep your wits.

Mira's head spun with stimulus as she stepped easily through the sweaty throng. At least six different languages buzzed in her ears. Her nose inhaled smells both sweet and sickening. Merchants held out brightly colored ceramics, spiced meats steaming on skewers, delicate cages filled with tiny songbirds for her perusal.

While the synaesthesia of Rome was intoxicating to her, Mira began to notice something infinitely more tempting. Dashing about in their daily affairs, Romans were an extremely preoccupied bunch. This meant they couldn't pay as much attention to the little things---like a dove coming to rest in a shriveled fig tree, or an old woman fanning herself in the doorway of an Artemisian temple.

Or their wallets, Mira smirked to herself.

Mira's mouth watered at the sight of it all. This place was a goldmine---almost literally. There was enough distraction, friction and preoccupation here to make this a cutpurse's Elysium. She shook the kinks out of her fingers and arms.

It had been a long time.

She smiled as she remembered...It had been a busy day at the fair grounds in Corinth---her only mistake had been in her choice of prey. Gabrielle admitted later that she had always admired Mira's ambition---though it hadn't stopped her from painfully twisting the girl's wrist, just before the pickpocket had snatched the wallet from the warrior's belt.

Mira had never regretted the encounter. Something about the enigmatic blonde woman with the kind eyes drew the girl to her---in addition to the fact that Gabrielle had not let go of her, and had physically drawn Mira towards her.

The warrior's gaze had passed over her, quickly changing from annoyance to wry interest.

"And just what did you need the money for?" the woman had asked.

"There's a young girl I know who could really use it," Mira said, half-smiling, unafraid.

"Oh?" Gabrielle's eyes had narrowed. *"Who?"*

"Me," Mira shrugged.

The jade eyes met Mira's own, and softened slightly. The girl was used to figuring people out from their eyes---it was an important skill in her line of work. This woman's eyes revealed a depth and sadness that Mira had never encountered before---and beneath it all, a compassion that was dizzying.

The woman had relaxed her grip. *"You have mud on your face,"* she'd said, as she gently wiped a smudge from Mira's cheek.

Mira's grandmother had always told her that there were only a few times in life where the presence of the Fates could be felt---times where you "saw their threads," as she would put it. That had been one of those times, Mira was convinced. Of course it had taken a little longer to persuade Gabrielle about it, but she came around.

The last year had proved her grandmother right, many times over. Although, Grandma had also told Mira that her real Grandpa had been some guy who called himself the "King of Thieves," but no one had ever believed that---not even Mira.

The young pickpocket fixed her attention on the temptations at hand. It would be easy---even if her skills were a little rusty. If only that nagging voice in the back of her head would just go away---the little voice that told her to do what Gabrielle had asked.

"Just buy the supplies and come back to the house, Mira. No 'shortcuts', okay?"

She had been really excited that Gabrielle had let her venture into the markets by herself. More so that the warrior had left her responsible for their supplies and trusted her to find her way back to Virgil's home. Mira began to wonder if it would be best to just do as the warrior had asked---in order to maintain the newfound trust she had been granted.

A portly man, dazed and drunken, dizzy in the heat staggered past Mira swinging a parasol with fey distraction. From his belt, a bloated coin purse dangled tantalizingly. The would-be thief took a step forward and then hesitated. Resolve returning she followed once more, and then stopped again as it vanished just as easily.

"I can't. I can't do it," Mira whispered to herself. "Damn."

The girl shook her head. "Just buy the supplies and come back to the house," she said, repeating Gabrielle's words. "No shortcuts."

"You're not used to displaying such...*restraint*," a voice behind her said. "Are you?"

Mira wheeled around to see a young boy, probably two years her junior (although it was hard to tell with boys---some were younger than they looked and some older) smiling almost sweetly at her.

"I don't have a clue what you mean, Shorty," Mira said, without missing a beat. "Beat it."

"Okay. Although," he paused as he turned to leave. "One thing about Claudius you might want to note: his bodyguards trail about twenty feet behind to prevent any...*mishaps* that may befall him."

Mira quickly noted two shifty-eyed and muscular men who followed the strolling fop purposefully.

"I knew that."

"I'm sure you did."

"Thanks, though."

"No trouble at all," he said, smiling.

"You've got a pretty good eye for detail."

"I'm not from around here, so I have to keep my eyes open."

"I'm from outta town too," Mira shrugged.

"I figured," he said, smiling.

"Yeah well," Mira rubbed her neck and grinned sheepishly. "Maybe I'll see you around." *What was she saying?!?*

"My father and I are making some repairs to a shop not far from here," he pointed to the west side of the forum. "We'll be here for at least another month."

"Okay then," Mira said, waving to the boy. "Have fun with that!"

She turned and moved very quickly towards wherever the farthest point away from this travesty was.

Just buy the supplies. Just buy the supplies and head back to Virgil's. Mira couldn't believe how geeky she was behaving. She was rarely caught in the act like that. Maybe that's what it was. *Yeah, that's what it was.*

Had he been watching her the whole time? If so, why? Mira didn't like being spied on, no matter how nice the creep was. She would have to stay focused, and be on guard. You didn't get to where she was by not watching your back.

It wouldn't hurt to check up on this kid either. Maybe do a walk-by of this 'shop' he mentioned. See this 'father' he was talking about, too. She wouldn't tell Gabrielle about it yet---might be nothing to worry about. Mira decided to do it tomorrow, after a night of rest.

As Mira began appraising supplies, she realized that she had never asked the boy his name. All the more reason to check him out, she decided. She smiled to herself as she squeezed an apple to determine its ripeness. Sometimes her cunning amazed even herself.

Maybe Grandma was right about Grandpa, after all...

Virgil could be heard padding down the hall towards the library where she sat. He entered bearing refreshments on a platter and a smile on his face.

"This should improve your mood," he cooed and placed the tray heaped with dried fruit, cheese, olives, bread and wine on the low table. "Help yourself."

Gabrielle brightened significantly. Her appetite, like her lifestyle, hadn't quit its own breakneck pace, as she grew older. The bread yielded to a gentle exploratory push and she sighed.

"Soft bread, you're spoiling me." The warrior scooped up a fragrant roll and took a large bite.

"I figured you might like something you didn't have to soak in water or oil," he said. "Or worse."

Gabrielle laughed. "I don't know what people have been telling you, Virgil," she said, popping a large green olive into her mouth. She leaned back and began chewing thoughtfully on its salty flesh. "I haven't completely abandoned my graces," and with that spit the pit onto the small empty plate Virgil had provided.

Virgil erupted into rich laughter. "I told you this would improve your mood," he poured out some wine, cutting it with water.

"There's nothing wrong with my mood."

Virgil spun the wine in his cup, gazing into it. "Gabrielle," he drawled, as though speaking to a child caught in a lie.

The warrior scanned the room quickly, desperately---pottery, paintings, statues and...*her scrolls*. They were lined up neatly near various other works in the library. She sighed.

"I see you kept the scrolls."

Virgil sat back, his mouth becoming a thin line. "Of course I did," he said.

"Good thing too," she said, sniffing at a piece of cheese. "Mira has her heart set on reading them."

"I'll make sure she does."

"Good."

Gabrielle nibbled at the soft cheese, its saltiness making her mouth water.

"So," she said. "Your story. How can I help you with it?"

Virgil brightened somewhat at the mention of work. "I need to borrow your flare for adventure. And your firsthand knowledge of it as well," he said.

"You're writing an epic," it was more of a statement than a question.

"That's right," he said proudly. "I figured it was as good a time as any."

"What's it about?" she asked, unable to curb, or conceal her interest.

"The foundation of Rome."

She rolled her eyes.

"A couple of kids raised by wolves? Not exactly an epic," she said. "Weird---but not an epic."

"No," he said with a grin. "A new story. Something rousing, unifying---a tale everyone can get behind."

Gabrielle paused just as she was about to pop an olive into her mouth.

"Unifying? For whom, Rome?"

"Of course."

"Are you crazy? These people are barbarians, Virgil. You know what they're like; what they're capable of." She was incredulous, bordering on furious. "Now you're just going to use your gods' given talents to rally them and make them stronger?"

Virgil smiled wryly.

"Gabrielle, I'm flattered that you hold my talents in such high esteem."

"Don't deflect, Virgil," she popped the olive between her lips. "This is serious."

"Look, Rome isn't going to go away any time soon. Why not try to change things? Show them different options---*choices*. Something can be good as easily as it can be evil, right?"

"I'm not so sure."

"How can *you* of all people say that?"

She looked at him soberly.

"Redemption and reform have their prices, Virgil---high prices. Especially, on a scale this large."

"You're not telling me to give up, are you?" he said, crossing his arms. "That just doesn't seem like something you would do."

She rolled the olive pit around in her mouth.

"No, I would never tell you to do that," she said. "You're just going to need my help, that's all." She smiled at him, baring the clean pit between her teeth. Virgil laughed in surprise.

"Oh Gabrielle! I'm so glad. I didn't think...I mean...well, since you haven't...you know..."

"At a loss for words, huh?" she laughed. "Not a great start, my dear."

They both laughed. She knew he didn't need her help. It seemed Virgil had discovered the secret to healing stubborn warriors---disguise the treatment.

Well meaning, but foolish, she thought. *Just like his father*.

Unconsciously, Gabrielle glanced at the scrolls again. The parchment had yellowed; the ends had curled---their cases scarred slightly, gathering dust. *Not unlike their author*, she smirked.

Virgil watched her with a practiced objectivity.

"It's been over twelve years. Why won't you finish them?"

Gabrielle popped a dried apricot into her mouth, with dishonest nonchalance.

"People love an unfinished tale," she said, sarcastically smirking. "It's a story in itself."

"But that story *has* an ending, Gabrielle."

"No it doesn't," her voice pushed the words through clenching teeth. "I never wrote an ending."

"You know what I mean," Virgil kept his voice calm. "You went to Jappa, you saved Higuchi, and you fought Yodoshi. It happened. She..."

"The scrolls are a *story* and *stories* don't end that way! Besides," she was panting. "I don't write stories anymore."

Virgil chose to abandon this thread of conversation gracefully and ate an olive.

Gabrielle looked out the window again. A cat, looking slightly underfed, moved through the dry grass with that mysterious purpose common to all felines. It passed silently through a space in the hedges, and Gabrielle wished she could follow.

An arid breeze kicked up layers of dust outside, blowing some through the open window into the library. The warrior backed away and looked to Virgil.

"How long?" she asked, indicating the dust, the heat, and the drought.

Virgil cleared his throat. "It hasn't rained since the early spring. But about a month ago, that's when the heat really picked up---that's when things got really tough."

"I could tell it was bad when we rode by the markets," Gabrielle said, nodding stoically. "People weren't buying."

"Prices have become ridiculous for most citizens," Virgil shrugged. He motioned to the snack on the tray, "Even staples have become luxuries."

The older woman nodded. "The stocks are low---the wares shoddy. This goes right up the whole chain. The merchants, the suppliers, the farmers---the drought's wearing them all down. It's only going to get worse---this place is one big tinder box."

Virgil sipped at his wine, reflecting, "Having a maniac as an Emperor doesn't help matters."

"No it doesn't," Gabrielle agreed. "But it's nothing new, either."

"True," Virgil smiled. "But psychopaths are like snowflakes: no two are exactly alike. Nero's... uhm... *tendencies* are too unpredictable. He's the epitome of chaos."

"Sounds like a typical Roman Emperor to me," the warrior spat.

The poet refilled his glass, not adding water this time. "Say what you will about its rulers, Gabrielle, but Rome is the pinnacle of everything humans have accomplished. You shouldn't judge it by its faulty parts---you'd be missing the whole point." He took a thoughtful sip. "When Rome works as it should, there is nothing to equal it," he said.

"And when it doesn't, people get killed," Gabrielle thumped her glass down for emphasis. "Lots of people. I've seen it."

Virgil's eyes burned into the warrior's quickly making Gabrielle wish she hadn't spoken her thoughts.

"No one better than I knows that, Gabrielle."

And you called yourself a bard once, she flung at herself.

The poet stood and walked to the window, where he squinted thoughtfully into the afternoon haze.

"Rome didn't kill my father Gabrielle," Virgil said. "Eve did."

The warrior swallowed hard at the memory---more than a decade later, it was still one of her most bitter.

Virgil turned and regarded his friend, "But I forgave her, Gabrielle. There was good inside of her, and a will to share it. To reject her would've been as vile an act as the murder of my father."

Gabrielle stood up. "Virgil I..." she began.

His eyes met hers. "Isn't that what you were fighting for all those years?" he asked. "Isn't that why *you both* were?"

The heat in the room became languid, soft---like a pillow over her face. Gabrielle's mouth quivered open without words to fill it, to answer him.

His eyes softened, "What *happened*, Gabrielle?"

The warrior let the question fall through the air between them.

"What didn't?" She turned away.

The front door opened and Mira's humming began to fill the home. Virgil's eyes were still seeking an answer from Gabrielle, when the girl walked into the library.

"I managed to get everything. Though the prices these guys are asking are a crime. PHEW!" the girl said, oblivious to the tension in the room.

Virgil turned, smiling at Mira. "Why don't I help you put everything away?"

They left the room and Gabrielle could hear them laughing in the kitchen. The warrior moved to the window again, looking out over the garden and into the gritty, late-afternoon haze draped over the city.

CHAPTER III. *Insomnium*

She landed soundlessly upon the roof of the large mansion. For a brief second Her scarlet mantle hung static in the air, concealing the moon like a caul, before it too fell silently about Her. Moving to the edge, She cast her eyes down to the surrounding gardens and grounds below.

The bloated night air was a fitting bearer of the decadent sounds emanating from inside the building. Revelers lit by braziers, projected crude shadows upon the shrubs outside. The grounds themselves seemed overrun by the spirits of the debauched and the depraved.

It was an easy descent to the earth and a quick jog to the back of the large home. The entrance to the kitchens and servants quarters was open, allowing a flow of fresh air into the building. She passed quickly through the cooling rooms and into the corridor.

The hallway was gaudy, hung with tapestries and decorative weaponry. Dust gathered on statues of the Olympian gods, of Romulus and Remus, of Caesar himself. She moved silently past the oneiric scene, further into the dark building.

Smells emanating from the large celebration hall threatened to turn Her stomach, a mixture of exotic meats, raw incense, desire, and various forms of bodily issue---hung in the air. There were even far-flung scraps of food just outside the large room, noticeable as She approached its slightly open door.

A loud, low groan somehow rose above the rest of the din. Genderless, almost surprised, it was ugly to hear. Soon though, unsure of its identity as an utterance of pain or pleasure---it receded into the tumult of gasps, gags and giggles like a stone into the sea.

Without peering into the room, She barred the large door with a sturdy looking ceremonial javelin. After testing it with a tug, she sprinted up the stone stairs to the second floor.

Bypassing the hallways to the bedrooms and smaller chambers, She moved towards the gallery above the celebration hall. Closing the door behind Her, She noted that the sounds and smells from below had wafted up to the second floor as well. Moving out onto the arched balcony, She finally allowed Herself to behold the scene beneath Her.

Fat-engorged flames sputtering from iron braziers lit the writhing nakedness. She could make out twenty to twenty-five of them-men, women, boys-in various states of congress. Many wore gold leafed masks depicting hideous perversions of animals and baser deities. Several waited, or simply watched, gorging themselves on spilled platters of boar, venison and flamingo. Others maundered towards the sides of the room to spew half-digested meals onto the marble. A fat and pockmarked man passed out, pulling down one of the large tapestries hanging upon the walls. Laughter arose from the throng as the cloth draped languidly over half the roiling orgy.

She drew her sword, the divinely crafted metal shifted to achieve a perfect balance in Her grip. Its polished surface picked up Her reflection, which She regarded momentarily. The blade's image could be seen reflected upon Her silver cowl, which in turn was again reflected within the blade's likeness and so on into infinity. She looked away, and focused her breathing and muscles.

Then suddenly, She flew from the gallery, descending silently, slowly to the floor below.

A jaded looking man with a greasy forelock pasted to his skin followed Her descent. Regarding Her at first with dazed indifference, and soon with mouth agape, he quietly said, "Oh my goodness," as She landed before him.

She stood proud, unmoving, about two strides before him, lit starkly by one of the braziers beside her. The flames danced upon the polished sublimity of Her mask, Her helmet, Her chest plate, greaves and gauntlets. Her sword's blade however, became dusky, as though fighting the light's ability to make it tangible, real.

Staring at Her terrible beauty, the jaded man leered and clapped his hands. The orgy slowed to a halt with disappointed groans from some. But soon the participants were speaking in hushed whispers about the armored stranger in the red cape.

"Well, what divinity is this, which stands before us?" the man said, grabbing a goblet of wine and walking towards Her. "It is as though the spawn of Ares and Aphrodite themselves has lighted before us. Dangerous

as a rose; beautiful as a sword; malevolent as a..."

"We get the idea Proclus!" the crowd groaned in unison.

The man grinned and regarded Her once more. "Would you honor us by sharing a drink?" he said.

The man giggled and offered Her the wine. With a free hand She accepted the goblet, never removing Her cold blue eyes from his bleary stare. She quickly drained the contents, much to the amusement of the crowd.

"Seems we have a real party girl here, friends," the man said. The crowd laughed heartily. "You must be one of those Macedonians we keep hearing about!" he said, guffawing at Her.

The laughter picked up at this and began to echo with menace against the walls.

Calmly, She turned towards the brazier and without ceremony spit the wine powerfully through the blaze. An explosion erupted, instantly engulfing a tapestry in flames, quickly spreading to the others; the walls were soon swallowed in fire. Screams went up throughout the room as a rush of heat came from the conflagration.

She gave a spinning kick to the brazier, tumbling it to the ground. Rivers of burning fat and fuel flowed into the room, causing the fallen tapestry--still with many quivering revelers under it--to catch fire. Much of the air in the hall was spent in feeding the flames, making it increasingly difficult to breathe. The panic began in earnest as those burning and suffocating tried to escape through the only exit, finding the way barred---the door locked. The fat man who had passed out started awake and screamed like a girl. A voluptuous woman succumbed to the smoke, falling naked onto a platter of fruit, spilling it into the air. A young boy knelt, catatonic---tears falling.

She stepped closer to the man, Proclus, who hadn't moved. He could only stare in horror at Her. She stepped towards him, raising the blade that seemed to darkly pulse in her hand with a need, a thirst.

Not raising his voice over the chaos, his lips were easily read: "Who?"

"I am the Sword of the gods," She said. "I am Nemesis."

The blade sang its pure note and the head of Proclus erupted from his body---rolling past the silent, crying boy, who soon fell unconscious and gasping to the floor.

Some of the more agile libertines had begun to climb up onto the balcony, their legs dangling frantically. Walking around hotspots, She pulled them down into the flames by dangling scraps of clothing, or their sweating legs. One by one they screamed, plummeting to the marble, feeding the fires.

Most of the Romans were dead or soon to be, burnt, suffocated, or clawed and trampled to death in panic. The flames began to retreat into a controlled burn, and air in the room was considerably scarce.

One fat man scratched feebly at the main door. She stepped toward him. He began to beg for his life. She sheathed her sword and he fell at Her feet, believing his life was spared. Kneeling, she lifted the man's obese chin with Her fingers. He had a blank expression on his burnt, flushed face.

With a powerful round kick to the jaw, she sent him spinning into the door, shattering it. Her battle cry pierced the air as she launched herself out of the crucible just as torrents of oxygen rushed in causing an

eruption of fire that filled the large hall---blowing the balcony doors off their hinges and spilling out into the halls.

Quickly passing through the passageway and out the kitchen doors, She flew like a smoldering arrow into the belly of night.

"The entrance is just behind these vines," Xena said. "Here, give me a hand." She began to move aside the ropey tendrils that grew thick against the cliff-face.

Gabrielle watched as the warrior's shoulder muscles flexed beneath bronzed skin. The bard slipped into a daze that was part daydream and part soul-satisfying relief. She had thought that she would never see her friend again, but here she was---in the well toned, rippling flesh.

A faraway grin appeared on Gabrielle's lips. A grin that endured even for a brief second after she realized the warrior's blue eyes were trained disapprovingly upon her.

"Well?" Xena said, indicating the vines with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh! Uhm...I..." Gabrielle stammered. "Sorry..."

Xena lay her most withering of gazes upon the bard, but could soon only grin. Gabrielle blushed, but soon felt patronized.

"What?" she demanded.

"Huh? It's just...oh, nothing. Nothing."

"Xenaaaaa..."

"Forget it!" the warrior said. "I'll tell you later."

"Sure."

"I will!" Xena said. "Look, we need to clear a path large enough for Argo to get through---now."

Gabrielle felt badly for forgetting the injured horse, and began clearing away the vines. The plants obscured what appeared to be a passage between two portions of the cliff. The women worked steadily for almost a half candlemark---lost in the task at hand, speaking little to one another. While not exactly a cave, the viney pass went through the rock about twenty feet with still no end in sight.

"How did you even find this place?" Gabrielle asked.

"I have many skills," the warrior said with a grin.

"Y'know, that's one thing I didn't miss. That whole "enigma" thing you do. You really need to tell me more," Gabrielle said. "Open up a little, maybe?"

"An enigmatic presence is an essential tool of the trade."

"I'm only half joking, you know? Communication is pretty important."

Xena met the young woman's eyes with a warm gaze. "I know," she said, placing her hand gently on Gabrielle's shoulder.

They continued to work in silence, tearing the foliage and moving it aside. The lush vegetation gave off a sweet aroma and gentle humidity, even if it was stubborn and thick. Occasionally, the warrior's gaze would fall on the bard when she didn't notice, and other times the bard would quickly glance at the warrior lost in her work.

Gabrielle was about to speak when Xena's hands removed some vines, revealing the end of their struggle. Sunlight was breaking through the wall of plant life, poking through in hazy beams, and the bard could make out a large open space on the other side. They increased their pace. Soon, the way was clear and their goal was finally revealed.

"Wow," Gabrielle gasped. "It's breathtaking!"

"Yup."

They stood at the mouth of the rocky channel looking out upon a wide and verdant valley, completely hidden among the surrounding mountains. There were scattered fruit trees, soft high and low green grasses, and a stream winding its way down from the mountains to a peaceful looking pond at the valley's center. Mute-colored wild flowers bloomed, speckling the grasses and lining the shore of the stream. Pollen and insects danced in the air, swirling, as a sweet and soft smell spun on the breeze like a lullaby. The bard even caught the sun-speckled splash of a fish leaping from the pond.

"I'll go get Argo. You close your mouth and set up camp," Xena said, smiling. "'Kay?"

The warrior walked away, leaving Gabrielle in awe of the wonderful sight before her. She had to remember to thank Argo for hurting her ankle---maybe mix some sweet apple blossoms into her oats, or something.

The bard looked around, mouth agape, wondering why Xena had been hiding this place. The two of them had been in the area before, so why hadn't they visited this little Elysium?

Gabrielle felt she had a pretty good idea. Whenever Xena avoided a person, place or thing, it usually involved some incident from her past. Maybe something terrible happened to the warrior here. Or maybe she committed some unspeakable act---a massacre maybe. It wasn't the first time they had trod on ground soaked in the blood of Xena's history.

Gabrielle sighed to herself. Maybe it was worse. The bard did her best to stop the feelings quickly overtaking her. It was hard to believe that anything horrible had occurred in this beautiful spot, ever. Maybe the memories of this place were of a happier time for the warrior. Maybe Xena had come here with someone special. Someone very special... I shouldn't do this, the bard thought. It's crazy...and it's her business...

Absently, she clutched at the leather of the saddlebags, and realized she should be making camp. She

walked towards a blossoming apple tree near the banks of the pond---it seemed like a nice spot. Perfect really, she thought. The bard began unpacking their gear and setting up camp.

The grass was pillow soft beneath her tired legs, and a happy little sigh escaped her lips. It would be nice to relax for a while---given all that had happened to them recently---given all that had happened to Xena. Another sigh escaped her, less cheerful this time. She wiped her eyes.

Just as Gabrielle was unpacking Xena's wet stone, she noticed the warrior and her injured horse approaching in the distance. Argo favored her left front hoof and Xena offered the golden mare soft words of encouragement, her hand gently stroking the horse's neck. The bard found herself entranced by the simple, rhythmic motion of her friend's slender hand.

The warrior freed Argo from her tack and gave the mare one last pat before letting her graze on the sweet looking grass. She approached the spot where Gabrielle was sitting, a peaceful smile on her lips.

"You picked the perfect spot," she said.

"You really think so?"

"Yup. I'm going fishing, what do you feel like? Don't say salmon."

"Umm...whatever. Surprise me."

The warrior raised her eyebrow and grinned. "When haven't I?" She headed towards the stream, unfastening her armor.

Gabrielle shook her head, in an attempt to remove the blush that heated her face, her entire body. Gods, I'm helpless, she thought. I'm hopeless... She leaned back on her arms, blades of grass tickling the soft skin near her elbows, and watched her best friend wade out into the warm shimmer of the pond...

Gabrielle eased slowly out of the dream. Always the same dream...

It was still dark outside. She opened her eyes as it quickly became apparent that sleep had abandoned her for the night. She sighed. Rising, she wrapped a silk robe about herself and left the oppressive humidity of her room.

The rest of the villa was still and cool. She moved silently through the halls, checking in on Mira's room. The girl had fallen asleep on a pillowed chair, an open scroll in her hands---a candle still burning in the corner. Gabrielle took the papyrus rolling it up and gently placing it back in its case. She turned to the dozing girl.

"C'mon sleepyhead."

The warrior tenderly lifted her friend and placed her in bed. The exhausted young thief never stirred. Still, she had made it through three of the scrolls before falling asleep. Gabrielle brushed a stray lock of hair from the girl's face and smiled. On the way out of the room, she extinguished the candle.

Virgil's home was filled with rare art and pottery, lining his halls, his rooms---even his garden. Gabrielle passed works by many of the world's greatest artisans, her attention finally captured by one simple piece---a

tiny urn with sides as thin as a whisper.

Well, that looks delicate, Gabrielle marveled to herself.

The warrior found herself compelled though afraid to touch its frail beauty, as one might be with a sleeping child. In the end, she withdrew her hand---the simple elegance of the pottery's ivory skin only accentuating the dirt gathered under her fingernails. Like a stone at the bottom of a clear pool, the urn remained silent, pale and somehow unreachable.

Gabrielle pushed a sweaty lock of hair from her eyes, dirty nails be damned.

She could remember a time when she had desired something as simple as pottery: as a keepsake, a memento---a pointless extravagance, even. Something, anything to possess, to inhabit, to haunt---something static and real like a chair or a bowl, a barn or a bed. Something silent, something still. A legacy---mundane, though tangible and undeniable...*and hers*.

Gabrielle smiled. This tiny, almost ethereal object represented so much weight to her now. You could not afford anything so trivial as sentimentality in her line of work. Accumulating possessions, connections only slowed you down---each attachment adding to the burden, until eventually you stopped moving altogether.

She sighed quietly, turning her attentions from the urn to the window overlooking Virgil's garden and the sleeping city just beyond it.

She also recalled a time when she had desired that type of weight---when she would have gladly stopped running. Every fiber of her had ached for it. She could have easily made and shared a home, filling it with such things---with her love.

But she had never stopped running. There had always been one more battle, one more journey---until everything she could claim as a part of her had been stripped away. Until there was nothing, no weight holding her in place, and the choice taken from her.

She shook her head, rubbing her moistening eye sockets. *You're tired*, she thought. Then laughed at how deeply true that was. Sliding wearily onto the sturdy divan, she switched her attentions to her temples.

"Gods, I hate Rome," she said to no one.

The city bore down on her with all of its weight---crushing, pressing the essence from her. She placed her two hands on the sill, holding herself up.

It had always been this way---Rome had fought them always. The streets, the buildings, the flora, the fauna, the people, especially the people, had always tried to destroy them, to break them apart.

But the Empire had never truly succeeded, though it had left its scars. It had made them doubt themselves, and each other. It had battered them. It had broken them. It had even managed to kill them once---putting Heaven and Hell in between.

She shuddered at the thought. But they had been true to themselves, to each other, and had returned to this mortal coil---stronger than ever. And still Rome cried for their blood.

Gabrielle sneered bitterly and wiped her eyes.

Rome had never succeeded, but it would persevere. She understood enough about the hearts of men to know that something as insidious as the Empire could never end. Rome would be victorious. It would endure; it would evolve---outliving them all. Powerless against eternity, she stood alone. It had been that way for a long time.

Outside the window, a chorus of rooks chattered into the early morning from the soughing tops of the trees. To Gabrielle, it sounded like laughter, cackling and cruel---born from another's misfortune. It sounded like Rome. Sighing, the warrior left the room for the uncertainty of her bed, passing the tiny urn without a glance.

Rome was beneath Her feet. Sprinting across the sleeping city, She skimmed from roof to roof on Her way to its outskirts. The scarlet cape snapped in rhythm with Her soundless steps.

Lights were out in the city, and there was little movement below Her. Rome was aberrantly malleable, ambiguous---vulnerable in the humming darkness. The wind beat powerfully in Her ears, almost drowning out the steady pound of Her heart.

Soon, she arrived at the temple---a simple, modest little acropolis built to the Goddess Aphrodite. Plain columns, free of adornment and a small courtyard of broken tile led to the entrance. She entered with a quiet stride.

Walking towards the small dais at the rear of the main chamber, She could make out two forms---one seated, one standing. She kneeled---head down, eyes closed.

"What is your bidding, Master?" She asked.

The seated figure stood, smiling down upon Her.

"You've done so much already," Ares said. "Why don't you take a little beauty rest?"

