

~ When do you know? ~

by Cas

Standard Disclaimer - These characters, most of them (except for the ones I created), belong to Universal, and Renaissance Pictures, and whoever else has royalties, control and discretion about Xena: Warrior Princess. This is written for personal enjoyment, and no copyright infringement was intended.

Specific Story Disclaimers:

Violence - Yes, there is violence of a moderately graphic nature in this story with hints towards sexual child abuse; so be forewarned.

Acknowledgements - There are a few quotations in here interspersed with the story. I would like to acknowledge the actual authors. Under subscript 1 is Anais Nin and under subscript 2 is Friedrich Nietzsche.

I would also like to acknowledge my beat reader and fellow running enthusiast Laura. Thank you for the endless chapter after chapter edit and suggestions.

Emotional distress - I have to put in a disclaimer here for this, because this story has a dark element to it. Refer to Violence disclaimer above. If this puts you off or is very disconcerting to you, please do not continue. I can not afford to send you to therapy unless you want to go with my dog to her sessions.

Subtext - This is based on the premise of two people who are very much in love with each other. They happen to both be women. There will be graphic depiction of this, yay! But be patient to get to it. If the thought of this gives you a problem, STOP now. Otherwise, I think my cat will be able to squeeze you into his busy schedule on his couch for a session and his analysis of your problem.

Dedication - To my loving wife, partner, confidant and friend. Thank you for putting up with my late nights with writing and typing this. For your suggestions and ideas and your frustrated urging to get to it and finish it this millennium.

So you have been warned, scared, chastised, beaten with a wet noodle and covered inoops ...wrong story.

And as always, any and all comments are always welcome. You can email them to:

Xena.Uber@gmail.com or check out my show at: www.xena-ubers.blogspot.com

[This story is copyright protected, please do not distribute, post, archive or rollup and smoke](#)

without the consent/permission of the author. Otherwise I will have to send the dog after she gets done with her therapy with the cat.

When do you know?

Chapter 1

"Wakey, wakey, Xena!" the man said snidely. "Oh, come on now Xena;" he said stepping closer to her. "You don't want to miss any of the fun now, do you?" he said with sarcasm in his voice.

Xena knelt on the floor of the tent with her head hung down. She hung limply by her arms as she was being held up by two brutish looking men. Her left eye nearly swollen shut, her lips cut and bleeding and a long gash was oozing dark red blood on her head above her right temple.

There were bruises and cuts that covered her body, but nothing she hadn't had before. She balanced between conscious and unconscious for what seemed to be like an eternity.

He stepped closer now; an arm's length away. Just the distance he needed as he lifted his right arm across his chest and backhanded Xena across the face, hitting her on the right cheek and cutting it just below the eye with the gold ring he had on his hand.

Her head snapped to the side with the force of the impact and suddenly she was wide awake with burning rage again coursing through her veins.

But she could do little or nothing with this rage, as these captors, her tormentors had ensured she would not escape, or worse, be freed of her bindings to undoubtedly the assurance of their deaths. They had bound her right hand and wrist to her left arm at the elbow, behind her back. The same was done to her left hand and wrist to her right arm. Her ankles were bound behind her at crisscross to each other, thus ensuring she could not stand on her own.

He stood with his back to her; but could feel the intense stare on him. He only smiled. He wore a thickly armored battle vest on that had clearly borne the brunt of many swords attacks; her stare would not pierce it.

"Oh my precious Lord Conqueror; you've decided to join us on this momentous occasion;" he spoke, still facing away from her.

He walked casually over to a small table where there was a small flask of wine and a goblet. He lifted the goblet and looked at it as if he was appraising a fine work of jewelry.

"Without your presence on this occasion, we would not have been able to proceed..." He poured the wine into the goblet and swirled the goblet to bring the scent of the wine to his nose.

"...You see, Lord Conqueror, that your presence here is vital; it ensures that you fully understand that your standing in the Realm, indeed all of the known conquered World, has come to a most inglorious and befitting end."

He raised the goblet with his right hand to his mouth and drank. "Ahh, an excellent harvest of the grape; I must find the vineyard of this magnificent drop and add it to my newly acquired wealth".

He placed the goblet back down on the table and began walking around the tent with his hands crisscrossed together casually behind his back.

Xena did not follow his walk around the tent, as she knew he would gloat. They all did at the start; but in the end it was her smile that they saw. Actually, not only was it was her smile they saw in the end, but also the last thing they ever saw.

This time though, she had a strange feeling. It felt very disconcerting to her and she could not shake the feeling of dread.

"Lord Conqueror or should I say Former Lord Conqueror or even, dare I say - Xena? You've have had it too good for far too long. You have taken what you perceived to be your rightful privileges whilst others endured your whims."

He was behind her, still walking around the tent.

"We sought it fit that the harsh conditions had to end and end now;" a bitterness to his voice evident. She did not stir or comment; she held herself perfectly still as if on the verge of unconsciousness; trying to conserve some of her energies and strength for her self healing and future use.

"...So when you felt you could crush us as easily as all the other uprisings, you neglected to realize that if we pulled ourselves together, we could and would defeat you".

He had come full circle in the tent; still with his hands behind him in a casual manner.

"Our greatest idea was to make you believe we were small individual bands of disgruntled commoners, or a roving band of barbarians trying for a shot at taking you down. You didn't see the forest for the trees, my dear Xena."

He stood now, once again in front of her but still with his back to her.

"We slowly took out your men, one by one, until we could get to you. Taking out your loyal

guard bit by bit, until the great Lord Conqueror comes down from amongst most high to teach us a lesson" he continued walking again.

"It was then that I gathered some generals, leaders and set my plan in motion, because with most of your guards and soldiers dead, the small bands united under a common front...to defeat you and *I did!*" he ended with a triumphant finish.

Still, she did not move; acting as if all her energy were gone and the men holding her started to look at each other as if to wonder if she had indeed died in their arms. The man continued on with the speech he had so long waited to do.

"You are indeed a formidable warrior my dear Xena, but not a leader. It takes more to be a leader than a sword Xena; it takes courage, it takes fortitude under fire; it takes the willingness to make harsh decisions when all those around you don't agree" he was again behind her, emphasizing his words with a pointed finger in the air.

"It is a shame Xena that you could not be around to see this happen, as I take over your empire and lead it to glory. For you see Xena, oh I do hope you mind me calling you that..." the last being said with sarcasm, "...You can not be left to live because you are far too dangerous."

He picked up a long dagger with a serrated edge and walked in front of the kneeling woman.

"Oh, come now Xena, you expect me to believe that you have passed out or even died? I am not that easily fooled". He placed the dagger down on the table by the flask of wine and leaned over, picking up a bucket of cool water and in one motion, threw it her, drenching her and bringing her to a completely awakened and alert state.

"Now that I have your undivided attention, I want you to see something with your own eyes. Something that will be the last image you take with you to Tartarus for eternity. You see Xena..." he continued as she now eyed him with trepidation, "...I want you to suffer like I did; I want you to have this image burned into your mind for all eternity, I want you to feel the anguish of your heart being torn asunder...as you watch helplessly..." he paused as if to give her time to absorb what he was saying; he retrieved the dagger from the small table and twirled it in front of her, "...as someone you love dies at another's hand...BRING HER IN!" he shouted.

Xena's head shot up; first at him then in the direction she heard the commotion coming from.

Two soldiers dragged a female's body in. Xena could not see the face as long red blond hair hung over the limply hanging head. She could see the body had been beaten as there were bruises all over and blood soaked the shift in the front and back.

He walked over to the limp body and wrenched the head up by the hair and with a quick motion; he slit her throat covering Xena in her blood.

Xena screamed out with all her breath, "Noooooooooooo..."

Chapter 2

The Conqueror sat upright in her bed in her tent.

Two of the royal guards ran into the doorway, swords drawn but did not enter; there were strict orders never to enter the chambers under any circumstances. They loudly called out to their leader "Lord Conqueror, Lord Conqueror?" with anxious voices.

Xena quickly gathered her bearing and replied "Stand down, it's okay...go back to your posts". When she heard them leave she took a deep calming breath and ran her hand through her hair. It was plastered to her head with the same sweat that soaked her sleeping shift as if she had indeed been soaked by a bucket of water. A shiver ran through her body as if Death himself had run a bony finger up her spine.

"Hades" was all she muttered out and got up. She had another nightmare, but this one was more descriptive than the last, each came with a little more detail than the last. She removed her soaked shift and dried her sweat soaked body with a towel that hung in her bathing area of her tent.

It was a huge tent, on the outside stood two entry guards. Upon entering the main flap one would step into the war strategy room and see a second tent further in at approximately twelve feet, where two royal interior guards stood at the entrance. The second tent was approximately 2 ½ rooms. The main entry room was set up as the Conqueror's private meeting room, where if she chose, she would hold private audience with someone. It was equipped with a small campfire pit to heat the tent in the winter with a unique design to ensure the smoke wafted up and out of the tent via a funnel shaped top opening.

Another set of heavy drapes covered the entry to the Conqueror's bedchamber and to the right of that was a small ½ room which served as the bathing and rest area.

She exited the bathing area and went to a chest and pulled out a set of trousers, shirt and dressed.

She walked out into her private meeting area and lit a candle and summoned one of the royal interior guards. "Abraxus get Mitrius and bring him here". The guard snapped to attention and replied with a closed fist to his chest in salute from the entry way "At once, Lord Conqueror".

She unfurled a map and laid it out with weights on the ends to hold it down. The next day's plans were still not to her pleasure and she felt she might as well make use of her time rather than dwell on something she couldn't and didn't understand.

The Gods never saw fit to grant her any favors of dreams yet to pass except for one, when it suited his needs only. So, she could not figure out who had decided to do this.

"General Mitrius, the Lord Conqueror commands you to her tent at once!" Abraxus stated with no room for misinterpretation after entering his tent. Mitrius sat upright in his cot and wiped the

sleepiness from his eyes, "Wha...oh yes, yes...coming". He quickly changed into his battle uniform with no doubt in his mind that she would not let him go back to his cot to sleep. "Ugh, why can't she just leave these plans be? It's a fairly simple plan; get the scouts, send in our troops and be done with it" he sighed and put on his cloak.

"Because it is too simple Mitrius, when something is too simple, it is more dangerous than the most complicated plan because everyone is lax." She directed a look of exasperation at him; "You know I will not send any of my men into something where it could be their demise because of ill planning".

She pointed at an area of the map and began "The castle fort over looks the ocean at this cliff here..." he leaned in and nodded. "...and there is a bay here where there is anchorage for ships coming and going..." again he nodded. "You say that is would be simple enough to take out his scouts and send troops in but you underestimate his deviate mind, Mitrius."

She walked away and asked Abraxus to have some mint tea sent to her, he replied "Aye, Lord Conqueror, as it is near on dawn, would food be required?"

"That would do, thank you".

"Aye, Lord Conqueror" he saluted and was gone.

"Now Mitrius, are you aware Timeon has a small stronghold due east of his castle and ½ a day's ride?

"Uh, no... no Lord Conqueror" he stammered.

"Are you also aware that he made certain agreements with Laertis in planning to overthrow me and overtake my realm?

Again, "Uh, no... no Lord Conqueror".

"And are you also aware that the communication he has been sending the last three moons have been copied to me so that I would know their plans and any alliances they have gained throughout my realm and command?

Now it was deathly quiet.

Abraxus returned with Timara, the cook's apprentice in tow, carrying a tray loaded with a steamy mug of tea and a fruit and pastry platter.

"Lord Conqueror?" Abraxus announced

"Ah, Yes Abraxus please enter with Timara" she replied.

Abraxus smiled to himself and Timara stood agape as to how she knew she was there. Abraxus

entered and saluted the Conqueror and Timara bowed her head upon entering. Timara placed the tray down near the chair the Conqueror sat at, she curtsied towards the Conqueror with her head still bowed and promptly exited.

"So you see my dear General Mitrius, I have followed the messages between Timeon and Laertis and those supposedly sent under secrecy... by you" she casually stated this as she picked up the steamy mug and inhaled the mint scent, ignoring the look of indignant outrage on Mitrius' face.

She drank from the mug and savored the moment in duality. "Abraxus has born witness to the messages himself, and has proven himself not out of greed for wealth, power or fear but loyalty. An integral character aspect you so dearly lack."

Mitrius glared at the Conqueror as he dared not challenge her. He knew first hand the damage she could inflict with her bare hands lest she be armed and now she had her loyal guard with her.

"Abraxus, take Mitrius to the encampment prison. Strip him of all his weaponry and place him in manacles. I want two guards posted on him at all times, then round up my other commanders and return".

"Aye, Lord Conqueror" he saluted and turned to Mitrius. Mitrius stood straight; handed him his sword and scabbard, dagger and then turned towards the Conqueror. She stood and walked past him without a word and entered into chambers.

"Lord Conqueror, as you requested" Abraxus announced while standing outside the study in the strategy room

The Conqueror emerged from her tent into the room dressed in her battle gear. Abraxus and the three other legion commanders and their seconds stood at attention.

"This morning General Mitrius confirmed my suspicions of his attempt at betrayal to the realm. He has been subsequently imprisoned under guard and stripped of his rank and status".

No one uttered a word of protest or remark. They looked to their leader with respect.

"Now, I know of the plot to overthrow my kingdom and take the realm by Mitrius, Timeon and Laertis and that they were not the only ones involved. Each of you had earned not only my trust but respect as warriors for the realm and that needs no more said.

I have chosen a General and Captain from amongst you to be my second and this is to be Abraxus. Each of you will report to him as my second, are there any questions?"

No one answered.

"Good, I will give you a moment to speak with him and we will begin the day".

The Conqueror turned slightly towards Abraxus and subtly nodded toward him then stepped into

her private study.

All the men gathered round Abraxus and offered a warriors handshake in congratulations.