"As you wish," She said, bowing Her head. Rising, She moved towards the hallway behind the throne, and the simple cubicle containing the cot that was Her bed.

Ares watched her leave, his eyes smoldering with admiration.

"She is awesome!" He said, laughing. "I did good. I did *real* good."

The God of War snapped his fingers watching his 'creation' pass through the door into the hall. He turned to the figure standing in the shadows behind him. "And I couldn't have done it without your help, Sis."

Aphrodite scowled at her brother.

"Don't remind me," she said, rolling her eyes. "Just another case of me-and-my-big-mouth-itis."

"Don't sell yourself short," Ares said, descending onto the floor of the chamber. "Realizing what I was doing wrong was a stroke of genius."

Aphrodite lowered her head, picking at the skin beside her thumbnail.

"And of course," the god said stepping towards her. "Once you added your special touch and I blocked out those annoying little memories: VOILA! Instant bad girl!"

The Goddess of Love groaned.

"Ironic isn't it?" Ares said. "The God of War can't create a proper Nemesis without giving Her the capacity to Love."

"Yeah, it's just super-faboo," Aphrodite said. Her features shifted to a subtle sadness. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

Ares spun around, glaring at his sister. "Of course I do," he said. "Who cares about this place anyway? What's wrong if I want to put a little god-fear back into these people?"

He gestured out the door to the sleeping streets of Rome. "They're snotty, arrogant troublemakers---*and* their Emperor thinks he's one of us," he said incredulously. "I mean, can you believe these people?"

"Actually, they sound right up your alley."

"Whatever," Ares said, waving it off. "They don't listen---they never did. I'm going to break them up into little pieces and have 'em tormenting each other in no time."

Aphrodite resumed her uncharacteristic melancholy. "They're not the only ones," she said quietly.

Ares turned to regard the Goddess. "And what's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You know who just arrived, right?" Aphrodite said with a shrug.

The God of War crossed his arms, puffing out his chest.

"Oh yeah, I know who came into town," Ares said, with a rich belly laugh. "And that means the fun is just beginning..."

PART 2 - Tighter Wind the Giant Coils

CHAPTER IV. "*Clouds, dewes and dangers come.*"

The sun rose above the Seven Hills of Rome, peering over them like the bloodshot eye of some insane god. Far off buildings were twisted by the terrible light, encrimsoned---as though crudely fashioned from flesh, blood and bone.

The sparse dew, collected during the restless night, was almost immediately seared into steam by the angry gaze of Helios. Fleeting, it rose in a coral hued vapor, hanging briefly above the city, then gone, like the final impressions of a dream---remaining only as an aching memory---a lingering, elusive sadness felt throughout the day.

"Look at it, Octavia," Nero said. "It's bleeding."

"Caesar?"

He gestured with a fey twitch of his arm, indicating the red horizon. "The city, Rome, it's bleeding."

The tall bodyguard nodded. "Ah," she added.

From one of the long, lavish balconies at the Imperial palace, the Emperor looked over the entire city. Stretching out below the Palatine, Rome lay like spilled teeth strewn to the banks of the Tiberus.

"My Uncle Caligula had a saying," Nero said. "Anything that bleeds is only one step from a feast platter."

He turned to his long-suffering bodyguard raising his eyebrow, perhaps looking for her comprehension of the recondite wisdom. She ran her hand across her stubbly pate. To her credit, in her years as the head of the German Guard, Octavia had mastered enough ambiguous facial gestures and grunts to abide countless such conversations with the troubled Emperor. Here she employed a subtle variation of both techniques, which seemed to placate Nero. Nodding his head at her, he turned to view the city once again.

"It's on the spit right now---burning, stewing," he said. "Soon it will lay between my lips, Octavia---and I will only have to bite down." He had closed his eyes, biting down again and again to emphasize the point to himself--his teeth clacking menacingly.

From within the quarters behind them, a minor commotion had begun. Octavia turned slightly and could see that several Praetorians had arrived. They were granted access and approached, striding confidently across the marble, sun gleaming upon their white robes. The lead man, a capable officer named Marcus Tavius held a sealed scroll. He looked slightly perturbed, more so when he regarded the Emperor. Suppressing a grin, the bodyguard nodded at the three men.

"Urgent news for the Emperor," Tavius said, bowing. "There have been some...brutal crimes..."

Octavia took the scroll from the increasingly nervous man's hands, whose gaze continued to dart towards Nero's back---all of the soldiers did the same. The woman surmised that it probably wasn't widely known that the Emperor refused to wear clothes of any kind until after the midday meal.

"Caesar," she said. "Urgent news."

Nero whirled around absently and meandered towards the soldiers and his bodyguard.

"What's this?" he asked happily. "A present? And so early in the day."

He opened the scroll, holding it oddly close to his face, and read with little stabbing darts of his blue eyes. Biting his lip, he whispered inaudibly. The Praetorians rocked slightly in the hard leather of their sandals, averting their eyes. Octavia monitored the Emperor's face, divining the scrolls' news from the augury of his twitches and utterances.

"Hmm...this is not good," the emperor murmured. "Not good at all."

Tavius stepped forward. "A full investigation into the murder of Senator Serentus has been launched, your majesty."

Nero absently scratched himself, moving towards the soldier. "Yes, yes, and what of the other murders? The merchants slaughtered at their table?"

"Caesar?"

"Who is investigating *that*?"

"Well your highness, we had assumed the crimes were unconnected."

"Yet they appear together here," Nero shook the scroll, "and they are both quite brutal, it looks to me as though they are connected in many ways. A Senator should receive no greater treatment than the average citizen, yes?"

"Yes, but..."

"Never mind that those merchants were to invest heavily in my play..." Nero sighed disappointedly.

"We'll expand the breadth of our investigation..."

"*Investigation*? Romans don't *demand* investigations," Nero said, raising his voice. "They *demand* Justice."

He quickly controlled himself, stepping uncomfortably close to the soldier. There was a sheen of sweat above his freshly shorn upper-lip. His eyes maintained a cloud of troubled menace, like a still lake with a wreck lying at its bottom.

"Be a good dog and round up the usual suspects, Tavius," he ordered. "It's been some time since we've had a mass crucifixion."

The soldier gulped as inconspicuously as possible, and looked at Octavia. She nodded slightly.

Tavius bowed to Nero. "It will be done, Caesar."

"Good, good," Nero smiled warmly and waved the soldiers away. He turned again, regarding the uncharacteristically fast-departing soldiers. "Oh Tavius," he called.

The men stopped dead in their tracks.

"Send the other two ahead with the orders and please wait for a moment." Nero then turned towards Octavia, pointing at the scroll. "This wasn't our idea was it?"

"Uhm...no, Caesar. It wasn't."

"Very well. Look into it, would you?" he said, winking conspiratorially at her. "Can't be too careful."

"Agreed."

Nero smiled up into the blinding calcimine of the new morning sun. The increasing heat poured down upon him like a river of invisible flame. His lips parted slightly as he drew a deep breath of sweet morning air into his lungs.

"And Octavia?"

"Caesar?"

"Do dispose of the messenger, uhm...what's-his-name," Nero gestured absently towards Tavius standing in the shade of the Imperial quarters. "In keeping with tradition, of course," he finished, shrugging in tired resignation.

Gabrielle shot her best warrior's scowl at yet another merchant who, like those before him, wisely backed off. Mira grinned at her friend as they strolled further along the bustling forum.

"I thought you liked to shop," she remarked.

"Not today."

Okay, the girl thought, so it's her 'stoic warrior' bit...

The two women had left Virgil behind to nurse a hangover, and decided to further explore the markets of the city. They had been beset upon by scores of desperate merchants, practically coming to blows for their attention.

Mira looked to Gabrielle and noted the same pained expression on the warrior's face as the day before. There was also an unkempt look about her that led Mira to believe that the woman probably hadn't slept much during the night.

"You know, my Grandma used to say that it helps to talk about it," Mira said.

"Did she?"

"Yeah."

Gabrielle sighed. "It's nothing, Mira. *Really*. Just bad dreams."

She walked on, but soon noticed that Mira hadn't moved. The girl stared at her with a raised eyebrow and an expectant look. "And?" she asked.

Sighing again, Gabrielle stepped towards the girl and grabbed her by the tunic. "Hey!" Mira exclaimed.

The warrior dragged her into an alley. "Look," Gabrielle said. "I don't know what it is about this place, but whenever I'm here I have the same dream. Night after night, the same dream."

"That must be terrible. Nightmares every night..."

"It's not a nightmare," Gabrielle turned quickly away.

Mira stepped towards the warrior. "Hey..."

Gabrielle wheeled around, a determined look on her face. "This time, the dream is more vivid, more powerful," she explained. "And different somehow..."

"What's the dream about?"

"It's a *memory*, really..."

"Oh."

The warrior turned her attention to the market, to the rest of the city sprawled around them.

"Look Mira, I don't know what it is, but something's not right around here."

"You feel it too?" Mira asked. "Like a...bad feeling?"

Gabrielle nodded, pondering.

"What do you think it could be?" Mira asked. "Like, witches? Or what about the Dream Queen? Not again. I hate that b..."

"I don't know who or what it is," Gabrielle interrupted. "But I'm going to find out."

"*You're* going to find out? What happened to *we're* going to find out?"

The warrior put her hand on Mira's shoulder. "Listen, I'm going to look into this, see what I can find out. You go off on your own and have a good time. Meet me back at Virgil's for dinner."

"But..."

"Mira, *please*! Just do it."

"O...okay..."

The girl left, hiding clenched fists at her sides. *So much for trusting me*, she thought.

Gabrielle's voice came from behind her. "And Mira?"

The girl stopped, not turning around.

"Stay out of trouble."

Mira's shoulders sank, and she disappeared into the street and the crowds beyond.

Gabrielle took time to think, leaning against the walls of the alley. If there was something supernatural going on, the drought was probably being caused by it---and it was all possibly connected to Nero in some way---

if the rumors were to be believed.

But why did the dream feel so different?

The warrior rubbed her eyes. Up half the night, hiding in alleys---it was always the same. How many times had *they* run down these streets, through these dirty laneways, across the rooftops and treetops of this city? Always on the run, always running from something or someone. She sighed.

Sparrows chattered on the eaves above her head, tiny feet tapping, scratching against worn clay---straw and string hanging absently from their beaks. Gabrielle could make out the organic chaos of a nest, draped overhead. One of the birds rose into the air, leaving the constriction of the close, cramped alley---breaking into the light and the open sky above.

The warrior lost sight of the tiny sparrow but imagined its path over the nearby forum---past the food stalls, the jewelry carts---the burlap-covered booths with their pots and pans hanging like bats from wooden pegs. Past red-robed Phoenicians---mustaches smudged, ink-black under regal hooked noses---selling their spices and silks and hard packed parcels of tea.

The little speck might drift over the stables where Argo had been hidden so long ago. Past the stable owner with his wide grin, hard skinned hands---his hay flavored with dried clover and orange blossom. Perhaps banking west and landing in the street before the small sweet shop where they had once stopped---even though lives had depended on the persistence of their movement and the steadfast focus of their hearts. The warrior's fingers had flaked the sticky pastry, passing it so easily, so comfortably between Gabrielle's lips. The bard had sighed at the sensation of sweet honey, the familiar smell and taste of those fingers in her mouth---the ecstasy, exhilaration of so intimate an intrusion.

As they left, Gabrielle had brushed the crumbs onto the pebbles of the street---robins falling red like autumn leaves from building tops, skipping and scooping morsels into their sharp little beaks. She had turned to smile up at the warrior, meeting those blue eyes for but a second before the hood of a cloak obscured them---before they joined the sweating and anonymous throng of the forum, the grit of the afternoon.

Leaving the street, did the tiny sparrow light upon the windowsill of the tavern room where they had agreed to meet? Where Gabrielle had chewed her nails---listened to shouts in indecipherable tongues, to drunken boasts and the full, throaty cries of old whores---her skin lit by the distant and indifferent face of the waning moon. Where later the warrior had entered silently, slipping out of her armor and naked between the sheets---obscure and pale in the dark morning light like a ghost or a half-remembered dream---gently descending against the bard's warm skin and damp pillow. Their love was coarse, desperate---the love of heretics, bandits, of hunted things---clutching, devouring. Their outbursts, epithets needing to say so much, saying so little---lost in the hollow plaster and cheap wood of the room, the straw and coarse burlap of the musty pallet, the uncertainty of the Roman morning. The warrior had wept in her sleep as she always did, pressed against the naked warmth of the bard who lightly and absently stroked her raven hair as if this were just another morning, another city.

Straw fell from above Gabrielle's head, floating gently to the oily, packed earth of the alley. The warrior smiled up at the busy nest maker. Looking at her briefly with its intense little eye, the sparrow returned to the task at hand.

"Point taken," Gabrielle said, half-smiling.

There didn't seem to be any logical place to start. She just couldn't walk up to Nero and start asking questions---well, she *could*---it just wasn't practical. *Yet*, she smiled to herself. All she had to go on was a slightly suspicious drought, and an uneasy feeling. *And the dream*, she thought. Not much less than she usually had to work with.

Outside the lane, the denizens of the market moved purposefully, kicking up clouds of dust. The din of their spirited bargaining was held at bay in the sharp sliver of the alley's mouth. Gabrielle tensed suddenly, an almost-forgotten, always unwelcome feeling washing over her body.

"Ares," she said.

"You're getting good." The God of War stepped out from the shadows near the end of the passage. "Maybe it *is* in your blood, after all."

It had taken Gabrielle some time to 'feel' when a god was near. Or rather, to recognize the physiological affects of a god's presence. Each one had slightly different influences on the body.

Ares' presence usually caused her skin to tingle uncomfortably, as though it were being caressed with the blade of a dull knife. Muscles tensed slightly, and a strange taste spilled onto her tongue.

"Gabby!" He stood before her with his characteristically arrogant grin. "Long time no see, huh?"

"I cried every night," the warrior said dryly.

"Yeah well, you blew your big chance," he remarked, grinning mischievously. "Just like your *friend* always did."

"If you came here to bring up the one thing in the last twelve years that I *don't* regret," Gabrielle said, stepping towards the God. "Then you're wasting your time."

"That's *not* why I've come. No," he said, turning his back on her. "I'm here to tell you to get the hell out of Rome."

Gabrielle crossed her arms. "Oh?"

"I've got big plans for this place, and I don't need some washed-up ex-sidekick hanging around and getting in the way."

"Plans, huh?" Gabrielle said. "What sort of plans?"

"Ah, ah, ah." He wagged a finger at her. "It's a surprise. One that'll shake this place up for good."

The warrior raised an unimpressed eyebrow at Ares. *At least this is all starting to make sense*, she thought. "What have you got up your sleeve, Ares?"

"Not what---*who*. There's a little lady named Nemesis in town," the God smiled.

"The Assassin of the Gods?"

"Yup, and She's a *bitch*. So if I were you, I'd make myself scarce."

Gabrielle smirked. "You'll have to excuse me if I choose to ignore any free advice you're willing to give."

"Suit yourself," the God spat, stepping toward her. "I just hope you still have what it takes when things start to heat up," he stopped, his face just above Gabrielle's, "because it's going to get a lot hotter around here before I'm done..."

With that, he vanished, leaving Gabrielle alone in the alley with the taste of blood in her mouth, and the sadness it always inspired.

"Hey! Watch it kid!"

The man was hot, sweaty and quick to anger, although more likely to be overly demonstrative of his irritation than to act out anything approaching rage or violence. Mira had been counting on this to create the diversion she needed when she had clumsily bumped into him. Paying more attention to his growing indignation than his own person, he wasn't able to feel the silver bracelet leaving his wrist---or to see it disappearing fluidly into Mira's tunic.

"Whoops, sorry!" she apologized with a clumsy smile and darted off into the crowd.

She laughed a little, feeling the added weight of several pieces of jewelry and a coin purse hidden in the secret pockets within her green tunic. *Not a bad haul*, she thought to herself.

Holding her head high, Mira strutted through the market toward a nearby side street. Getting ditched by 'Grumpiella' was turning out to be fun after all. The girl scowled slightly.

A little communication---is that too much to ask for?

Mira wandered through the side streets, through some alleys and into a busier avenue filled with two-story shops. She patted the various items hidden within her clothes. She needed to find a place to unload some of this stuff, before she went back to Virgil's.

The street was partially cut off from the raging sun, a dark slant of shade falling from the rooftops to the walkways across the road. Mira strolled happily along, watching the people pass. Her mirth seemed slightly out of place, so she adjusted her look---while remaining bright on the inside. *No use in wasting a good mood*, she thought, *even around these sourpusses...*

It dawned on her that she was heading towards the area of the city where that kid said he and his dad were working. She marveled at what a strange coincidence it was to be headed this way. Mira's grandma had always told her to heed coincidence---so it was probably a good idea to check up on things. *Just to be safe*, she thought. She moved on towards the forum where the shop might be located.

Quickly Mira noticed that things were amiss in the square. A large crowd was gathered, and voices were cast in a worried murmur. She approached slowly, making sure to remain inconspicuous and seamlessly woven into the mob.

Several horse-drawn carts and military chariots had stopped in the street. A large squad of soldiers battle-ready with spears and shields stood nearby. Mira listened in on the various murmurings in the sweaty crowd. *An arrest, perhaps?* No one seemed to be sure.

Suddenly, a group of shackled men and women began to stagger through the door of a shop. Armored and robed soldiers also left the building, pushing them forward and loading them onto the carts. The crowd began to roil and rumble, angry shouts thrown towards the captives.

"Godless freaks! Good riddance!"

Stray pieces of fruit and other refuse were hurled spiritedly toward the line. One of the white-robed Praetorians stepped forward, unrolling an official-looking scroll. The sun shone dazzlingly off of its pale surface and the drape of his robes. He raised his arm for silence, and the crowd calmed quickly.

"By Imperial warrant," the soldier began. "The men and women of this barbaric cult are placed under arrest for the brutal murders of the Senator Gaius Servius Serentus, his two servants, twenty members of the Adriatic Merchant League, and thirty-five of their guests and servants. Secondary crimes of destruction of property, wielding weapons, and violation of curfew are included in the charges. Justice will be swift and final."

The crowd roared in horrified disbelief. Mira furrowed her brow. *Sounds pretty serious*, she thought. Maybe that kid would know what was going on. She scanned the clammy, incredulous faces in the crowd hoping to find his. She drew in her breath sharply.

Near the end of the line of prisoners she saw him, shackled like the rest. He seemed surprisingly calm, with a small defiant turn to his lips. Suddenly a commotion erupted from within the shop---shouts, cries, the clash of metal and wood. A beautiful woman emerged from inside the shop and ran towards the boy, shouting at the soldiers.

"Let him go!" she yelled. "He's not one of us! Let him go!"

Though shackled, the woman expertly swept the feet from beneath a Praetorian close to the boy. Other soldiers ran towards her---surrounding her, spears brandished. She remained in front of the boy, shielding him with her body.

"Let him go!"

A robed officer gave an order and the soldiers moved in unison, sweeping the woman off her feet and subduing her with blows from the butts of their spears. Cheers erupted from the mob. They loaded her slumped body onto the cart with the rest of the prisoners, including the boy. The procession soon left, kicking up a large trail of dust as it headed northeast towards the outskirts of the city.

Mira slowly eased away from the dispersing crowd. She had to get back, and quickly. Moving swiftly, though not too swiftly, she made her way towards the Aventine hill, and Virgil's. The kid was in trouble and she felt a strange obligation to help him, but it was more than that now.

It was the woman as well---she had recognized the woman who had protected the boy. Mira had gone with Gabrielle to visit her in Gaul a year earlier. She and the warrior were like family.

Her name was Eve.

CHAPTER V. *Chaos is a Friend of Mine*

Reflecting the mid-morning sun, the sword burned brightly in Her hands---a blinding nimbus, whirled effortlessly about Her. Breathtaking to hold and to control, the blade handled as if alive, as if an extension of Her body. Lost in the gyre of combat drills it became hard to discern where She ended and the sword began--if it was She who wielded it, or if the opposite were true.

Shifting to a sudden stop, She looked at the sword as it rested in Her hand like a leopard on a branch.

Clean, unmarked, immaculate---words did not fully describe the quality of metal, the precision of edge, the perfection of its design. There was a purity to the sword, beyond the metallurgical, that one felt when gazing upon its surface. Forged from fire by divine hands---life blown into it, hammered into it from the lips, the arms, shoulders, chest of a god. It sang in the air, a single note---one pure tone like a nymph, a siren, or an angel.

Its only adornments were the exquisitely hewn laurels wound up its shaft. A deceptive decoration: the designs were the source of the blade's power. The vines were hollow---veins containing the liquid metal azoth, which flowing freely, adjusted the sword's weight to its wielder's actions, increasing its deadly power. Light on the back swing, heavy when striking, the sword could cleave through limbs, wood, even metal without difficulty. It was from this property that it derived its name---Meridian, the dividing line.

Her Master had revealed its hiding place of centuries to Her, in flirtatious whispers---as he wiped the caul of birth from the ink of Her hair. Traveling through swamp and forest, descending into the bowels of the earth, She had rescued Meridian from its rocky prison. One of Her earliest memories was holding it in Her hands, and how right it all felt to Her---pulsing with inner light, with that purity, in the darkness of Gaia's womb. She held it that way now, feeling the blade shift with the beat of Her heart.

The grass tickled Her bare feet, the breeze Her bare skin---She prepared to continue. She had been drilling since first light. Her sleep had been a restless one, so She had left the comforts of the bathhouse to practice the only thing She understood, the only thing that seemed right. A tingling of Her skin, a taste in Her mouth told of the presence of Her Master.

"You are something else," Ares said, smiling in admiration. "You know that?"

Laying Meridian at his feet, She bowed.

"Thank you, Master."

"I bring you out to the coast for some R and R, and look at you," he said. "Amazing."

She beamed slightly, not raising Her head.

"You can stand, you know," Ares smiled, offering his hand to Her.

She took it and rose up before him. He captured the other hand, gently parting Her arms, and gave Her an

admiring look. She looked upon him impassively.

"Do you always train in the nude," he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Or is this for *my* benefit alone?"

"I practice *only* for your benefit," She replied.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, Master."

"Gotta admit," Ares said, caressing Her fingers in his hand. "I love when you call me that."

The God of War grinned, and raised Her hand to his lips. He stared into Her eyes, his body closing the space between them. She continued to stare at him without emotion, obediently. He observed Her for a long moment, then sighing he let go of Her arms.

"I have another task for you," he said.

"It shall be done, Master."

"Oh I know it will." He leaned in to whisper in Her ear.

After he disappeared, She kneeled claiming Meridian from the brown grass. Above Her head seabirds seemed to choke on the foul humidity draped about the coastline---calling out in surprise at the absence of the fast moving ocean winds. She stood, looking out across the calm water.

Flat as a smooth stone or a pane of glass, the Tyrrhenum's blue resonated from its depths---pure, cerulean---like Her own gaze or the blade in Her shaking hand. With the taste of blood on Her lips and a burning in Her eyes, She marched toward the shade of the bathhouse, naked skin aglow with the terrible light of the climbing sun, and the pallid shimmer of the sword in Her grasp.

"The Emperor has never made secret his...*disillusionment* with the Senate, but this..."

An impassioned roar filled the rather poignant and intentional space left at the end of Senator Darius' long-winded speech. The eruption of voices slammed heavily against the high ceiling of the large hall. Nero could see the faces of the old men, swelling and puffing into amaranthine baubles, like wine-soaked pastries, or plump, ripe grapes.

The Emperor giggled at this---picturing himself plucking and picking their still nattering crania and rolling them one at a time out the open double doors of the senate hall. Purple heads bouncing and tumbling down the steps, rolling across the forum. Tripping and upsetting aged and bloated Senator's wives out for a stroll---bronzed Carthaginian slave-boys, soft and fey as cream fed leopards, trailing behind. Wide-eyed, stuttering heads flipping up over the lips of fountains like amative frogs in the moonlight---splashing into the water and piss, gurgling and bubbling just under the dusty surface, grinding coins between their rounded teeth.

Nero placed a hand in front of his face. He should attend more of these things. Biting down, he broke the skin to keep from laughing out loud.

Senator Orinthius raised his voice above the rest: "My good Darius, I am a simple man from Hispania," he said. "And, as such, am sadly immune to the subtly-crafted implications of a Roman-born orator. Would you care to elaborate on just what crime it is you are accusing the Emperor of?"

Nero raised an eyebrow towards Darius, hoping for a witty and imaginative rebuttal. The corpulent senator waved his hand.

"My dissatisfaction lies not with the throne---although I still object to the blatant waste of public funds on the fruitless excavations being conducted in the Apennines. But that is beside the point," the senator was obviously choosing his words carefully here. "I just can't believe this ragtag rabble of barbarians were responsible for the Senator's murder---and I won't."

The Emperor noticed that the fat man had trouble sitting down. Nero surmised Darius' nocturnal predilections had begun to catch up with him. His slaves inconspicuously and continuously brought him a small, bronze urn, which he continuously and inconspicuously seemed to fill with whatever issue it was that had become visible as blood flecked dribbles on the loin of his generous toga. Nero shook his head---he had to stay focused, this debate was getting good.

Cries sang out from the gallery. "Then who?" and "Who has done this?"

"Why not this cult?" Orinthius said. "They have been causing trouble throughout the Empire since the time of Julius Caesar. Their leaders are descendents of various troublemakers and enemies of the Empire. Their entire belief system renounces the Pantheon of Gods in favor of one solitary deity."

The senator chuckled at the apparent absurdity of this last point---others joined in. As he laughed, the infected welt on his neck, inflicted by his overzealous use of a razor began to suppurate. The tiny speck of fluid occasionally glittered as it caught the light. The Emperor found it hard to remove his gaze from it.

"I'll tell you why not," Senator Gallus said, arrogantly. "The praetorians' preliminary findings indicate the precision attack of a lone, highly-trained assassin---not a group of godless thugs."

Nero shifted slightly on his throne. He watched the vein in Gallus' neck pulse in time with the beating of his useless heart---counting, taking inventory, collecting the seconds, minutes, hours left in his young life. Nero ground his jaws, hoping to dull the ache of his unrequited wish to have the skin of the senator's neck between them.

"This killer had the weapons, the skill, and the means to stride in and assassinate---without leaving a trace other than butchered corpses and buckets of blood."

Much of the crowd seemed to concur with this hypothesis---buoyed on by the young Senator's bravado as much as the facts. Nero felt as though he were looking upon a room of young boys who had decided to rebel against their teachers. He suppressed his laughter.

"Oh come now," Orinthius said. "And we're to believe that this single, solitary killer also killed a room full of grown men in the prime of their life? Bear in mind, my dear Gallus, the report is preliminary, and as such should be read with some discretion. It also proposes that the killer of Senator Serentus is the perpetrator of the massacre of the members of the merchant's league as well. A fact I refuse to embrace without more evidence."

The yelling died down somewhat, crumbling into scoffing murmurs. Nero looked out towards the light of midday pouring in through the large entrance to the hall. This was becoming quite boring, quite quickly. He got up and descended from his raised throne. Silence spread quickly through the chamber.

"Oh my little birds," he said. "My twittering, tweeting, buzzing little birds. The murderers and enemies of the state have been captured, and they will be executed by my order, in two days." He stopped in front of Gallus. "And that alone should satisfy you all."

Quiet mumbles of discontent, limped through the hall. Nero casually raised an arm.

"The issue is closed," he said. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

The Emperor broke into a run, quickly leaving the Senate chambers behind for the bright and unforgiving Roman noon.

"Come on little guy," Gabrielle whispered to an especially wilted leaf of lettuce. "You can make it."

She poured a stream from a copper amphora into the cracked earth. Greedily absorbing the water, the soil quickly began to dry in the midday heat. The warrior had never seen plants punished in this way.

Hoping to discuss their next move in light of her encounter with Ares, Gabrielle had returned to an empty house. While looking for Virgil or Mira, she had happened upon the drought-punished plant life before her.

She took a leaf in her slender fingers. Brittle beneath her caress, she worried over the brown and parched plant as a mother might the hand of a sick child. Gabrielle found that, even under the circumstances, kneeling in the ordered rows granted her a sense of peace---if only to placate the desire to control something, anything around her.

She had always enjoyed working in the fields---not enough to devote a lifetime to it, but enough to appreciate the quiet dignity and satisfaction it imparted. There was no denying that she was a farmer's daughter, although the warrior couldn't remember the last time she had tended a garden, or worked in a field. Her father's fields---*Poteidaia*---seemed a lifetime away.

That *Poteidaia* was. The girl she was---the girl who burst across the grass at the edge of that sleepy little town, tramping clover and baby's breath, running into the flowing rows of wheat and barley just to bring father the lunch mother had wrapped in the old handkerchief father sometimes wore around his neck but mother hated so much---Gabrielle recognized that girl as someone completely separate from herself. There was no way back---too many divergent paths, so much blocking the way, not enough threads---not enough thread, *period*.

She smiled her empathetic smile down at the suffering plant. Tipping the amphora once more, she gave the plant a little extra water. Flies buzzed lazily, loudly twirling about her head. Occasionally, lighting upon her as she worked, their feeble bites barely drew blood.

"Drink up, boys."

Gabrielle sighed to herself as she pulled herself with a feline weariness into the shade of an orange tree. She adjusted her light robe, covering the skin of her shoulders. *Gardens were just one more thing that went and died on you, that dried up and turned to dust---that disappeared.*

Behind her, Mira entered the house excitedly with Virgil. Unaware, Gabrielle sat quietly with her eyes closed. Eventually, her two friends emerged onto the terrace, calling out to her. When they approached, Gabrielle immediately knew something was wrong. She stood up.

"What is it?"

Mira stepped forward, unconsciously reaching out to touch the warrior's arm. "The Romans, they've got Eve."

Gabrielle cocked her head as though she hadn't heard correctly. "What?"

"Your friend that we visited in Gaul...*Eve*? The Romans arrested her and a bunch of other people."

"The Cult of Eli," Gabrielle added. "Where did they take them?"

"I don't know. They threw 'em into a bunch of wagons and headed northeast," Mira was panting. "The main guy said that it was an Imperial order, or something---and that Eve and the others were responsible for some murders over the last couple of days."

Gabrielle ran a hand through her hair. She looked to Virgil.

"Probably took them to the Praetorian camp at the edge of town," he said. "Only problem is, they wouldn't be kept there for long. They'd be processed and moved to a prison of some sort..."

"We've got other problems too," the warrior said.

"Like what?" Virgil asked.

"Ares."

The poet rubbed his unshaven chin, just as his father had sometimes done when nervously pondering.

"You saw him? What did he say?"

"You know...that I should get out of town...that he's got some big master plan...that there's going to be fire and death and destruction...the usual." Gabrielle's voice trailed off. She had omitted the part about Nemesis on purpose, though couldn't say why. She turned to Mira, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. "You did good."

"Thanks, but what are we gonna do about all of this? I mean, Eve didn't do it, right?"

"Of course not."

"Then?"

Virgil turned to the warrior. "I can speak to some friends of mine---powerful friends," he said. "We might be

able to get to the bottom of this, or at least get more information."

"I don't think we can wait that long, Virgil," Gabrielle replied. "Romans never wait for their executions. We need to find out where they're being held---and fast."

"Great," Mira exclaimed excitedly. "When do we leave?"

"*We* don't," Gabrielle stated. "*I* leave at sunset."

Mira straightened. "Okay, that's it," she said, stepping up to the warrior. "I can't believe you're keeping me out of this *again*."

Gabrielle sighed. "Mira, don't do this. Not now."

"No? I guess we could just wait until things are less dangerous...oh wait! They never are!" Mira turned her back on her friend. "We've been in a lot worse, you know..."

"Not like this."

"Oh, whatever!" Mira spun around angrily, her arms swinging wildly. Something silver flew from her tunic, landing with a tinkle upon the tiles of the terrace. Rolling her eyes, she groaned a long curse heavenward.

Gabrielle knelt, lifting the shiny trinket from the ground---eyes moving from the stolen bracelet to Mira in a slow and steadily smoldering arc.

"What do we have here?"

"Just say what you're going to say and get it over with."

"What's the point, Mira? It's pretty clear you won't listen anyway."

"Not when you keep treating me like a kid, *no*."

"Then stop acting like one!" Gabrielle snarled. "You have a problem with something---talk about it. Don't run off doing stupid things hoping to get caught."

"You're really one to talk..."

"What?"

Mira stepped closer. *In for a dinar...* "The whole time we've been here, you've insisted on beating yourself up for things that are ancient history---but instead of talking about it and dealing with it, you just walk around doing that stoic-warrior-with-a-dark-past thing you do."

Gabrielle's eyes burned with anger, her voice was a serrated whisper. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Virgil shifted uncomfortably, trying to get between the two women. "Guys...let's not..."

"Maybe I don't," Mira said to the warrior, gulping. "From what I *do* know, you've faced Tartarus these last twelve years and managed to walk away with your soul intact." She put her hands on her hips. "But anyone can see that your life can't continue until you let go of all that regret you keep carrying around. Xena wouldn't have wanted you to..."

Mira didn't even hear the slap coming, let alone see it. Her eyes filled with stars as she felt an incredibly sharp pain throughout her face, her neck snapping harshly to the side. Looking at the warrior with a pained expression, Mira's vision blurred with both intended and unintended tears.

Gabrielle's eyes were colored by shock---as though she had been a witness rather than a participant of the act. She reached out to the girl, stammering:

"Gods...Mira...I...I'm..."

Mira timidly shoved the warrior's hand aside and ran towards the house and the city beyond.

"Mira, wait! Wait!"

Virgil ran after her, leaving Gabrielle alone on the terrace. The warrior knew he wouldn't be able to stop her, that she would be gone.

Gabrielle stepped absently back toward the garden. The horse flies continued to hum in the still air of the afternoon---scuffling loudly along the weather beaten marble walkway. She sat down quietly among the thirsty plants; there was no point in wasting her tears.

The large cell was easily the tallest she had ever found herself in. Smooth walls stretched upwards about 40 feet, ending in a glassy ceiling. From there, suspended on short chains, small braziers sickly sputtered---popping and crackling loudly, giving little light and certainly no heat.

Eve sat with her back against the cold marble wall and took stock of her present predicament. Elbows resting on gathered knees, she watched the various prisoners move about in the shadows, some were friends, others here when she had arrived. Occasionally, moans of discomfort and sorrow broke the constant hum of breathing and quiet murmurs that were ubiquitous with incarceration.

Her current prison was also a marvel of design. There were no windows and the door was part of the wall---sunk seamlessly into its glass-like surface. Even its position afforded maximum advantage to the guards. When Romans put their twisted little minds to something, the results often approached the sublime.

She got up off the dusty floor and moved slowly through the half-light. Strolling around the cell was meant to merely stretch her stiff legs, but Eve had accomplished much more. She smiled to the Elians as she passed, their dirty and hopeful faces turned up towards her like beggars' bowls.

Further into the cell, Eve came across the older tenants of the prison---an assortment of shifty-eyed footpads, aging whores, and lower-end ruffians. Most appeared to be ill---faces drawn, eyes glassy. As she approached, Eve smelled the sickness upon them.

She sighed, feeling the usual weight slam down upon her shoulders. She looked around at the followers---her friends. The tendency to attract deep and dangerous trouble was something that never seemed to leave her.

Even her earliest memories were of being on the run, in danger---hunted. It was when her penchant for trouble put others at risk, as it had here, that she felt the burden.

A younger follower smiled sweetly, shyly at Eve as their eyes met. This girl, all of the followers, had accepted the risks---but none save Eve knew the true danger of bringing the Word of Eli to Rome. None were as intimate with the place as she was.

But this was where they had to be. The dreams---the visions had told her so. They passed through her body, like fire through dry grass---stripping it clean of everything except its divine purpose, its destiny. She was no help to anyone burdened by unfocused feelings and doubt.

Eve rubbed her eyes. How were they going to get out of this one? She smiled to herself, wistfully. *If only Gabrielle was here...or...* She allowed herself this one tiny, useless luxury---this weakness, before she prepared to lead the evening meditation.

The workman's son approached softly, and Eve smiled sadly down at him. She rubbed his dirty cheek.

"Joshua, I'm..."

"Don't, Eve. It's not your fault," he said. "I wasn't going to let them just take you all."

"You mean?"

"Yeah...I kind of dropped some boards onto a couple of soldiers' toes. Didn't help much, I'm afraid."

Eve suppressed the part of her that wanted to laugh, especially under the current circumstances, and shook her head at the boy.

"I don't know whether to say thank you, or scold you," she said. "You've got yourself into trouble that I don't think you fully understand."

"Maybe you can help me understand, Eve," he said. He looked directly into her eyes. "Are you responsible for those murders?"

"Of course not."

"Now I understand all I need to," Joshua said. "I stand by my actions."

Eve looked deeply at the boy. More brave acceptance---indifference to the terrible risk---by one who had no real understanding of the Word or any knowledge of Eli. Although, there was...*something*...

He smiled at her and nodded, turning his attention to the faint groans and sobs lost in the darkness behind them.

"Is there any way we can help them?" he asked, indicating the tattered forms lying against the walls.

"Let's find out."

She took him by the hand and led the way.

Eve kneeled before one of the sick, a thin woman of about thirty years. Placing her hand on the woman's brow, she already knew the problem. The fever was not an intense one, but under these conditions could easily win a war of attrition.

"It's dysentery," she said.

"Then it's the water," Joshua finished her thoughts. Eve looked up at the boy. He shrugged. "I've seen it before. Where I'm from."

She moved away and motioned for him to follow.

There was one steady source of water in the cell--it leaked in thin rivulets from the tip of a rusted pipe halfway up the wall. The stream fed a large stone basin against the far wall of the cell. When full, the murky water overflowed into a shallow gutter, which served as the latrine. The slow, virtually still water had an unpleasant odor, and Eve could feel its impurity. Kneeling before the basin, she motioned for Joshua to stand back.

Placing her hands over the water, Eve cleared her mind of everything. Soon a purification litany filled the void--repeating steadily like a pulse, gaining strength and power. Eve let go, allowing the words---The Word to flow through her like breath through a mouthpiece.

Joshua watched Eve as she prayed---her face seeming to free itself of lines of worry or age. He watched her hands---perfectly still, held palms up in the broken light. There seemed to be a power, building near him--from within the kneeling woman, reaching outwards into the musty air around them. There seemed to be a voice, or a hum just on the edge of the boy's hearing, that was growing in intensity but not in volume. A vein in the woman's temple trembled slightly with strain and light dew appeared on her skin. An almost imperceptible glow emanated from her. Her lips began to move, pushing word-flecked breath from her lungs, as though she were being steadily squeezed around the middle. Joshua began to shake from the force of the growing hum, the intensifying roar. He tried to block it from his ears before they were ruined. He looked around---no one else seemed to be affected. His eyes widened in astonishment. The hum was in his heart---not his ears. Suddenly, Eve plunged her hands into the basin with a dramatic splash. The light, the hum, the power were all gone. Joshua rubbed his aching jaw, which he had clenched tightly during the entire event.

A thin wisp of steam rose from the surface of the water as Eve removed her hands and stood up. Her face was calm and drawn, as though she was tired---although her eyes remained alert and focused.

"That should help for a couple of days," she said. "At least until everyone gets better."

The steam cleared and Joshua peered into the basin. Even in the sickly light of the cell, he was now able to see through to the bottom. Along the tub's floor, the once algae-encrusted stone had been scoured clean in a circle radiating from the point where Eve's hands had been centered.

"Come on," Eve said, smiling serenely at the boy. "You can join us for meditation."

He took her hand and they walked to the other end of the cell where the followers had begun to assemble.

CHAPTER VI. *Nyctalopia*

Her Grandma had always said that running away never solved anything. In most cases she was probably right---but not in this particular one. In this case, running away was definitely more appealing than weeping like some spoiled kid in front of a warrior and a poet.

She hit me...

Mira was hiding out on the rooftop of a closed shop---the butcher had gone home for the day. Clotted pigs' blood and curing spices left ghostly odors on the late afternoon haze. The forum below her was slowing down, merchants shutting their stores and packing up their carts. She had been up here for several hours, taking a nap at one point in the suffocating heat---now she was just watching life pass beneath her.

During it all she had cried quite a bit. Mira rarely shed tears, even as a child. There had never been time---she had always had to help her Grandma and Grandpa Teresius with the pottery cart and other chores. As a young teenager, the crowd she ran with didn't appreciate a crybaby---so you learned to tough it out. Even when Mira had run away from home she had only shed a small tear.

She hit me...

No one had ever hit her like that before. *Was that what it was?* The slap had hurt, sure---but whatever it was that had come loose inside of her because of it, hurt a lot more. And now she couldn't stop crying. It was embarrassing.

Mira sighed. Maybe walking around would keep her distracted. She climbed down the side of the building and lowered herself quietly to the ground. Soon, she was wandering aimlessly through the dusky streets.

The warrior's face was like someone else's---twisted with rage, deformed with a deep and profound hurt. Her eyes had listed as though blind. Gabrielle's hand had whipped out automatically, the way she might employ it to throw her chakram, block a punch or catch an arrow.

She hit me...

Mira pushed past a group of raggedly dressed travelers, slinging their heavy packs---their voices curving around strange alien words, which they hung in the ambiguity of dusk like lanterns on a porch. Sniffing, Mira detected the scent of pinesap drifting among them. She and the warrior had camped on a bed of pine needles far to the north a month after their first meeting...

Once they had thwarted that warlord---the one who said he was the son of some guy...Dragon or Draggo or something---Gabrielle had led them due north, out of Greece. It was the first time the girl had ever left the fever and bustle of her homeland. Once through the mountains, pine trees had stretched out as endless as the sea. Mira remembered the land that rested beneath their nettled branches being a lonely one. Half a day into the ethereal woods, and they happened upon an abandoned settlement.

Littered about the soft carpet of needles were ghostly artifacts---fragmented, strewn about the earth, half-fashioned in the shade and mist beneath the ancient trees. She and the warrior had passed collapsed and rotting huts, strange broken masks, ornately crafted weapons gathering moss and fungus. Mira had many strange impressions that day, a lasting one being the feeling that they were trekking through a dream long abandoned by its dreamer.

"*What was this place?*" she had asked.

Gabrielle had stopped in front of the splintered ruins of a large hut. "*These were Amazon lands,*" the warrior said.

"*Amazons? I thought those were just stories people told kids to frighten 'em?*"

"*No,*" Gabrielle had smiled at her, completely without humor. "*They were real.*"

That night they camped near a fallen dwelling. Mira had gathered a few armloads of dry wood and gotten a very warm fire going. She was admiring her handiwork when Gabrielle returned carrying two skinned rabbits.

Ruffling through their packs, the girl got the larger pot, holding it out for the warrior to toss dinner into. Gabrielle had smiled strangely and took the pot from her, placing the carcasses into its yawning mouth.

"*I'll cook tonight.*"

The warrior had prepared the rabbit stew with a sad and quiet dignity. Her hands feeling through the process in a fevered, anamnesiac sort of way---like a suppliant performing a long forgotten ritual. Lost in the gnosis of the act---the remembering---Gabrielle never made a sound.

While lying awake that night, Mira wondered if she had ever eaten a stew so delicious. Even Grandma's---the one *with* the dumplings---paled in comparison. She hadn't known that the warrior could cook so well---another hidden skill. Between her full belly and the dreamy scent of pine, Mira was going to get a very good night of sleep.

She had propped herself up on her elbows. Had Gabrielle said something to her? She called out to her new friend. There was no answer. Mira looked over at the warrior---her back turned to the girl. Was it the flicker of the waning flames, or had Gabrielle's shoulders been heaving?

Mira had listened intently, trying to phase out the sounds of the northern woods. Beneath the stammer of the fire, the lazy breeze stumbling through the trees, the plaintive call of an owl---Gabrielle was sobbing, sometimes whimpering. Mira got out of her bedroll and moved quietly to the woman's side.

"*G-Gabrielle?*"

The warrior had been asleep, though her face was contorted in a pained grimace. Her usually laconic features softened---weakened---by this hidden torment. Strangely, she appeared younger, more vulnerable than she normally did. Mira furrowed her brow. She rubbed Gabrielle's back, and eventually the warrior's sobs had quieted. The girl had never mentioned the incident, or the other times it happened, or that she had performed the same soothing and secret act for her friend.

It remained the best way to help the warrior deeper into sleep, to a place where dreams were peaceful and more forgiving...

Mira felt tears well up in her eyes again. *Stupid...stupid...* She wiped her eyes and sat on the edge of a fountain in the center of a small forum. *Damn...* Sighing loudly, she traced a finger through the tepid water. She looked around the square.

Grinning a little, Mira realized that she had once again returned to the area where she had met that boy yesterday---where later she had seen he and Eve and the others rounded up and taken away by the Praetorian Guard. She remembered the shop where they had been dragged out of---how small it was---and how many of the Cult of Eli that had come out of the tiny building...

The girl ran towards the square where the shop was located---keeping to the shadows, and out of the gaze of passersby. Filled mostly with tiny shops, the forum was already deserted even this soon after dusk. Mira slipped into the open door of the building.

Boards and wood shavings littered the front room, and Mira had to step carefully to avoid making any noise. From what she saw, there didn't seem to be signs of a large scuffle. Passing through a doorway, she moved further into the building.

A short hallway led to a larger storage room. A pile of rags rested in a corner near a closed door. There were more boards and planks, as well as various carpenters' tools littering the chamber. The room was big, but not big enough for nearly 40 people to mill about in any sort of comfort.

Mira scratched her head. The door at the end of the room thumped slightly. A closer look revealed that it had been forced and broken, and was now rattling with the light breeze outside. She pushed the door open and stepped out into the alley behind the shop. She looked around, there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary---until she noticed what she had first thought was a discarded rug. The rug was indeed a rug---but it had been covering a wooden hatch that appeared to hide a hole in the ground. The Romans must have discovered it after pushing out into the alley.

Mira prepared to descend into the hole. She didn't know what purpose going in there could possibly serve---but she figured there was nothing to lose. Mira lit a small candle, pulled from her tunic and dropped into the opening.

She found herself at the end of an average sized hallway. Following the narrow, unfinished corridor, she soon came to a larger chamber that also appeared to be under construction. Beyond it were other rooms of various sizes---within many were bedrolls and other signs of habitation. Mira poked around and discovered about 40 people had probably been living down here, even though it was still being built.

"An underground hideout..." she muttered to herself.

Suddenly, from behind her noises could be heard, the sound of breathing and footsteps moving steadily towards her location. She quietly pushed further into the catacombs, hoping to find another exit. Mira entered a musty smelling room and closed the door behind her, only to realize that she had reached a dead end. Inspecting every inch of the rough-hewn room, her predicament sank in.

The footsteps scraped to a stop in the hallway behind her. Mira turned, just as the door began to open.

Lying prone against the roof of the building, Gabrielle felt the stored heat of day radiating from the sun-soaked slate tiles. With the cool night air draped on the exposed skin of her back, she felt like something pressed between two worlds---like a god or a ghost. *Or a warrior...*

Peering over the edge, she squinted into the alley below. Finding it empty, she gripped the eaves and lowered

herself to the ground, where she blended expertly into the shadows.

From the alley, it was a short sprint to the courthouse. Gabrielle smiled to herself. Despite everything she hated about the Romans, in this case she was glad for their infamous administrative zeal. When dealing with warlords, one had to bust a few heads to obtain valuable information---when in Rome, if one possessed the skill, one need only bust into a building.

Quiet and dark, the building appeared to be deserted. From her vantage point, Gabrielle saw that there were only two guards maintaining an almost somnambulant watch. Their pacing left much of the courthouse unguarded. *So hard to get good help these days*, she smirked to herself.

Only a gentle, impotent breeze inhabited the forum in front of the warrior---the street was empty, and quite still. Flexing her leg muscles, she peered up at the second floor of the courthouse. A window remained open---perhaps in hopes to lure some of the cool night air into the stuffy rooms inside. *That wasn't all*, Gabrielle smiled.

One of the guards disappeared into the shadows collecting at the side of the building. The warrior sprinted from the alley, crossed the cobbled forum in six quick strides and with a powerful leap, flipped herself through the open window. She landed silently, her wake upsetting only a delicate piece of parchment from a wooden desk.

Gabrielle moved quickly through the room. She scanned documents as best as she could in the thin light---moving on to the next office when she did not find what she sought.

A search of the next room produced the same results, and the warrior wondered if this had been a good idea. The Roman love of accurate administration also had its downside---a tendency to create sub-administration upon sub-administration. The documents she was looking for could be anywhere in the city---the Empire---for all she knew.

The next room brought a smile to the warrior's face.

"Jackpot..."

The large office appeared to belong to a chief magistrate. Hundreds of scrolls, loose parchment and writing tablets were filed in cabinets along two walls. A large marble desk was covered in them. Gabrielle was also pleased with the thick oak shutters that blocked out the night---allowing candlelight reading.

Soon, she was pouring over the obscene myriad of documents that served as the lifeblood of the Imperial judicial system. Property disputes, tax evasions, municipal corruption---the Romans had even managed to make crime complicated.

The mountains of paper in this office alone were staggering. Gabrielle tried to imagine the amount of papyrus and parchment the Empire consumed just to maintain itself. She cringed at the thought. It certainly explained their tendency to abbreviate---to reduce complex ideas, concepts---entire philosophies to short clusters of letters or numbers.

After tossing aside a set of building permits, she discovered a group of police reports. The warrior rifled through them, soon coming upon the object of her quest. Written in the rough hand of a lower ranking officer---a long list of names, various charges, an arrest log, and other information. Gabrielle's eyes scanned the list

frantically, coming to rest on a short, simple, three-letter epithet: *Eve*.

Continuing to read, the warrior widened her eyes at the severe charges leveled against the Cult of Eli---charges that had only one form of punishment under Roman law. Gabrielle tried to remain focused, looking for any information on Eve's current whereabouts. There was nothing, only a transfer ordering the cult moved into the custody of higher authorities, without indicating where.

Oh Eve, Gabrielle shook her head. *You've always been in trouble...* The warrior smiled ruefully. She had spoken with the girl about Rome during her visit to the Elian camp in Gaul.

Gabrielle always referred to Eve as "the girl" even though Eve was actually older than the warrior by almost two years. Although Gabrielle didn't pay it much attention, the story behind this was an odd one, even for *her*---considering she had witnessed Eve's birth, had held her often under the platter-like moon, whispering of the future into her tiny ears.

The future... The warrior smirked ironically. Much of the girl's future had been spent alone, angry, hurt---manipulated by the gods and Rome. Her mother and Gabrielle remaining asleep locked away in an icy tomb. Waking had not dispelled darkness for them only woven its sorrows tighter, making it more tangible. But they had beaten it all in the end, at least for a little while and Gabrielle had felt less out of place in this strange new world they had woken up into. They were a family, after all. No matter what had happened, nothing had ever changed the aunt-niece rapport Gabrielle and Eve had almost always shared with each other.

That's why in Gaul, Gabrielle had criticized Eve's plans to take the cult into the heart of its enemy's territory---it was too dangerous. The girl wouldn't listen and was being completely bullheaded. Of course, displaying the typical family traits...

"It's where we're needed most," she had said.

"And where they can do you the most harm." The warrior had needed to make Eve understand. *"You said the Romans have been cooling off their pursuit lately---you don't want to go and stir them up now. Not where they're the strongest, Eve."*

"I can't worry about that." The girl had indicated the followers of Eli around them. *"None of us can."*

"You'll just be throwing your life away!" Gabrielle had said---perhaps a little too forcefully. *"Theirs too."*

"For the greater good, Gabrielle."

They were always slipping through her fingers, weren't they? All of them eventually... Always helpless, always powerless---always a sidekick---Gabrielle had fought back tears.

"How do you expect me to just let you do this?" she pleaded. *"After everything I promised her..."*

"Because you know I have to. Because you know it's right. She would too."

Gabrielle had just let the tears fall.

"But there's so much we need to..."

"Shhh..."

Eve raised the warrior's bowed blonde head. She had smiled that serene little smile of hers---a smile that spoke of secrets she was almost too excited to share.

"*Sacrifice is just something you learn to accept in our line of work,*" she said, raising her eyebrow---another family trait.

Gabrielle shook her head. *They could make me agree to eat my own sword...*

The warrior scanned the scroll one more time. *Best place to start is at the beginning,* she thought, replacing things as best as she could. Stepping soundlessly down the hall, she backtracked to her point of entry. A quick glance from the window showed the street empty of guards.

Gripping the top of the frame with both hands, Gabrielle swung herself up to the third floor ledge---another quick flip and she was on the building's roof, sprinting across its cooling tiles. Soon, she launched herself to the building adjacent, then to the next. The warrior continued from rooftop to rooftop, ascending the long stretch of the city leading up to the Palatine Hill.

Mira desperately tried to snuff out her candle, as she moved quietly for the side of the door. She readied herself to deliver a swift blow to some unlucky jerk's melon. The portal swung open quickly, a tall middle-aged man standing in its mouth.

The man was obviously not Roman. He was definitely not a soldier, or a warrior, or a mercenary. Mira quickly realized that he was incapable of harming even a fly. She relaxed a little, stepping slowly away from him. He stood with a soft stub of a candle burning in his right hand, and his kind brown eyes staring questioningly at her.

"Uh...hi!" Mira tried.

"I heard noises...thought someone had returned..."

"Um...yeah...sorry..."

"I don't remember seeing you around here before," he said, rubbing his long beard.

"No...I'm...I was looking for a friend..." Mira had to figure out who this was before she could start asking questions.

"A friend, huh?" the man said, skeptically. "Only rabbits and beetles have friends who live in a place like this one."

Mira chuckled. "That's true. But sometimes we need to imitate rabbits and beetles when things aren't so hospitable on the surface."

The man rubbed his beard. "Hmm...friends with them, were you?"

Mira hoped he meant the Elians. "Uhm...yes?"

The man's face darkened somewhat. "Well, they're all gone. Carted away---arrested," he said, his head bowing a little. "Even my son..."

"I'm sorry..."

"Thing is, he's not even one of them...just got caught up in this whole mess..."

Mira's mouth opened. "Oh?"

The man stepped into the room a little. "It's so hard to get work in Rome when you're not a citizen, but we got this job here...and sure it was a little weird, what with building secret passages and them being religious zealots and all...but everyone was real nice and Joshua and I were being paid well enough, until..."

"The Romans arrested everyone for murder...including your son..."

"That's right!" the man said with surprise. "How did you know?"

"Well...you did just tell me...but also, I was there when they were taken away," Mira said. She moved close to the man, placing her hand on his forearm. "Listen, my friends and I are planning to rescue them...but we don't know where they're being held..."

The man's face brightened a little. "I know!" he said. "I tried everything I could to learn where Joshua had been taken---went to every court house and police barracks in the city...Eventually, a kind Praetorian took pity and told me that they were all being held beneath the Temple of Caesar that's being built up on the Palatine Hill near the palace...but no one is allowed to visit..."

Mira smiled at the man. "Don't worry..."

"Josepus."

"Don't worry, Josepus," she said. "We'll rescue Joshua...he's a friend of mine..."

The man scrunched up his face a little. "Who are you?"

"My name is Mira," she said, puffing her chest out unconsciously. "But some call me the...*Princess of Thieves*..."

The man rolled his eyes. "I always told that Joshua to stay out of trouble...did he listen? Nope...first he gets all mixed up with those mystical types...talking all that crazy talk...now he's running around with thieves..."

Mira patted Josepus on the arm and moved around the muttering man back into the hallway. She could hardly keep from bursting right out of the tunnel and into the night sky. She leaped out of the hole and onto the street and didn't stop running until she reached the front gates of Virgil's home.

Gabrielle watched the home from a shadowed copse of pines. The building and the surrounding area seemed deserted. She quieted her breathing and opened her ears to the sounds of the night.

All around her, insects chattered in their incomprehensible tongue, spewing devotions to the darkness or the battered face of the moon. Servants of the various homes on the hill could be heard washing pottery and cutlery---the metal scraping dully against worn wooden basins. Farther away, a wagon pulled by two mules rounded the last corner of the road leading off the hill.

Upon the night's air, the warrior detected the golden smell of honey, almonds and... *Cinnamon*, she smiled to herself. She could hear frantic chewing and the faint clack of smacking lips about 200 feet away.

"Titus! So help me---if you're out there eating again..." The woman's voice was shrill. It caused the older man to run quickly back to the house.

Gabrielle smiled, even though her stomach shuddered with unrequited hunger. She shook her head, training her sight upon the home---the murder scene. Satisfied all was clear, the warrior moved quickly and quietly towards the townhouse. She grabbed and lit a small torch from her pouch, then stepped through the cedar door at the rear of the house.

There had been an admirable attempt to clean up, but the sheer amount of blood had made a full cleansing impossible. Three large, dark stains were soaked into the porous tiles of the pantry. The warrior noted also one thin jet of blood---a neck-wound, she surmised---the cascade reaching the ceiling at its most intense, then the wall as the force of spray and with it the force of life gave out.

Green eyes intensely darting about the room, Gabrielle pieced together what she could. The warrior paced about slightly, hands clasped---muttering out loud.

"Three victims...small space...almost no signs of struggle...Hmm..." She looked around the room. "Only room enough for one attacker...and even then...a real good one..." She noted no sword scrapes on the wall from clumsy, wide swings.

Gabrielle stopped at a counter. She examined the smeared cutting board and knife on its top, the upset, half-sliced leg of lamb. Turning around---she took in the room from this new perspective. Her eyes darted from the door to the blood spray and back. She turned towards the counter again.

"Fixing a snack and then..." She spun around quickly. "A surprise from behind..."

Rubbing her chin, Gabrielle ran everything through her mind. The assassin was highly skilled---adept at stealth and the sword.

Her mind went immediately to Ares. It was easy to draw a straight line through all of the pieces to him. The drought, his warning, the murders, Nero's arrest of Eve and the Cult of Eli...he was the thread that bound them all.

But, why?

Gabrielle remembered that Ares had mentioned Nemesis---the legendary assassin of the gods---used to wreck retribution, revenge and divine justice upon humanity, and if necessary, the gods themselves. The warrior looked to the floor, the stains of blood---wondering if this was evidence of Her work. She couldn't remember many stories about Nemesis, but of the tales she could, none ended well.

Just then, she detected a presence approaching from inside the home---from behind the door to the hallway.

Gabrielle pressed herself against the wall beside the closed portal. She took a slow, deep breath. Whoever this was, they possessed a cat-like stealth if the warrior's keen ears could hear them only now. Eyes narrowing to sharpened jade shards, Gabrielle watched the door.

It inched open slowly, tentatively---silently sliding in its well-oiled hinges. A polished hardwood tube, about a thumb-span in diameter inched into the pantry at Gabrielle's eye-level. Soon, more of the tube probed its way slowly through the doorway and into the room---and guiding it in: a slender hand.

Gabrielle grabbed both the tube and the hand in a blur---flipping their owner forcefully into the room. A tall woman with short-shorn, sandy-hued hair rolled expertly into a crouch in front of the shuttered window, training the tube on Gabrielle.

"Who the hell are you?" the woman asked in a distinctly Roman accent.