"The first thing is for Philaties to take his command and secure the stronghold here..." the Conqueror pointed on the map on the table which the commanders surrounded, "...once he has left, Bruton, I want you to send your scouts out and get all of Timeon's so there is no chance of reinforcements. Casius should return within two candlemarks with his assignment complete; it is then that I want you and I, Abraxus, to quietly introduce ourselves into the castle up till Timeon's door".

All went well as planned and the Conqueror was now walking in the corridor up towards Timeon's private chambers at the far end.

Her keen hearing was listening to a small child's crying and then she heard the sounds of a man's grunt and a breath being forcibly exhaled. The next thing she heard was Timeon's voice "You BITCH!" and then a scuffle, a hard hit, a smashing of furniture and a young woman's scream then "Tie her up! I'll show her to interfere!" and then the sickening crack of a whip, again and again.

The Conqueror opened the door just as Timeon drew back for a fourth strike but it did not reach its intended mark. Timeon turned to look back and see why and saw the whip wrapped in the Conqueror's hand.

"You never did know how to play nice Timeon" she oozed with sarcasm.

"Lo..Lord Conqueror;" he stammered "...This bitch interfered in something that did not concern her" *'just like you are now'* he thought to himself.

The Conqueror pulled the whip out of his hand and coiled it up. She walked into the room where two male slaves had tied the young woman up to a pair of whipping posts; they now knelt by those posts. Her back was bleeding profusely from where the three whips had cut long deep gashes into her. She hung limp as apparently she had passed out. Her head hung forward with her hair obscuring her face.

Something struck the Conqueror odd with the look of the young woman.

Her arms strained with the weight of her unconscious body being held up and her leg was bent at an unnatural angle.

A slow anger rose up in the Conqueror's veins at this sight and she gripped the coiled whip with white knuckles.

"They are my slaves to do with as I see fit" Timeon said in an agitated voice.

"Correction, don't you mean 'My' slaves, Timeon? As this castle is mine with you as an official

representative of the realm that I appointed?" she stated as she walked around him.

"Take her down!" she ordered the two slaves. They looked from her to Timeon and back, "I said take her down NOW!" and they scrambled to do so quickly.

Chapter 3

Abraxus entered the room and stood at the ready.

"Abraxus take all the female slaves to Nika and have them cleaned and cared for. The girl is to be carried to Tidimous. Have him tend to her and report back to me on her condition".

Abraxus snapped to attention and saluted; turning to the two slaves "Get a litter immediately to carry her." They ran out of the room on his command.

He motioned one of his soldiers forward and ordered the slaves be gathered immediately for removal.

The Conqueror could hear horses arriving in the courtyard. "It seems that you have presumed a great deal, Timeon, such as secrecy amongst criminals is never secret. Your alliance with Mitrius to overthrow me and take over the realm has come to an end" she stated to him while he just stood there with an incredulous look to his face. "Oh, for sure Timeon, you do not expect me to believe that this is all a lie?

"Yes! I had no idea of such a plot! He protested, looking about the room wildly.

"So, if I brought in Laertis or Mitrius, they would also deny this? And deny the messages that have been intercepted with your signature to them? She casually stated as she walked about the room.

There was no response.

"Casius enter!" she commanded.

In entered a battle worn warrior. He was covered in dust and dirt from a long, hard ride.

"Lord Conqueror" he saluted.

"Casius, did you happen to pay a visit to Laertis?"

"Aye, Lord Conqueror" he replied.

"Did you happen to question him on his involvement with Mirtius and Timeon?"

"Aye, Lord Conqueror" again he replied.

"And...what was his response?" she continued.

"At first, he denied any involvement, stating his loyalty to you and the realm. But when confronted with news of the messages, he then changed his defense to only joining due to their pressuring him and..."

"He lies!" Timeon shouted, interrupting Casius and moving towards him and the Conqueror.

The Conqueror merely raised an eyebrow slightly as indication of his reaction.

"Casius, Is he here?" she questioned.

"Yes, Lord Conqueror, as you requested...only slightly harmed in transport" he replied with a smirk that she understood to mean he did not come willingly.

"Timeon, you can understand my situation and that I require something from you to ensure the truth comes out. That something is your assured silence", with that she strode up to him and faster than he could comprehend what she would do, she struck out and jabbed him at a pressure point on his throat.

Timeon, startled at her action, grabbed for his throat instinctively and coughed. Only no sound escaped him, not even the cough. He began to panic, to which the Conqueror stood back and turned, walking away from him stating "As I said, I need your assured silence and this is how you will give me that. I will release it once this is done...maybe" she added with an evil grin.

With that she nodded towards Casius who had been standing near the door now.

Casius opened the door and motioned for two soldiers to escort in Laertis, who was blindfolded and shackled.

Once inside, they moved him to the center of the room, a few feet away from where the Conqueror stood, facing the window looking over the bay.

Laertis stood there with his hands bound at the wrist in front of him. He had the same amount of dust and dirt that Casius had about him except his clothes were not for battle but for the life of leisure, that of an official. He turned his head as if to see about the room or listen for any sound that might clue him to where he was.

The Conqueror casually, yet with stunning stealth and silence, walked to his side "Hello Laertis" she stated with a lilt in her voice which caught him by surprise and startled him to jump and bring his shackled hands up as in defense.

The Conqueror noticed his breathing was ragged and had quickened which brought a small smirk to her lips.

"My, my Laertis, you seem a bit nervous..." she stated as she began to casually walk about the room, circling him with her arms crossed over her chest "...did I frighten you?"

It became apparent to him finally who it was and he changed his manner in an attempt to cover his fear. "Merely startled me, Lord Conqueror; I was not expecting a voice so close to me", lowering his arms and straightening his shoulders to stand upright as if nothing had happened.

"Oh? I thought you would be expecting the unexpected at this point..." the Conqueror replied "...and was it a voice ...or my voice?" the Conqueror continued her casual walk throughout the room, picking up things Timeon had about the room and inspecting them, which had Timeon bristling with anger.

"I presumed to eventually hear from you based on the allegations your man Casius has laid against me" he replied with more bravado than he actually had.

"Casius was instructed to ask you about any involvement with a plot that was being set... are you saying he did not ask you then?" she smiled at Casius knowing full well he would follow her orders to his death if need be.

"He implied more than asked" he replied, unknowing that Casius was in the room still with them.

"So Laertis...let me ask you here and now, do you deny the allegations?" she asked standing before him, her arms still crossed over her chest.

"I know of this plot you speak of ..." he answered as if still working on how to reply to the Lord Conqueror knowing full well she could and would kill him with her bare hands if she felt like it. He did not want to give himself up to the slaughter so easily, "...but my loyalties lie with the realm".

The Conqueror did not acknowledge his statement either way, giving him the chance to continue as she knew that given enough rope, most officials hiding something often enough hung themselves on their own words.

"...I merely went along with the plot to see who was involved and what they intended to do; I was never *with* them as they pressured me into alliance with them. I only went along so as to garner their trust and earn information to pass along to you and the realm when I had enough to expose them" he stated arrogantly, as if disclosing a well hidden secret of grand importance.

The look on Timeon's face was one of absolute disbelief, anger and shock.

"So, I am to believe that you had the Realm's and my best interest at heart when interacting with Timeon and Mitrius?" the Conqueror nonchalantly stated as she walked towards Casius and extended her arm towards him, her hand up.

Casius placed a small scroll into it and nodded to her.

"Yes, Lord Conqueror..." Laertis sniffed at the air and raised his head as in outrage over being accused of such an act of treason, "...I would never do anything to jeopardize the Realm's trust

and confidence in me as one of its officials...I was made to join them by threat of harm if I did not do as they bid me to do", his voice quivered as if emotionally upset.

"Timeon, our plans go well. We have secured the allegiance of the General which ensures us the inside knowledge we seek. I am glad you agreed with my plan and that we should try. With the help of the others we can gather our forces and attack when we have all points covered" the Lord Conqueror read from the scroll.

Laertis stood stock still as all the blood drained from his face, realizing he had played the wrong hand.

"Timeon, I will give the word soon. We wait on a signal that will lead us to victory! I, myself, await the opportunity to send pieces of her to Tartarus at the end" she read another.

"Oh, you see...I had them fooled!" the sweat beading on his forehead trickling down the sides of his face "I convinced them I was going to lead them to victory when in fact I was actually going to lead them to you!" he proclaimed.

"Really?" was all the Conqueror stated sarcastically.

Walking about the room again, "So, all the weapons we found in your cache, the men amassing in the near by strongholds and the extra taxes levied on the citizens to raise money for this effort were all a ruse?"

"That was their idea..." he screamed as he realized she knew, "...I did as they told me to!"

At this point the veins in Timeon's neck were at bursting point with rage unvented. He couldn't scream so he did the only thing he could do, he attacked Laertis.

Running at him, he lunged at his throat with his bare hands, knocking him down before Casius could stop him.

Laertis did not see it coming as he was still blindfolded, so he thought it was the Conqueror and began yelling "No, no....they made me....I swear...I don't want to die...someone help me!"

The Conqueror stood nonplussed by the window and watched as Casius and his men separated the two.

Once they were held apart, the Conqueror walked over to Laertis and took off his blindfold.

Laertis blinked several times while trying to adjust his vision and catch his breath, as he still held his hands to his throat in reflex to the attack he just received. As he did, he saw the blurry image of the Conqueror walking away from him towards a man.

He recognized him after a few more blinks and watched in horror as the Conqueror jabbed him in the neck and he began to cough.

After a few moments of sputtering, Timeon spouted "YOU LIAR! I'll kill you myself!" he lunged forward as the soldiers held him back, "You planned this from the start, you set us up should we ever get caught!"

Laertis' face was one of shock and realization...he had not only betrayed the men he conspired with but also had gotten caught in a lie to the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire.

"Casius, make sure they are secured far away from each other so as not to be able to kill each other...and..." she walked closer to Casius and said the remainder so that only he would hear, "...make sure the guards are kept at a safe distance from them as they could easily try to get their weaponry and either escape or hurt someone; also keep an ear for any news".

He nodded and motioned the soldiers to move them.

Chapter 4

Abraxus had returned and stood waiting the Lord Conqueror.

"Abraxus, we must try to find out who else is involved in this plot. I know that Laertis was not smart enough to lead this. He is a follower, not a leader. Someone has put these men up to this and our mission is to find out who!" the Conqueror stated to him whilst overlooking the bay.

"Lord Conqueror, perhaps if we tried to find any of the original message scrolls?" he asked.

"No, they maybe simple but they are smart enough to have destroyed anything such as that...besides, their original contact would have been made in person, not by message. At least that's the way I would have done it to ensure I could gauge their interest and reaction to such a plan" she replied still looking out over the bay.

"Lord Conqueror?" Casius stated as he had returned from securing the men, "They have been secured at a fair distance from each other with strict orders for the sentries to stay clear of them".

"Thank you Casius, I would ask a few more moments of your time before you can rest" she stated with a gentle voice.

"By your wish, Lord Conqueror" he stood at the ready.

"Casius, how long have you served with me?" she asked

"For a score and five, Lord Conqueror" he proudly stated then furrowed his brow as if wondering why she would be asking this.

"And how many seasons were you when you started?"

"Another score and ten, Lord Conqueror" he replied looking to Abraxus for some hint of what

was going on but Abraxus did not return the look.

"You, my dear Casius, have served the Realm with the upmost pride and respect. Not once have you faltered in your duties or carrying out my orders. By my calculations you would be nearing three score in age, yes? She smiled gently at him.

"Aye, Lord Conqueror, but still young at heart and with sound mind and body" he replied as if trying to convince her that he was still young enough and capable to do the Realm's bidding.

"That I have no doubt of my friend" she laughed reassuringly which brought a smile to his face and eased his tension which she could see right away.

"You have not only done the Realm's bidding, but my own when I was at my worst..." she reflected "...but also have been there as a sort of guide for me...for what a warrior should be".

At this, Casius could feel his chest stick out a bit and his shoulders square as a bit of pride took over at being acknowledged by the Lord Conqueror for those qualities, which he actually thought himself of the greatest warrior he had ever known, her.

"Casius, I do not question you for mere folly, but to show you reason for my next action" she slowly walked towards him and placed a hand on his shoulder, noting he never moved a muscle.

The Conqueror stood easily a half of a head taller than Casius, actually than most of the men in her command barring a few.

"Casius, I would like for you to be my next official here at Trachis. You have served the Realm and myself with the best of your life and I want to repay that with a simpler life for you and Minete" she smile sincerely at him and could see that he knew this was her way of repaying him for all the years of his loyalty and faith in her.

"Lord Conqueror, I don't know what to say..." being a man of few words, he really was struggling with this.

"Say yes! You will be in charge here and I will have someone that I trust watching the bay. The staff will be servants to be chosen by you and Minete, you may hire or fire whom you wish, but there will be no slaves. You will have the pay to ensure the running of the day to day business here in the bay as well as remuneration for your position and status...what do you say, my friend?"

Casius looked over to Abraxus for a sign to help him and the Lord Conqueror moved to one side to see as well.

What Abraxus did next not only shocked Casius, but impressed the Lord Conqueror.

Abraxus snapped to attention, brought his right fist to his heart and bowed his head in a warrior's salute to the man who was not only his mentor but showed him what it meant to be a warrior.

"Aye, Lord Conqueror. I would be honored" Casius replied with an unshed tear in his eye.

"Excellent! We feast in your honor tonight!" she slapped him on the back and looked to Abraxus.

"Notify Ophelia that we will need a banquet tonight to celebrate Casius' appointment. She is to make use of the kitchen here in the fort and to use how ever many people she needs to accomplish it".

"At once Lord Conqueror" Abraxus replied, saluting with a small smile, he turned and left.

"I'll leave you to get some rest and clean up" she stated and exited the rooms as well.

Casius sighed and looked about the room "*How am I supposed to know how to run a Port bay?*" he inwardly thought, "Ye Gods...I hope Minete knows!" he chuckled to himself and left the room.

Midway through the festivities, Abraxus approached the Conqueror and handed her a message scroll, off in the distance she could see a messenger waiting.

After reading the message scroll she turned to him and stated "Let the messenger know she is welcome, make room at the edge of the fort for the encampment of her caravan".

"Aye, Lord Conqueror" he saluted and returned to the messenger waiting. The messenger bowed curtly and promptly left the area.

"Lord Conqueror?" Abraxus questioned seeking permission to draw back the drapery that covered the entrance to her private study.

"Enter" she replied with her back towards the entrance, deep in thought at the desk.

Abraxus stepped in and drew the drapes back with one arm, while bowing slightly and beckoning the guest to enter with his other free arm.

"Abraxus stand down the interior guards and let them enjoy the revelry this evening. Have the exterior guards rotated by watch so that they can enjoy as well".

"Aye, Lord Conqueror" he replied.

"Also, accompany the royal escort to the festivities and show them a bit of hospitality..." she continued, still facing away and began pouring some wine into two goblets.

"Aye, Lord Conqueror" again he stated.

"...and, I am not to be disturbed" she finished with no uncertainty in her voice.

He saluted and exited the private study to carry out his orders as given.

"It has been a long time Princess" the Conqueror stated as she turned with both goblets in her hands. She crossed the study and offered one to the Princess with a small tilt of her head to the left and a barely noticeable bow forward.

The Princess took the offered drink and curtsied low to the Conqueror in a show of her authority.

"Yes, Lord Conqueror. It has been a few seasons since when we last met" the Princess replied.

"So, on what occasion does this meeting come by Princess?" asked the Conqueror as she turned and sat down in her chair, which was fashioned to mimic her royal throne in smaller ratio, and began sipping her wine.

"The Lord Conqueror never sees an occurrence of crossing paths as just chance?" the Princess replied coyly with a question and a smile.

At this, the Lord Conqueror laughed heartily.

"No, I know better of you, Lord Conqueror. Nothing is ever by chance when you are concerned" rising up the goblet in her hand to toast her.

The Conqueror held up her goblet in acknowledgment with a nod of her head.

The Princess then motioned to the chair next to her for permission to sit down and the Conqueror once again nodded in approval.

Once seated, the Princess began "I have been traveling abroad for many moons now. My journey began in Amphipolis and then moved inwards to the Port town of Pella where I met with a few Port Captains in attempts to free up the trade routes for exchange trades. We then moved past Olympus heading towards Corinth when my scouts advised me of your encampment a moon ago..." she sipped her wine.

When the Conqueror heard Amphipolis, inwardly her interest was peaked.

"...I made for your encampment as I was headed to see you before continuing on to Mycenae".

"Oh? You were actually seeking me out?" smiled the warrior.

"Yes, but initially only for the sharing of information possibly quite vital for you to know..." she blushed.

This brought an arch to the Conqueror's brow in curiosity.

"...When we were staying in a small village outside Pharsalus, some of my escorts were given a not so friendly introduction to the town by the local pub merchants. Afterwards, one of the escorts overheard a gruff sounding man talking with another, saying "Those foreigners won't be

allowed near here when Wotan takes over from that bitch!'...

"...at that point the other man told him to shut up as they were sworn to secrecy otherwise it was to be their heads".

"Wotan? Hmm" the Conqueror said to herself.

"So, I thought it prudent to tell you of this as we have 'shared' information with each other before for the security of our Realms" the Princess finished and sipped her wine again.

"You stated earlier you initially sought out to share information, what changed?" asked the Conqueror still seated and looking at the Princess.

Holding her goblet of wine, the Princess rose from her seat and walked over to the Conqueror, taking her goblet of wine as well before she placed them both on the table next to her. Then she knelt down in front of the Conqueror and proceeded to untie the laces to her boots.

The Conqueror merely watched as the Princess' gown hung low and open over her bosom giving her an unobstructed view of the tanned Egyptian Princess' body as she leaned down.

The Princess slowly stood up and held out her hand to the Conqueror, who took the proffered hand and was led to the entrance of her bed chambers.

Reaching up to each of the Conqueror's arms, the Princess removed the arm bracers and placed them on the side table.

"To share more than information, Lord Conqueror...to share myself...with you" the Princess stated looking up into the Conqueror's cerulean desire filled eyes.

The Conqueror leaned down and whispered "I like sharing with you, Nefertiti" before taking her lips in a passionate kiss and closing the drapes to her bed chambers with one hand whilst untying the Princess' gown with the other.

The next morning found the Conqueror looking over her maps as Abraxus entered the strategy room.

"Lord Conqueror" Abraxus saluted.

"Morning Abraxus, we have some new information regarding our possible missing link in the plot" she replied.

"Is it another official, Lord Conqueror?" he inquired.

"No, but the name almost sounds familiar all the same. His name is Wotan" she replied.

At this Abraxus stood stock still and his face drained of all color.

The Conqueror, who was still huddled over the desk looking at the maps felt a change in his demeanor and looked up. She walked over to him and tapped him on the shoulder in an attempt to snap him back into the now.

"Abraxus?" she asked

"L..Lor...Lord Conqueror, did you just say Wotan?" he stammered.

"Yes, you look as if Hades himself has touched you man" she answered.

"Lord Conqueror, this new information...with all respect..." he said shakily "...is it reliable?"

"Yes!" she stated a bit disturbed that he would question her as such "...I am assured in the reliability and have no doubt to its validity. What would make you question this?" she stood back, looking at him and then turned to sit.

He hung his head while pinching the bridge of his nose, then shook himself as if clearing a fog off his mind.

"My sincerest apologies, Lord Conqueror; I meant no disrespect to you or your source. It is just a shock to hear that name after so many seasons, that I found it unbelievable and I must admit, I did not want to believe it" he said with a bow, his fist to his chest to show respect and sincerity.

"Abraxus, you have never questioned anything I have ever said to you, and it gives me pause to see you react this way. Come, sit down and relate to me this reason" she motioned towards her private study and rose to enter.

The Conqueror poured him a drink (as he looked as he could use it) handed it to him, and taking her morning tea, she turned and sat down.

He took a swig of the drink and swallowed hard, and then the Conqueror motioned for him to sit which he did.

"It was something I always thought a nightmare, not real. But, when you said his name, it brought all those horrible images back and the reality hit me...it did happen. You might or might not know this of me, Lord Conqueror but I was raised by Casius and Minete, as their child" he somberly said.

At this, the Conqueror looked only slightly shocked and then a knowing smile etched her lips as she realized the implication of his salute to Casius earlier.

"I must start at the beginning..." he took a deep breath and exhaled, "...I was born in a village town on the Thracian border called Haemus. My father was the elder apprentice to the blacksmith and my mother was the innkeeper's niece. I was just a few moons old when the group of barbarians attacked the village. Apparently there had been only a few attacks in Haemus

during my parent's life time there, and this attack was unprovoked or expected.

It was the start of the winter and I can only presume that it was the only way the barbarians could ensure surviving the winter, by attacking a village and steal food, clothing and money to last them..." he took another swig of the drink and then fumbled with the goblet "...but this was more; there was no reason for the slaughter! Most of the villagers were farmers or traders; they did not have any warriors or soldiers, it as a simple farming village!" he said with anger rising in his voice.

"Their weapons were huge war hammers and short swords, and they killed anyone who was in their path...man, woman or child" he stopped and closed his eyes as if trying to shut out the vision.

"Most of the village was still out on the fields, ready to come in for the midday meal when the attack started. My father tried to defend the younger apprentice while the blacksmith fought against the others, but they were beaten with these hammers and their skulls crushed in. The village was in chaos as the rest of the farmers returned, like lambs to the slaughter. My mother heard the screams and ran outside, she saw men leaving the blacksmith's and setting it ablaze. Seeing this, she did the one thing she could, try to save me. She ran back inside the inn and supposedly put me in the brush outside the back of the inn. When she went back inside, she was killed by someone" he stopped and a tear streaked down his face and he quickly wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"Being that this was one of Rome's border points, it just so happens that a legion was returning from abroad and happened upon the horde, but a little too late as much of the damage had been done".

The Conqueror just sat, sipping her tea and listening.

"The retreating horde were heard to shout 'Hail Wotan, he will be pleased' as they left the village. The Romans rescued those that they could and disposed of those already dead or dying. Some children and very few adults survived. Casius had only joined the Roman Legion a moon or two before and was on the soldiers checking the area for survivors when he heard my crying in the brush. I was shoved in a little crate and covered with a blanket. Knowing that the Romans would have said to leave me behind, he somehow managed to bring me back to Rome," he laughed sadly as something funny had occurred to him "he never has told me how he managed it.

He was betrothed to Minete and was unsure how she would accept his wanting to keep me, but nonetheless he asked and she surprised him by saying yes. They raised me as their own, and of course I grew up with a few more siblings in time. I eventually learned of my real parents when I was of the age of understanding. A few more seasons later, I was able to make passage up to Haemus and visit my village of birth. Casius had long been in your service and I wanted to be as him, being my second father, when I returned".

Looking up at the Conqueror, he continued "Lord Conqueror, please do not regard him any less trustworthy for not telling you who I was to him. I asked that he not so that I would not be

treated any differently and regarded as just another soldier in your ranks" he exhaled, finishing something that had weighed heavily in his heart.

The Conqueror sat without saying anything for a while. She finished her tea and set the mug aside "Abraxus, you have clearly mistaken me for someone else..." she stood and walked towards him.

He did not know what to expect and feared the worst.

She stood before him and offered her arm in a warrior's handshake and he sat unmoving, mouth agape "Lord Conqueror?"

"Oh Abraxus, I would not think ill of Casius or of you for the matter. I have trusted Casius' judgment while you were still in nappies..." she smiled at him, "...and I will do so for many seasons more to come. I did not know of your history and I offer my condolences for your past and grief..." she stated somberly "...you have earned my respect and trust. That is why you are my second. We both have reason now to find out who this is and why he is coming to try and destroy my realm!" she spoke authoritatively.

"Aye, Lord Conqueror; that we do!" he replied whilst grabbing her proffered hand and standing up.

"Let's begin finding out why!" she slapped him on the back and they walked out to the strategy room.

Chapter 5

Near dark that evening Tidimous made way to the Conqueror's tent; "Lord Conqueror?" he asked from outside the private study.

"Enter Tidimous" she responded.

He found her seated at her desk overlooking some scrolls with intensity.

"Begging your pardon for the intrusion Lord Conqueror, but you asked for a report on the condition of the slave".

"Yes, yes how is she and the others?" she looked up and then back to the scrolls.

"Well Nika says that most of the girls are okay, just a bit underfed and healing from some scrapes and cuts" he replied with a bit of reluctance in his voice which the Conqueror could hear, immediately catching her attention.

"And the others?"

"Um, a couple have been severely beaten recently Lord Conqueror. One has had a broken arm that looks as it will never mend to be of any use, another has an infection on her back from a

recent severe whipping. I am trying to clean them and put herbs to them in attempts to stop it from spreading".

"Continue" was all she said.

"They are merely children Lord Conqueror! Some near on seven or eight seasons" he said in a shaky voice.

The Conqueror closed her eyes and took a calming breath, "What of the girl?"

"Her back will need stitches as they were so harsh, he nearly cleaved flesh from bone. Her leg is broken and..." he stopped and fiddled with his fingers as if contemplating asking her a question.

"What is it Tidimous?" she looked at him with a patient understanding.

"Lord Conqueror, I have been a healer for sometime and am very well capable at what I do..."

"Yes Tidimous, I trust in your healing skills. Otherwise you would not be here" she encouraged him.

"Lord Conqueror, I can not seem to be able to set this leg of hers" he said sadly.

"Tidimous, Why?" she pushed her chair out from the desk and turned to face him.

"She has been out cold since they brought her in, but the moment we touch her leg she screams in agony...it disarms my apprentice Nika and me Lord Conqueror. I fear she will never walk again if it is not set correctly...I don't know...I am here to humbly ask you for your guidance Lord Conqueror.

Do I let it set the way it is? She is only a slave after all. Or do I let her go...give her a draught to end her misery and make her passing easy?"

"Tidimous! She is a person such as you and I" she stated to him "She doesn't deserve to agonize in pain; especially since she was trying to help someone" she finished more gently.

"Come healer..." she stood "...show me our patient and I will try to help anyway I can" and she exited her tent.

Upon entering the healer's tent, the Conqueror could see a cot on the right side with a small child lying in it. The child was on her stomach and her back was crisscrossed with deep oozing gashes that were spotted black with yellow-greenish pus. The stench was that of rotting flesh.

An apprentice was walking over to her with a bowl, fresh linen and some cream. No doubt to try and cleanse the wounds.

On the other side of the tent was another cot. In it was the young lady the Conqueror had seen

hanging from the whipping post the day before.

She was facing the tent wall on her stomach as well. Her leg was splinted in a makeshift manner, as it was three times the normal size and was bent at an irregular angle just below the knee. Her back had three open cuts that had bled through their packing.

"Well Tidimous," she began "we are going to have to turn her over so that her leg is in a more natural position. That way I could try to set it back in place and quickly splint it" she hesitated "...but to do that we need to have her lie on her back and that's going to cause those whipping gashes to possibly bleed open" she said as if trying to figure out a better way.

"There is not other way I can think of" she finally said looking toward Tidimous. "Now, we need to get things in place first. We need a decent splint with ties, a clean towel to roll her on to so those whipping gashes don't get dirt in them and then possibly infected; clean linen for her for when we are done and turn her onto her stomach, a sleeping draught and your apprentice to help with turning her and holding" she listed.

"Aye Lord Conqueror, at once..." he said ready to do her bidding "...but what of her screams and pain?" he asked.

"I have something for that".

Once everything was in place, the Conqueror explained to Tidimous and his apprentice their roles.

"Tidimous, you will assist me by standing by her legs, as we will have to do this in two steps. You, Nika, are in charge of her head and neck. Now when I tell you, you will turn in the direction her body is going, understand?"

Tidimous and Nika both nodded.

The Conqueror went to the girl's waist; leaning across her she put one arm over her hip and another over her shoulder and pulled back at the same time while telling Tidimous and Nika "Now!"