Before Gabrielle could answer, she heard a sharp click from within the tube-like object. She quickly dove out of the way as a rush of air escaped the weapon and a menacing metal dart imbedded itself in the wall where she had been standing an instant before.

Her fingers gripped the chakram before she gracefully tumbled into a low stance in the corner---her arm releasing it in a quick and liquid motion. The woman had already begun a desperate back flip out the window, smashing the wooden shutters open with a loud crash. The chakram followed her out into the darkness.

Sprinting across the room, Gabrielle hopped up into the windowsill---eyes and ears tuned outward. The warrior quickly leaped into the night---dodging another screaming dart that shattered a teetering shutter with the force of its impact. Catching the returning chakram in mid-leap, Gabrielle tucked into a quick front roll, which she used to add extra power to the throw that she leveled against her adversary.

The tall woman quickly raised up her strange weapon, which appeared to be a long, oddly shaped staff, into a defensive block. It shattered into pieces with the impact of the chakram, which separated and spun back towards Gabrielle. The warrior stepped forward and quickly re-released the returning pieces of her weapon, one after another, over and over---forcing the tall, shorthaired woman to execute a series of multi back-springs into the stretch of woods nearby. Using the momentum of one of her flips, the woman launched herself expertly into the strong lower branches of an oak tree---continuing her escape up into the canopy of the woods.

Gabrielle broke into a full sprint towards the tree line---catching and uniting the chakram as she went. With a seamless leap she was in the treetops, a short distance from the fleeing woman. They continued in an almost silent rush through the dry-leaved foliage---from branch to branch, further along the Palatine hill.

A break in the trees near a tall aqueduct allowed moonlight to illuminate a series of throwing irons the woman launched towards Gabrielle. The warrior had to tuck herself into a ball in mid-flight---allowing the sharp stilettos to rush past her into the trees.

Anticipating her adversary's next landing, Gabrielle fired the chakram once again. The blade sawed through a branch just as the large woman landed on it---shattering it and sending her plummeting downward. In an act of desperation she cast out her arms, grasping blindly. Her hands slapped against a strong oak branch, and whirling about it, she flung herself up to another landing---continuing in this manner until she launched herself up onto the aqueduct.

Gabrielle had been following from lower branches, eyes trained on her quarry. With the splash of water from above, she grabbed her whip.

"Oh no you don't!"

With a loud crack, the whip wrapped about a truss on the aqueduct, and the warrior threw herself out of the trees---swinging in a wide arc upwards. She landed with a spray, just in front of her startled adversary.

Even in the knee-deep water, the tall woman was able to deliver a strong kick to Gabrielle's chest---knocking her backwards, though not off her feet.

"Die, will you!" the woman yelled, angrily releasing more throwing irons in quick succession from hidden folds in her leathers.

Gabrielle quickly drew her sword, and expertly batted the weapons away---their sparks illuminating the wide trough of the aqueduct. The warrior went into a low battle stance, and advanced with a lunge toward her tall adversary. The woman drew her own blade and parried Gabrielle's thrust in one smooth maneuver.

A frenzied volley of mirrored attacks and parries showed the two were evenly matched. Gabrielle was able to anticipate many of the woman's moves, but the tall stranger's slight strength advantage was keeping the warrior off-balance. Conversely, Gabrielle's speed and experience kept the enraged woman's vicious attacks at bay.

After another furious volley, the larger woman feinted low with her sword and caught Gabrielle with a swift uppercut, knocking the warrior slightly off-balance. Capitalizing on her advantage, the woman kicked the teetering Gabrielle hard in the ribs, flinging her off the aqueduct.

Quickly shaking off the daze of the blows, Gabrielle cracked her whip out at her opponent as she careened downwards. The aged leather coiled about its target---wrapping snugly around the strange woman's legs. With a scream of rage, the woman buckled, falling face first into the trough and was dragged up and over the edge of the aqueduct---droplets falling, flaring like comets in the moonlight. Clawing desperately, she grabbed at the railing---holding herself and Gabrielle to the tall structure.

Not waiting for an invitation, Gabrielle let go of the whip and grabbed the rafters. She sprang up, a couple at a time---moving towards her adversary. The woman had untangled the whip from her legs and trained it upon the climbing warrior. With a crack, she lashed at Gabrielle---who gritted her teeth in searing pain.

"Oh, you're going to pay for that," she growled.

The woman laughed menacingly and lashed out again at Gabrielle. This time, the warrior grabbed hold of the whip, and with lightning speed launched from the supports. Using her adversary as a pivot, Gabrielle swung herself up and onto the top of the aqueduct. Running to the edge, the warrior drew a small dagger hidden in her belt.

With a battle cry, the woman sprang from below, tackling Gabrielle---who dropped the knife, and fell backwards into the water. With a quick shift of what little balance she had left, the warrior used the momentum of the tackle to pitch the woman over and off of her. She rose from beneath the stream to find her enemy on her feet and approaching fast.

They exchanged a rapid succession of punches and blocks---water spraying into a fine mist around them. The warrior began to leave a tiny, controlled opening on her left flank---drawing her enemy's attacks low. After unleashing a vicious flurry that Gabrielle was barely able to block, the tall woman left herself slightly exposed.

"Time to wrap this little dance up," Gabrielle exclaimed, thrusting both index fingers into the flesh of the woman's neck---the soft nerve clusters and muscles beneath suddenly jerking into tight, iron-like cords, strangling the very arteries they were meant to strengthen and protect. The large woman went rigid, pale, clutched at her neck.

Gabrielle stepped forward. "I've just cut off the..."

Suddenly, the woman lashed out with a hard right cross to the warrior's jaw. Gabrielle's ears rang as she fell backwards into the water, her vision blurring. Soon, a weight pressed upon her, a tense and desperate weight filled with sinister purpose and panicked strength. Hands clutched at her throat, crushing her larynx---holding her under the water. Gabrielle's lungs burned, her throat trembled helplessly---everything was reduced to the boiling water and blood in her ears. She clutched, scratched at the woman, but her grip and her consciousness was slipping from her like a handful of soft, pale sand in an indifferent wind.

Gabrielle laughed to herself as a strange memory occurred to her. She remembered being crucified and how death had been so long in coming that time. There had been a lot to think about, to say---*so much to say to each other*---but eventually they had both been lost to one another in the labyrinth of their own half-starved, fever dreams. It was only then that shivering and terrified she had wept from her useless, hungry and broken eyes. After all she had experienced with the gods and the various planes of existence, a strange and utterly frightening thought had occurred to her---what if there was nothing after? What if she just died?

This time it didn't seem so bad. There was no fear, no doubts. This time she knew what came after.

And who...

The pain seemed to be subsiding; maybe her throat was going numb. Soon, it felt as though only one hand was pressed feebly to her windpipe. Gabrielle felt a breeze touch her face, enter her nostrils---she coughed violently, suddenly---her body shooting reflexively into a sitting position. Her eyes were blurry, but she saw the woman on her knees grasping at her throat---pressing her index fingers into the two pressure points. The tall woman got shakily to her feet, cursed at the warrior and swung herself off the aqueduct.

Gabrielle rubbed her eyes as she continued to expel water from her lungs. Her throat was burning, but she still managed to spit the words from her mouth.

"Gods, I hate this place!"

CHAPTER VII. *The Conclusion of Fools*

When it was spread-eagled before him like a mendicant trollop splayed across a pallet---its many valleys, crevices, curves, blemishes displayed unflinchingly, without any semblance of shame or good taste---the whole world did very little to impress Nero. It was just so lumpy and brown and unappealing. Not unlike the fleeting childhood memory he had of the back of his grandmother's thighs as two large and tragically castrated slaves had lowered her gently into a salted bath. Pushing the reminiscence aside for another, more solitary occasion, the emperor tried to refocus his attention on the late night strategy talk/feast/orgy he had organized.

He had removed himself temporarily from the spilled food, vomit and naked pleasures in the other room to actually talk some strategy. Standing with Terrence, the most trusted of his commanders, he looked down on a large, crude model of the world---the Roman World, positioned on a large oak table. The soldier was waxing on about troop deployments in upper-such-and-such, and the strengthening of borders between the outer Empire and some gods-forsaken land---his tanned, leathery face noble and stupid like a farm horse.

"...Meaning we'll be in need of at least two legions along the borders in Egypt...so I thought it might be best to commit the XIV Gemina along with the reinforcements out of Pannonia..."

Nero tilted his head, like a hawk when it first spies prey. "Think again, Terrence."

"But Caesar...having two legions guard your...*project* in the Apennines seems like a waste of men. Surely, one legion would suffice?"

"I think not, Terrence. What about the II Augusta? Or the Italica?"

"Not experienced enough, or too experienced in the Augusta's case."

Nero walked over to the model. He began picking up the small figurines, each representing a cohort of 480 men, and dropped them petulantly across various parts of the world.

"What is the point of being an Emperor if I can't move my little soldier men from one place to another, Terrence?"

The soldier stared blankly at his emperor. "I'll see what I can do, Caesar."

Nero nodded. "Good. What's next?"

"Well Caesar...I must admit I've been rather alarmed by much of the intelligence I've been hearing regarding the senate's movements as of late. Seems the senators are willing to back up their promises to my men with a little more than their word. It all started with the drought, and now more so since the murders..."

"The senate is trying to *buy* the army?"

"Yes, Caesar."

"And how is that going?"

"Caesar?"

"Is it working, Terrence?" Nero's patience for the general's natural immunity to all things subtle was wearing thin.

The soldier rubbed the rough iron-hued stubble of his scalp. "Enough that it could become a problem during volatile times such as these."

Nero stroked his jaw. "Yes. Volatile...*most* volatile..." A dreamy smile appeared on his face.

"Caesar?"

"I'm afraid, Terrence, that due to the *volatile* situation existing within the empire---Rome herself lies threatened. We need to bring several of our best legions home, to strengthen and protect the capitol." He smiled at the commander, hoping that the man might catch on.

"But Caesar, the senate would never allow you to have that many troops within the city."

Nero tittered. "No they wouldn't, would they?"

Through a door on the other side of the long chamber, Octavia strode agitatedly into the room---her clothes appeared to be wet. Nero met her gaze, learning much before she arrived in their immediate presence. He nodded to the still confused Terrence.

"Just make sure the orders are passed through the senate and shat out for all of Rome to pick through."

The soldier bowed and left. Nero turned swaggeringly toward his tall bodyguard who stood staring sheepishly down at the model of the Roman world.

"You've looked better," he said with a smirk.

"Caesar, there may be another element to these murders," she said.

"Oh?"

"My visit to the first crime scene---Serentus' house---led me into combat against a highly-skilled warrior," she said, then averted her eyes. "I barely escaped with my life."

The emperor was intrigued; he began circling the woman, looking her over. She was sporting a nasty set of bruises on her neck, as though she had been strangled. Nero flushed, trying to remain focused. "Who was this warrior?" he asked. "The killer?"

"She certainly had the skills, Caesar. But why return to the scene?"

"Indeed..."

Octavia continued. "It didn't seem like something she would be capable of..."

"Murder?"

The stern looking woman nodded, rubbing her sand-colored pate. Nero wrung his hands, his face twitching away.

"Well, these incidents certainly have many layers, don't they? Maybe her body will..."

"She's not dead," Octavia said, bowing her head.

Nero smiled. "Ooh," he said lifting up her chin with his index finger. "That *does* get your goat, doesn't it? Her being out there---*alive*."

Her lips became a thin line.

"I wouldn't worry about it...things are progressing just as I've planned...as we've talked about..." Nero slid behind her and whispered soothingly. "My poor Octavia, it's so upsetting to see you this way---so vulnerable, so tense." His fingers slowly unbuckled the straps of her armor. "I feel that I must do everything in my power to ease your tension."

She sighed sliding out of her armor---she ran her hands over the low, smooth folds of Lower Egypt. He untied the laces of her tunic. "After all," he said kissing her bare shoulders, leaning her forward. "You've spent so much time watching my back, I thought I might return the favor..."

It was by no means the first time she had dressed her own broken ribs in the dark. Sitting on the settee in Virgil's front room, Gabrielle gingerly wrapped a bandage around herself. *Another memento*, she smiled.

Virgil slept propped up in a wooden chair behind her, an empty wine bottle still clutched in his hand. He had been steadily snoring since the warrior had arrived, and she hadn't the heart to wake him.

Gabrielle cleared her throat with some difficulty; given that swallowing produced a stinging pain. The swelling of her windpipe would last for at least a day or two---the bruising on her neck even longer. *Guess I'll just wear a scarf around town*, she chuckled to herself.

Winching as she pulled the bandage tight, Gabrielle expertly tied off her handiwork. She reached for the old knife she kept in her medicine pouch to cut off the loose ends. Running her thumb over the chipped bone handle she thought back over the night's events.

Was that woman the killer? Why had she returned to the scene? Her adversary had been a vicious fighter, fully capable of murder. Gabrielle sighed, her lips crumpling into a grimace. *Fully capable of surprising and almost killing me---and escaping the pinch*, she thought. The warrior still smelt the peaty perfume of the aqueduct in her hair, still felt it burning in her sinuses. Through the throbbing contusions she could still feel the cold, strong hands around her neck...

The knife slipped from her fingers and clattered to the marble floor. Gabrielle rolled her eyes as Virgil bolted awake.

"Huh? What? Gabrielle...when did you get back?" he questioned, rubbing sleep from his eyes in the half-light.

Steadying her hands, she bent with some difficulty and retrieved the knife. "About an hour ago," she said.

"Hmm...I must've drifted off." The poet got up, clutched his head briefly and began puttering around the room. "Could use some light around here..."

Gabrielle sighed and carefully trimmed the bandage. Satisfied with her work, she drew her robe up over her shoulders and stood, turning to face Virgil.

"Any luck with your friends?" she asked, hopefully.

Virgil lit a candle, his face becoming grim in its warm glow. "No," he said. "Since the murders, they've been in

hiding---they're frightened for their lives."

"Ah," Gabrielle's eyes dropped. She paused slightly, the light in the room seeming to dim around her. "I wasn't able to find out where they've taken Eve."

Virgil looked at her, his eyes widening at her bruises. "Gods Gabrielle, what happened?"

"Let's just say that we're not the only ones trying to get to the bottom of these murders," she said, waving off his attentions. "I think someone in the Empire isn't convinced that Eve and her friends did it either."

"That doesn't help us much, does it?"

"No..."

Virgil shook his head. "And Mira isn't back yet..."

Gabrielle lunged forward. "What? She isn't back?"

"No. I thought you knew..."

"No..." The warrior was a blur as she gathered her things---throwing on her shift and donning her armor.

"Gabrielle wait...I'm sure she'll be back..."

The warrior turned to Virgil. "It's too dangerous out there."

The poet didn't know what to say. Through his pounding headache, he tried to figure out a way to help out---to not feel so utterly helpless. He decided to grab her a cloak he had and ran to his room.

Gabrielle laced her boots. The boots Mira had suggested she buy when they had returned from Gaul, because her old pair was falling to pieces. *Like everything else...*

The warrior ran her hand through her dirty hair---leaving her fingers tangled up at the base of her skull and the top of her neck. Her breathing was quick, shallow, and barely successful. The panting seemed to grow louder in her ears, until she realized that it was someone else's, approaching her.

"Gabrielle?" It was Mira's voice.

The warrior's head shot up. "Mira? Wh...where were you?"

"That's not important now...I..."

"Not important?" Gabrielle stood up and almost ran over to the girl. "We were losing our minds worrying about you!"

The girl turned her face to the side. "So you're just going to lecture me again?"

"You're damned right," Gabrielle smoldered, green eyes blazing. "Maybe you haven't heard but we've got Ares, a Roman Emperor and gods-knows-what-else running around here with their various machinations for

gods-knows-what... You can't just run off and put yourself in danger like that... especially in such a foolish way..."

Mira met the warrior's glare. "Our friend's life is in danger... is any risk 'foolish' at this point?"

"But that's not why you ran away."

Mira crossed her arms. "No... no it isn't. Is it, Gabrielle?"

The warrior turned her face away. "Look Mira... I'm really sorry about..."

"W-what happened to your neck?"

"Oh... it's uhm..."

The girl reached out to gently touch Gabrielle's bruises. "Gods..."

"I can't believe I hit you Mira... I am *so* sorry..."

"Look... don't worry about it... okay? I've got a big mouth..."

"Don't say that... it's not your fault..." Gabrielle was crying.

Mira hugged her and stroked her hair. She turned up her nose, sniffing. "You smell funny... like a frog, or worms or something..."

Virgil laughed from the doorway. The two women separated and smiled at him, a little embarrassed.

"What?" Gabrielle said.

"I'm sorry," the poet said, beaming. "I couldn't contain myself any longer..."

"Yeah well..." Gabrielle rubbed the back of her neck.

"Hey!" Mira blurted out, remembering why she had run all the way back here. "I know where they're keeping Eve!"

"What?" Gabrielle and Virgil exclaimed in unified incredulity.

"I found out where they're keeping Eve," the girl repeated, realizing quickly that she was the only one who did.

"How? What? Who? Uhm..."

"It's a long story... needless to say. They've got her under the temple to Caesar on the Palatine Hill."

Gabrielle smiled at her sidekick. "Good work."

Mira puffed up proudly. "Thanks."

"Come on." The warrior looked at them both, a steely determination washing over her.

"We've got a lot of work to do before we break them out of there."

Eve couldn't sleep.

She could feel morning looming heavily, perched on humid talons above the city. The sun's arrival would set it loose upon the world---perhaps its fiery bluster even reaching this damp and retched place. Blinking up at the ceiling, Eve shifted uncomfortably on the straw covered floor.

The audible melancholy that had pervaded through the cell had eased off considerably since she had performed the purification. Once word had spread, its inhabitants had drunk heartily allowing the healing properties of clean water to work its magic. Hopefully, the effect would last for some time to come.

Eve rubbed her eyes, keeping her knuckles pressed into the sockets. The evening's work had left her drained. While happy that she had helped cure sickness and lift everyone's spirits, she still found it hard to shake off the weight of guilt. Especially when she punished herself ruthlessly with the knowledge that certain prisoners were not getting better, that somehow her efforts could not rescue everyone---that no matter what she did there would always be some degree of failure.

She sat up and adjusted her now dirty silk robes. While running hundreds of combinations of plans through her head, Eve still hadn't been able to come up with a way to escape without losing more than half of her friends in the process.

Hugging her knees up to her chest, she rested her chin on her arms---a soothing habit she had adopted as a small child growing up in Augustus' care. Her attention drifted beyond the cell. The Romans seemed to be everywhere. She could hear them---sense them through the walls, pacing.

That was the problem...the Romans seemed to be everywhere... Even when hiding out in some of the more remote points of Gaul or even Africa---she had always had to maintain a constant vigil for legions of soldiers hunting them down. There had been many close calls. More than once, she had been required to seek outside help. *Gabrielle's help...*

Eve placed her cheek on her forearms. No chance of the warrior's aid this time. Gabrielle typically kept a wide berth between herself and Rome---or at least the Italian peninsula. *It was pretty hard to keep entirely away from Rome's influence these days...* Regardless, Eve wasn't expecting the cell door to crash open and the blonde warrior to be standing there any time soon. It was up to the Elians to engineer an escape.

It was up to her...

The pained hiss of the copper braziers high above brought her focus back to the cell. She felt the soft tingle of eyes upon her. Turning with a conspiratorial smirk, she met Joshua's sleepy gaze.

"So, should we start the escape now, or should we wait until daybreak? You know...give ourselves a challenge?"

Joshua smiled, rubbing his eyes. "We should at least wait for them to bring in fresh guards," he said.

Eve grinned, running her hand through the boy's hair. She stared at him, even after her smile dissolved. Her fingers slid sadly along his scalp.

"I'm sorry, Joshua."

"Eve...I've told you..."

"I don't think I can figure a way out of this..."

"You don't have to do it alone, y'know? We all can..."

Eve shook her head, a rueful smile on her lips. "It's up to me Joshua," she said. "We all know it is. It's up to me alone."

The cell was almost peaceful, almost silent. Only the sputtering braziers and the steady rhythm of bodies breathing could be heard. Eve had lowered her head, hoping to disappear into the omnipresent silence.

Joshua sat up and looked empathetically at the woman. He placed his hand on her exposed shoulder for a moment, giving it a firm, almost loving squeeze. It slipped softly from her skin, as he lay back down on the dirty floor.

"Sometimes battles are fought alone," he said, closing his eyes. "How unfortunate it doesn't happen more often."

Eve slowly, though steadily, raised her head. Lost in thought, her gaze was unfocused until the pure light of understanding beamed upon her face. She could feel morning above them, hung over the city---waiting for the sun's arrival. Sitting up straight on the straw covered floor, Eve welcomed the new day and everything it promised. She smiled a hopeful smile down at the young boy, who was already fast asleep.

The night had arrived parched and empty handed, bringing neither comfort nor promise of breeze---nor any sign of rain. Even in the darkness of the approaching morning, sweat dripped beneath Her armor. Crouched in the blonde grass, She narrowed her eyes at the small fortress. Only two sentinels paced upon the outer wall, their spear-toting silhouettes moved against the pale aspect of the moon. The garrison would house only a small detachment, most off-duty, sleeping huddled like rats upon coarse blankets. She could fall silently, anonymously upon them like misfortune, like woe.

The soldier's mouth listed clumsily, unconsciously---the circadian twitching of an infant's jaw. He lifted his head in weakening spasms, futilely trying to rise up off of the grass at Her feet, in the shade of the indifferent trees. Lying on his back, his leather armor began to crush his mortally pierced chest.

She watched the screaming pleas in his eyes---unrealized, fading. Meridian had easily plunged between two of his ribs, deflating both lungs, flooding them with gore. Kneeling above him, She returned the sword to its scabbard.

The dying sentry clutched feebly at Her sandaled ankle.

She trained the icy shards of Her gaze upon him---looking down into his scared and uncomprehending face.

Reflecting off the silver of Her mask, moonlight streaked his skin in pale scribbles. He died knowing his slayer, as a soldier should. She sneered. *It was more than this Roman dog deserved...*

Standing beneath the trees, She tried to steady Her heartbeat. Killing had brought a strangely familiar satisfaction to the surface---one that went beyond Her service to Her Master---but it had also brought more. Closing Her eyes, She struggled to control Her breathing. The hatred She had directed toward this soldier, toward all Roman soldiers, still threatened to consume Her---pulsing like an open wound.

Her hand clutched a nearby tree. She had become painfully aware that Rome was all around Her, belching fumes and sewage and evil---suffocating and strangling Her, scrapping at the skin like smashed glass. Her knuckles tightening upon the trunk of the tree, She panted like a nauseous cat. Within Her heart, Her mind---Her entire being---faces peeled free like worried threads in a black tapestry, spinning before Her eyes. She bent at the waist, Her teeth barred. Familiar though nameless, people, places, pulled away from this once-uniform fabric leaving it---Her---tattered, full of gaping holes.

A scream was building, from far, far away---from another time, another place---from within Her. It pushed Her shallow breaths against the walls of Her chest---threatening to explode from Her and lay waste to the forest, the city, everything. The muscles in Her back pulled taut, tense enough to snap like harp strings. Her mouth opened from the coppery taste of blood on Her tongue. Had She gnawed at it in fear? She felt blood run in rivulets down Her chin...

She straightened, and was still. The thundering was gone from Her ears, the faces from before Her eyes. The blood had been the key. A reminder of the task at hand---the mission for Her master. She strode from the trees, moving toward the walls of the garrison.

With a quick and powerful leap, She was upon the wooden battlements. Falling upon the first sentinel, She quickly wrenched his neck---cradling him gently as She placed his body on the ground. Sprinting low to the ground, She came out of the night, the second guard not even having enough time to intake a startled breath. Her index fingers thrust into the clustered nerves at the side of his neck. As he spilled to the ground, dying, She could hear him sobbing chokingly, face down on the wall. She knelt and flipped the guard over. His face twitched, blood spilling from his often-broken nose, tears from his often-squinted eyes. She leaned in close to his face, his ragged, rasping breaths tickling Her cheek.

Soon, She stood, peering down upon the shaded order of the sleepy garrison---over the obscuring canopy of woods at the base of the Quirinal, past the river and the city beyond. Rome stood there packed tight and dry like straw, like tinder in the night---and She would be the spark, the flame.

The smile never left Her face, until softened by the dark oblivion of sleep hours later, miles away.

PART 3 - Azygous

CHAPTER VIII. *Chiasmus*

The forest is perfectly still, except for Her frantic and crippled escape. Somehow, in the midst of it all, She finds this amusing---always in opposition with Her surroundings, with those around Her---so typical, so familiar. There is no time to savor the humor, there never is.

Her ragged clothes are soaked through with blood and sweat, tattered and torn by twig, thorn and stone. She stumbles over a root, cursing Her legs---Her ruined legs---tumbling to the ground like an old woman. Tears fill Her eyes and growls pour from Her like those of a rabid thing. Pushing Herself upright, She launches again into a clumsy and painful sprint.

She can hear the dogs. After all that had happened, before they had set Her loose---She had been surprised that there were dogs in such a strange and far off place. Now those same animals had Her scent, were only minutes behind Her. They would drag Her to the ground---perhaps waiting until their master's arrival before tearing Her to pieces. Perhaps...

There are no more tricks, no more schemes, no more skills---only the cold and simple rules of nature; it is almost liberating. She feels nothing except pain, but that has been true for so long. She is nothing except Her will---and that has been all that She has ever desired. Strange to be in such a brutal situation and yet have it somehow be everything you've always known, always wanted.

She hears the panting and yapping of the dogs; they are closing in. Turning, She tries to ascertain their position---imagines them skimming between the trees, brindled and leering like dusk through the woods. Her ankle twists horribly, tragically and She tumbles into the leaves. Coming to a stop, She sighs and prepares to fight and to die. The speedy padding of the dogs moves closer and closer.

Her ankle may be broken, again. There is someone standing over Her, a woman adorned in red silks---the sun obscures the face, bathing Her eyes with radiance.

A vision...or worse...

The woman's breathing is familiar, controlled---steady in comparison to the tumult and unrest of Her own ragged gasps.

The dogs spill frantically into the clearing and rush toward them...

She opened Her eyes to the warm water and steam of the baths. Sweat beaded over Her tanned shoulders and dripped into the pool that engulfed Her waking body. She exhaled slightly. Her breathing was still excited, labored---it caused slight ripples across the water.

She blinked in confusion as She rested Her head against the marble edge of the pool. The forest, the dogs, Her traitorous legs, the enigmatic woman---they were as real to Her as this chamber; the water She soaked in; the sounds of songbirds filtering in from outside. She flexed the muscles in Her ankles and rotated her feet finding them strong, healthy.

She sighed. There was another element to these "visions" or "dreams"---they pulsed with the emotional connections, familiarity that only memory brings. She raised a leg out of the water and carefully examined it for signs of injury, scars, of past damage. Steam rose from Her dripping skin into the shade of the bathhouse. Nowhere could She recall any of the events She had seen---but She knew without doubt that they *were* memories.

Her eyes drifted to Meridian resting in its scabbard against a marble encased column. She pursed Her lips in satisfaction and pride. Her memory began *there* with the sword---and ended *here* in the bath, She decided. Since these "memories" did not fall within those clear boundaries, they remained phantoms, ghosts---unreal to

Her.

Her master entered the bathhouse. He smiled down approvingly.

"Having a little soak, are we?" he said. "Hope I'm not interrupting."

"You never could, Master."

He stopped at the bath's edge and picked up a nearby sea sponge.

"May I?" he asked, indicating that She should lean forward.

He soaked the sponge in the bath, sensuously enjoying the heat of the natural springs. Lifting it above Her, he squeezed, allowing the warm water to pour slowly onto the skin of Her shoulders and neck, letting it trace its own exquisite course down Her exposed body.

"I have another task for you...an important one."

"All my tasks for you are important, Master..."

Ares placed the sponge underwater again.

"This one is more of a *test*, really," he smirked, menacingly. Once again he squeezed the sponge. "One that I'm sure you'll pass."

"Thank you."

The God of War looked longingly at the smooth nape of Her neck.

"You'd better get ready. Tonight may be...*difficult*."

She nodded, rising slowly from the bath. With damp footfalls She passed Meridian and left the bathhouse---trying to drive the sounds of rushing leaves and Her own panting breaths from Her ears.

Ares sighed as he watched Her leave. There was a shimmer beside him, and Aphrodite appeared.

"Eeew! Steam is just *so* nasty on the pores," she exclaimed.

Ares rolled his eyes. "What do *you* want?"

The Goddess of Love crossed her arms. "Are you sure about all of this, Bro?" she asked. "I mean, why do this part at all?"

"Why *not*?" he asked, squinting at her.

"Why take the risk? Why not wait, like, a century or two---why do this whole master-plan-thingy *now*?"

"There's no better time than right *now*." He smiled at her. "Besides, there's no point in playing this game without the risks."

Aphrodite sighed and stepped away from the pool.

"Can't you leave them out of it? Why put them through all of this---*after everything?*" she asked sadly. "It's not even about them..."

Ares turned defiantly.

"That's right---it isn't about *them*," he replied coldly. The God of War glared at his sister in the humid, half-light of the chamber.

"Not anymore."

Dusk was approaching slowly at the secret valley, lazily draping the sky in soft diaphanous curtains of vermilion and ginger. The songs of birds and insects surrounded the two friends---a fitting accompaniment to the wayward dances of floating pollen buds. Gabrielle closed her eyes hoping nature's peaceful hum would calm her own apprehension.

Xena stuck her tongue out in concentration, surveying the task at hand. "So...uhm...is it okay if I start off...uhm...slowly?"

Gabrielle sighed. "You don't have to do this at all, if you don't want to. I'm sure I can find someone in the next place we stop to do it for me."

"No!" Xena responded forcefully, then, "No. I want to do it...it's just..."

"Just what? That you've never cut someone's hair before?"

"That's not it," the warrior said. "I used to cut Lyceus' and Toris' hair for them."

Gabrielle smiled as she let her fertile imagination do its magic with that image. She tilted her head slightly. "Then what is it, Xena?"

The warrior remained silent and began running a brush through the bard's strawberry hair in slow, preoccupied strokes. A look of extreme curiosity bloomed on Gabrielle's face. Whatever mysterious tidbit her tall, dark friend was keeping from her must be a doozy---Xena had been uncharacteristically distracted since they had sat down to trim the bard's hair. The warrior had also been absently forthcoming about a potentially embarrassing childhood memory---that kind of carelessness usually never occurred!

Xena looked down at the bone handle of her breast dagger, hoping to find the best way to explain her anxiousness.

Gabrielle was enjoying herself far too much to let her friend suffer in silence. "Well?" she asked.

"I...I just don't want to mess it up," Xena said finally. "You have such beautiful hair, I..."

"You...you really think so?" Gabrielle's hand drifted vainly towards her mane, but she was able to restrain it. As for the blush that had painted her skin---she wasn't so successful.

"Well, who wouldn't?" Xena said straightening a bit. "I'm just worried you know...this isn't exactly one of my many skills..." She gestured with the dagger, "A big ole' knife like this one...y'know...you could wind up looking like Joxer or something..."

"Like Joxer?" Gabrielle laughed. "What do you plan on cutting, my hair or my face?"

Xena guffawed, and the bard could swear she felt her friend's apprehension melt away. With a renewed confidence, the warrior gently took a lock of Gabrielle's hair and began trimming it with the dagger. The bard let her eyes drift to the still surface of the pond.

"If the world could see me now," she said with a smile.

Xena never took her eyes off her work, tongue darting out of her mouth again. "Whattaya mean?" she asked.

"Well, I'm letting Xena: Warrior Princess cut my hair---with a knife, no less."

"Just don't tell anyone," Xena whispered in the bard's ear. "My reputation is completely shot as it is."

Gabrielle smiled warmly, letting out a tiny giggle. Peering down briefly before she resumed her work, Xena grinned at her young friend. "You like it here, huh?"

"I love it here, Xena," the bard said with a sigh. "The trees, the grass, the water, the animals---everything's perfect. It's like we're the only people on earth."

Xena grinned, perhaps a little too wolfishly. "That might be fun...uh...funny, I mean..."

Xena stepped in front of Gabrielle and began trimming the bard's bangs. Gabrielle quickly averted her eyes from the tanned flesh of the warrior's neck, shoulders and other attributes---just being this close was...very, VERY distracting. She needed to concentrate elsewhere...

The bard sighed. "Uhm...Xena?"

"Gabrielle?"

"Why have we never come here before?"

The warrior darted her eyes away. "Oh...uhm...I don't know...no time...never in the area..."

"What do you mean? That whole fiasco with the Titans happened around here, and as I recall...we had some spare time after that."

"Hmm...must've slipped my mind then," the warrior offered weakly.

"I'm sure..."

Xena stopped trimming Gabrielle's hair, her blue eyes meeting the bard's. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What happened here, Xena?" Gabrielle smiled confidently. "You were obviously avoiding this place for a reason."

"I wasn't avoiding it...I..." The warrior looked away.

"Then what were you doing?"

"Like I said...it must've slipped my mind," Xena muttered, starting to cut at Gabrielle's hair again.

The bard sighed and decided to hold off on the line of questioning---for now. Whatever had happened here, Xena was being stubborn about sharing it. Maybe after a swim and some dinner, the warrior's lips would prove to be a little looser. Gabrielle found herself flush at the wording of that last thought.

Xena made a few quick cuts with the knife. "There, that's it." The warrior stepped back a little to admire her handiwork. "Well...I think...yeah...I think I did a pretty good job." Xena's wide grin made Gabrielle giggle.

"Pretty proud of yourself, huh?"

"Yup," Xena smirked. "I think you're going to need to go for a swim to wash away all the little bits of hair. Don't want you to get all itchy, right?"

The warrior playfully tickled Gabrielle's ribs, forcing the bard to spring upwards and squeal in delighted surprise.

"Hey! I thought we made a deal!" Gabrielle flushed with excitement. "You don't tickle me and I never mention that whole 'underwear incident'. Whatever that was..."

Xena blushed. "Hey! I explained what happened there...it wasn't my fault..."

Gabrielle nodded. "Mm-hmm..."

The warrior crossed her arms. "Go take your swim," she said, raising an eyebrow. "Just watch your back..."

The bard laughed. "Oh yeah...what are you gonna do?"

"Start dinner, actually," the warrior smirked.

Gabrielle blinked. "Really? You? Uhm...dinner?"

"Sure. Why not me, uhm...dinner?" Xena mimicked the bard.

"No offense, Xena---I love you, but you'd burn water."

They both laughed. The bard wished that she hadn't blushed so much at what she had said. Another

part of her wished there was some way to repeat it over and over again. The middle bit, anyway...

"Alright, alright," Xena chuckled. "You go swim and I'll clean the fish and ready the pans for the master chef..." She bowed with a flourish.

Gabrielle grinned and nodded her approval. "Sounds good."

The bard walked to the water's edge. She sat down, quickly unlaced her boots and threw them beside her on the bank. She dangled her bare feet in the warm pond and sighed happily.

With the sun setting in such a slow and dreamy manner, Gabrielle lost herself in a wave of emotions. She found herself extremely excited about this evening's upcoming fireside conversation. Because of their current surroundings and their obvious safety, she felt that Xena would be more relaxed, more open. While their adventures in the real world were more exciting than Gabrielle had ever imagined they could be, it was her own adventures in exploring her friend's psyche that she truly relished.

She stood and unlaced her green shirt, throwing it near her boots. She stripped out of her skirt and undergarments and stepped out into the shallows of the pond. The young woman stood with her back to the campsite, slightly crouched as she splashed water on her arms. In the sun's gaze the entire scene was a crown forged in oranges and reds---with Gabrielle its glowing jewel.

She sighed, her teeth chattering a bit. The past few weeks had seen too much happen---Xena's death, Callisto, Velasca, other issues---issues between the two of them. Gabrielle dove into the shimmering water, coming up near the middle of the pond. They would sort all of it out---Gabrielle knew they would. The bard stood, water raining in starry rivulets from her smooth form. She hoped that she would be able to say everything that was on her mind.

Pushing her dripping hair back out of her face she peered longingly to the shore. Xena was nowhere to be found...

The bright light of morning seemed to press against the shutters of Gabrielle's room, threatening to violently fling them open. She rubbed her eyes. The warrior winced as she rose from her bed, clutching her ribs. She threw a robe on and padded silently out of the room, down the hall to the library. She grabbed her sword and scabbard and left the house.

Gabrielle squinted in the blinding quartz of the approaching noon. She unsheathed her katana and moved into the first stance of her daily drills. The limits of her injuries needed to be tested, and her morning drills were a good way to accomplish that. They were also an excellent method for curing frustrations and less tangible aches the warrior often suffered...

She worked at a fraction of her usual pace, concentrating on technique and precision rather than power and speed. She felt that her ribs weren't severely broken; with some stretching and a fresh dressing they would be as good as they could be for later...

Stretching out in a low stance, Gabrielle monitored her injuries. Everything seemed to be okay, under the circumstances. It had been a long time since anyone had been able to hit her that hard. A *long* time...

Gabrielle slid back onto her heels in a defensive-position. There were too many players in this game for the warrior's liking, and all of them deadly ones. She worried about Mira.

She smiled as her mind wandered to her friend---the girl had outshined both she and Virgil with her discovery of Eve's whereabouts. The warrior slowly rose into a tall attacking stance. Now, they could rescue Eve; now, they could act; now, they could strike at Rome.

She launched into a vicious downward thrust that proved too much for her still-tender ribs. Lowering herself to one knee, the warrior shook her head, finding it difficult to breathe. *Getting too old for this*, she sighed to herself---only half-joking.

Gabrielle rose with a determined look. She began again, at a faster pace. Her ribs complained less this time around. Soon, she had worked up a satisfying sweat.

And as always, in the midst of the warrior's work, the womb of now, Gabrielle let the wash of memories claim her without a struggle---falling headlong, a sacrifice cast into the churning waves.

There was only the one memory---the memory of Her---in a ragged and dirty shift pulling weapons from the earth like a god, running slavers through, saving Gabrielle's life, changing her life.

The memory of Her---standing watch, looking sadly down upon a group of women She had saved, perhaps wishing to laugh as they did, bathing carelessly in the languorous river.

The memory---realizing that the heavy list, the slight thump in the coffin was Her body, and that she would never see Her again.

The memory of Her---enslaving, liberating with kisses, touches, in rented rooms, by campfires, caves, gently beneath cool springs, fiercely after battles with lust growling from them, shredding their clothes.

The memory---the awful memory of the last time Gabrielle looked into those blue eyes, upon that beautiful face---fading away into the moody darkness of a crypt in Amphipolis. Stares and words had been the sole tools of expression for so long, they had replaced touching, kissing---possessing. For some time, in the half-light, they could do neither. Eventually, the comforting words, the bravado, Her weariness---sublimated into the final, plaintive gaze they shared.

Gabrielle straightened into the final stance of the set. She wiped her brow, her face---her eyes. Mira approached from the house. She carried a tray with a mug, a pitcher and a bowl of dates on it. The girl tried to nonchalantly appraise the bruises on Gabrielle's neck as she placed the refreshments down. The warrior smiled.

"Gross, huh?"

"What? Oh...they look a little better, actually..."

Gabrielle nodded. "They don't hurt as much..."

She finished wiping herself off. Mira shifted and absently bit at a nail. Gabrielle smiled at her uneasily.

"I'm going to change the dressing on these," she said, indicating her ribs. "After a bath of course." The warrior sniffed at herself mockingly.

"Eat something." Mira indicated the dates.

The warrior began to protest, but thought better of it when the girl shot her a look. "Okay..." She picked up a plump date and popped it between her lips. It was better than she had expected... "There," she spoke around the sugary fruit, spitting the clean pit into the garden with a grin.

The girl crossed her arms, unimpressed. "The milk."

Gabrielle shrugged in resignation. "The milk..." She poured herself a mug and drained it in a few gulps.

"Happy?"

Mira shook her head.

"What now?" the warrior's patience was running thin.

"Mustache..."

"Huh? Mustache? *Oh!*" Gabrielle wiped the milk from her upper lip and smiled at her friend, who returned the grin warmly. They sat upon the cool marble steps, shaded by a gaunt lemon tree.

"Was that so hard?" Mira asked.

Gabrielle shook her head.

"You shouldn't get yourself all tired out," the girl said. "We've still got a job to do."

The warrior smiled. "I was just testing out the ribs."

"And?"

"Well, they've been better, but they'll be fine---as long as nobody hits me there...or anywhere near them," Gabrielle grinned.

Mira shook her head. "Be careful, will ya?"

"I will, I will. Stop worrying. I've done this kind of thing hundreds of times." Gabrielle shrugged then winked at the girl. "A couple of times with a stabbed leg, too."

Mira shook her head again. "We all want to rescue Eve, you realize that, right?"

Gabrielle shifted. "Uhm...I know."

"And we *will*."

"I *know*."

Mira placed her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "Getting hurt---*in any way*---isn't going to help, though. It's only going to put us all, *and Eve*, in danger."

Gabrielle met the girl's eyes and nodded with a sigh. "You're right. I guess...I guess this one is really...*personal*, you know?"

The girl couldn't let this unprecedented act of openness and honesty interfere with her ability to give advice. "I know," she said comfortingly. "That makes it personal for all of us..."

The warrior smiled at Mira. "I'm glad you understand..." she paused, looking for words, "I'm glad you understand what Eve *means* to me."

Mira nodded and smiled with a wisdom that seemed beyond her years. She left the warrior to eat by herself in the shade. Gabrielle scooped up a couple of dates, popping one into her mouth.

She reclined against the drought-tormented tree. Lazily, she gazed up into its branches. The tired thing was modestly jeweled with yellow fruit. She stretched her arms upwards, running her fingers over the rough bark. Her ribs protested with a weak throb. She sighed, lowering her arms.

Taking the pit from her mouth, Gabrielle rose. She looked out past Virgil's garden, out over the Aventine, towards the haze and fumes of Rome. The sky above the city was still and pale, like a sun-atrophied rag.

A golden-plumed eagle chased a sparrow over the neighboring townhouses. They spun, black and desperate against the pale sky, above the slate rooftops. The raptor's talons spread wide in anticipation of the kill but the tiny bird darted into a clutch of grape vines, narrowly avoiding death---losing its pursuer in the process.

"For how much longer?" the warrior said quietly, as she watched the small, tawny sparrow wash itself in the shrunken pool of a birdbath. She headed inside, out of the light and heat, taking her sword and scabbard with her.

Nero watched the soldier's nervous approach with straight-faced glee. The Praetorian officer walked with that particularly Roman stubbornness---a dumb resignation in the face of imminent danger that the Emperor had seen on countless bearers of bad news. Rome had been built on the backs of simple chattel such as this.

The officer was a large man, but he was dwarfed in size by the tall, vaulted heights of the Domus Aurea. Nero's private abode, away from the bureaucratic bustle of the Imperial Palace and the Palatine, was built next to several wealthy senators' homes. The Emperor gritted his teeth. He had been trying for ages to have them all moved, or killed, or whatever, so he could level their homes and make the Domus larger still---and truly golden. Nero splashed angrily at the water.

Octavia stepped out into view from her post and approached the soldier. He grimly handed the bodyguard his scroll and waited as she read. Nero popped his foot out of the water and glanced at his toenails. The soldier and the bodyguard entered the large bathing chamber and approached---their footfalls growing louder upon the marble floor.

Nero smiled at the pair as he scooped a large ladle of water and poured it onto the brazier of heated rocks beside him. Steam quickly obscured the area giving the chamber a dreamlike quality.

"Caesar," Octavia addressed through the haze. "More urgent news."

Nero picked up an apple from a nearby tray and gazed for imperfections upon its surface.

"Well, I should think so," he began, "given how you've interrupted my favorite part of the day."

The soldier shifted uncomfortably. Octavia continued---she knew that Nero was merely having fun at the man's expense.

"The fort on the Quirinal Hill...the troops there..." she seemed shocked.

"Yes?" Nero took a bite from the apple, and gestured with it. "Go on."

"They were destroyed; the fort was burned to the ground."

Nero chewed. The Praetorian blinked nervously. Octavia read the words over again in disbelief.

"The vigiles arrived on the scene in time to control the fire and tend to the wounded...there weren't many

left..."

Nero looked calmly to the soldier for an explanation.

"Caesar, it is our belief that...that..."

Octavia spun on the man. "Out with it!"

"It is our belief that the attack was perpetrated by a lone...a lone assailant."

Octavia clenched her fist, crumpling the papyrus.

"Are you *sure*?" she whispered.

The soldier seemed surprised that the woman hadn't beheaded him for such an improbable hypothesis.

"We are."

Nero began to laugh. Octavia slowly turned to meet the Emperor's gaze through the clouds of steam. He continued to guffaw and indicated that she should dismiss the soldier---unharmd. Raising an eyebrow, she did. The man did his best not to break into a run.

The Emperor took another bite out of his apple and indicated for Octavia to sit at the side of the large bathing pool. She approached, still reeling from the news of the Quirinal.

"There's going to be rioting in the streets."

"I know. It's perfect," the Emperor giggled.

"Caesar?"

"Oh, come on Octavia," he smiled. "And here, I thought you were such a smart little soldier."

"Caesar, with all due respect---there's someone out there...one person, mind you...that has the ability to destroy hundreds of our soldiers at a single pass. Surely you should..."

"Octavia, please---try and see the big picture," Nero grinned condescendingly. "This person or whatever it is will be like any other---buy it or find its weakness and destroy it, it makes no bloody difference to me."

He waved his hand. "What I *do* care about is the big picture---Rome, the Empire, the Universe. This person has furthered our plans beyond our wildest expectations and we haven't had to bribe or kill anyone."

Octavia blinked.

"It's disappointing, I know, but still satisfying," Nero finished.

The bodyguard dropped her eyes in belated realization. "Of course..." she began.

"That's right," Nero finished for her. "No one in their right mind would ever object to more troops in Rome now---not even the Senate."

Octavia nodded.

The emperor continued. "Also, I can close the Senate, declare martial law and drum up a lot of anti-Republican sentiment, but we can talk about that later. For now, see if you can dig up anything on this killer, hmn?"

The dour woman stood and prepared to leave.

"Octavia?"

"Caesar?"

"Big smile, huh?" Nero gestured at her, motioning with his hands that she should smile. "You have such lovely bone structure and teeth, you need to learn to show them off more."

"I shall try, Caesar."

"Good girl."

Nero sank back against the edge of the bath. He watched the woman leave, his eyes lingering on the tanned

skin and well formed muscle of her powerful thighs. He stared greedily up her form, his eyes finally resting upon the boyishly short stubble at the back of her neck and head. A sigh escaped his lips as she disappeared through the door.

The Emperor turned and caught his reflection in a mirror across the chamber. From this distance, it seemed a similar looking man was spying on the Emperor, his eyes falling upon him, sharing in this private moment.

Nero stuck his tongue out at himself.

He poured a fresh ladle of water onto the brazier, his reflection disappearing behind the swelling cloud of steam.

Mira had left her position near the Temple of Caesar to grab a bite to eat in the marketplace, only to find it teeming with Roman soldiers. Her first instinct had been to hide and observe, but after a stomach-growling hour of reconnaissance, she decided to give up. She wasn't learning anything new just sitting around--
-besides she didn't "do" hungry anyway.

Mira had tried to watch the events in the market from a partially obscured doorway, situated down a secluded side street. It wasn't working so well, no matter how much she squinted or pushed her neck out. Her gut protested audibly. She cursed under her breath, thrust her head down and stormed from her hiding place into the street.

The market seemed normal save for the soldiers patrolling the street in large numbers. Officers stopped civilians for questioning, even taking away the occasional person. She didn't like the looks of it one bit.

It was very simple for Mira to look suspicious. She had always found it hard to wipe the grit of guilt from her face---even when she *hadn't* committed some sort of prank or caper or robbery. Maybe she had a guilty sort of gait. She shook her head. Not her *gait*---her gait was unimpeachable. Mira sighed. Having access to Virgil's library was dulling her edge, eroding her connection to the street---*polluting her vernacular*! She sighed, rolled her eyes and continued into the crowded square.

The girl wiped her brow. It was way too hot. She pushed through an especially drunken and sweaty crowd of patrons and headed towards a food stall---one of the Roman ones. The cook smiled at her in welcome.

"You got anything that doesn't have that fish sauce on it?" she asked, looking around somewhat suspiciously. She caught herself---then realized that that probably came off as suspicious as well. She grit her teeth.

"I got meat on a stick, how's that sound?"

"Great," Mira grimaced. "Just *great*."

The man busied himself with food preparation, muttering something under his breath about how fish sauce never hurt anyone, and how it was actually quite good for you once you acquired a taste for it. Mira nonchalantly trained her eyes over the forum, looking for any distinct patterns.

Most of the soldiers were moving in groups of four around the perimeter of the market. Several ivory-robed Praetorians made their way in pairs through the crowds. Mira noted that the makeshift base of operations in the forum was beneath a large triumphal arch in the northwest corner of the square. It was there that several chariots were parked and a large compliment of soldiers could be seen.

"Your food is ready, miss."

Mira absently grabbed the stick and paid the man. Her eyes continued to scan the crowds. She wondered what had prompted such an increased presence. A question best saved for after lunch. She took a bite. *Not bad...as meat on a stick went...*

A tall man, dressed in white robes adorned with the signature purple sash of the Praetorian Guard, stepped out of the crowd toward her. He smiled warmly at her, but Mira was already looking for an escape. It was the same officer who had read the Elians' arrest proclamation the day before.

"You're not from Rome, are you my dear?"

Mira remained calm; she took another bite out of the barbecued meat. "What makes you say that?"

The soldier stopped right in front of her. "Your clothes, your hair---but mostly your eating habits," he smiled, indicating her meat-on-a-stick. "No fish sauce."

To her credit, Mira calmly took another bite of her food and smiled. "I'm allergic."

"Of course," the man chuckled. "Well...enjoy your meal and your *visit*."

He moved to leave, then turned back.

"Oh, and stay away from fish sauce," he smirked. "And anything else that might prompt an undesirable...*reaction*."

Mira stopped chewing. "Uh...yeah...thanks..."

The soldier left, leaving the girl growling under her breath.

Whatever! He doesn't know anything. Does he? There's no way...

She finished her meal and threw herself back into the sweltering masses. Faces, smells, sounds, *smells*---all bled into one spinning, shoving, groping sensation for her. She headed back toward the temple up on the Palatine Hill.

Mira held her breath as she came across a patrol of four armored legionnaires. The sunlight beaming from their brightly polished armor and weapons seemed to repel the crowd. She caught a glimpse of herself in the surface of a shield and winked. She also caught a glimpse of the Praetorian---he was following her.

So that's how it's going to be, huh?

The streets that wound up the Palatine Hill were significantly less crowded. Mira found it easy to feign nonchalance among the wide and quiet avenues---the Praetorian found it hard to do the same. *Jerk sticks out like a centaur at a town dance*. She kept walking, looking for an opening, an escape.

Orange, lemon and fig trees lined the way, leaning into the road. Mira snatched an orange from a low hanging branch. She began peeling it and humming to herself. Judging the stone-faced look on a passing woman, she knew the Praetorian was still tailing her. She decided to leave the Palatine and come back later. She flipped a segment of orange between her lips and turned into the crowd of a busy street.

Following the almost mindless shift of the masses, Mira entered the valley to the southeast of the Palatine. The Praetorian lost some ground, but was still within sight when she hazarded a glance over her shoulder. Ahead she could see a cloud of hazy dust hanging over the clustered markets. Mira pushed toward it.

The sound of thundering hooves and loud cheers soon became apparent. *Chariot races...nice...* Mira smirked and moved toward the excitement. The praetorian followed, still losing ground.

The girl's eyes widened as she took in the sight facing her. The Circus Maximus opened up before her in its colossal majesty. Thousands took to the seats on the hill at its southern edge---others crowded around its flat outskirts, nudging for a better view. Huge chariots pounded around the gritty track.

Forgetting herself, the girl stood on her tiptoes hoping to get a better view. Through the road-worn leather of her boots Mira detected something strange about the ground. She peered down. She was standing on a sewer cover. Squinting, she tried to peer through the holes into the darkness.

A mischievous smile spread slowly and satisfyingly across Mira's face. *Guess you really are the Princess of Thieves...* Looking back out towards the Palatine, she nodded in concentration and then triumph. She had just solved two problems with one solution.

A glance behind saw the praetorian staring right back. She had to time this just right...

The chariots lined up as a new race began. Everyone, including the slightly distracted praetorian was giving their attentions to the start. Mira reached into her tunic and produced a small pry bar. In a relaxed motion she gently dropped the tool and caught it in the soft leather of the toes of her boots. With a calm step, she placed the bar beneath the cover and placed her weight upon it. A shift had it removed and the hole partially uncovered.

The praetorian remained remotely fixated on both Mira and the race. The riders approached the home stretch. Mira raised her arms and cheered.

Julius of Pompeii had won---again. The Praetorian cursed his gambling streak and the stupid barkeep who had given him the bum tip. He trained his eyes to where the girl had been standing.

There was no sign of her, only the parched and grumbling masses of Rome. The guard cursed again, louder this time.

Dusk was progressing swiftly into night, as it did in the early springtime. Gabrielle sat by the fire and poked dejectedly at the flames with a pale piece of driftwood. She was exerting an almost godlike effort to prevent herself from pouting, from sighing---from feeling negative in any way.

Xena had probably just wandered off to find supplemental herbs for the poultices she'd been applying to Argo's injury, the bard decided. That's probably why the warrior had just left without saying anything. Why she hadn't lit the fire, cleaned the fish, started the meal---and had just left without saying anything. Why she hadn't returned in almost two candle-marks, why Gabrielle couldn't find signs of her anywhere in the valley and why she had just left without saying absolutely anything to the bard at all about where she could be going---aargh!!

The fire sputtered and hissed. Someone else in Gabrielle's state of mind might have taken this as even the universe mocking them, but she didn't. She settled on it being the fire alone laughing at her expense. She sighed.

"Laugh it up..."

She poked. She prodded. She adjusted. She poked some more. Settling back on her haunches, Gabrielle abandoned her fire tending and decided to just give in and have a good, no-holds-barred pout. It couldn't hurt really---and she did have a mouth that leant itself to the whole process.

Gabrielle shook her head. She wasn't upset that Xena had left without saying a word to her at all---well, to say that she wasn't upset about it was like saying that water wasn't wet---but at the moment there were other issues. What really bothered her---and this almost made her laugh out loud, but didn't---what really bothered her was that she couldn't protect Xena if the warrior was out of her sight.

Gabrielle chuckled incredulously. You've had some weird notions in your days, but this...

Since her friend's resurrection, the bard had found it increasingly difficult to remain rational and calm when Xena went into battle. Having had the warrior ripped from her once already, Gabrielle found it excruciating to have her friend placed in any sort of peril. Even watching Xena and Argo ford an especially rough stream made the girl's hands sweat. It was strange to be so protective of someone who could so effortlessly protect herself.

It was strange, but easy to explain...

It's not like I can just ask her to...to stop what she does and settle down...

Gabrielle smirked at the last thought. The thought of Xena settling down wasn't amusing so much as it was almost impossible to imagine---she was a Warrior Princess after all. And just whom would she settle down with? The bard sighed, afraid because she was unsure of the answer.

"What am I going to do?" she said out loud.

"With what?" Xena asked from beside her.

The bard jumped to her feet and yelped. "Xena! WHAT! WHERE? How did..." Her face scrunched up into a scowl and she shook her finger at her friend.

"You..."

"What?" the warrior shrugged, a nonchalantly innocent expression on her face.

"Where on Gaia's green earth did you go?"

"Away for a bit," Xena answered coyly. "Why?"

"Why? WHY?" Gabrielle shook her head. "She wants to know 'why?'...I'll tell you why, Xena... because...I..."

The warrior quickly snapped her arm from behind her back and presented a large bouquet of delicate yellow flowers to the bard.

"I went to get ya these..." Xena smiled, flashing her flawless teeth.

Gabrielle took the bouquet. "...I...I..."

The Eyebrow rose, and Xena crossed her arms. "You're welcome."

The bard shook her head, snapping out of the surprise. "Xena! There are flowers all over this valley! Why did you have to leave just to get me some?"

"Why not?" she responded matter-of-factly, unlacing her boots. "Besides, there aren't any of these yellow ones around here...and those are your favorite..."

"Well...yes...yes they are my favorite...but...I..."

"Glad you like 'em," Xena smirked as she sat down.

"...Well...they are beautiful..." Gabrielle sniffed the flowers---secretly hating herself for being swayed so easily, and by something as sentimental as flowers...Still, who was she to argue?

"You really went through all that trouble for me?"

The warrior leaned back on the ground, stretching her toes. "Gabrielle, considering some of the past trouble I've gone through for you---this was an absolute pleasure."

"Very funny," the bard scowled. She sat down across from the warrior. "Did it ever cross your mind that I might be terribly worried about you?"

"Uhm...no...I guess it didn't..." Xena looked away sheepishly. "Sorry..."

Gabrielle raised her nose in the air. "Well...I suppose these flowers will make some amends, but it may take a little time for me to completely forgive you."

Xena bowed her head, until she realized the bard was smiling at her. She threw a twig. "Funny, kid. Real funny."

"I thought so."

Gabrielle grinned at her friend. The warrior grinned back. Each woman made a point of not breaking the other's gaze. Soon their smiles faded, but they continued to stare deeply into each other's eyes. There were butterflies in Gabrielle's stomach and a warm flush spread in tingling shivers just beneath her skin.

"You...uhm...you didn't answer my question, Xena..." the bard asked distractedly.

"Which question?" The warrior asked.

Gabrielle snapped out of her trance. "Uhm...why have we never come here before?"

Xena blushed, but then steeled herself. She swallowed loudly.

"I guess I was..." her eyes captured Gabrielle's again. "Saving it..."

Gabrielle's face scrunched up in confusion. "Saving it? For what?"

The warrior blinked bashfully and tilted her head. "Umm..."

Suddenly, it dawned on the bard. "Oh..."

Xena timidly nodded. "Yeah..."

A swallow darted over the pond and attacked a shimmering cloud of gnats. The two friends remained silent for what seemed like the better part of eternity, then:

"Xena, I..."

"Gabrielle, I..."

Both laughed self-consciously at their over-lapping outburst.

"You go," Xena said.

"No, you."

"Be my guest."

"Please, I insist."

"Go, will ya."

"Really Xena, I..."

"Gabrielllllllle..."

"Oh, okay." The bard collected her thoughts. "Xena...you died...and...well...even though you had sort of done that before...this time it was...different, you know."

The bard tried to steady her hands, with little success. "It made me realize a lot of things...things that I guess my heart had always known...but my head couldn't figure out. Does that make sense?"

Xena's face was stone. "Go on," she said.

"I guess it all started with how angry I was about it all. You just gave up on everything...on life...on us..." She met the warrior's blue eyes, "On me."

"Gabrielle I..."

"Let me finish...this is hard to say...to put into words...even for me," she smirked then continued, "I started to think about why I was so angry and so hurt and I just couldn't figure it out, until..."

"Until?"

"Until we kissed..."