Nika supported her head and neck while Tidimous slowly helped turn her legs.

Once on her side, the Conqueror quickly said "Okay, I am going to lift her and lay her down; you two make sure you turn with me and make sure that leg is steady!"

"One, two, three, turn!" she stated as she easily lifted and turned the girl, gently laid her down.

Her hair had come across her face while being lifted and she moaned at being moved, but nothing else escaped her lips. Her face was discolored from the bruises and distorted from the swelling of her jaw and eye.

Nika supported her head and neck, Tidimous began unfastening the makeshift splint so the Conqueror could get to her leg.

"Okay Tidimous, let me know before you take the splint off as this is crucial to her not being in agony" stated the Conqueror.

"Aye Lord Conqueror, ready" he replied.

The Conqueror looked at the girl's leg and put her hand near her hip and thigh; slowly feeling for the joint between leg and hip. She stopped and very quickly jabbed two fingers at a point which caused the girl to elicit a moan.

She moved with precision and purpose now.

"I only have a few candledrops to do this in..." and she removed the splint.

"Tidimous make ready that splint!" she ordered and he quickly did so.

The Conqueror took the girl's leg in her hands; she placed a hand at the ankle and the other just below the knee. She pulled on the ankle and twisted while supporting the leg with her other hand. The Conqueror smiled imperceptibly as she felt a snap of the bone as it settled in place with a cracking sound.

"Okay Tidimous, splint it!" she rushed.

With sure hands, he put the splint to the leg and bound it.

"Okay, I'm going to let it go now, it will be set..." the Conqueror stated as she let go "...I don't want those bindings too tight for the swelling or too loose not to support" she continued as she checked them before saying "perfect".

She stood and walked up to the spot that she had jabbed earlier "Okay, when I do this again, it will be more than likely she will scream in pain. Make ready that draught and give it to her while she is up and then we'll roll her over again" she said while looking at a marking on the girl's hip that she had not noticed earlier.

"Lord Conqueror?" Tidimous brought her out of her musing.

"Yes? Um...ready?" she said and jabbed.

A moment passed and then a muffled wail escaped the girl. Nika immediately supported her up as Tidimous gave her the draught.

"Okay, let's get her over again so you can clean up her back and stitch her up" the Conqueror stated and they began their task.

Just as she had finished rolling her over, Tidimous began the smallest of fine stitches on her back when Abraxus came in.

"Lord Conqueror?" he saluted

"Yes?" she replied still looking at Tidimous stitching the young girl, and wondering 'what was that mark?'

"I just received some news that you would really like to hear" he stated with a joyful look.

She turned and walked to him, "Come, and tell me" as she walked out of the healer's tent.

"I just received word from the guards that the three are talking amongst themselves. Of course Laertis is merely trying to squirm his way out of his predicament but Mitiris and Timeon are sporadically making remarks about someone carrying out the rest of the plan" he stopped to look at the Conqueror.

"And?" she asked with an arch of her eyebrow towards him, as she knew there was more.

"Supposedly, they had talked in their plans that there was a possibility they might get caught, and if that indeed happened; whoever was free would attempt to free the others to finish the plan".

"So, all we have to do is sit and wait for him to come to us."

"Yes, Lord Conqueror".

"Well, we aren't going to make it easy for him to just walk up and be done with it..." she smiled wickedly, turning back into the healer's tent "Tidimous, a first light tomorrow we head back to Corinth; make sure they're able to travel in the caravan" walking away, "Abraxus, have the guards listen and report on anything they hear".

It would take more than a moon's cycle to get back to the Palace and Tidimous knew the journey at first would not be pleasant but he looked forward to being able to take care of people in familiar surroundings with proper medical supplies.

By the end of the first half turn of the moon, they had come upon a village that had been in the midst of rebuilding.

"Abraxus, we have not come through this route and village before. Find out what has happened and lend aid to the locals".

At the end of the day, Abraxus had reported to the Conqueror that a set of barbarians had attacked the village under the same ranting of Wotan.

She was now a bit perturbed about having to hear that name again.

Chapter 6

"Oh, come now Xena, you expect us to believe that you have passed out or even died? We are not that easily fooled". He placed the dagger down on the table by the flask of wine and leaned over, picking up a bucket of cool water and in one motion, threw it her, drenching her and bringing her to a completely awakened and alert state.

The Conqueror tossed in a fit of restless sweat; the nightmare coming again in its vicious taunt; "Noooooooo...."

Once again, the two interior guards ran up to the entry of the bed chamber; "Stand down; it's alright. Go back to your posts".

"Hades hornets!" exasperatedly, she sat on her bed. Finally getting up to change her sweat soaked shift, "This one showed her eyes..." she said aloud, "Her eyes were as emeralds... Who is this woman?" splashing water into her face, "Oh well, might as well go and do some drills since I am so uptight and worked up", she said grabbing her sword and heading out.

Finally reaching Corinth, the Conqueror set about putting in a plan to have the fourth member of the group caught when in an attempt to rescue the prisoners.

The Conqueror had a suspicion that this last criminal would not come to rescue but to eliminate the three who failed rather than be implicated, so she set about gathering as much information from them as possible but also learn any information of this 'Wotan' character as well.

"Lord Conqueror, if you would please!" Sephina said in an exasperated tone; "You have only had a nibble or two in the past few days and Ophelia will have my hide if she thinks I am neglecting to impose on you to eat".

Sephina was the Conqueror's personal servant. No one else was allowed to enter her private bed chambers unless escorted by her. She would clean the room, change the linen, clean the private bath, make the food deliveries when the Conqueror wanted to eat in her private rooms and usher any remaining evening's entertainment out.

She had seen the change in the Conqueror's demeanor upon her arrival home. It was as if something haunted her.

"I'm not hungry!" the Conqueror replied in a harsh tone, walking to the fireplace. She leaned into the side mantle piece with her left forearm and placed her forehead to rest on her forearm, sighing and staring into the fire.

"Lord Conqueror? You have been troubled since your return. We worry for your health if you do not keep up your strength" she said with a worried look.

"I know Sephina. You and Ophi take good care of me; so you needn't worry over one or two

meals not eaten. I just have a lot on my mind right now and food is not one of them".

"Aye Lord Conqueror, I will not bother you anymore and advise Ophelia that you were just a bit busy to take in this evening's meal" exiting the chambers, leaving the Conqueror to her thoughts.

The next morning found the Conqueror walking through the palace courtyard grounds heading towards the library. The morning sun was filtering through the archways sending streams of golden rays through the corridor. The crisp autumn morning refreshing in its greeting and foretelling of an expectation of a cold winter ahead.

Looking up from the courtyard, she caught a glimpse of a reddish blond haired woman's figure through the archways. She immediately turned for the stairs to the corridor. The figure was nearing the end of the corridor which leads towards the stairs to one of the towers. The Conqueror made the corridor just as the figure ascended the stairs. The Conqueror ran to the end and raced up the stairs just as the door closed to the tower.

She wrenched open the door to find no one there.

She turned completely around in full circle; yet she found herself alone, "What in the name of Zeus's sanity is going on?" fuming and running her hand through her hair.

She looked about the tower noticing it was an unused section of the palace, "Come to think of it, it's an unused corridor as well" she mused to herself sitting down on a small bench facing the early morning sun.

Just then, she had the oddest sensation over come her. As if she was not alone.

She jumped up while unsheathing her sword from its scabbard when a brilliant shimmering light cascaded down to the bench she just rose from.

"Tsk, tsk. Put that thing away before you hurt someone!" said the sweetest of voices.

The Conqueror blinked her eyes in disbelief, thinking she was finally starting to go mad at having seen things and now, hear them.

"Oh Xena, come now. I mean you no harm!" said the shimmering apparition while sweeping her arm through the air.

The Conqueror's sword disappeared, only to reappear inside her scabbard on her back.

Finally coming into complete view, stood a vision of absolute loveliness and beauty. Standing easily a head taller than the Conqueror was a woman with golden hair that hung in locks about her face and shoulders. She had the face of one of the many statues seen throughout all of Greece, very elegant and fine. Wearing a robe of gossamer, yet not completely see through so as to give the alluring feel of sensuality.

"Who are you?" questioned the Conqueror who was disarmed in all literary sense.

"I am Aphrodite, Xena" was all she said, letting the words sink in.

"What does the Goddess want with me? Is Ares making you do this?" she fired off, starting to pace the small tower.

Aphrodite merely watched her begin pacing and shook her head in sympathy rather than reply.

"Xena, come sit down and stop stressing for just a candle mark while I explain" she finally replied in a very gentle voice but with an authority that the Conqueror undeniably heard.

Slowly, the Conqueror walked over and timidly sat at the edge of the bench.

"I won't bite you, Xena...although you are quite a tasty little morsel..." Aphrodite snickered, looking the warrior up and down.

The Conqueror merely arched an eyebrow at the goddess and said nothing.

"Oh, lighten up" Aphrodite exhaled and waved her arm again, this time the Conqueror took a very deep and long breath, exhaled and visibly lightened her mood.

"Unlike my brother Xena, I do not like to meddle in the affairs of mortals. But since this is a destiny that he shouldn't even attempt to interfere with..." she stopped short and shook her head, trying to calm the rising anger noted in her voice' "...let me start again Xena. In answer to your first question, I don't want anything from you but to fulfill the life thread destiny that the Fates have woven for you. And second, no; he didn't send me".

The Conqueror visibly relaxed even more. She looked up at the goddess now seated next to her, realizing how hauntingly beautiful she was.

"You have a perilous journey before you, Xena. One that will test the moral fiber of whom you see yourself becoming; but you are only half yourself. Your strongest weapon will be your weakness yet undiscovered. You must guard this with your life!" she cautioned.

"Why the riddles, Goddess Aphrodite?" she questioned again.

"Still respecting those who have respected you hmm Xena?" smiled the goddess noting the way she referred to her.

The Conqueror lowered her eyes and bowed her head in a show of humility.

"As I said earlier, I will not meddle in the affairs of mortals...but this is an exception to my own rule. Yet, I am bound by Father's orders not to reveal everything. In that, I can tell you but only in this way. The rest you must do on your own Xena" looking into the Conqueror's eyes.

"My sister has a chosen warrior that is to lead her nation but she is yet to become complete in her fate and assume her role. I have a vested interest in your entwined threads. I will not have these paths altered for personal pleasures".

The Conqueror knowingly nodded at who the goddess referred to...Ares.

"Goddess Aphrodite...might I ask you something?" the Conqueror asked with her head slightly held askew.

"Yes Xena. If I can answer it, I will".

"I, well...Morpheus has not been pleased with me as of late...I do not recall offending him or..."

"Xena, Morpheus does not just bring you dreams for passing of the night," she interrupted, "...there is a reason for those...but you must put the pieces together...I can only give you some of the vital pieces. Do you understand?"

The Conqueror's brow furrowed in thought as she tried to put it all together.

"Xena, this is not simple. It will not be answered in a candle mark with what we have discussed here. There is yet more to be revealed. When it does; then you will be able to put it all together and see your path". Taking her hand and cupping the Conqueror's chin she lifted it slightly to see her face and eyes, "Xena, take what I have given and sort it out in your own time...I will be here for you. Just call for me and if I am able, I will speak with you".

With that, she caressed the cheek and slowly disappeared; leaving the Conqueror to still feel her lingering caress long after she had gone.

The Conqueror sat there wondering if what she had just seen and heard was real or just another visit to Morpheus. Shaking her head slightly, she muttered "I'm getting too old for this", getting up to walk back to the library.

Time had passed and the Conqueror had taken to writing down bits and pieces of the conversation she had had with the goddess, whilst also writing down the dreams and parts she could remember. In trying to put them into some sort of order she hoped to decipher them which would give her some sort of clue as to what was going to happen or what was actually going on.

The prisoners had not revealed much in regards to the identity of the fourth member of their plot; having become more and more despondent at being there, in prison for so long. As far as they felt, it should have happened already.

The Conqueror made sure their time was not just spent sitting in their cells; she had them put to hard labor. They dug trenches, emptied stables, washed clothes and any other menial task she could think of as to ensure they knew what they had lost and that they now had nothing.

One evening, the Conqueror felt she just wanted to eat her meal in private. She was in a bad

mood and didn't want to be disturbed by the noise and bustle of the dining hall, so she asked for Sephina to be sent up. After awhile went by, the Conqueror grew irritated that she had not come up yet.

She rose from her chambers and headed towards the servants arranging rooms down the stairs at the end of the Palace.

It was unusual for Sephina not to be prompt when summoned, so she wanted to know why.

The servants arranging room was actually more than one room; it was multiple rooms which all interconnected. The main area was Ophelia's domain, the kitchen. No one was allowed to touch anything in there unless Ophelia directed so.

The rest of the rooms were for various uses such as linen sorting, food storage, utensils and so forth.

Just as the Conqueror stepped onto the landing, she heard a round of laughter by many people followed by clapping. She stopped. A moment later many servants exited in different directions from the main room.

Sephina hastily ran towards the direction of the stairs and began to climb two steps at a time before realizing the Conqueror stood on the landing before her.

"Oh, Lo...Lord Conqueror" she stammered.

"Sephina" the Conqueror replied flatly.

"Lord Conqueror, I beg your forgiveness!" she immediately fell to her knees with her head bowed low.

The Conqueror's temper was renowned. She had had many slaves flogged for mistakes and servants were berated and banished from the realm. Though she had tried to reform, there were still times she could be heard in the palace yelling at some unfortunate individual who had caused her temper to flare.

"Is there a particularly extraordinary reason why I had to come and look for you instead of you answering your call?" she stated with in an icy tone and steely glare.

"Lord Conqueror, my sincerest apologies. I meant you no disrespect or disregard" she spoke almost at a whisper; but the fear evident in her voice.

Then another hearty laugh echoed through the stair corridor, it was Ophelia's.

"So..." arching an eyebrow in a questioning manner, "...is this the cause of your absenteeism?"

"Yes...um...no, I mean yes and no, Lord Conqueror" she stammered.

"Well, which one is it?"