The warrior's eyes moistened, her hand reached out for Gabrielle's. The bard gently caressed the soft skin of Xena's offered fingers, her wrist.

"That's when I realized...I realized that...I..."

"That you love me..." Xena smiled, self-consciously. "I know..."

Gabrielle was in a strange place. She didn't expect Xena to know the nature of her feelings, didn't know if the warrior felt the same or if she was mocking her. She searched her friend for any sign, any clue. Tears pooled in her green eyes.

"Gabrielle, listen to me..." Xena began, caressing the bard's cheek. "It was when I was a part of you, when we fought Velasca together, that I realized your feelings...and...well...it was embarrassing for me..."

Gabrielle began to recoil from apparent rejection.

"Wait! Not the way you think," Xena quickly tried to comfort her, moving her arm to her friend's trembling shoulder. "It was because...well...here I was, this supposedly fearless and powerful warrior with all this worldly experience...and I was never able to tell you that I had been in love with you for the longest time...and you...you had just realized your true feelings and were ready to tell me...just like that...it was all so easy for you..."

Gabrielle blinked in confusion at the warrior.

"I love you, Gabrielle. I've been in love with you for a long, long time."

"Huh?"

"That's why I brought you here. That's why I've been saving this place. For the day that I would...that I could tell you."

"Really? You...love me too?"

Xena grinned. "Come on, Gabrielle. Isn't it obvious?"

"Uh...NO! Hello? Aloof warrior enigma---you can be really hard to read, y'know?" Gabrielle had to fight not to grin, to cheer, to float up into the sky, scoop all the stars into her right hand and sprinkle them out into new patterns across the blanket of night. "Even for me..."

"Oh...even for you, huh?"

"Yes."

Xena smirked at the bard. "So you fancy yourself some kind of Xena expert I guess?"

"That's right," Gabrielle grinned.

Xena leaned closer, a deliciously mischievous look in her eyes. "What am I thinking now?"

Gabrielle could feel tendrils of heat spinning off from the warrior's skin, could smell her subtle aroma on the night breeze between them. She felt light-headed. The warrior moved closer still, her hand gently touching the girl's shoulder, her neck---burning against her soft cheek. Gabrielle bit her lip to keep from groaning too loud.

"Uhm...I don't know," she panted. "But I'd like to find out..."

Gabrielle was entranced, lost, trembling. Xena gently pulled the bard near, her lips lingering just out of reach.

"I thought you might..."

As their lips touched, not only did all the hairs on Gabrielle's body stand on end, she felt as if her entire soul had as well. She had imagined this moment many times, in many different ways---it was her duty as a bard, she always told herself---but what she actually felt, at the root of it all, she would never be able to put into words or to describe for anyone. That night, in front of the still cackling fire, as she melted under the warrior's touch, Gabrielle realized that she wouldn't have had it any other way...

*Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open and she found herself staring up at the gently swaying leaves of the lemon tree. The late afternoon sun peaked through the waving branches. She allowed herself a long, lusty stretch then she carefully lifted herself onto her elbows and squinted toward Virgil's house. There didn't seem to be any sign of the poet or of Mira. *Probably preparing for tonight*, she thought.*

And me? I take a nap... she shook her head.

*Favoring her ribs, the warrior sat up on the divan she had used for a bed and began to rub the sleep out of her neck and shoulders. She sighed, not unhappily. There were certain parts of her she couldn't rub the sleep out of...*not at the moment anyway*... She smiled, wistfully.*

Her fingers continued to work the stiffness from her muscles. She shut her eyes. A frown soon settled upon her features as gently as dust. Abandoning the massage, she left her fingers tangled in the hair at the base of her skull. A small, plaintive sound escaped her throat. She bowed her head. The warrior remained this way, with the weak and tepid breeze passing over her.

Eventually she stood up and walked into the house, passing through the library into the peristylum. Virgil had had an olive tree planted in one corner and it had sprouted defiantly from its place in the marble, beside the well. It cast a cool shadow across the open space at the center of the home.

Gabrielle moved toward the well. She removed the cover from the large cistern beneath the spout. Sunlight spilled in sparkles upon the gently rippling surface of the water. The wooden dipper was light in the warrior's hand as she bent over to spoon herself a drink.

In the calming water, Gabrielle could see her reflection. She let her eyes pass objectively over the subtle lines of her face, less objectively over any new ones. Even after a quick bath earlier in the day, her hair was still a fright and her nap had proven unsuccessful in removing the faint circles around her eyes. She frowned, and fine creases beside her lips became more prominent. She violently plunged the dipper into the cool depths of the cistern.

"What did she ever see in you?" Gabrielle said under her breath.

She sensed Virgil's entrance and returned the dipper to its place. The poet walked into the courtyard with a relaxed smile on his face.

"Well, well, nice to see you among the living," he grinned.

"I just don't know when to stay dead, I guess," Gabrielle said. She waited as patiently as possible for Virgil to finish his drink of water.

He wiped his mouth. "My friends have come through for us. They're more than willing to help."

"That's the first bit of good news we've had in some time."

"It is, it is," the poet was lost in thought.

Gabrielle tilted her head. "What is it?"

Virgil met the warrior's gaze with one of substantial dread. "Gabrielle, we can't fail..."

"I know, Virgil."

"No. It's something more," he closed his eyes, struggling to put it into words. "This feels like it's part of something...*more*...not just Eve getting herself into trouble as usual...it feels like eternity is watching every move we make..."

Gabrielle smiled with mock confidence. "That's everyday of a warrior's life, Virgil."

"Perhaps," the poet nodded, unappeased.

A tiny snake slithered towards a warm rock near the house. Virgil sat in one of the chairs. Gabrielle ran her hand through her hair. She turned to the poet.

"Virgil, I don't think we're going to have a chance to work on your epic for some time."

He smiled. "I know."

"It's sad, really. I was looking forward to it," she said.

"I know."

"I guess...in a way I...*needed* it...to at least...*try* again..."

Virgil just looked admiringly at his friend.

"Thanks for recognizing that," she finished.

He nodded. "No rest for the wicked, though," he smiled, regretting what he said immediately.

Gabrielle smiled wistfully. "No rest..."

Mira entered the house and soon joined them in the courtyard. She beamed happily. Gabrielle turned her nose up suddenly, a pungent odor arriving soon after her friend.

"You stink."

"Guess where I've just been," the unfortunately rank girl said.

"The sewer?" Gabrielle joked.

"Yup. It's the best way into that place," Mira ignored her friends' questioning and incredulous looks. "In fact, it takes you right under the prison cells."

"I'm not even going to ask how you wound up in the sewers---not now, at least."

Mira grinned proudly. "I think this is going to work out just fine."

"Oh? Is that your expert opinion?" the warrior raised her eyebrow.

"It is, actually," Mira replied. "I think the plan will go according to...uhm...plan..."

"Glad you think so," Gabrielle chuckled and placed a hand on the girl's shoulder. The warrior immediately regretted it, as the smell seemed to become more aggressive when physically provoked.

"One teeny, tiny problem, though: there's, like, a ton of soldiers in the streets and everyone's on edge," she said.

"Tons of soldiers?" Gabrielle became serious. "What do you mean?"

Mira ran a hand through her chestnut hair. "There are soldiers walking around everywhere. I'm not sure why, really. I think there was a fire or fight or both last night."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Great..."

"I don't see how this changes anything," Mira shrugged. "It's not like it was any less dangerous before."

"But now the whole idea is becoming stupid, Mira. Not to mention suicidal."

"But unavoidable, I'm afraid. The execution is tomorrow," said Virgil. "We have to do this tonight."

Gabrielle and Virgil were lost in thought. Mira shook her head and threw her arms up.

"I still don't see the problem here. The soldiers aren't looking for us---well actually I don't know that for sure---but they can't possibly know we're going to break Eve and everyone out of there."

Gabrielle still looked skeptical. Mira crossed her arms, looking more determined.

"That's the element of surprise and someone told me once that that is 'an essential tool of the trade,'" she said with a hint of the warrior's dry tone and a proud smile.

"Well, I suppose that does account for something," Gabrielle nodded.

"Especially if they're amassing in response to some other threat," Virgil agreed. "Roman soldiers are pretty single minded. If we can catch them looking the other way..."

"We just might pull this off," Gabrielle smiled.

Mira puffed out her chest. "See? I told ya."

Virgil turned to Gabrielle and grinned. The warrior crossed her arms and squinted at the girl.

"How'd you get to be so smart?" she asked.

"My grandma?" the girl deadpanned.

Gabrielle shook her head.

"You ungrateful little...you've got a five second start before I send Virgil here after you...FIVE..."

Mira grinned. "Good one..."

"...Four..."

The girl looked at Virgil who stood with a wicked grin on his face.

"Uh...can't we..."

"...Three...two..."

"Ahhhhh!!"

Mira bolted into the house with Virgil soon behind. Their hoops and hollers echoed out to the peristylum. Gabrielle splashed water on her face and headed inside---quick to leave the settling surface of the cistern and the shrill and triumphant cry of an eagle behind her.

The villagers had thrown stones. They had brandished pitchforks, carried torches---it was really quite funny, when She thinks about it. She remembers how they had even chosen the wrong type of rocks to hurl at Her---it had amused Her, even at the time.

Now, She is poorly shackled, under-guarded and soon to be sentenced to death. Nothing new, really, She smirks.

Sounds in the hall indicate that the awkward routine of the jailhouse is being upset. Here comes the lynch mob, She rolls Her eyes. The door of Her cell is flung open and the tired, angry, ugly faces of several of the villagers leer at Her. Not a lynching, She decides. A beating...

Probably isn't too much to ask to just let them hit Her a little. She can send Her mind to a separate place; sever it from Her body---free it from pain.

But Her body is not as comfortable with rest, inaction---peace as Her mind is. The beating only pulls Her taut, stretching Her soul to its limit, its apex---arming it with the poison bolt that is Her instinct, Her will to survive, and the darkness that still comes so easily.

She had indulged their need to shackle Her, so they could feel safer. The time for that had passed---She would see to it that after this day, even in the brightest, most private havens of their souls, they would never find anything approaching safety again.

Broken chains become weapons as enemies often become friends. The cell that was meant to hold Her could do the same for anybody when the door was closed behind them. Power was funny that way---so fickle, so fleeting.

They scurry like rats, insects. They become afraid so quickly it is almost not worth it. Almost... She takes Her time with the ones whose faces She likes the least---tries to smash the ugliness back down their throats. Her vision becomes blurred. She doesn't need to see. Flesh yields to steel and to bone---She only proves this truth, is its dark instrument. This is Her work, Her Way.

The cell door opens and suddenly there is a shift in it all. The ugliness, the darkness has parted and a face is before Her---a beautiful and innocent face, a vision of light---of The Light. She wishes She were powerless against the nymph (for surely that is what this beauty must be)---that She could surrender, that She could rest. But for Her, surrender has always existed in one simple form---this is Her work, Her Way.

She lashes out towards the light...

The vision shattered into shards of light and darkness before Her clenched fist. She stepped back and looked at Her bleeding hand. Several pieces of glass were embedded in the knuckles.

Her quarters in the bathhouse faded into sight. A shattered mirror cast fragmented reflections of the room in the burning candlelight. Her eyes passed over the countless tiny images of Herself, the room. It was as though thousands of different worlds were open to Her through some strange portal embedded in the marble wall. She took a long, deep breath.

She had been preparing for the evening's task---Her test. The weapons had been sharpened. Her armor and cape had been readied, and She had only glanced at Herself, Her hair---Her face in the mirror. *And then...*

The flow of blood had stopped and She cleaned out the cuts on Her knuckles in a copper basin. She wrapped them snugly with a coarse piece of cotton. Her hand slipped easily into the hard leather of Her gauntlet.

Meridian trembled in its scabbard as She fastened it to Her. She seized Her helmet and stared into its polished silver faceplate, blinking at the reflection it cast.

The oubliette, the villagers, the face---more visions disguised as memories, distracting Her from the task at hand---a test within the test. She clenched Her jaw and placed the helmet on Her head, the mask over Her face. The candle went out with a sputter beneath Her hand. She was ready.

Outside the sun was setting over the crash of the ageless sea, transmuting the Tyrrhenum into smelted iron. She inhaled the charged air. She clenched Her fist. She broke into a swift run towards the north, and Rome. Daylight was crushed by night, shrinking away from the world in bruised shades of red and purple.

Darkness conquers Light---that was Her work, Her Way...

CHAPTER IX. *The Palest Light of All*

The worst part about the prison was its parsimony of light.

Perhaps it was the unique effect the light had on the eyes. Fuelled by the cheapest, most impure oils, the braziers cast a glow that failed to illuminate but rather seemed to suffocate objects. The nimbus clung to things, giving them the impression that they were formless and obscure versions of what they truly were---like shadows made of light, huddled and obscure. The eyes were unable to focus, to rest---to trust what they saw. They rolled aching in the sockets. Prisoners held their heads, temples throbbing. The physical reality of the place was now twisting their bodies into maquettes of grief and despair.

Perhaps it was because the light seemed always in the midst of death. They sat filthy and clustered beneath a constant reminder that hope was fleeting and unrealistic really, in such a place---perhaps in life as well. The braziers punished the spirit---they were an affront to everything that light was supposed to be.

While the prisoners could not rely on light, they could now draw some solace from their water and they quenched themselves in body and soul during the day. Eve waited her turn behind two men as they cupped water to their mouths with their hands. She smiled to herself. Stripped to nothing, humans still had tools. *A valuable lesson...* The men smiled at her as they walked away---drinking as greedily from this sign of hope as they had seconds earlier from their curled palms.

Eve soaked a shred of fabric in the basin. She had torn a piece of the Egyptian linen from her robe and was now using it to carry water to some of the weaker prisoners. It worked well enough.

It had been a restless day for everyone, and even now close to midnight, many shifted in the darkness. The weight of incarceration had finally begun to press upon them, settling like a coat of oily soot. Eve had been unable to sleep as well. She palmed the rag, careful to not spill a drop as she made her way across the cell.

The news hadn't surprised her. Romans liked to take care of their business as quickly as possible---so it was

no shock that she and the rest were to be crucified the next morning.

Eve smiled wistfully. *Like mother, like daughter...*

She made her way back to where the boy was. Joshua stood when he saw her approaching. They exchanged a quick glance, and then she knelt beside the prone form of a woman. Eve placed her palm upon the woman's brow, as much a caress as a way to determine the course of a fever. The woman's eyes fluttered open.

"Drink, Analea," Eve whispered.

Analea parted her shivering lips. With a squeeze, Eve let the water drip into the woman's mouth. When she had finished drinking, she gave Eve a glassy-eyed look of thanks.

"Rest now."

Joshua shifted, turning his body away and rubbing at his eyes. Eve touched his cheek. He looked down at Analea and then pleadingly to Eve. She sighed.

"I don't know if I can, Joshua."

"But...you...the water..."

Eve smiled sadly. "I'm afraid it's taken a lot out of me."

Joshua's shoulders sank.

"I didn't say I wouldn't try," she smiled.

The boy's look brightened somewhat, but remained empathetic and deep. "How do you do it? How do you not give up?"

Eve sighed. There it was, the question. It was never quite the same, but just as rivers flowing from divided and different lands can empty into the same ocean---it inevitably led to the same answer. She knew that by sharing the answer, the Word, she would change their lives---for better or for worse.

Eve kneeled, she took the damp shred and dabbed it across Analea's forehead. "It's simple---and yet... complicated," she smiled.

Joshua furrowed his brow.

"*Love*, Joshua. Love is the key," Eve said. "Love for everyone and everything. Love for the wicked and cruel as much as for the strong and the brave, the gentle and the weak."

He pondered this. "Doesn't sound that hard..."

"It's the first and most important teaching of Eli---and that is how I can do it and how I can go on. But healing is special," she indicated Analea. "To heal you have to strip away all desire, still your mind and heart---you must become pure love."

Joshua nodded.

"It's not easy," she smiled benevolently.

The boy looked at her. "That is why it is so powerful, I would imagine."

Again, such wisdom... Eve furrowed her brow and nodded. "Yes."

Analea groaned feebly. Joshua looked to her. "Why isn't she getting better?"

Eve sighed. "She drank too much of the tainted water. The water I blessed has limited healing powers."

She knelt beside Analea again. Her mind already ridding itself of needless things, stripping useless thoughts away like tattered garments, throwing aside emotional clutter.

"Now you need to heal her directly," Joshua whispered---a statement.

"Yes..."

The healing litany began, like a long journey, one movement at a time. Stacked upon itself, striding forward, gaining momentum---the words conflating, bleeding into one single power within her. Then spilling like a pulse, a heartbeat flooding out again into the world, the universe, renewed.

Eve placed her hand upon Analea's burning brow. She felt the sickness, black, coiled like a coal-colored thread throughout the woman's body---choking every part of her. She let the words pass over her---breath over a spark.

Then she could feel it, flowing down her arms, through her hands, into the woman's body. The light began to devour the sickness, burning it off. It pushed hungrily through fevered flesh, storming, conquering. Eve was always surprised at the ferocity of Heaven's power, its terrifying strength. It was the force that moved all things, and inexorable in its purest form---the Light of Love. It had taken her some time to quell her fear of it.

Joshua watched Eve intently. Her face betrayed neither success nor failure, although he could feel powerful energies at work. He placed his hand on her shoulder.

Eve felt the light begin to ebb, the fever gaining strength. She held on as best as she could, but knew what the outcome would be. Analea's temperature began to rise again. Eve intensified the meditations.

Suddenly a power swept through her, strengthened her---overtook her. It pulsed strongly down her arms and into the sick woman. The power scoured her with its purity, crushed her with its immensity. She fought hard not to let it claim her---to take her home---it would be so easy.

She could only guide it through Analea's body. The black fever melted away quickly. Almost as soon as it began, it was over. The power dissipated, receded, leaving Eve exhausted. She slumped forward, biting her lip as she covered her face in her hands---a veil of flesh. She sighed. It felt as though a veil, a shell was all that she was now, her grief hollowing her out.

"Are you alright?" Joshua asked, his hands helping her stay upright.

"Just a little drained...I'll be okay...Analea?"

"She's fine...she's awake."

Eve opened her eyes and saw Analea sitting up, looking tired and a little shocked, but well. They smiled at one another.

"You should rest," Joshua said, and then smiled at Eve. "Both of you."

"I will," Eve whispered. She rubbed her eyes, puzzled. It had been apparent that she had not the strength to heal Analea and that something or someone had intervened---had lent its energy. *But what? Who?*

She sneered at the futility of the act. She had somehow saved Analea only to have her killed upon a cross. Eve sighed, resting against the wall. She looked out into the cell.

A part of her, detached from this, laughed in revelation. She had always thought The Light of Heaven a force she channeled down through herself, but it was no such thing---not when experiencing it as she had. Another laugh---*how arrogant she had been!* Eve had only ever used the Light present in herself, in everyone, a sliver of the divine---the spark---but this now was the flame that birthed the spark, the fire itself threatening to strip her from herself. The power had not come from within her. It had rained down upon her. It had filled her, warmed her, and spilled forth like lava from a rent in the earth.

Joshua helped Analea settle into her spot on the floor. He smiled peacefully down at her. Eve furrowed her brow. The light pouring down into the cell seemed to reflect rather than cling to objects around them now---peeling away like the dried husk of a cocoon, leaving something tender and unspoiled behind.

The moonlight drifted blindly beneath the canopy of cypresses and pines, wending its way like a sleepless child through a darkened home. Gabrielle knelt at the forest's edge and looked out across the pavilion. The temple to Julius Caesar appeared to be free of activity---mute and obscure in the night. The warrior focused her breathing, compensating for the silk mask that covered her face and head.

The way in would be easy. She would take it in three quick bursts---to the garden, to the shadows beside the worker's tents, and into the unfinished window at the west side of the building. Gabrielle had observed only two patrols in the entire candlemark since her arrival---it would be simple for her to synchronize her movements to their infrequent rounds.

Once inside the temple, things became slightly more complicated...

The warrior moved a finger over the edge of her chakram. How she ended up volunteering to create the diversion in all of this, she would never understand. She smiled and shook her head.

It had been Mira's idea, of course, one that the warrior had disagreed with almost immediately. The girl had never been the spearhead of anything this dangerous before. Gabrielle had dismissed the plan without much tact.

"It's a stupid idea, Mira."

The girl's hands had shot to her hips in a defensive posture. *"No, it isn't. Think about it: you're a warrior, I'm a...well...I was a thief. Which skills are gonna be more useful when you have to sneak into a place,*

pick some locks and bust a bunch of people out of prison?"

"It's a prison crawling with Roman soldiers."

"So? If I do my job right, they'll never know I was there."

The two of them stood glaring at each other without a sound. Virgil stepped forward.

"Umm...she may have a point, Gabrielle."

Mira crossed her arms and smirked in triumph. The warrior didn't relent.

"You haven't done anything like this before and I don't think you're ready yet."

Mira stepped forward. *"You're the one who isn't ready!"*

"I'm not?" Gabrielle had allowed herself a moment of pride-fueled incredulousness.

Virgil leaned forward just as surprised. *"She's not?"*

The girl nodded. *"That's right: she's not. I staked out that place all day. The best way in is through the sewer. That means you have to be able to squeeze into some pretty tight spots. Believe me---I squeezed through 'em personally."*

Gabrielle realized where this was going. *"And with my broken ribs, I could never do it..."*

"That's right," Mira finished.

The warrior smiled as she remembered. Mira's potential was beyond even what the girl herself realized. Still, Gabrielle was worried that this task was beyond her skills---beyond all of theirs.

She also recalled what Virgil had said earlier that day---about eternity.

The guards passed out of sight and Gabrielle darted soundlessly from the tree line. She enjoyed the opportunity for a late night sprint, savoring the breeze that flowed easily through the black of her stealth silks, the gauze of her cowl. Within seconds she had traversed the several hundred-yard clearing between the forest and the quiet garden. She came to rest silently against a peach tree.

The collection of exotic flowers and fruit trees encompassed a relatively small patch of land in the middle of the grand Imperial Pavilion. Typical of all things Roman, even nature's simple beauty was conquered and presented as spoils of war. Gabrielle sighed. Sweet aromas came to her---lilac, jasmine, honeysuckle, cherry and orange blossom---singing with unfurled tongues their perfumed lullabies.

She became still, losing herself---sublimated into the night. Crickets lamented from amphitheatres of grass or dirt. Birds rustled puffed feathers in their sleep, between dreams of the world passing below and the freedom of the heavens. The trees kept a dutiful and stern watch over it all, creaking occasionally, weary and wise with their unfathomable age.

Gabrielle smirked at what a contrast she was, hidden within such a delicate gathering of plant life and nature.

The majority of flowers had their petals closed---asleep, but a few were blooming, gaping like cats' eyes in the night. The warrior tried to adjust her vision to discern the colors of the nocturnal plants. She regulated her breathing again. She couldn't recall the last time she had taken the time to admire a flower. She sighed, and then burst quietly from the garden and sprinted toward the cluster of worker's tents.

A quick appraisal showed that her way was clear. She slid softly into the shadows nearby. She closed her eyes and let her ears search the night for signs of nearby life. The workers rested inside their coarse tents, snoring and wheezing but not stirring. Gabrielle readied herself for the next sprint.

Just as she was about to break into a run, a man emerged suddenly and silently from a tent. The warrior froze in the shadows, fingers on her chakram. The worker relieved himself groggily and returned to his bed, unaware. She exhaled as quietly as she could.

She rubbed her brow. She hadn't heard the man. The warrior shook her head. *Getting too old for this...*

Mira and Virgil had not probed Gabrielle's earlier objections, dismissing them as concerns about the girl's lack of experience. The warrior knew differently. In fact, she despised herself for the reasons.

The way of the warrior left little room for errors---mistakes of the mind, body or soul could easily become deadly ones. Here she was committing all three. Gabrielle cursed inwardly.

She had objected to Mira spearheading the jailbreak simply out of pride, and her own biased opinion that deferring might just be admitting...

I don't have what it takes anymore...

She clenched her fist. *Damn, Ares.* She couldn't afford to waste time with self-loathing and doubt now. She needed to focus.

How had She done it?

How had She kept it all in check?

Maybe She hadn't...

The window stood open, empty---as enigmatic and uncertain as a mouth about to utter a poem, a curse, or a confession. Gabrielle sprinted straight for it, launching herself through its black jaws. She executed a smooth roll on the hard marble floor inside, landing in a battle stance, her katana ready.

The room was unfinished, empty. A pile of lumber gathered dust in the corner---pine by the smell of it. Gabrielle sheathed her sword and moved to the doorway. The hall outside was quiet and dark. She jogged silently down it.

The warrior paused at a corner, peeking her head around it. A heavily armored guard stood just around the turn, his back to her. He was guarding the entrance to a large chamber that opened up beyond him. Gabrielle readied the muscles throughout her body, particularly the ones near her ribs. *Not perfect, but here goes...*

She lunged forward and in one motion thrust her foot into the tendons behind the Roman's knee, causing him to buckle to one side while she gripped him tightly around the head. The warrior then anchored herself and

allowed the momentum of the soldier's fall to break his own neck as she held his head in place. His helmet had not dropped. She dragged him to a dusty smelling spot nearby. With the body concealed, the warrior moved back down the hall towards the chamber.

The foyer opened into a vaulted expanse several stories tall. The dust that floated throughout the perpetually evolving temple dissipated into this dramatic void. Two winding staircases led up to a plain looking hallway. Another hall on the ground floor led off into vague darkness. Gabrielle heard voices coming from a small passageway directly across from where she was. She sprinted for the doorway on the ground floor.

Gabrielle darted into a shadowed alcove. She needed to figure out what she was going to use as a diversion. *Maybe they've got a couple of barrels of Greek fire lying around unattended...*

She made her way down the hall, sticking to the shadows as best as she could. The unmistakable sound of marching Roman armor could be heard approaching. Gabrielle thrust herself into a deep doorjamb, her fingers on the handle. Soon three soldiers rounded the corner. She cursed softly behind the mask. Three would be loud---not loud enough to be considered a diversion, though. *Just enough to get caught...* The warrior quietly turned the doorknob and backed into the room.

She spun as she shut the door behind---a soft chorus of feminine gasps, incredulous peeps and even several surprised giggles erupted from the far side of the room. Gabrielle went pale before she realized what was going on. The room was filled with a scantily clad collection of about a dozen women. Entertainment for the soldiers, she surmised. The warrior breathed a sigh of relief. She indicated that the gaudy-smelling women be quiet with a finger in front of her black cowl. Many of them looked skeptical, but complied nonetheless, continuing what they had been doing before the sudden interruption.

Gabrielle listened at the door. She hoped that the Romans weren't paying their ladies a visit right now. The three soldiers soon passed in the hall and she prepared to continue along. The warrior winked roguishly at one of the younger girls, eliciting a flirtatious giggle, and dashed soundlessly into the hall.

For an unfinished temple, this place is pretty busy... She sprinted through the halls heading for what she assumed was the building's center.

She rounded a corner, still needing a diversion. *But what?*

Gabrielle halted in front of a huge doorway. Beyond was a large chamber, half-lit by braziers. She couldn't detect any guards beyond. She walked into the enormous room.

Scaffolds rose up the towering walls of much of the 400-foot wide chamber---many surrounding large marble encased pillars that spun upwards into the darkness. A large obsidian altar adorned the raised dais at one end of the room, an ornate balcony looking out over it. The ceiling was partially shrouded in shadow, and partially by hanging scaffolds. They obscured the giant relief of a man's face. The warrior continued to look around the room.

Gabrielle then stepped forward, a mischievous grin spreading across her face. At the other end of the chamber, across from the dais, stood an incomplete colossal statue of Julius Caesar, staring regally into the darkness.

"Well, here goes."

Mira jimmied the heavy sewer cover open with her pry bar. She placed it carefully to the side. Taking a final look at the plaza around the silent Circus Maximus, she dropped into the darkness.

The fetid stink of the sewer filled her nose and it became a brutal struggle to hold back a retch. She shook her head. *I'm seeing way too much of Rome for my tastes...*

Her eyes adjusted to the pale light cast by intermittent torches. The brick tunnel descended gradually to the northeast. Mira focused and then moved quietly into the sewer.

The passageway was circular, and roughly 30 feet in diameter. She stepped along a raised walkway that overlooked the seep of the sewage trench. The sound of flowing water echoed in her ears. She continued slowly along for about ten minutes.

It was distressing to Mira how quickly a person could become accustomed to ungodly stench. She no longer wore a sneer of disgust on her face---let alone the slightly hunched posture of imminent nausea she had for the first little bit. It reminded her of the time she was sent by her grandma to help out on Uncle Joris' chicken farm. She shivered at the recollection. Mira still couldn't stomach poultry---or at least avoided it whenever possible. She sighed in resignation.

Up ahead, the drainage tunnel connected with a larger, main sewer line. Even over the rush of water, Mira could hear voices---men singing, actually. Mira recognized the tune; it was an old Greek folk song. She crept forward, keeping nestled within the abundance of shadows.

The large, round chamber was about 150 feet in diameter. The water from the tunnel fell into what was essentially a large underground river, 20 feet beneath Mira. She could see tunnels similar to the one she hid within, throughout the large sewer. There were two men standing in a boat, listlessly drifting upon the river. They spoke loudly to one another as they poked at the murky water with long poles.

"I can't even guess what *that* was..."

"It's just a bit of garbage," the other said admonishingly. "Y'know, Democles, you should have mentioned that you had a woman's stomach before you took this job."

"Very funny," Democles shouted sarcastically. "I only took this job 'cause you said we'd make some good coin doing it. *Remember?*"

"How was I supposed to know that 'a strong knowledge of sailing required' meant anything resembling this?"