"Lord Conqueror, I do not wish to get the bard in trouble with you. She has given us a moment's levity" Sephina pleaded.

"Bard? Who is this person and when did they come here?" the Conqueror said with a confused brow crease to her forehead as she knew of all the personnel in the palace, for she was the only one to give permission for them to be there.

As Sephina was about to answer, there was a commotion outside. Commands could clearly be heard given out.

The Conqueror motioned for the nearest sentry to come forward, "Find Abraxus and have him report to me at once!"

"Aye, Lord Conqueror" Abraxus answered walking quickly around the corner on his way towards her chambers.

The Conqueror waved the sentry back to his post, "What news?"

"The outermost sentry post report a large contingent of warriors en route some by foot, some mounted" he saluted.

"Friend or foe?"

"They carry the banner of the Amazons, Lord Conqueror"

"Amazons? I did not send for a meeting with them, nor was I informed or requested" she said exhaling a breath as she was quite tired from the combination of a pounding headache and hunger from not eating her evening meal. Exasperated; *'Why can't I just get a little peace and quiet when I want it?'* she mentally said to herself.

"Sephina, you're dismissed" the Conqueror said turning to go to her chambers to change for the upcoming meeting.

Sephina, still kneeling gasped in horror, bringing up her hands to her mouth to cover the sobs coming forth.

The Conqueror turned to see what was the sudden noise, seeing Sephina's horror stricken face she then realized her statement was taken in the wrong context, "No, Sephina. Not dismissed from my services, just for the evening" then turned back towards her chambers while shaking her head.

Sephina quickly retreated, attempting to gather control over her composure.

"So, how long before they arrive?" asked the Conqueror while putting on her battle dress uniform and arm braces.

"At their current speed, the sentry said less than a candle mark, Lord Conqueror" he kept pace with her as she made her way through the courtyard heading towards the meeting hall.

"Make sure they have a clear area for their encampment, advise the stable hands to make ready for arrivals and get Ophelia to set a table for some road weary travelers".

"At once Lord Conqueror" he replied and was gone.

She proceeded into the greeting section of the meeting hall in the Palace and sat down, wondering what the reason could be for an unannounced meeting from the Amazons.

A very short candle mark later, Queen Melosa and her escort arrived into the courtyard. Abraxus greeted them and explained to them the encampment and food provisions before leading the Queen and her escort to the Conqueror's greeting room.

Chapter 7

"Enter"

The Queen and her escort entered the room. Ephiny promptly bent to one knee and the Queen bowed in a show of respect and deference to the Conqueror.

The Conqueror walked up to the Queen and extended her arm in offer of a warrior's handshake while speaking, "Queen Melosa, welcome".

The Queen accepted the handshake, "Lord Conqueror, well met. This is my second, Regent Ephiny".

"Rise regent".

Ephiny saluted with a fist to her chest and rose, "Well met Lord Conqueror".

"Well met" she replied motioning to the seats for them to sit.

"Thank you Lord Conqueror," Queen Melosa spoke, "your hospitality is very kind, especially at this candle mark".

"So, do what do I owe this *unannounced* visit?" the Conqueror asked emphasizing the fact that no request for the meeting, which was protocol, was sent.

"Ah yes, umm...it is something that would be best discussed in private, Lord Conqueror" replied the Queen.

The Conqueror's eyebrow shot up at such a suggestion. It was rare indeed that anyone would suggest a private meeting with her, least of all by the Queen of the Amazons.

"Come then" the Conqueror rose, going into her private meeting room.

After the guards had closed the doors, the Conqueror began, "So?"

"Lord Conqueror, this is something you might want to sit down to hear" replied the Queen.

Again, the Conqueror arched an eyebrow to the Queen's words.

Ephiny was being lead with the rest of the Amazon's into the dining hall by Abraxus when they all heard her.

"SHE WHAT?" the Conqueror bellowed, both eyebrows lost in her hairline as she stood over the seated Queen.

"Umm...she has asked for your hand in a bonding ceremony. According to our laws; she researched this apparently; she can ask for your hand. If you decline, she can then challenge you for rights...umm...certain....umm"

"Oh Hera's tits woman, spit it out!" growled the Conqueror.

"If you decline, you must then accept the challenge for her right to be your champion..." the Queen paused as this brought a shocked incredulous look from the Conqueror, "...and consort!"

"WHAT?!" again the Conqueror bellowed.

The Queen had now risen and was backtracking from the Conqueror, seeing the angered look on her face. She looked to the door then back to the Conqueror as she had begun to pace the room, clenching her fists and breathing hard, like a caged animal ready to be let loose.

"YOU HAVE GOT TO BE JOKING!" she finally said looking at the Queen.

The Queen merely looked up, "Would I joke about this?"

"No, you wouldn't" she shook her head, "Where is she now?" she began rubbing her temples with her fingertips as she felt one Hades of a headache start.

"As per law, she has gone into seclusion for a moon's cycle. She has to have no contact from anyone so she can cleanse herself and be...um..."

As she had begun to stammer, the Conqueror looked up to the Queen with an exasperated look.

"Oh Hades! She has to be pure and untouched when asking for your hand" the Queen finally said throwing her hands up in the air.

"OH GOOD GRIEF!" exhaled the Conqueror, running her hand through her hair.

"Well, good news is you have at least a bit of time Lord Conqueror..." earning her another look from the Conqueror, "...well, a moon's cycle in seclusion and then the time for her to travel here to seek permission for private counsel with you asking for your hand..."

The Conqueror rolled her eyes and began pacing the room again.

"...and..." she continued, which brought the Conqueror's pacing to a stop; "...you have a moon's cycle to answer her request for your hand..."

This brought a small smile and a raised eyebrow to the Conqueror's face as she felt there was still more.

"...and..." at this point she had the Conqueror's undivided attention, "If you decline her request..."

"IF?" the Conqueror replied incredulously.

"My apologies Lord Conqueror, I do not wish to presume your answer. You might choose to accept it upon seeing her. It is up to you" she shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh Hades NO!" she emphatically replied.

"Yes Lord Conqueror. Um...if...um well I mean when you decline her request and she then challenges for her right to be your champion and consort..."

"UGH" was the only sound coming out of the Conqueror as she buried her face into her hands.

"...If someone else takes that challenge, you have, sorry...they have...Oh Hades...there is a moon's cycle granted to prepare for the challenge competition. So basically it can be up to three moon cycles before this really has to be sorted" the Queen finished happily.

The Conqueror looked through her splayed fingers that held her face.

A long silence crept through the study.

"There has got to be a way to stop this! This will end badly if I don't figure out a way!" the Conqueror began rubbing her temples again.

"I have brought one of our elders who knows of all our laws with us as well as some of the ancient scrolls in hopes that there might be some way to help..." then in the barest of whispers, "and our priestess just in case".

The look of shock on the Conqueror's face was priceless. You could count on one hand the number of times anyone alive could ever recall having seen it.

"Okay. There is nothing to be gained here tonight. You are weary from your travels Queen Melosa, and I thank you for your efforts to get here and the fealty shown to the realm to advise of such a ...proposition being considered".

"More than that Lord Conqueror, I consider you a friend and would not let this blindsides you" she said with a gentle smile.

"Thank you Queen Melosa," getting up from her chair and walking over to her, "I am honored to have you as a friend..." she said and put a hand on her shoulder, "...come now friend. Eat and rest; I will speak with your elder ...and priestess...after rising tomorrow".

"Aye Lord Conqueror" and they walked to the dining hall.

The Conqueror decided she would like to soak in the thermal spa located in the healer's area of the palace. She had proposed the idea for the spa in the palace as they were well known for helping with the recuperating and healing process for injured people.

It was fairly quiet as the Conqueror walked along the palace corridor; most of the palace and town were asleep at the time.

She entered the corridor to the healer's rooms and then drew back the heavy drape to the thermal spa.

It was there that she froze to the spot.

In the spa sat the reddish blond haired woman from the corridor earlier. She sat in the elevated spa, with the water level reaching up to her shoulders. Her hair was drawn up in a bun atop her head with a few loose curls draped down the sides of her face.

She lifted her leg and massaged it for a bit before lowering it back into the water, massaging it again. She then stood up; her back facing the Conqueror who stood rooted to the spot; as the steam rose from her body, leaving her completely mesmerized at the sight.

The Conqueror took in the beautiful skin and shape of her body; the water cascading down along the length of her back slowly and smoothly until... 'Scars?' the Conqueror mentally said.

Three scars, still not fully healed stood out in stark contrast to the fine skin.

The woman stepped from the spa and turned reaching for her towel; in the process, revealing her body to the Conqueror.

Totally awestruck, the Conqueror gazed upon her breathtakingly beautiful body. She had perky breasts that dripped water from the spa they had recently luxuriated in, her small taut stomach where the water rippled over and collected into her sensual navel before traveling down to a core of beautiful blonde hair. Very powerful yet sleek thighs held the body up before her, revealing a small birthmark between her thigh and hip.

The Conqueror was lost from all concentration and dropped the drapes she was holding to the side and exhaled a deep breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

The woman jumped, startled at the noise and reflectively grabbed the towel to her body. Upon seeing the Conqueror she dropped to her knees, "My Lord" she stated with her head bowed.

"Um...pardon...Isorry....thought this was..." blushing profusely, the Conqueror turned into the drapes. Grabbing them haphazardly and trying to pull them back so as to leave, "Hades!"

She finally pulled them back and briskly walked away, leaving a bewildered looking woman behind.

When she finally got to her chambers, she was out of breath and sweating, "What in the Hades? Get a grip Xena! You haven't blushed or stuttered since you were a child!" she admonished herself.

"I'm not leaving here until first light! I can't take anymore surprises" walking into her bath chambers and stripping off her shift, she picked up a bucket of cool water and threw it over herself. Sputtering water, she passed a hand over her face, "Ah, that's much better".

At first light, the Conqueror was up and out, going through a mental check off list of things she wanted to do.

"Lord Conqueror" Abraxus greeted, pulling her from her thoughts.

"Abraxus, everything go well with our guests?"

"Yes, Lord Conqueror" he stated as he walked alongside her, "So it seems you have an admirer?"

This earned him a stern look with one eyebrow lifted from the Conqueror.

A few candle drops passed before she spoke, "So you heard then?" she said in an exasperated tone.

"Yes, Lord Conqueror. I heard your, um... reaction to the news and was told also by the Queens's second Ephiny of the reason behind the reaction".

"As if there is not enough on my plate right now, that I have to sort out this suitor business out as well", she continued walking.

"Well, maybe their elder can help?" he said reassuringly.

"Let's hope so!"

By mid day, they had gone through a review of the explanations of the previous evening's news and started going through the scrolls containing the Amazon's laws in the hope that they could

find a way to stop this from proceeding any further.

Deciding on taking a break for the noon meal, the Conqueror requested food be brought to the study for those present whilst the rest of the Amazons were to dine in the hall with the rest of the palace.

"So, let me get this straight again..." the Conqueror began, "Satori is of your tribe, living a happy life. Then last solstice, something happened to her. What, you don't know. Just that she became obsessed in research" looking at the three Amazons sitting with her in her study.

"Yes" the Queen replied.

"Then she approaches you about a moon's cycle ago and asks your permission as Queen for approval to seek a bonding?"

"Yes"

"And, she doesn't tell you who?"

A knock at the door stops the Queen from responding.

"Enter!" the Conqueror said with a bit of frustration.

The four servants entered the study, each carrying a tray loaded with food and drink for each of the guests.

They waited with their heads bowed while the guests made their way to the dining table at the other end of the study.

After the Conqueror had seated herself, each of the Amazons took a seat and the servants begin placing the food onto the table for each of the guests.

The Conqueror sat quietly lost in her thoughts until she noticed a slender arm reach across to place a dish on the table in front of her. Following the arm back with her eyes to the servants face, she froze.

The servant girl took that exact same candle drop to look up and into a pair of the most captivating cerulean eyes she had ever seen in her life looking into hers.

The Conqueror was drawn into the face of innocence that surrounded the forest of emerald green eyes.

They were transfixed, lost in each others eyes. They were totally oblivious to those around them, who were watching them.

The tray the servant carried began to slope sideways, causing the drink to slide off and onto her

and the Conqueror, startling them both from their locked gaze.

The servant attempted to catch the drink, her motions only causing her to fall backwards as the Conqueror was rising from her chair at the same time. Instinctively, the Conqueror reached out and wrapped one arm around the servant's waist while grabbing her arm with the other.

The servant girl's eyes were as round as saucers in shock and fear for having caused the scene and embarrassment of Conqueror in front of her guests. She cringed, closing her eyes in fear for the beating she knew she was about to receive.

"Are you all right?" said the sweetest voice she'd ever heard.

She peaked open an eye in curiosity at who was speaking. Wondering who was talking to whom.

"Are you all right?" said the smooth voice again, and she realized it was being asked of her.

Opening both eyes, she looked up into a sea of blue.

Looking back at her were two compassion filled eyes.

She could not find her voice, so she merely nodded.

The guests were all standing now, and the servants were all frozen in motion and shock.

The Conqueror still held her in her arms, "You sure you're okay?"

The servant girl could only feel the soft yet strong arms about her; nothing else was registering.

A clearing of a throat caused the Conqueror to realize she still had not let this woman go and that the Amazons were staring at her.

Letting go of her finally, "Um...as long as you're okay...could you...um...well let's get this cleaned up...I...um...I'll be back. I'm going to go get changed" she stammered, blushing she turned and exited her study.

The Amazons watched her leave; then all eyes went to the servant girl, who stood with her back to them, with the same color to her cheeks as the Conqueror's.

The Conqueror quickly went into her private chambers and walked directly into her bath chambers, grabbed the bucket of cool water and poured it over her head, fully clothed.

"What the..." she thought.

'You have got to get a grip woman! That's the second time in less than twelve candle

marks!'...pacing the room, 'But, it's her...I know it's her! Those eyes...those are the eyes of my dream! That face, her hair...it's her!' saying to herself.

She absent mindedly got out of the wet clothes and dried herself off; getting into another set and drying off her hair.

Meanwhile, the servants had left the room after replacing the Conqueror's meal and chair.

Queen Melosa and the rest of the Amazons at the table sat in silence; waiting for the Conqueror's return. Then slowly, ever so slowly a small smile crept onto the lips of the Queen.

She looked over to her regent, then to the elder. They looked at her, wondering what the smile on her face was for, then; as if communicating without words, the elder and regent began to smile.

The Conqueror returned to the study were the three Amazons rose when she entered, "Well, I want to finally get some food" rubbing her hands together and sitting down.

She looked up to three smiling faces, "What?"

After the noon meal was finished and cleared from the room, "I have to WHAT?"

"Well, you could avoid all of the coming propositions by already being bonded with someone or have someone stand for you, basically to answer to the challenge" Queen Melosa stated.

"Who am I supposed to be bonded with or stand for me in such a short amount of time? Besides, why do I have to do this?"

"Yes, because she has a right to ask you for your hand and if you decline...Oops, when you decline, she has the right to challenge. That you cannot deny. If no one challenges, then she becomes your champion and consort. You might not consummate her as your consort, but no one can then ask for your hand in bonding nor can you ask anyone else, as she would be your champion and consort till death".

"Ugh" was the only sound heard as the Conqueror held her head in her hands.

"But, if there was someone already or someone to challenge...well then..." Queen Melosa was saying.

"But who? I just don't want to bond for the sake of not bonding. If that's the case then I'll just say yes!" this shocked them all including the Conqueror when she realized what she had said, "What am I saying?! Oh HADES!"

"Well Conqueror, is there anyone with whom you would like to be bonded with? Someone who you could see yourself grow old with and be happy to be with as a bond mate?"

"No, I haven't gotten to that point... in my life yet"

'Ah she didn't say she hasn't met that person yet!' the Queen thought to herself.

"Is there anyone you could see yourself with?" the Queen asked with a smile.

The Conqueror did not reply; she looked away as if in thought.

"TO HADES WITH THESE LAWS! I have not gone through all that I have to be dictated to as to who I must be bonded with!" the Conqueror bellowed and rose abruptly, "If she so much as steps one foot on Palace grounds, I will behead her myself!" and stormed from the study.

"Well, that went well" Ephiny deadpanned.

"Queen Melosa, might I suggest we leave this method of thought alone for a while and possibly consult with the Priestess in the hope that she might have some sort of message from the Goddess Artemis regarding this predicament" the elder said.

Taking a deep breath, "Yep, let's try that" Queen Melosa replied and they headed towards their encampment.

The Conqueror paced in her chambers like a wild caged animal. "I am the Conqueror! I will not be dictated to! I will choose who I want, when I want!" she ranted, "I want it to be when I am ready, when...when I feel I am ready...when I feel...when I fall...in love" she finished in almost a whisper. She sank down into the bench near the window, deflated.

Chapter 8

The sun had just set, with the moon yet to rise to its highest peak. As it was nearing winter, the temperature was low and the palace fireplaces were all being stoked to keep the stone enclosure warm and comfortable.

The Conqueror sat in her room, alone. She had asked that her evening meal be skipped, but Ophelia directed that a platter of warm pastries and hot tea be sent up to her anyways.

A light knock on her outer chamber door was heard by her keen hearing.

"Enter"

Another knock on her private bed chamber door.

"Enter" she replied absentmindedly.

The servant came in and placed a tray on the small table by the chair in front of the fireplace that the Conqueror sat in; "My Lord, these were sent by Ophelia" said the smallest voice.

The Conqueror only heard the words *My Lord* and turned to see the servant girl from earlier; "You?" she questioned.

The servant girl went to her knees immediately, afraid the Conqueror was going to punish her for the earlier misfortunate accident, "My Lord..."she said, her voice trembling with fear and her head lowered.

The Conqueror rose from her chair and walked to stand in front of the servant' she could feel the fear she had and wondered, '*what has caused this reaction to be ingrained in such a beautiful creature such as this? Why does she call me My Lord? I have not made her a servant of mine, yet she acts as if she belongs to me already*'

Leaning down, the Conqueror gently cupped the chin of the servant, lifting it up so she could see her face, "Who are you?"

"I am no one of importance, My Lord. I am your servant and slave" she meekly replied, averting her eyes from the Conqueror's gaze.

"You have a name? What is it?" the Conqueror asked softly.

"Gab...Gabrielle, My Lord" she stammered.

"Gabrielle" the Conqueror said softly out loud, her low pitched voice prolonged the syllables making it sound exotic and sensual.

The Conqueror's use of her name brought shivers to her body; Gabrielle looked up into the cerulean eyes and was lost.

The Conqueror gazed into soft emerald green eyes, flashes of her dreams swirled through her mind, "*I Love You, Xe*".

A noise outside brought the conqueror out of her trance, "Gabrielle..." said the Conqueror again, "...do not fear me. I will cause you no harm," still cupping her chin gently, "Please stand up; this is causing my back to ache a bit" she joked, letting go of her chin.

Gabrielle went to stand up but was stopped in mid movement when the Conqueror extended her hand in offer of assistance up.

She hesitantly and shakily took the proffered hand.

When their hands connected, they were both transported into a dreamlike state. Before their eyes they could see themselves as if looking down into private moments.

At first, the scene was of the two of them walking together through the palace gardens hand in hand, and then the scene morphed into them romantically dining alone in the Conqueror's private chambers, next came a festival ...no ...a ceremonial celebration with so many people in attendance. Finally, the scene was of a room...a roaring fireplace throwing shadows across two bodies entwined in an intimately passionate embrace on a huge four post bed.

When their joined hands came apart, they both blinked several times in bewilderment while looking at their hands. Then at the same time they looked up to each other, blushing profusely.

'Did she see that?' they both thought to themselves, then both stammering "I...um..."

"My Lord, I am sincerely sorry for my actions earlier and causing you any embarrassment; please forgive me" Gabrielle said while standing with her head bowed.

"It was an accident, Gabrielle," the Conqueror replied while stepping back from her, "there was no harm done...except to my clothes" she teased.

Gabrielle looked up to see the Conqueror smile softly to her, attempting to ease her fear.

Sitting back down, the Conqueror looked to her, "Gabrielle, would you sit with me for a while?" blushing again for asking her such a thing.

Gabrielle's shocked look caused the Conqueror to explain, "I would like to ask you a few things, but it's difficult with you standing and me sitting, besides...I'm a bit tired" came the weak excuse.

"My Lord is most kind" Gabrielle said taking a seat across from her.

"Gabrielle, how did you come to be here?"

"My Lord brought me here" Gabrielle replied with a puzzled look.

"And who is your Lord?"

"You, My Lord" she replied with a confused look as to why she was asking.

"Maybe you misunderstand me Gabrielle. Who brought you here to the Palace?"

"You did, My Lord" Gabrielle clasped her hands on her lap.

"Me? When?" asked the now confused Conqueror.

"Yes, My Lord. Near three moon cycles ago...from Trachis, My Lord..." she tried to explain.

"The girl...on the whipping posts..." the realization dawning on the Conqueror, she said more to herself than to Gabrielle and turned her head to the fireplace as if seeing her there again.

Gabrielle could see the Conqueror's face change from soft to a tensed anger, her eyes turning steely in the process.

Misunderstanding the Conqueror's change as one of disgust, she lowered her head and with tears

already sliding down her cheeks unchecked, "Yes, My Lord" she whispered while watching her tears fall into the upturned palms of her hands.

Silence descended into the room with only the crackle of the fire as sound.

The Conqueror took a deep breath to calm the animal that had begun stirring. Turning to Gabrielle, she saw her sitting with tears falling and quiet sobs causing her shoulders to shake.

"Gabrielle, are you alright?" she rose and unconsciously went to bended knee in front of the girl, the hardness in her eyes fading. Taking both her hands in her own, "What is wrong, little one?"

"My Lo...Lord finds displeasure in me" she whispered

"What? I don't understand..." the Conqueror leaned back.

Crying, Gabrielle attempted to speak, "I am sorry for Trachis, My Lord. For the damage I did earlier, for..."

"Whoa!" the Conqueror said, holding a hand up in a stopping motion and interrupting Gabrielle.

Gabrielle immediately flinched and brought the back of her hand to her mouth, fearing quick reprisal.

The Conqueror's face softened and she reached up to gently take Gabrielle's hand from her mouth, placing it on her lap with the other one which was cupped in the Conqueror's much bigger ones.

With her other hand, she brought it up to Gabrielle's cheek and cupping her chin, wiped away a stray tear with her thumb. The girl's grief tearing at the Conqueror's heart, "Gabrielle, oh little one, no tears...no tears, sssshhhhh"

She spoke with comforting tones, "...you misunderstood my actions. I am not displeased, nor am I upset for the events at the noon meal. That is all forgotten. I am still trying to figure out what happened that you were put to those posts and treated in such a manner".

She now held both her hands, tenderly rubbing the skin with her thumb absentmindedly, "he said you interfered in something...you did not cause harm to anyone, did you?"

Gabrielle shook her head no.

"Did you cause the death of someone?"

Again, another shake no.

"Did you betray the realm or me?"

An emphatic shake no with wide eyes caused the Conqueror to laugh, "Okay, so...little one, what caused him to do that to you? When did you come to be in his service and where did you come from?"

Gabrielle sat still, overwhelmed at the Conqueror's questions and presence so close; she looked away, trying to hide her nervousness and sudden intense feeling.

The Conqueror could see her distress, "Gabrielle, its okay" lightly tapping her hands that she still held in hers, "Why don't you have a drink and a breather, then we'll talk. Okay?" she leaned towards the table where Gabrielle had sat the platter with a mug of tea.

Gabrielle watched as the Conqueror leaned back and to the left side, reaching for the platter. Glancing at her body as she extended back, she could see the underlying strength coiled inside, enclosed in such a beautiful figure.

The Conqueror brought the tea over to Gabrielle, "Here, have a drink and relax a bit. Then you can try to answer some of my questions, Okay?"

She nodded as she lifted her hands to accept the mug. Bringing it to her mouth, she took a long drink and then a very deep breath; calming her nervous and shaking body.

"Better?" asked the Conqueror suddenly realizing where she was; on bended knees, holding her hand on Gabrielle's knee and the other resting on the arm rest of the seat she was in. "Um...well..." getting up self consciously and sitting back in her own chair, "So, Gabrielle..." this brought more shivers to Gabrielle's skin; "where are you from?"

"My Lord, I am from Trachis"

"Is that your home town where you were born?"

"No, My Lord...I was born in a small Port town called Potidaea.

"So how did you come to be in Trachis?"

"It was long ago, My Lord. I was taken from my home town by a group of slavers when I had gone to get supplies..." she said sadly, "...I was just ten seasons when I was taken with three others; we were put on board a ship and set to sea within candle marks".

"So, you were not a slave by act of war or debt repayment?" asked the Conqueror with a tensed look about her.

"No, My Lord; but the slavers beat me when I spoke of being a free girl. They said they would make it that I never spoke again if I ever said it. Another of the girls did not listen to their threats...she was beaten, raped and tortured. When she was brought back to us, she was unrecognizable..." she said sadly recalling the memory, visibly shuddering at the images playing in her mind, "...she jumped ship while at sea and they made no attempts to rescue her. I am sure

Poseidon's sea creatures finished off her misery" with a lone tear escaping its confine.

She sipped on the mug of tea, suddenly realizing she was drinking the Conqueror's tea as if it were her own, "Oh My Lord," she jumped up, "Your tea...My Lord...I did not mean to drink...you do not have any...oh..." she put fingers to her mouth.

"Gabrielle...Gabrielle, it's alright. I didn't want it any...Don't worry. I gave it to you freely" the Conqueror put her hand up to try and stem her actions.

"My Lord, I should not take any more of your time; forgive me and my sad ramblings".

"Gabrielle, I asked you. Remember? Unless of course you have...to meet someone?" asked the Conqueror, a pang of jealousy biting and making her feel unnatural to her normal stoic emotional state.

"NO!..." she replied almost startlingly, "I mean no, My Lord. I have no one...to meet. I was just...well you've had a long day than I, My Lord and I didn't want to take up your time" she said sitting back down.

"Thank you, Gabrielle for your thoughtfulness. But, I just enjoy chatting right now to take my mind off things".

"Does My Lord not feel well?" replied the concerned voice.

"Just a bad headache and a possible maniacal suitor on the way; nothing much" she deadpanned.

Gabrielle's puzzled look caused the Conqueror to rethink her reply, "No, Gabrielle. I'm fine, just a headache. That's all"

Gabrielle breathed easier; "Would you like for me to get the healer, My Lord? He could prepare a draught to alleviate this"

"No, its okay, I'll just sit a while and then go to bed..." she motioned towards her huge canopy post bed.

Gabrielle had not noticed the bed until now, turning to look in the direction the Conqueror had motioned towards. Upon seeing the massive bed with its pillows and blankets, a feeling of de-javu came over her. She blushed at the image of earlier when their hands connected and she witnessed two lovers in passion.

"If it pleases My Lord..." she turned back towards her, "...may I be dismissed so that you can retire and get some much needed rest?"

"It is getting late, isn't it? Thank you for chatting with me Gabrielle".

Standing and taking the mug with her, Gabrielle curtsied with her head bowed, "The pleasure has

been mine, My Lord. You are indeed most kind", she blushed and exited the room.

The Conqueror smiled, 'Hmm...very interesting'

Chapter 9

"Priestess, we come to seek the Goddess Artemis' guidance" Queen Melosa stated as she entered the tent of worship.

"Queen Melosa..." the Priestess responded, "...the Goddess Artemis has revealed that there is to be a challenge..."

This brought a smile to Queen Melosa's face.

"...but the challenge shall come from within the Amazon Nation"

This caused the Queen to furrow her brows in consternation, "Priestess, how could this be? I have not had any others ask permission to seek a bonding".