"BAH!" Democles waved at his companion dismissively.

"Bah, yourself."

Mira rolled her eyes. How long were these jokers going to be here? They continued to poke at the water in silence. One of them jumped nervously and began jabbing frantically into the sewage.

"Ya see! Now *that* wasn't just a bit of garbage, Alymachus!"

"Aw, c'mon!" Alymachus helped poke into the water.

"Damn! I hate this place," Democles spat.

His friend patted him on the shoulder. "We're a long way from home, huh?"

He nodded. "From my family. This place is full of freaks. It's burning up. Everything they eat has that fish sauce on it. I float around in a sewer shoveling shit all day. I smell horrible. I feel horrible. And the kicker is: it's not like they pay me all that much money. Most of it goes to living in this gods' forsaken place. I need a break..."

Mira scowled, shaking her head. "Go...take a break...get outta here, already..."

Alymachus nodded. "Okay...let's take a break. We should go check out that new tunnel they're working on..."

They began to drift off down the river. Mira began to climb down to the lip on the sewer's edge. That had been a serious waste of time. She had half-expected Gabrielle's diversion to get underway while she was skulking around in the dark and stinky.

Mira had to enter a smaller tunnel to find a place to leap across the putrid river. She made her way back into the large chamber and began to climb up a slimy wall. The girl had to move a lot faster than she would have liked---time was wasting.

Losing her footing several times on the viscous brickwork, she finally lifted herself up into a side chamber. Sewer water flowed past her and out into the river of sludge. She jogged down the side of the passage, into the vague and pungent darkness.

Arriving at a small crossroads, she took a breath. She shook the kinks out of her joints and walked slowly up the ascending left passage. She counted her painstakingly equal steps.

When she had counted up to 183, she stopped. Above her was a sewer opening and light could be seen feebly spilling downward. Within the opening, there were the rungs of a ladder and Mira began to hoist herself upwards toward the torchlight.

At the top of the climb was a grated sewer cover. About two feet above it lay another larger grate, beyond which lay the prison beneath Caesar's temple. Mira carefully pulled out the pry bar and began removing the cover. Soon she had it pushed aside and she carefully slipped herself into the drainage trough between the upper grating and the tunnel she had just climbed up.

I'd like to see someone with broken ribs do this... she smirked to herself, as she slithered on her belly through an inch of sludge. What had been the warrior's problem, anyway? True, Gabrielle was always reluctant to give up the reins, but this time had seemed different somehow. There should've been no argument, no resistance from the little control freak. Mira couldn't figure it out. It wasn't just Eve's imprisonment either--it seemed to lurk deeper within the woman. Maybe it had something to do with those dreams she keeps having...

Soon Mira was in complete darkness, squeezed between the two levels. She continued to inch forward, counting her movements---desperately maintaining her concentration and suppressing the desire to start

screaming and crying uncontrollably. Small things, crawly things rushed past her in the black constriction of the gutter. She bit her tongue and counted.

Ahead of her a light began to materialize. At first she thought she had hallucinated it, but soon realized that she was approaching her destination---the ditch beneath the cells. She crawled faster, the light growing stronger in intensity.

A shrill mechanical sound began, as of wheels turning and chains grinding. Mira froze as the light was suddenly cut off from her by what appeared to be some kind of door sliding shut. She punched its metal surface futilely as she realized the sheer magnitude of her entrapment.

Tears poured from her eyes and she almost put her face down into the muck. She took a deep breath. *Okay, I can get out of this...just got to think...*

The pipe suddenly resonated with another more menacing and dreadful noise. Mira's heart sank as she realized what it was. It was the sound of the pipeline being flushed with gallons of rushing water.

Gabrielle decided that the sculptor of the statue had never met Julius Caesar. While capturing the ruler's likeness admirably, they had failed to bring out the true essence of the man. The lip wasn't curled in that self-impressed little smirk he used to wear; the eyes were lacking that terrifying coldness, or the irrational ambition. Caesar's face wasn't provoking the response it used to from the warrior---she merely wanted to knock the statue over, not visit any sort of insane violence upon it.

She tried to figure out the best way to do it. The statue was unfinished and appeared to still need some help in standing upright. Supports were being constructed, most of the weight being carried by temporary wooden and steel reinforced scaffolding.

Gabrielle ran her thumb along the chakram's edge. One well placed throw and this whole thing would fall flat on its face. She grinned impishly.

The smell of burning incense floated through the air. Gabrielle sighed, turning around. The altar was covered with offerings of fruit and meat. Votive candles burned. Gifts of animal skins, leatherwork and jewelry crowned Caesar's trove.

Gabrielle shook her head. As she became older, people made less and less sense to the warrior. *Especially Romans...* The people had assassinated Caesar because he had thought himself a god. Now a few decades later, they erected a temple and offered devotions and sacrifices as though he had been right.

This type of capriciousness wasn't an exclusively Roman trait. She had observed the fickle waywardness of humanity all of her life, and all over the world. The warrior in her saw it as a weakness, an undoing---civilization's ultimate downfall.

The bard within her wasn't sure. Maybe the ability to change and seek out different options was the beginnings of the revolution that could actually change the world for the better---the revolution that would allow love to conquer all.

That seemed to be what Eli and then Eve had always believed---and she had too, for a time. Maybe she still

did...

She looked up into the huge eyes of Caesar's gargantuan statue. She sighed. *Then again...*

It seemed that only the worst qualities conquered death---that had any permanence. She had survived enough battlefields to know that, had seen enough tyrants, had lost enough---had watched pieces of herself shrivel, grow cold, disappear. To beat death one had to become like it: hard, cold, merciless. She sighed.

Gabrielle tilted her head and began to search for the weak points in the support structure. *Wouldn't take much of a throw, really...* The bard inside smiled at the symbolism behind the whole thing. It was the perfect diversion---and not a bad way to work out some very personal demons.

She straightened suddenly. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She was being watched from above---from somewhere in the hanging scaffolding. Gabrielle took a cautious step backwards, flexing her muscles to readiness.

Maybe that woman...from the night before?

Something drifted menacingly to the floor behind her---as if upon giant wings. The warrior turned.

The first thing Gabrielle noticed was the woman's cape---an ethereal scarlet, as though dyed with blood and ash, coming to rest behind her. She was tall and equipped with simple, though masterfully crafted armor breastplate, grieves and gauntlets---all hewn from purest silver. Her ringed mail skirt ended short, leaving her strong legs bare, with hard leather sandals covering her feet. Upon her head she wore a striking helm and hiding most of her features was a plain silver faceplate.

In a soft, almost loving motion, the tall woman drew an ominous looking blade from behind her. The warrior blinked, adjusting her cowl---wondering if this were a dream. She wasn't sure, but the sword's aspect seemed mutable, or perhaps it was the fleeting firelight of the temple.

Only the woman's full lips were visible to the warrior, were truly real. They appeared to be ready to move, to talk.

Gabrielle spoke before the woman could utter a word.

"I know who you are."

She drew her katanna.

Keeping her head above water was becoming increasingly difficult. To be fair, there was not much to work with, and the crawlspace was already half full. Something frantic splashed desperately past her in the pitch black.

This didn't happen the last time I was here...

Mira's fear was a tourniquet wrapped around her torso, squeezing breath from her lungs. Panic bled into the fringes of everything, blinding her more profoundly than the flooding darkness. She didn't know for how long she had been clawing hysterically at the top of the chamber.

She had to think clearly. Thoughts and feelings threatened to shut her down, to stop her from acting and just embrace the sweet bliss of white panic. She was soaked but knew she was crying. Water occasionally poured into her mouth and she fought not to vomit. She kept wanting to apologize to everyone she had ever known---for what reason, she didn't know. She remembered being afraid one moonless night in the rolling hills of Britannia and Gabrielle placing a hand on her shoulder---the impressions of the warrior's face, pouring from the dying firelight had made her realize what having a mother might feel like. She had never thanked her friend. Mira desperately continued to scratch at the sides of the pipe.

There was a possibility that the pipe wouldn't fill completely with water---but she couldn't take the chance. She started to calm herself. Mira moved toward the recently closed portal, hoping to find a way to pop it open.

Another metallic slam echoed through the pipe. Mira breathed a sigh of relief as it appeared that the water was beginning to slow its flood. She took a deep breath and prepared to renew her mission. *I think I'll just keep this one to myself...*

Suddenly there was a lurch and a powerful jet of water sprayed through the pipe. It was flooding even quicker now, flowing in a constant stream.

"You've got to be kidding me!"

Mira found that the spray was pushing her back down the pipe, and she had to claw at the sides just to keep from being blown away. This became increasingly difficult, as she had to turn to face the ceiling to continue getting oxygen from the small air pocket left at the top of the rapidly filling cylinder. As she raked her fingernails along the lead of the pipe, she could feel the pocket shrinking.

Then she was being carried rapidly through the churning rush of water. The current wrenched her forward and she prepared to be smashed into the end of the pipe, or drowned somewhere under the city. *Nice one, Mira...*

All at once she was sucked downward and spit out an opening she didn't remember existing before. There was no time ponder this, as she was falling through the air into darkness. She threw her hands out blindly and was rewarded---a rung of a service ladder smacked her hand. She was able to grab its lower twin and end her descent. The gallons of water plummeted around her, battering her. It required all of her strength to keep herself affixed to the ladder like a burr.

Then the deluge ended. Soaked and rancid smelling, Mira raised her head upward. She could make out the drainage hatch that had opened into this chamber; it hung pale in the darkness about 20 feet above her. She began to climb the ladder wearily.

Another sound of metal grating upon metal echoed in the darkness. Mira rolled her eyes. *What now?* She squinted up. The exit was disappearing---the hatch flipping closed slowly.

"Aw, no way!"

Quickly looking around, Mira noticed ladder rungs leading up on the other side of the pipe. She launched herself upward and across, landing upon the opposite side. Then back across and higher still. The hatch continued to close. Just as Mira prepared to make the final spring to safety, she slipped slightly and misfired

the jump. She desperately stretched out her fingers and managed to grip the closing hatch. With a quick vault, she swung herself into the pipe above.

It was a full minute before Mira felt safe enough to release an official sigh of relief. She lay on her belly in the freshly flushed crawlspace. With a shake of her head, she crawled forward toward her goal.

As she suspected, the recently closed-off section of the pipe was open again. The light of the cellblock's drainage ditch trickled down into the pipe. She slithered toward it. She had seen enough of Rome's technological mastery for one day... *More like one lifetime...*

Soon she was directly in the light. She rolled onto her back, and stared up through the grate. An empty chamber opened up above, and a steady drip could be heard. She pulled out some tools and began removing the iron grill.

Within a minute, Mira was in the room above. The stench of the drainage ditch was less intense than the rest of the sewer had been. As a result, her own putrescence became more pronounced.

"Man, I stink..."

She looked around her. An iron door was the only way in or out of the chamber. *So one would think...* Mira looked up. A large, rusted pipe disappeared into the ceiling above. Water dripped and occasionally trickled from it. From her first visit to this part of the temple, she had figured out that the pipe was the drain for the water source in the prison cell. By putting her ear to the pipe she had heard voices, and within minutes, had figured out that the voices were those of the Elians.

Now all I have to do is to figure out how to get them down here...

She lit a small piece of tinder, pulled herself into the cylinder and crawled along at a tentative pace. The pipe soon twisted upward and she was forced to make the difficult climb. Thankfully, it wasn't long before the pipe became horizontal again. Within seconds, she came to the end of the line---the drainage grate beneath the cells. Mira peeked through it.

She could just make out several people standing, sitting, and walking around what appeared to be a completely sealed chamber. She listened carefully and was quickly able to pick out several of the voices she had heard earlier in the day.

She peered at the grate. Large bolts formed a circle around its edge. Mira rubbed her chin.

"This should be simple enough..."

She began to work on the tightly wound bolts, remaining as quiet as possible. Within a quarter of a candlemark she had them loosened. She peered up into the cell again.

"Hey!" she whispered through it, feeling a little silly afterward.

There was no answer.

"HEY!" she spoke louder this time.

Voices sounded confused and concerned from above.

"I've come to rescue you..."

"Really?" There was shuffling.

"Yes, really. I need to know how many of you are up there."

"Umm...there are 53 of us."

"Hmmm..."

This could work... There were several voices talking up there. Then a calm female voice called downwards, and Mira looked up into a familiar face.

"Hello...who is in there?"

"Oh...uh...hi, Eve. It's me. Mira."

"Mira?" the woman laughed. "How'd you..."

"No time, Eve...I'm going to remove the wash basin and then I'm going to need you to start moving through this pipe one-by-one. Quickly."

There was no answer, only sounds of shifting and movement---Eve looked away distractedly.

"Eve? Did you hear what I said?"

"I'm afraid we can't do that Mira..."

"What? Why not?"

Mira thought she heard a steady grinding noise. The prisoners in the cell were very still. Eve's voice trickled down to her in soft drops.

"The soldiers have arrived..."

The two women locked eyes in the dim light of the temple. Nemesis strode toward the smaller woman with menacing purpose, her sword held in an attacking position. She swung with a lightning fast strike that Gabrielle barely had time to avoid. The warrior back-flipped out of the arc of the attack, leaving only air for the blade to slice through.

The leap carried Gabrielle toward one of the large marble pillars, which she expertly bounced from with a powerful thrust of her legs. She aimed a fierce kick at her opponent's helmeted head. The caped assassin blocked the attack with her sword arm, and unleashed a brutal, open-palmed punch straight for the warrior's ribs.

Gabrielle barely had time to protect her injuries, twisting her shoulder into the painful strike---spinning around

in mid-air from the force of the blow. She landed on her feet and slashed down with the katana. Nemesis parried strongly, the clash of the two blades causing sparks to erupt with a flash of light.

Neither woman disengaged, each testing the other through the thin connection of their weapons. Nemesis was stronger than the warrior, but with effort Gabrielle was able to use her low center of balance to keep their swords locked. The caped woman's blade seemed to pulse as though it were alive, throwing off Gabrielle's reactions slightly. Sweat beaded under her silk mask. Her muscles strained against the larger woman's inhuman strength.

Gabrielle's gaze went to her opponent's eyes. While often criticized for this---the sword the more important focus---the warrior had always been able to learn much about her adversaries through their eyes. She had won countless duels in this manner. Locked in their desperate standoff, it was difficult for Gabrielle to find the assassin's eyes set deep in the woman's helmet. She only caught glimpses of herself, reflected cruelly upon the metal.

All at once, Nemesis broke contact and backed off. The caped woman moved confidently around the warrior, circling like a panther. She took a couple of mock swings, cutting the air with the dark sword. Gabrielle remained in a defensive stance, stepping cautiously.

This is not good, the warrior thought. She began to worry about being discovered by the Romans. It was bad enough she was engaged in a life and death struggle with Nemesis, having to deal with a roomful of legionnaires would only make things worse. More importantly, the whole plan, the Elians, Eve---*Mira* was relying on her. She needed to cause the diversion---and *now*.

Without warning, Nemesis attacked again, this time low to the ground. Gabrielle parried, raising her opponent into a quick redirected attack, which she also parried. The warrior then unleashed a swift combination of counterstrikes that put the larger woman on the defensive. Soon they were locked into a seemingly endless flurry of attacks and parries---their blades connecting so often and so quickly they emitted a single, unwavering tone that resonated throughout the chamber.

Gabrielle began backing herself away from the assassin, moving toward one of the marble pillars. Part of her marveled at the unparalleled skill of her adversary---she had seen nothing like it in many years.

In twelve years, to be exact...

The warrior sensed the pillar directly behind and shifted her attack slightly, hoping to go on the offensive. Nemesis easily redirected Gabrielle's swings against her, shifting the smaller woman off balance. The assassin unleashed a wide swing threatening to cleave the warrior at the waist. Gabrielle barely rolled out of the way in time---the dark blade humming over her and sinking halfway through the marble pillar, as easily as if it were flesh.

Gabrielle rolled to her feet and took a blind stab at the caped woman. Nemesis had anticipated the attack and kicked the warrior hard in the thigh, following it with a close-fisted backhand to the jaw---knocking the smaller woman to the ground.

Even though her ears rang, her head spun and her stomach lurched, Gabrielle was still able to taste the blood pouring into her mouth. Tears filled her eyes. Nemesis moved towards her, sword ready.

Pushing the dizziness away, Gabrielle attempted a desperate leg sweep. Nemesis cleanly leaped over the

warrior's leg, her cape billowing with a snap. She trained her blade on the spinning woman. Gabrielle used the momentum of her sweep to spin herself into a series of cartwheels. The assassin thrust into the ground too late.

Gabrielle jumped up onto some nearby scaffolding; hoping she could get a bead on the statue and get a shot off with her chakram. She climbed higher. Nemesis was close behind the warrior, stepping onto the first level of the structure.

From where she was, Gabrielle couldn't be sure she could make the shot. There was too much in the way, and she couldn't make out all of her targets. She climbed higher still, knowing that soon she would have to face the inevitable---the dark blade and the darker soul that wielded it.

"Aw...come on...where is it? Come on! Come on!"

Mira had crawled speedily back down the pipe, opened the large iron door and was frantically searching the musty hallway beyond for something, anything to stop or even delay what was going on upstairs. She didn't have much time, either. If she didn't hurry this entire rescue would be completely pointless.

"There you are!"

While she wasn't sure what exactly she had discovered, Mira could surmise that whatever lay behind the iron wall panel had something to do with the large prison cell directly above. She went to work on its covering, moving with blinding speed that, if she had the time, would have even impressed her.

The open panel revealed a complex gear and pulley mechanism. Mira rubbed her chin---an unconscious habit she had developed whenever she was being crafty. Her guess was that all of this stuff was part of the cell's security door.

All of a sudden there was a low and loud rumble from upstairs. Then, a second later there was a ground shivering crash. Mira slapped her forehead. *The diversion!*

The girl took a quick and careful look at everything in front of her. She was just going to have to go with her instincts. Thrusting her hands in, Mira shifted some of the gears and the mechanism sprang to life. It grated swiftly for a moment and then slammed to a stop.

"Well...that seemed to work," Mira said, not entirely convinced.

She ran back through the iron door and scrambled up the pipe. When she got to the grating under the cell, she quickly removed the loosened bolts and sprang through the opening into the room---ready for battle. She blinked with curiosity at the scene she happened upon.

The door to the cell was shut and sealed. Two Roman guards lay unconscious on the floor with a group of the Elians standing around them. Eve was softly speaking to them in reassuring tones.

"...And that is what is known as 'the Greater Good,'" she finished. The Elians nodded in understanding.

"Uh...hi, Eve...I'm...uh...here to rescue you guys..." Mira waved awkwardly.

Eve smiled. "And I'd say you've done an excellent job, too. After that large commotion, most of the soldiers left. That's when the door locked shut and we...*disabled* these two."

Mira stood proudly. "Uh...that's exactly what I had planned," she lied.

Eve grinned, then turned to the Elians. "Once again, we have been delivered from darkness by the light..." She winked at the girl. "And Mira, of course."

Mira laughed. Just then she spied Joshua. He was trying to get her attention. *The little goof!* She had more important things to worry about right now than saying hi, or whatever.

"Follow me," she said heroically.

They made their way one at a time through the pipe and down into the sewers. Mira stood around impatiently, waiting for them all to emerge. There were so many Elians and not a natural sewer rat among them.

Making their way back through the various tight squeezes and crawl spaces was harrowing and exhausting work. Mira led the large group diligently through the stench and darkness. Soon they were following her down the long and winding tunnel to what Mira hoped was the Circus Maximus and freedom. Eve and Joshua were right behind. The boy moved up beside her.

"I'm impressed," he grinned.

Mira managed a distant look at him and then stared ahead again. She was pretty sure she didn't blush, or at least, not in a shade that would be in any way detectable in this light.

"Yeah, well...it was no big deal, really," she shrugged.

"I'm sure," Joshua smirked. "Still...thanks."

"It's not too far now." Mira glanced sideways at the boy. "Are...are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, yeah I'm fine." He smiled. "Prison agrees with me...I...uh...I just don't agree with it."

Mira rolled her eyes.

"Bad joke, I know," he shrugged. "Wouldn't hurt you to smile, though."

"Actually, there's something wrong with my face, so it actually does hurt me to smile," she said.

"Oh! I'm...god...I'm so sorry..."

Mira couldn't contain herself any longer and spit out a laugh. "Gotcha."

Joshua shook his head and grinned from ear to ear. "Very crafty. Very sly."

"Comes with the territory."

"I see."

They came to the opening that led up to the street. Mira pointed up at the portal.

"This is it," the girl smiled.

Mira climbed up the malodorous tube and crawled into the street. *Hopefully there weren't going to be any more surprises...*

She spotted a torch being waved frantically at her from behind a building across the street. Mira motioned for the others to quickly follow her across the road and to the light. The torch led them behind a building into a gully that wound clumsily toward the Tiberus. Virgil stood holding the torch, ankle-deep in mud. As they arrived, the poet smiled a greeting.

"Right on time, Mira. Well done."

"Thanks," she smiled. Then frowned as she looked around.

Virgil noticed and grinned. "Everything is just over the rise. You'll see." He stepped happily over to the emerging Elians, sneaking up behind one. "And hello, EVE!" He grabbed her and lifted her into the air, much to the shock of the already stressed Elians. She laughed as he spun her around into a hug.

"Hello, Virgil." She glanced around the ditch. "I see your taste in haunts hasn't changed."

He chuckled. "Neither has your idea of a good time."

Mira crossed her arms. "Uh...hi people...escaping *HERE*."

"Right," Virgil nodded. "This way."

Mira, Eve and Virgil crested out of the gully. Mira quickly got her bearings. They were standing behind a row of low buildings in a lot sparsely covered by dusty smelling scrub. The city rose around them as they were to the southwest of the Palatine. She glanced around and stopped upon what she realized was their transport.

"Nice, Virgil..."

Grazing in the dry grass were about 12 skinny donkeys and the poet's own team hitched to his wagon.

"Real nice."

"Hey...it's the best I could do!" Virgil crossed his arms in mild irritation. "Besides...there's nothing more reliable than a donkey!"

Eve shrugged at Mira. "Never trust a man to do a woman's job." She turned and went to gather everyone.

The girl rubbed her eyes. "This is gonna suck..."

Gabrielle sprang up onto another level of scaffolding with Nemesis still on her heels. She fired the chakram down at her relentless foe. With a simple gesture, the assassin brought her blade up to parry the attack. Ringing shrilly, the chakram separated into its two halves and arced outward---soon swinging back on return trajectories. Nemesis closed on the warrior. She batted aside the two sections with little effort and they spun away, linking somewhere high over the temple floor and heading back toward Gabrielle. Nemesis continued to draw near.

Gabrielle turned on the penultimate level of scaffolding, just as her enemy leaped to attack. The warrior parried a wicked overhead chop, but her knees soon buckled as Nemesis began to force her to the ground. She looked into the masked face of her opponent, unable to see the shaded eyes. The woman's lips had barely changed from a determined straight line.

Gabrielle's ears began to ring, or at least she thought they did---then she remembered the chakram on its return course. She fell away from its path. Nemesis turned in surprise and blindly brought her blade up to parry. The chakram deflected sharply into the scaffolding, passing through the structure with enough force to damage the supports and continue toward the ground below. The large series of platforms lurched ominously then pitched sharply, tossing the adversaries off their feet and from the structure.

The warrior threw out her hand desperately to save herself, miraculously gripping a steel beam that held her weight. She rolled her eyes. Really *getting too old for this...*

Nemesis had gripped a nearby support and the two women hung nearly sixty feet above the temple floor. The assassin swung her sword with a free hand. Gabrielle parried, the force of the blow causing her to veer back violently. The larger woman swung again. Gabrielle tucked herself into a tight ball allowing the attack to pass below, her ribs searing painfully from the strain of the contortion.

With a powerful chop, Nemesis attacked the scaffold near Gabrielle. It lurched, jarring the warrior dangerously back and forth. Using the sway, the smaller woman pitched herself up toward her enemy. She vaulted off of the assassin's shoulders into the air, closing the gap between herself and the labyrinthine scaffolding that covered the ceiling. Landing gracefully, she sheathed her katana and pulled herself into the hanging maze.

She climbed quickly through the beams. There was no way she could win this by strength and skill alone. She squeezed silently into a small wooden nook that was used to store worker's tools. Her breathing was slightly labored.

Nemesis leaped effortlessly onto the suspended scaffolding. Sheathing her blade, she quickly slithered up into the structure, moving with the fluid grace of a holy predator. Her breathing remained controlled, still.

From where she hid, Gabrielle could faintly see the great eye of the giant face that stared down from the ceiling above her. She shook her head and tried to control her heaving breaths. Her ribs ached dully.

Ares wanted them to fail. He hadn't plagued Eve and the Elians for years now, why the sudden interest? Gabrielle licked her lips in thought; blood seeped into her mouth almost as a reminder of the God of War's taint permeating the whole affair.

Without warning there was a loud clang and the scaffolding shook ominously. It happened again. Gabrielle peaked out into the structure.

Perched on a lower beam, Nemesis struck the metal supports repeatedly with the flat of her blade. The reverberations shuddered through the framework. They rattled Gabrielle's teeth, bones---ribs. She clenched her jaw, squeezing her eyes shut.

"Okay... enough!"

Gabrielle swung herself from her hiding spot toward an iron support above Nemesis. Catching the bar with her legs, she gripped with her thighs and swung under the beam, hanging upside down---drawing her katana and attacking in one fluid movement. Nemesis half-swung, half-parried into the warrior's fierce attack, sparks showering the two of them.

They exchanged a frenzied flurry of attacks in this manner---the assassin balanced upon a beam, the warrior hanging from a higher one. Nemesis swung viciously at Gabrielle's thighs, striking the scaffold instead. The sword severed the metal and the smaller woman fell, her katana slipping from her fingers.

Gabrielle had plummeted from dangerous heights so many times that she was almost jaded by it. While lasting fractions of a second, the warrior experienced it all in unhurried, calm instants. The katana spun futilely downward. She watched it smash against a beam and spin off toward the floor far below. She twisted slightly in the air. As Nemesis turned, her cape spun after her. Gabrielle reached out into the air, her fingers stretching.

She caught the assassin's cape, swinging up with the momentum of her plummet. She aimed a kick towards the larger woman, hitting her soundly in a vulnerable spot between breastplate and skirt.

Still holding on, Gabrielle attacked from behind with a three-blow combination to the throat. The last hit caused her foe to gasp in pain. The warrior readied a stronger assault.

All at once Nemesis hit the warrior with a swift and powerful elbow to the ribs. The warrior felt herself hollowed out by the pain and white light filling the void, becoming her sole focus. She screamed, her vision blurring---it felt like someone else had done it for her, out of courtesy or odd sympathy. She felt herself begin to fall.

Somewhere between consciousness and darkness, the warrior thrust two of her fingers into the muscles of the assassin's unprotected thigh. The large woman's knee buckled and she too dropped from the scaffold. The two foes became entangled within the crimson folds of Nemesis' cape, crashing painfully through several of the metal beams.

Gabrielle waited until the last possible second to twist away from the floor, letting her opponent take the brunt of the fall. A thunderous crash marked their collision with the marble. The warrior struck soundly, even though she tucked herself into a roll. She blacked out momentarily with a long expiration of breath.

She sat upright with a start, causing her ribs to burn in pain. *Oh, this is not good at all...* With extreme effort she lifted herself to her knees, to her feet. She staggered, her head spinning violently.

Nemesis stirred, rising slowly but strongly. She got to her feet, listing slightly in front of Caesar's statue. She walked toward her fallen blade.

Gabrielle fell to one knee, scraping it painfully. Her hand slammed into the floor to support her weight---it touched cold steel. The chakram was beneath her palm, glowing in the half-light.

I guess it's now or never...

She threw the chakram, straight and true. The pain of her hurl caused her vision to tunnel, her head to spin. The blade sailed toward the statue's supports. Gabrielle fell to one knee again.

Nemesis had picked up her blade, it smoldered at her touch. The assassin stepped ominously toward the doubled-over warrior. Gabrielle looked around for her fallen katana. It lay twenty feet from her. *Much too far...*

The chakram impacted and rebounded noisily behind the statue, destroying the supports and sending them tumbling to the floor in splinters. The statue lurched, but remained standing.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. *Worth a try, I suppose...* The chakram headed back towards her.

Nemesis threw her hand up and caught it. She stood staring intensely at the strange weapon in her grasp---trembling slightly, transfixed. Gabrielle's mouth hung open.

"By the gods..."

They both stared in awe at the metal ring in the taller woman's hand. Tied to it, to each other---spellbound in a circle of mystification. Gabrielle staring at Nemesis in disbelief, the assassin hypnotized by the weapon she gripped tightly. Light seemed to bleed into the chamber only from the chakram---a star to which both women orbited silently.

Breaking the silence and tension with a loud groan, the giant statue of Julius Caesar lurched violently forward. Chunks began to crumble and crash to the floor. With a final roar, the monument spilled forward, breaking into huge, heavy pieces that shook the temple with their plummet.

Gabrielle dove out of the way. Absently, Nemesis moved to the side---but not directly out of harm's way. Pieces of the statue knocked her to the ground, the chakram spilling out of her hands, her helmet flung from her head.

Gabrielle found herself near the sacred katana and scooped it up. Spinning around, she noticed the chakram rolling in her general direction and collected it as well. She squinted through the dust, hoping to find a glimpse of her foe.

The warrior gasped. Nemesis was rising with difficulty to one knee, long black hair hanging in front of her face---a face that was revealed in silhouette for but a second. Gabrielle's stomach spun out of control, the blood leaving her skin.

It can't be...it couldn't be...

Gabrielle's mouth opened but no words escaped, her throat cracked from the grit she inhaled---from everything she felt.

"Get them!"

Soldiers were spilling into the chamber from the various entrances. They began to form a circle around the

two women. Their heavy armor dully gleaming in the dusty light of the temple. Gabrielle wiped her eyes and looked around for an opening. She took a quick glance to her right. Nemesis was standing defiantly, the helmet returned to her head---the mask over her face once again.

The Romans advanced with swords ready. Nemesis took a step forward and lashed her cape out to meet them. As the edge of the cape whipped them they screamed in agony, falling to the ground, blood gushing from brutal gashes to their faces.

The attackers wavered at the sight of this, Gabrielle used this brief instant to its fullest. She cut the legs out from under a soldier behind her and spun through the gap that was created. The warrior sprinted toward the altar.

Several soldiers blocked her way, brandishing their shields and swords. She waved the chakram, dramatically preparing for a throw. The Romans instinctively crouched into their armadillo-like defense---shields held outward and above them. Gabrielle put the weapon away and leaped on top of the shields, and then sprang up to the balcony above the altar. She quickly tore through the empty hallway beyond, the sounds of steel upon steel and the screams of dying men fading behind her.

"Well, this is a *real* improvement!" Mira yelled sarcastically at Virgil.

"It's better than the donkeys!"

The poet, Mira, Eve and Joshua were in the wagon, now being pulled by a team of geriatric horses---the only ones Virgil could round up in such a short time. His donkeys and any other transportation had been given to the rest of the Elians and prisoners who were now scattering across the city.

"Can't these things go any faster?" Joshua asked.

"What do you want me to do? Get behind and push?"

"I don't know...give 'em a carrot or something."

Virgil shot a menacing look back at the boy. He noticed two chariots turn speedily down the street behind them.

"We've got company."

Mira turned.

"Great...just great," she said. "I guess I don't have to tell you that they're gaining on us, right?"

The Imperial curfew was making it difficult to just simply fade into the city. Virgil tried to will the old horses to greater feats of speed, to no avail. Soon they would tire, sweat already dripping from their flanks.

Eve watched the chariots bear down on them. She began rooting through the back of the wagon. Under the blankets and hay on the floor she found a shovel. Standing up, she took aim at a fast-approaching catwalk that crossed over the street. With a sure swing, she smashed through the wooden supports knocking the structure down behind them. The first chariot swerved wildly, but managed to avoid the fallen debris. Not as

lucky, the second chariot had been blinded by the first and crashed over the jagged wreckage, pieces wrapping in its spokes. With a wild pitch, it slammed hard into a building.

"Nice one, Eve!" Mira yelled. "We've still got one behind us, though."

"Maybe we can duck down that side street," Virgil pointed ahead.

"Go for it!"

Joshua took the shovel from Eve with a smile and aimed at another oncoming catwalk. The pursuing chariot was closing fast. The second soldier threw a javelin that shattered the rear of the wagon. It lurched forward, causing the boy to lose his balance a little. He regained himself and prepared to swing at the walkway.

Just then Virgil began his turn and Joshua's swing went a little wild. After smacking the walkway, he fell on top of Eve in the rear. The catwalk pitched over, almost hitting the wagon. A large tarp draped itself over the entire cart.

"This is not good! This is not GOOD!" Virgil exclaimed.

The cart rocked wildly back and forth as the poet and Mira tried to remove the blinding piece of heavy cloth.

"Don't pull back on the reigns yet! We don't know if we lost 'em!" Mira yelled, as she clawed at the tarp.

"I can't SEE, Mira!"

"I'm working on it!"

"OW!"

"Sorry!"

The wagon thundered along the side street.

Mira finally felt the edge of the cloth.

"Okay, here we go..."

She flung the tarp free of the wagon, letting it fly off the back toward the pursuing chariot. She turned around just in time to see what Virgil had begun to yell about.

Half of the thin street was blocked by a series of tall, workers' scaffolds---there wasn't enough room to go around.

"Oh boy..."

The horses and the cart barreled through the scaffolding, tumbling it to the ground behind and on top of them. The pursuing chariot crashed and flipped through the debris, one of the soldiers smacking into a wall with a bone-crunching thump. Somehow the wagon stayed upright and managed to break free.

"Nice!" Mira patted Virgil on the back.

"Uh...thanks," he smiled crookedly.

They careened out of the side street and raced along a road near the river.

"If we can just get near the Aventine, we'll make it," Virgil said.

"You'd think..." Mira looked bleak and pointed.

Two chariots appeared a couple of blocks ahead. With a blast of a horn, they broke into a gallop directly toward the wagon.

Gabrielle skimmed along the rooftops as she headed down the Palatine hill. She could feel the warmth of the tiles through the leather of her boots as she sprinted away from the temple. The wind caressed her now bare face. The homes, the streets, the city---all were silent beneath her and she skimmed over them like a stone across a pond in a child's dream.

There were three archers behind her somewhere in the night. They had been the only Romans able to keep pace with her---and barely, at that. She knew they were having trouble following and wanted it to remain that way.

While she had a good lead, her breathing was becoming more and more ragged. Her ribs were a serious hindrance in a foot race and it would only be a matter of time before she would have to turn and make a stand.

The trick was to keep moving. Her specialty---the never-ending trick of perpetual motion. She had to fight the familiar tug in her chest that made her want to turn around and let the arrows fall where they may. A last stand was every warrior's right to claim---why not here, now? She growled at the thought. *Not by a Roman...not again...*

An arrow whispered by her shoulder into the night. She altered her course and kept heading down into the city, toward the river. Another bolt flew nearby, the trajectory indicating the same archer. Gabrielle slowed down.

"One more time..."

A third arrow fell through the night toward her. *Big mistake...* She spun, catching it in her left hand and firing the chakram off behind with her right. The blade disappeared over the city. Gabrielle leaped onto the next roof, catching the returning chakram as she landed. She nodded when she noticed the blood coating its sharp edge.

The archer's shots had appeared to be leading Gabrielle to the southwest. *Probably into a trap...* she thought. The warrior headed toward the southwest.

The way down the hill was best traversed between two taller buildings. Just beyond them was a lower temple. Archers positioned on the shorter building would have an excellent shot when a target moved through the space between the two towers.

Gabrielle continued her sprint. Wincing in pain, she fired the chakram again. It whirled at the tower on the left, separating---the two halves hurtling toward the temple. She sprinted hard into the narrows between the towers. With a flip she was upon the temple roof, she caught one half of the chakram and with a quick thrust buried her katana in one of the surprised archer's chests. The man's right hand was missing.

The other archer ran at Gabrielle, a knife held in his left hand. His right arm hung uselessly at his side, the second half of the chakram buried in the wrist. She killed him quickly, striking against his undefended side. The warrior clutched her ribs as she stooped to remove the weapon from the man's arm.

The blast of a horn sounded. It was a Roman alarm, nearby as well. She ran to the edge of the roof and surveyed the streets below.

She widened her eyes at the sight. Two Roman chariots moved on an intercept course toward an old, beaten wagon---a wagon carrying Mira, Virgil, a boy and *Eve*. Gabrielle didn't know whether to laugh or cry or shout for joy. She soon realized all were inappropriate actions as the Romans sped menacingly towards her friends. The warrior had to act fast.

Sprinting along the roof, Gabrielle built up enough speed to launch herself far into the open air. She descended directly into the path of one of the rushing chariots. *This is going to hurt...*

The warrior landed exactly between the lead chariot's two steeds, gripping their tack with some difficulty. The breath was knocked from her and she bit her lip as her vision blurred---yet still she held on, her feet only inches from the rushing ground.

She shook her head. Lifting herself up, Gabrielle began to veer the horses to the left, towards the second chariot. Both vehicles began to charge out of the way of the oncoming wagon, which rushed by. The warrior heard Mira's voice and smiled.

From the chariot, one of the soldiers prepared to skewer Gabrielle with a serrated javelin. She let go of one of the horses, gripping with both hands on the other. The javelin passed into the flanks of the right horse causing it to screech and buck wildly. The chariot began to swerve dangerously as its speed dropped. Gabrielle flipped herself under the left horse and over the other side onto its back. She fired the chakram at its harness, freeing it from the out-of-control chariot. The warrior raced away as the vehicle flipped and crashed into the doorway of a temple.

During the commotion, the second chariot had turned and was again in pursuit of the haggard wagon. Gabrielle spurred her horse. The chase sped through the streets by the Tiberus startling sleeping river birds into flight across the dome of night.

From a side street, another war-chariot whipped into action. It quickly pulled up alongside Gabrielle. A soldier aimed a crossbow at her. The warrior launched herself from her steed, past the speeding bolt, at the cavalryman. She spun into a powerful kick that connected with the man's chest, sending him crumpling to the floor of the chariot. The driver grabbed at her arms, hoping to keep her from the reigns. The two became locked in an intense struggle.

Ahead, Gabrielle could see the other Romans had begun to launch javelins at the wagon. Freeing her hand from the driver's grip, she grabbed the chakram and let it loose upon the other chariot, blacking out briefly from the pain in her side. Her opponent noted this and punched her in the ribs.

Gabrielle let out a scream of pain that was cut short when the driver's hands wrapped about her throat. She fell to her knees, struggling to break the man's grip. The other soldier picked himself up and removed a dagger from his belt, intent on finishing off the warrior as well.

Then Gabrielle noticed the returning chakram. It was hard not to, as it was heading right for her face. She thrust her fingers desperately into the driver's neck, stopping the flow of blood to his brain. His grip slackened and she quickly lifted herself out of the way, just as the other man moved in to stab her, just as the chakram returned---just as the chakram embedded itself in the man's stomach. He lurched backward, dropping his dagger. The warrior grabbed the reigns and regained control of the chariot, reaching back and removing the chakram from the soldier's gut as he fell off the back of the vehicle into the street.

The chariot sped up. Gabrielle could see the Roman almost on top of her friends--he was preparing to hop onto the wagon. The warrior tried to get as close as possible but was having trouble maneuvering around the other vehicle. With a powerful leap, the cavalryman landed on the wagon, knocking Eve to the floor.

Gabrielle got up on the front of the carriage and balanced carefully. She hopped onto the back of one of the horses then onto the back of a horse on the second chariot---and then with a back flip and battle cry, the warrior vaulted onto the wagon. With a quick foot sweep she knocked the soldier to the floor. Unfortunately, this happened just as Mira swung a shovel that passed through where the man's midsection had once been, and into Gabrielle's chest, knocking the stunned warrior staggering backward. She stumbled against the side of the cart and tumbled over the edge. Flailing her arms out, the warrior clung desperately to the wagon.

"Oh! Gods! Gabrielle! Sorry!" the girl stammered, moving to help her friend back into the shuddering vehicle.

The soldier grabbed Mira by the tunic and prepared to stab her with a cruel-looking dagger. Eve tackled him from behind. The man fell on top of Mira, still trying to kill the girl---who held his arm at bay with both of her hands. Eve struck the soldier in the neck with a strike that made him drop the knife. He swung wildly at the woman just as Mira got in a punch to his ribs. The entwined trio spun wildly, smacking first into Virgil's head, knocking the poet unconscious and then into the just-righted Gabrielle, sending her skidding toward the back of the vehicle. She tripped and slammed face first into the bottom of the wagon. Joshua tackled the man around the midsection and everyone crashed to the floor---on top of the prone warrior. The cart skimmed along, driverless toward a construction site.

Unfortunately, the soldier had suffered the least damage from the melee and stood up first. He pulled a crossbow from his belt and brought it to bear on the dazed and prone friends. Gabrielle shook her head, stopping her dizziness just in time to notice the low hanging beam that was fast approaching the back of the leering soldier's skull. She covered her head.

After the loud thump she got to her feet and grabbed the reigns out of Virgil's slack hands. She maneuvered the chariot out of the construction site and back toward the Aventine. Glancing around she saw the soldier face down and unmoving between her friends. His helmet had a huge dent in it. She looked back to the road.

Mira appeared next to her, grinning wildly. Gabrielle was too tired to offer much more than a thin smile in return.

"Well, I don't know how, but we did it!"

"Yes we did," Gabrielle nodded.

"The rest of 'em are heading to the safe houses, like we planned," Mira continued, looking into the night. "I don't think they were followed."

"Good."

Gabrielle spurred the horses through the city.

"You did a good job, Mira," she said.

The tired-looking girl positively beamed when she heard this. "Really! Uh...thanks."

"*Really*," the warrior smiled. "I couldn't have done it without you."

Mira smiled and squeezed the warrior's shoulder. She moved into the back to check on everyone.

Gabrielle tried to relax and focus on the road. This was only a momentary lull in their flight---they would be on the run for a while yet. *Always running...*

The pain in her torso was as much a part of her as her bones, her blood---her exhausted flesh. Somehow she had managed to avoid any permanent or mortal damage, but her ribs were still badly hurt. Her head sank. The adrenaline that had filled her veins with its caustic flood had begun to subside.

The warrior's mind wandered through the night, past the pain and the conflict, the light and the shadows, past the receding fear and customary, though always embarrassing, heat between her legs---past it all to that one moment, to that one silhouette. *Her* silhouette... Gabrielle wept silently, exhaustedly. The wagon hobbled down the still Roman streets, disappearing into the arid night.

CHAPTER X. *Dénouement*

Nestled in a quiet corner on the plateau of the Capitoline Hill was an old, overgrown and abandoned building. Tiny, inconsequential, unadorned and somewhat dilapidated the building had stood for hundreds of years---existing far back into the supposedly halcyon days of the early Republic. Derelict for some time now, the building had served many functions in its existence.

As recently as a year ago, members of the IV Britannia had billeted on its moldy floor during their stay for a large Imperial triumph. A few raucous nights had brought a heated glow to the temple. The soldiers' garbage, cast-offs and misplaced articles still littered the floor.

During the initial stages of Augustus' reign, the building had been used as a temporary prison for traitors to the Empire. If one searched the building well enough, manacles and chains could be found as evidence of this. Several bloody and expedient executions had been carried out upon the front stairs.

Over a century ago, an Esclepien cult had used the building as a hospital---dispensing aid and care to the injured and the ill. They had been chased out soon after by the Republican legions that were ordered to: "evict the tax evaders."

While most Romans in the area knew of one or several of these past purposes and other more esoteric ones, none knew the building's true beginning---its original purpose.

Constructed on the then sparsely built-upon Capitoline, the edifice was originally a small temple constructed in honor of Ares, the God of War. Most Romans were also unaware that it was one of the God's favorites. Sparse, simple, functional, he had appreciated the builder's quiet passion and attention to detail.

He still did. Ares looked from the roof of the temple out across the city. He could hear the Roman trumpets sounding the alarm, the soldiers mobilizing, the shouts---the whip cracking down. He grinned widely.

"Oh yeah," he laughed.

"We could be watching all this from anywhere, y'know?" Aphrodite said, rolling her eyes.

"I need to be here, sis. I need the smells, the sounds, the sights---the hands-on."

"I'm sure..."

"What a morning!"

Aphrodite looked less than thrilled. "Is this the part where you gloat about your master plan and how it's all going perfectly...I mean really, Ar'. Snoozers!"

The god of war hadn't heard her. "I mean I knew I was good...but this? PHEW! Pure magic." He smiled at Aphrodite. "Like, every piece just..." he snapped his fingers. "Slid into place... Oh...and there's so much more, sis. *So much more...*"

Aphrodite sighed. "I kinda figured..."

Rome lay intangible under the murk of night. Aphrodite had never been a fan of the place, especially in darkness. At night, the city rested on its belly like a scorpion in the grass, hidden---watching, waiting. A place of cruel cackles and jaded groans, of majestic temples stained with excrement and filth---set into the earth like a clouded, black stone.

The Goddess of Love squinted across the city. She cast her mind out into the roiling waves of human emotions. Her search stretched over the city like a silken glove, quietly probing until she came upon one heart---the one she favored above all others. Even now, in such a state as it was---damaged, tarnished, unsure; she loved it---perhaps more still.

Aphrodite smiled at that thought. Many would be surprised at how seldom she truly felt the emotion---and always for mortals. *Silly, silly goddess...* She had inherited her father's shortcomings, it seemed.

The heart trembled to itself---a quiet, pained counterpoint beneath a calm surface. *My brave little one...* Aphrodite sighed to herself. *What are we doing to you? To both of you...* She scowled at her brother, who was still prattling on about his greatness.

"This city had better get ready to kneel down and pucker up," he grinned.

"Right..." Aphrodite rolled her eyes. "Look, bro, it's been a slice---but I gotta jet. Got that whole love thing

to take care of, 'kay? Toodles!"

She disappeared; thinking as she did of the heart out there lost, lonely---no better than all the rest, save for the favor of a goddess' love. Aphrodite frowned to herself at that.

The Goddess of Love sent a soothing wave to the troubled heart and was gone.

Ares had forgotten that his sister had been around until she had opened her big mouth. He grinned out into the night. The sounds of more alarms filled the air. There was commotion by the river. The God of War laughed.

"Gotta admit, Rome's my kinda town..."

Octavia marched calmly toward the Hall of Mirrors. While many found the absurd immensity of the Domus Aurea's halls daunting or even gaudy, the bodyguard found them strangely comforting. Their size was a constant reminder that power was the dominating force in the universe---with power anything became possible. She continued her determined pace. Her footsteps drifted into the expanse, eventually returning as feeble echoes.

The Hall of Mirrors stretched before her, a shimmering testament to Nero's ultimate dominance. A huge, four hundred foot long chamber, covered in the best glass and mirrors the Roman Empire could assemble---all upon the questionable whims of the anemic deviant of an Emperor. Octavia smiled to herself. The lengths people will go to indulge even the most irrational fancies of their rulers, spoke volumes as to the power they commanded. As examples of this, the Hall had no equal. For many reasons...

At night the hall was lit sparsely with only half torches, the light reflecting in scattered shards throughout the enormous chamber. Octavia's reflections were multiplied and mutated in the strewn and broken gloom. She appeared to be on thousands of missions, each with a dark and unenviable task. As comforting as company of any kind would be, it was only she who bore the burden of bad news.

She had refused to let anyone else inform the Emperor of the escape. He had been in such good spirits earlier, the pendulum-like swing of his rage would put all messengers save her at risk.

The bodyguard passed through the baths, the banquet halls, and other chambers before entering the Emperor's wing. She nodded to the two German Guards at the doors and entered. The bloated smell of incense met her.

Passing through several chambers she found Nero sitting at a large table, sharpening a knife intently. A teen boy and girl, dressed in the robes of slaves ate happily from a tray of fruit. The Emperor looked up from his task.

"Ah, Octavia."

"Caesar."

Nero contemplated the bodyguard for a moment. The Emperor put the knife down on the table. He looked to the boy and girl.

"Children," he clapped his hands. "Run along for a moment. Go play in the next room, there's a big bed for

you to bounce on."

The youths stuffed several items of fruit into the folds of their clothes and ran into the adjacent chamber. Nero grimaced at his bodyguard.

"You have bad news..."

"Yes, Caesar..."

"I'm not going to have my crucifixions, am I?"

Octavia shifted. "I'm afraid not, Caesar."

Nero stood perfectly still. Then he rubbed his brow incessantly for some time. Octavia blinked at the knife on the table. Finally, he stood with his face raised to the ceiling, eyes closed---he took a deep breath and opened his arms. He exhaled dramatically.

"I'm okay. I'm okay with this," he said calmly. "It's a game, right? They're winning---but the game's not over...*is it?*"

Octavia shook her head. "No, it isn't, Caesar. As long as they are within the Empire, they are within our grasp."

Nero nodded, eyes still closed.

Octavia watched Nero intently. He composed himself suddenly and smiled at her.

"Well, I think I'm going to retire for the evening, my dear," he said cheerily. "Good night."

Octavia bowed. "Caesar." The bodyguard turned and left, her footsteps fading into the inevitable expanse.

Nero took the knife casually from the table, testing the edge with his thumb.

"All a game," he whispered to himself, and walked calmly toward the bedchamber, where the enthusiastic whispers of the teens could be heard.

Gabrielle wondered if she should just get up and open the shutters.

She had been lying on the pallet in her room staring up at the ceiling. Sweat soaked the sheets---her insomnia and restlessness creating a steady heat that rivaled the Roman summer. The fresh dressing on her ribs was a little tight as she shifted slightly.

She growled softly to herself. It was a common occurrence of late for her to be completely exhausted and yet unable to sleep. *And more than ever she needed sleep...rest...oblivion...*

In the morning the real task would begin. They needed to get the Elians out of the city as soon as possible. The safe houses provided by Virgil's friends in the senate would only be 'safe' for so long. The Praetorians were combing the city even as she lay sleepless in her bed. They could be on their way to the house at this

very moment.

Let them come... There wasn't much that could move her. Not even relief, as feeble as it was, from the swelter of her room. Yet still, no sleep.

She thought of Eve and their tearful reunion.

"*You cut your hair again,*" the girl had said smiling as she had turned from looking up at the stars in the peristylum.

"*I've been busy,*" Gabrielle had winked. "*Plus it's the style here and you know the saying...*"

"*I always liked it that way,*" Eve nodded, and then added carefully, "*Everyone did.*"

They had embraced by the well. Gabrielle stared into the girl's eyes for a while---until she felt the guilt that always accompanied her indulgence. Eve smiled benevolently, consensually at her friend. This time the warrior had a different, troubled look.

"*What is it, Gabrielle?*"

The warrior had straightened. "*Nothing. Tired. It's been a long day,*" she nodded. "*Tomorrow is going to be longer. We need to get you all out of Rome---out of the Empire, if possible.*"

"*The others, yes. I will be staying here.*"

"*Eve...*"

"*Gabrielle, things have become somewhat...complicated...*"

Gabrielle had crossed her arms. "*Complicated? How?*"

"*I still need to figure that out...*"

"*I don't know, Eve...*" The warrior had blinked then shook her head. "*Get some rest. We can talk about this more in the morning...*"

Gabrielle rolled carefully onto her side. She did not need all of this. There were already so many worries. *There were always so many worries...*

A crow cawed in the darkness outside. She rolled her eyes. *Damn this place.*

It was hard to consider everything that had happened that night a victory, but that's what it was. They had accomplished what they had set out to do and no one had been hurt or lost in the process.

Why the sense of dread, warrior?

Gabrielle thought again of the silhouette, lit by the excited light of the temple. The dark hair, the skin, the lips, the skill... She hadn't seen the eyes---*that* would have been the true test...

What am I thinking?

She put her hands over her face, leaving them there for some time until they fell to her sides, palms up. Eventually, her head sank heavy with sleep into the damp pillow...

Gabrielle woke up with the perfect pink light of morning tiptoeing across the valley. She sighed happily. She nuzzled against the warrior. While the events of the last evening hadn't fully registered in her mind, she was too busy being happy about them to care.

How long had she dreamed of sharing a bedroll like this? How long had she wished she could kiss those lips? Run her tongue along those teeth? And just...

She felt the flush flow through her body with its warm and steady flickers. The warrior's arm gripped her shoulder, pulling her closer. The bard whimpered contentedly.

"Xena?"

"Huh...whazziz?"

"Let go of me... I want to make you breakfast..."

"No..."

"Yes, Xena. Don't you want breakfast?"

"Umm...no...don' wan' breakfas'..."

Gabrielle smiled mischievously. "Not even if it's those pastries with the red stuff inside?"

Xena's left eye popped open as her eyebrow raised. "Hmm?"

The bard looked up at her and grinned. "That's right..."

"What did I do to deserve this?" Xena winked with a wolfish grin.

Gabrielle decided to counter with her own innuendo. "What didn't you do?"

This produced the desired effect as Xena's eyes almost bugged out of her head and a color resembling the filling of the warrior's favorite treat painted her skin.

Gabrielle laughed. "Gotcha!"

"Yup. Nice one. Now go and fix me breakfast," Xena deadpanned.

"Excuse me?" Gabrielle feigned incredulity.

"I said: go and fix me..."

"I heard what you said. I just can't believe you said it. Why Xena, just because we..."

Xena began to tickle the naked bard under the bedroll. Gabrielle screeched and leaped out of the roll and into action.

"We had a deal!" she yelled.

"Yeah, yeah. Never bargain with a warrior princess..." Xena smiled warmly at Gabrielle.

The bard returned the look. They remained that way for some time. The birds chirped their happy little songs in the trees above. The sun slowly and steadily swelled in the sky...

Xena began to break camp as Gabrielle placed breakfast into the fire to cook. The bard sighed.

"I wish we could stay longer."

Xena smiled wistfully. "Me too, Gabrielle. But I said we would meet Autolycus in Corinth tomorrow morning, and I kinda owe him one, y'know?"

Gabrielle walked over to the warrior and wrapped her arms around her neck. Meeting Xena's blue eyes with a smoldering look, she pressed herself against the taller woman.

"We both do..."

As their lips separated, Xena's eyes stayed shut. Gabrielle smiled.

"Are you okay?"

The warrior nodded. "Umm...never better..." They smiled...

After their meal and a swim and drying lazily and lustily in the grass, it was time to leave. Gabrielle sighed as they headed toward the secret entrance.

"Xena...you have to promise that we'll come back here...whenever we need a break..."

The warrior smiled as she led the healed Argo through the pass. "Okay...I promise..."

The bard got a strange look on her face. Xena raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "It's silly."

"Gabriellllllle..."

"I want to stay...I know we can't...but I want to...stay" She looked away. "...Forever...Told you it was silly."

The warrior smiled and put her hand on the bard's shoulder. "It's not silly at all..."

Gabrielle turned around for a last lingering look and sighed...

They hid the entrance and made their way down the hillside, eventually meeting up with the main road. It wasn't until a few dusty hours later that Gabrielle slapped her forehead.

"Gods! The flowers! No!"

Xena halted Argo. "Huh? What about 'em?"

The girl was absolutely distraught. "I...Xena, I'm sorry...I wanted to save them...dry them...keep them...but, I guess I was so excited and everything that I...I forgot them in the valley..."

Xena scrunched up her face. "Keep them, why?"

"To remember...umm...YOU KNOW..." The bard made an awkwardly suggestive face.

Xena looked down from Argo's back, smiling. "It's okay, Gabrielle. Really."

"But..." The bard thought of the bouquet of yellow flowers and started to tear up.

"There will be other flowers, Gabrielle," the warrior smiled. "I promise."

Gabrielle looked up at Xena. She smiled. The warrior extended her hand. The bard took it and was pulled up onto the saddle behind her friend. She leaned her head on Xena's back, wrapping her arms around her waist. Argo carried them this way down the winding road that stretched out ahead of them...

EPILOGUE - Servian Wall

She smiles to Herself in the torchlight of the temple.

There is the sense one feels in a dream---the familiarity of inhabiting this one delicious instant, this one place before. Many times before...

Her surroundings---every scar on the weathered rock walls around her, the heavy smell of the scented oil burning in the iron braziers, the sounds of exotic twilight birds in the jungle outside---all feel familiar to Her, all feel right.

Not normally one for philosophy, She ponders fate---considers destiny.

To most, destiny felt like something linear---something one approached or was pulled toward. A thread stretched out that one followed along to its terminus---its line of division. Right now as it lies before Her, She knows it for what it truly is.

Destiny is endless, it is infinite---it is a circle, with no beginning and no end. One recognized one's purpose, one's destiny, because it is something one experiences endlessly---destiny isn't encased somehow in life, life is wrapped within destiny...

Destiny is two sharpened metal rings set into stone before Her.

What is it that Ares called them? Chakram. It is his gift to Her. And She so truly deserves them...both

of them... *But the God of War had continuously warned Her not to touch the circle at rest in the white setting...*

While She rarely listens to the warnings of the Gods, this one seems worth heeding. Besides, he is keeping Kal busy so she could sneak in here and do this... She smiles down at Herself, reflected in the divine metal of the round blade.

The Dark Chakram---endless, beautiful, deadly. They have so much in common... She catches the symbolism, the irony. She laughs as She lifts it from its setting and loses Herself in its sublime form, its impossible craftsmanship---the perfection of it between Her fingers.

Like finding the other half of my soul...

She extinguishes the torch, inviting the smother of darkness---the circle of the chakram continues to burn in Her vision like the frayed ends of a dream...

Her empty hand was held before Her face.

It was still night. She was walking along the outside of the city's outer wall. Meridian pulsed softly on Her back. She didn't appear to be injured.

The stars provided a subtle light to the countryside around Her. She steadied Herself against the wall.

More visions...

This time, the visions carried truth of a sort. The round blade, the chakram, She had seen it here, now---had held it. *Had remembered it...* It had changed, appeared different---but remained unmistakable.

Horns echoed far away in the city. Chariots thundered over the cobbled streets. Dogs barked mournfully. Children cowered in their beds.

Her hand fell open---empty.

She broke into a run. Her powerful legs carried Her silently over the earth. The stars smeared in the sky above Her. She ran for several candle marks before slowing to a halt in a sleeping glade.

Animals began to stir in the trees around Her. She stepped softly, staring mutely at the dormant foliage at Her feet. Her head pounded, Her ears rang. She put Her hands to Her temples.

With a scream, She hurled Her helmet against a nearby tree; it rang ominously in the night. Birds flapped into the dark morning sky.

She fell to Her knees, clutching Her head.

Rocking like this, She could feel the world carrying Her toward dawn. Her fists clenched. Her teeth punctured Her lip.

She opened Her eyes and stood up. She shook Her head and went to pick up Her helmet. There was something in Her hands.

In the tumult, She had torn several handfuls of flowers from the earth. They lay sleeping in Her palms. She placed Her helmet upon Her head. Breaking into a steady run, She headed southwest, toward the coast. She had thrown the dozing yellow flowers into the dust behind Her---left to wait for the waking rays of the rising sun.

---FIN---

November 2001---August 2002