"The Goddess Artemis did not offer any more except to reveal that this will not come to pass until nearing Solstice" she replied.

"But how can that be? Satori is due to finish her term in seclusion by this moon's turn".

"That is all the Goddess revealed, Queen Melosa. I shall pray to our Patron Goddess in hopes of more answers while we are here" the Priestess replied, turning towards the makeshift altar.

Exiting the tent, 'This just keeps getting better and better!' Queen Melosa thought to herself.

The next few days went by with no new situations arising. Queen Melosa chose to keep the Priestess' latest revelations from the Conqueror as she knew she would ask her more questions that she did not have the answers to.

The Conqueror in the meanwhile, kept busy between looking through the Palace library scrolls with Abraxus for any references to Wotan, sitting with the Amazon elder and going through all of their scrolls for any law or sub clause that could stop this proposal from happening.

One afternoon the Conqueror feeling a bit frustrated with the uneventful goings of the scroll researching, decided to take some of those frustrations out with a bit of sparring exercises with the Amazons.

"Eponin, I am seriously warning you...don't go up against her. Send in a few of the newer warriors...she'll go easy on them" Ephiny pleaded with her weapons master.

"Oh come on now Eph, she is just like you and me; mortal. Yeah, so she has had a few more battle encounters under her belt, big deal. She doesn't have the same experience as me with the

staff or chobos" she casually but egotistically stated.

"Eponin, I mean it. She has been under a lot of pressure lately. She is ready to blow her top here..." Ephiny tried to convince her, "...why just yesterday she took the metal mug of tea and crushed it in her hand when she had gone through another set of scrolls without getting a scrap of information useful to her".

"So, a little frustrated eh?" an evil grin coming to the weapons masters lips.

"Eponin! Don't even go there!" her regent demanded.

"Has she had any...company lately...to help relieve this...frustration?"

"Eponin, I really am only going to say this one last time...Don't do this...Any of it!"

"It'll be good for the Amazons to see some real fighting, Eph. They can know that they have been trained by someone who can hold their own against and possibly even beat the Conqueror", she cockily said.

"Okay, I warned you...it's your funeral" Ephiny replied, moving away from the weapons master and exiting the tent.

Eponin was warming up with the staff on the training grounds being watched by the Amazons. Ephiny leaned casually up against one of the walls as the Queen walked up to her, "What is she doing?" asked the Queen.

"I warned her, she wouldn't listen to me" Ephiny replied to the Queen while shrugging her shoulders.

"Oh great! Go notify the healer he'll have another patient this evening", Queen Melosa stated to Ephiny in an exasperated tone.

The Conqueror strode into the training grounds from the other side of the courtyard grounds, dressed in her training clothes. This consisted of a pair of trousers cut to fit her very snugly which fed into her mid calf boots. The blouse was a button up sleeveless cotton that revealed her well defined arms giving her complete range and mobility but was neither restricting nor suffocating, as she always wore it with the buttons open down to her ample cleavage. Her hair was in its normal plait hanging loosely.

Most of the Amazons had turned and watched her stride towards the area with their mouths agape including the weapons master who had stopped warming up to watch as well.

She struck all as a beautiful specimen of raw strength and power exuding an energy that they could see and even feel.

Queen Melosa walked up besides Eponin to greet the Conqueror, "Close your mouth Eponin, you'll catch flies" she spoke under her breath as the Conqueror approached.

"Lord Conqueror, May I introduce our weapons master, Eponin" Queen Melosa turned to the side and with her hand, motioned towards Eponin.

"Lord Conqueror" Eponin stated while going to bended knee.

"Well met, Eponin. Will you be training with me today?"

Rising from her knee at the Conqueror's permission with her hand, "Aye Lord Conqueror; I wanted to show some of the Amazons the proper use of some of our weapons", she motioned towards two Amazons holding a set of staves and chobos.

"I have only seen and used the stave, weapons master. What are the others?" the Conqueror asked walking towards the Amazon holding the chobos.

The Amazon went to bended knee, holding up the chobos for her.

"The small wooden clubs are used as a pair Lord Conqueror, and they can inflict serious damage if used properly on a vulnerable and exposed body. The technique and idea is to keep them in constant motion, as if they are part of you, any extension of your arms if you will" Eponin said as she picked them up and demonstrated a few movements with them.

"Interesting" the Conqueror said; "Why don't we start with the staves to warm up?"

"As you wish, Lord Conqueror" Eponin stated, handing the chobos back to the Amazon. 'So, she's hesitant to use what she doesn't know, huh?' Eponin smirked to herself; 'I knew it, she's just like everyone else; just lucky'.

They started off in the training arena with some basic moves to loosen up their muscles, circling each other and tapping staves lightly progressing into some more difficult moves quickly.

Eponin moved to strike at the right side of the Conqueror's head, which she easily blocked with the stave. The Conqueror then attacked with several successive blows; head, right knee, ribs, left shoulder. This kept Eponin busy trying to block but she missed one and received a glancing blow to her right forearm.

Eponin was now starting to breathe hard while the Conqueror had just started to warm up it seemed.

The Conqueror then did the same to the other side.

As Eponin had stepped back from the blow, the Conqueror made the motion to stop with her hand, "Why don't we try the wood things now?" with her thumb she motioned over her shoulder.

"Chobos Lord Conqueror", Eponin walked towards the Amazon while rubbing he forearm.

"Chobos, right", the Conqueror repeated as she handed her stave to the Amazon and took a set.

Tapping the chobos together to get a feel of them, the Conqueror said, "Okay, ready to try this when you are".

Eponin smiled and swirled the chobos in a circular pattern and then did figure eights with them, attempting to impress the Conqueror.

Eponin attacked without warning; hitting at the Conqueror from all sides; easily causing the Conqueror to back up a step from the assault. Her blows striking the Conqueror's chobos with a force and rapidity that almost knocked them from her hands which was not small feat.

The Amazons could see the Conqueror had a hard time keeping up with the blockade.

One set of turns the Conqueror physically jumped from, but not before Eponin landed a blow to the Conqueror's forearm; the bruise visibly rising.

"As I said Lord Conqueror; these can inflict damage if used properly on an exposed body" Eponin repeated her words from earlier with an arrogant smile while walking around the Conqueror still doing figure eights in the process.

"Clearly" she replied with coldness in her voice as she had never been hit by another Amazon; she fought to maintain her composure and not allow the beast that pawed at her skin for release to come forth.

Shifting the chobos in her hand to adjust to their weight, the Conqueror could see all the Amazons smiling at their weapons master and her achievement and command of the training session with the chobos thus far.

Again, Eponin went to attack, this time the Conqueror held her chobos and her ground.

The weapons master, using her experience to her advantage assaulted the Conqueror with a barrage of hits; overhand, arm, leg swipes causing her to move backwards by the onslaught, occasionally ducking the odd swipe that got past her defenses.

On one combination head and arm, Eponin swirled around and when the Conqueror went to hit her back, she turned behind her and caught her with both chobos across the back.

This move and hit caused the Conqueror to drop to her knees, losing a chobo from her grip in the process.

Eponin smugly stood over her, "...inflicting serious damage if properly used on an exposed body".

Eponin couldn't tell where the noise came from but she heard it start as a low guttural growl.

The Conqueror stood with both chobos now in her hands. Eponin sensing a sweet easy victory went on her final attack.

As she moved in, the Conqueror side stepped back and dropped her hands, causing Eponin to go past her without contact.

Eponin caught herself and turned around looking at the Conqueror, "So, you have started to be a bit more proactive Lord Conqueror? Your frustrations are starting to show".

The Conqueror did not reply, but the look she gave caused Eponin to shudder.

"Heeeyaaahh" Eponin yelled as she lunged at the Conqueror, "Frustrating isn't it Lord Conqueror? But it seems that has been your recent state of mind eh? Frustrated" Eponin was now taunting the Conqueror and in doing so she did not hear the beast break free.

"One wonders Lord Conqueror; in such a state, with so much power at your feet and the ability to have whatever or whomever you desire..." she struck at her sides and then at her knees, "...that you should be ...visibly...frustrated?!" striking an overhead blow with a smirk.

The Conqueror dropped both chobos at her sides and caught Eponin's above her head with her hands.

The growl came from within the Conqueror's chest and Queen Melosa heard it from across the arena, "Uh oh!"

Chapter 10

Gabrielle sat next to the healer's desk, sorting herbs that had dried and placing them in piles as instructed by Tidimous. As no one really knew of a specific task for her yet, she was at odds ends doing a bit for everyone.

Ephiny had just entered the healer's rooms and strode up to Tidimous, "Healer, I was instructed to inform you to expect a patient...within a candle mark".

"Oh, where are they and what has happened to them?" Tidimous looked up from his scrolls to the Amazon standing before him and was a bit intimidated by the fierce looking woman who had a sword strapped to her back, a short sword on her side, a dagger visibly seen in her boots and stood easily a head taller than him standing.

"Well, right now they're on the training field in perfect health, but by the time the Conqueror finishes; I really don't know exactly what will be broken but I am pretty sure it will be a few things!" she shrugged with a smirk.

At the Conqueror's name Gabrielle looked up and saw the Amazon. She had never seen one before up close and was quite intrigued by her dress and weaponry. She was physically well fit and quite handsome but one could see she was not to be toyed with.

"Ah, drilling exercise?" he queried.

"You guessed it!" she replied and looked over to see Gabrielle looking her up and down, "Well met mistress", Ephiny saluted and bowed towards Gabrielle causing her to lower her gaze and blush profusely at being caught staring and the use of such a title.

"Oh, this lovely lass is Gabrielle..." Tidimous introduced, "I am sorry. I did not catch your name warrior", he said looking to Ephiny.

"I am Ephiny, Regent to Queen Melosa of the Northern Tribe", once again bowing towards Gabrielle, her eyes never leaving Gabrielle's.

"H.hello" Gabrielle said softly, clearly still embarrassed at being caught ogling.

Noting her embarrassment, Ephiny tried to ease it by asking questions to get through the awkwardness of the moment, "So, My Lady Gabrielle. Are you a healer also?"

"Oh no; I am not knowledged in such an art..." she replied candidly, "I am helping the healer in stocking his supplies for use later on when needed", she smiled.

"Well your help will come in handy soon enough!"

"Is there something wrong?" Gabrielle asked, concerned over her earlier announcement.

"No, just going to be a bit of someone's ego being shattered along with a few minor cuts, scrapes and maybe a broken bone or two; but nothing major" she replied casually.

"Huh?" Gabrielle's not understanding came out more as a sound than question.

"Healer? Would I be able to ask for a candle marks worth of this lovely lady's charm away from you?" Ephiny asked still looking into Gabrielle's eyes.

Tidimous was already intently back in his healer's scrolls to see the look on the warrior's face; she was completely captivated by Gabrielle's eyes, "Yes, yes that's fine" he replied waving his hand in a shooin motion.

"My lady?" Ephiny offered her hand in assistance up to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle blushed once again at the use of such a title and the cordial manner of this warrior; taking the proffered hand and standing.

Escorting her from the healer's room, Ephiny had managed to keep Gabrielle's hand by having placed it on the crook of her left elbow on her arm, "My Lady Gabrielle, I am unfamiliar with this Palace and its layout. Would you kindly direct me as I chat with you?"

Gabrielle smiled at the title now and placed her other hand on Ephiny's arm, feeling at ease with

the warrior, "Yes, where would you like to go?"

"Anywhere your heart desires My Lady" came the quick reply.

Gabrielle had to turn her face from the heat she could feel rising at that statement, so they walked aimlessly.

"So My Lady Gabrielle, where is it that such a beauty as you comes from?" asked Ephiny wanting to know all that there was about her.

"I come from a small port town called Potidaea..." she smiled happily, "...but have lived in Thracis for the last ten seasons" the last she said sadly and Ephiny could see the change in her at that statement.

"My Lady Gabrielle, when you first looked at me, I am going to say you looked a bit shocked. Is that correct?"

"No, no Ephiny. It was more of awe. I have never seen an Amazon warrior before, lest alone been in the company of such a handsome one" she lowered her head and stated in a giddy school girl manner.

Ephiny laughed heartily at the honesty of her answer, "Well thank you My Lady for such a compliment. I have never been called handsome before. Would you have any questions of me since this is your first encounter with my kind?" she asked with a flirtatious smile which Gabrielle did not miss.

"Well, yes. But first I would like to say thank you for being my first..." she paused for a reciprocal flirtatious effect, "...encounter with an Amazon warrior. If you wouldn't mind, I would like to ask you how you became an Amazon warrior."

"Oh no My Lady, the honor is all mine at being your ...first...Amazon warrior" she smiled at Gabrielle, looking into her eyes directly, "I did not chose to become an Amazon warrior; I was born into it. My mother was an Amazon as was her mother before her, so it is in my blood. When we are infants, we are chosen by our Priestess's dreams to go into our chosen field. I was chosen to be a warrior; others are cooks or healer, etc".

"So there is an entire society?" Gabrielle stopped and turned, asking excitedly.

"Oh yes My Lady; our village has its own structural hierarchy," Ephiny turned to her and explained, "We have a Queen, Queen Melosa, and then we have a regent - me..."

"What is a regent?" Gabrielle interrupted.

"Well, when the Queen is away; either visiting other tribes or fighting or anything that requires her being away for a period of time, in her absence then I am in command".

"Oh!" Gabrielle replied in surprise, "So you're like a princess?" standing back and bowing her head.

"NO, No My Lady - I am no Princess!" Ephiny replied waving her hands in the air in front of her, "She would be the Queen's daughter. I am only regent; a duly appointed officer of the Queen's. A princess is of royal blood; of which I am not. Please do not bow to me, My Lady" cupping Gabrielle's chin up to look into her eyes, "You are far too lovely to bow to the likes of me, My Lady".

Gabrielle lowered her eyes in humble acceptance of such a compliment.

Extending her arm again, Ephiny waited for Gabrielle to take it so they could continue their walk.

"Ephiny, since you are regent and you are here; who is in command of the village now? Is the Queen there?"

"No, the Queen is here and I am part of the royal escort for this journey. I have a second in charge at the moment to watch over things as we are not under any threat of war or attack" Ephiny said as they walked towards a small garden alcove.

Reaching down, Ephiny plucked a petal from a beautiful rose and turned Gabrielle's hand over gently, placing the petal in her palm.

Gabrielle looked up to Ephiny with a curious and questioning gaze.

"My Lady wishes to know why I would place a beautiful rose's petal in your soft hands and not the entire rose; no?"

Gabrielle merely nodded and looked to her palm; Ephiny took her other hand and guided her to a bench to sit while she explained.

"My Lady, there are several reasons. First would be that to cut the rose from its branch, though you would see its beauty, it would be fleeting as it will eventually wither and die. Ours is a path of harmony with nature, not to intentionally do harm. By cutting the rose I would brutally take it from its life source", she motioned to Gabrielle if she could sit next to her. Gabrielle slid over and padded the seat, "Thank you My Lady..." Ephiny continued, "...Another reason is that even though you have seen and would hold the rose's beauty and fragrance; you would be denying everyone else the opportunity of the same by taking it away. Again, ours is the path of sharing as well. We are a communal tribe; we share our village belongings with each other. Only certain items are claimed as personal..." she motioned with her hands to her sword as an example.

"But the petal, plucked from its base can give you so much and more. You see, you still hold its beauty and if you lift it to your nose..." taking Gabrielle's upturned palm with her cupped hand, she raised it to her nose, "...you can smell its scent", lowering her hand away. "Another reason for giving you this petal is to show you the similarities you have to it..."

This last sentence made Gabrielle look up from her palm to Ephiny with a quizzical look.
"While the rose may still maintain its existence, you may take part of it with you...just as you do with your sharing of your life with others. You see My Lady; the petal is soft and silky to the touch, just as the caress of a lovers touch..."

Gabrielle blushed again as Ephiny reached up with her hand and with her index finger, caressed the petal in her palm.

"...it is fragile, if one was not caring and gentle with it; it would tear. Such I feel would be the dame with your feelings. It is beautifully vibrant in color, just as are your eyes My Lady", she looked to her eyes and received a smile back in response.

Hearing the banging of weapons broke their reverie.

"Well My Lady, I am sure that I have taken up more of your charming time than I was allowed..." she rose and extended her hand again to assist Gabrielle up, "...I am greatly appreciative for your indulgence in my chat".

They began to walk back towards the healer's room.

"Ephiny, the pleasure has been mine that a warrior such as you would take time out for me", Gabrielle tilted her head to the side to look up to her.

"I would always make time for you My Lady", Ephiny said taking Gabrielle's hand that held the petal, turning it over to kiss the top of it.

Just then a group of Amazons were heard rustling through the corridor towards the healer's room

Ephiny and Gabrielle both looked up, startled at the commotion, to see them carrying in a litter.

On it laid Eponin, Ephiny's weapons master. Walking behind the litter was Queen Melosa, a sullen and sad look to her face.

"Oh boy!" Ephiny said, "I warned her!"

"Who?" Gabrielle asked.

"My weapons master, Eponin" she sighed.

"Warned her about what?" she asked again looking from the Amazons carrying the litter into the healer's room back to Ephiny.

"The Conqueror!" answered Queen Melosa, walking up to them.

Ephiny bowed to her, "My Queen!"

Gabrielle saw this and went to her knees, bowing to the Queen.

"Ephiny...who is this?" Queen Melosa asked.

"My Queen, this is My L...this is Gabrielle", Ephiny replied.

"Gabrielle? So that is your name..." Queen Melosa said looking down on a kneeling Gabrielle, "...you may rise"

Gabrielle rose with the assistance of Ephiny's hand which did not go unnoticed by Queen Melosa, but she kept her head lowered.

"My Queen, what happened? Is she alright?" Ephiny asked.

"Well, that is for the healer to find out. But I am sure it will be her pride that is quite broken after this" Queen Melosa replied rubbing her forehead, "...You warned her but you know how thick her head is! Next time I want you to order her, okay?" she said the last in exasperation, "She started taunting the Conqueror...not a good idea! The next thing I heard was a growl...it came from the Conqueror...it was almost all over before anyone knew it or had time to react...", she began to pace across the corridor, "The Conqueror dropped her chobos and grabbed Eponin's in mid strike above her head. Eponin froze at the look she had, the Conqueror dropped down and put her foot to Eponin's stomach and flipped her over landing her on her back, losing one of her chobos. She somehow managed to get back up and try to attack, but the Conqueror blocked the hits with her forearms. Eponin's hits would have broken any mortal man's arms but the Conqueror just laughed. It was almost as if she enjoyed the hits. She struck out and broke her nose with her fist, and then she was kicked in her gut. When Eponin doubled over, the Conqueror hit her so hard with her next hit, she flipped over. Then the Conqueror bent down and picked up a chobo...I didn't know what she was going to do...but I ran in and stopped her by putting myself in front of Eponin's body. She seemed like she was in a trance...I had to call her several times to get her to finally see me. I don't know what would have happened if I didn't stop her", Queen Melosa said sadly with a faraway look.

"I will go and check on her My Queen, and report to you later" she bowed to Queen Melosa and turned to Gabrielle, "...I hope to see you again, My Lady" giving her a small bow of her head with a smile and left.

Queen Melosa looked on as Ephiny took her leave and then turned to Gabrielle, 'Interesting' she said to herself out loud with an arch to her eyebrow.

Chapter 11

The Conqueror had bent down to pick up the chobo, the beast in full command of her now, demanding and exacting vengeance at being taunted. She turned towards her opponent's body, which lay strewn on the dust covered ground, blood pooling by her head. She picked up the chobo when someone stood in front of her. She heard something faraway, something akin to a

whisper of her name. This person ran and knelt in front of her with raised hands, "Lord Conqueror! Lord Conqueror! NO! I beg you, NO!"

Blinking, she looked down to the person. Something familiar to the face, "Lord Conqueror!" again, but this time louder, "Lord Conqueror!" She blinked again and her body began to shake.

The beast wanted to finish it, it had smelled the blood; it needed more. But the Conqueror finally realized who it was kneeling in front of her; it was someone who she called 'Friend'.

Shakily, she began to lower the chobo, then dropping it, she walked away.

Queen Melosa took a very deep breath, coming to grips that she was only but a breath away from death herself as she had looked into the steely ice gaze of the beast in battle.

Ordering the Amazons, who were all frozen in place, she had them get a litter to take their weapons master to the healer. Queen Melosa looked towards the Conqueror who had grabbed onto a wooden training post and as she looked on, the Conqueror broke it in half with her bare hands. Then standing there and visibly shaking, taking deep breaths Queen Melosa later would swear she heard a growl echo throughout the training grounds.

"So Gabrielle, I..." Queen Melosa was interrupted by Abraxus, "Queen Melosa..." bowing slightly, "Might I speak with you" as he stood up.

Turning towards Abraxus, who had approached while she was turned to Gabrielle, "Huh? Oh yes", she replied and turned back around towards Gabrielle, "Dismissed", Gabrielle bowed and quickly walked away.

"Abraxus, what might I be of assistance with?" asked Queen Melosa walking with him in the direction of the main palace.

"Arrrgggghhhh!" the sound came from her chest. She stood with her whole body shaking, the pieces of the training posts in front of her feet. She took in some very deep breaths, trying to regain her composure. The afternoon sun on her bare arms caused the sweat to glisten over the muscled texture; and also caused the bruise to stand out starkly. Her shirt was soaked through with the sweat of her exertion and her hair was plastered to her forehead.

Feeling the beast retreat to its resting place, the Conqueror took a final deep breath; then released her clenched fists. She shook her head to get her bearings and then headed to the palace towards her chambers.

Gabrielle, having so many thoughts of what she had seen and heard, was walking through the corridor distractedly when she walked right into the Conqueror.

"MY LORD!" she gasped with her hands to her mouth, dropping down to her knees.

The Conqueror saw the look of horror on Gabrielle's face and wondered what caused that only to

look down to her shirt and see why. She was covered in the blood of her opponent from the top of her blouse to mid waist.

Unnerved at the reaction she received from Gabrielle; she did not acknowledge her but immediately walked around her and briskly went on to her chambers.

Gabrielle knelt there until she realized the Conqueror was gone, having left her alone. She shuddered at the image still in her mind while rising and heading back to the slave quarters.

"Queen Melosa, I was wondering if you might be able to assist us in some information we seek. I know that you are currently reviewing your archive scrolls to assist the Conqueror..." Abraxus stated while walking with the Queen, "...and while in that, possibly if you could also seek reference to someone or something we are at a lost to?"

"Abraxus, we are at the Conqueror's service", Queen Melosa replied, "Who or what do you seek?"

"All we have is the name Wotan".

"Wotan?" she queried, "I, myself, have not heard of such. But I will put my elder to research...might I ask what this is about?"

"Oh, of course; thank you for your assistance first" he told her and she nodded in acknowledgement, "we had just finished sorting things at Trachis, when the Conqueror received word that there was a possible uprising being plotted against her and the realm. The information is the same as that of a small town we happened upon on our way back. They were attacked by the same horde and were heard shouting that name".

"I will ask my warriors as well; with a small hope that one has heard of such or read an archive somewhere" Queen Melosa said with a nod of her head.

"Thank you once again Queen Melosa. It doesn't hurt to try all resources" Abraxus said as he bowed slightly and left.

Queen Melosa took a calming deep breath and turned towards her encampment in thought.

Sephina had arranged a hot bath for the Conqueror as she had always done for her after her training sessions. She had a small servant child with her to help with the Conqueror's needs.

The Conqueror threw open the doors to her chambers and stormed in; abruptly stopping at a chair by the hearth.

Taking a deep breath after a few moments of reflection she turned away and walked to the bathing chambers, tearing open her blouse and casting it to the floor and then sitting down in a chair by the bath.

The small servant quickly went over to the Conqueror and dropped down to her knees in front of her, immediately untying the laces to the Conqueror's boots.

The Conqueror looked down and noted the tiny hands of the child before her, then looked about the room seeking Sephina. She had already left the room to retrieve the Conqueror's evening meal.

"Who are you?" the Conqueror asked the child.

The child's hands began to tremble at the Conqueror's question, "I am Palaminas, Lord Conqueror" she replied in tiny voice.

"Palaminas, how did you come here?" the Conqueror asked in a gentler voice at seeing the distress in the child.

"We were brought here by your troops Lord Conqueror".

"Were you a slave in Trachis?"

"Yes, Lord Conqueror. All I can ever remember is being a slave in Trachis and now here", she replied never looking up from the boots. She removed the Conqueror's boots and took them to the other room so that they would be cleaned for the next days use.

When she returned, the Conqueror spoke to her, "Palaminas? Would you go find Sephina for me and ask her to come up?"

The child bowed, "Yes, Lord Conqueror. At once" and immediately ran from the room.

The Conqueror watched her go, the look of despair on the child's face causing the Conqueror to become sullen. She rose up and stripped off her clothing, discarding them into a pile on the floor and stepping into the hot tub to soak her body.

Sephina returned within candle drops with the Conqueror's meal, placing it on the dining table and walking into the bath chamber and bowing, "Lord Conqueror?"

"Sephina, how many children did...who many children are slaves in the palace right now?" pinching the bridge to her nose.

"There were only a handful Lord Conqueror but with those brought back from Trachis, then now number a dozen" Sephina replied.

A deep sigh escaped the Conqueror's body, "As of this moment, no child of or under the age of eleven seasons is to be a slave and is to be released to either a parent or relative. If this puts burden on payment of debt, then it is to be brought before council but I do not want to see another child as a slave" leaning her head back against the tub rim and draping her muscularly defined arms over the edges she closed her eyes and sighed, "...No child should suffer the loss of

their innocence and youth..." she stated to herself, "I will speak with council in the morning to order it decreed".

"Yes Lord Conqueror, as you wish".

After soaking in her bath until she felt relaxed, she rose and put on her robe to sit in front of the fireplace and eat her meal alone.

Chapter 12

The new day saw the Conqueror head towards the healer's rooms. As she arrived, Queen Melosa had just come into the corridor as well.

"Well met Lord Conqueror", Queen Melosa bowed her head.

"Ah, well met Queen Melosa. I was just coming to see how fared your weapons master today".

"More than likely nothing compared to a small herd of wildebeests trampling her head me thinks" she deadpanned, "Lord Conqueror I must apologize for the behavior of my weapons master Eponin yesterday...she had no right to act so disrespectfully in sparring with the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire. It was a bad reflection on my reign, my Amazons and their training" Queen Melosa apologized with a fist to her chest and a deep bow.

"Accepted Queen Melosa, she most probably felt that same chance all challengers do when fighting against me; the opportunity to overthrow and possibly beat me. It is nothing I hold ill will toward and it is not unexpected..." she replied sadly, "...it will always be that way until someone does or my life's thread has come to its end".

Queen Melosa saw for a fleeting moment the sadness before the Conqueror's shield when up again.

"So, let's go and see her eh?"

"Lord Conqueror" Tidimous greeted.

"Tidimous, how fares the Amazon?"

He rolled his eyes and she knew he'd been kept busy with her by the exasperated look on his face. She had often caused that look herself.

"She is over here Lord Conqueror and has been more that a handful might I add" he quickly walked towards the end of the hall to one of the many private rooms along the way.

"...I told you not to do it....but Noooo....you have to go and try to prove you're better again. Couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" Ephiny was sitting next to Eponin's bed, legs stretched out in front of her, arms crossed over her chest glaring at the reclined patient, " ...Yes, I

am going to lecture you! Since your jaw is sewn shut, it'll be the only time I get you to shut up and not talk back!"

The Conqueror, Queen Melosa and Tidimous could hear her down the passageway.

"Next time if I have to, I will order you! And you had dam well better do as I say!" she rubbed her hands across her face exasperated, "Now, when the healer's apprentice give you some herbs for pain...you take them and shut it! I don't want to hear of you giving them any grief. They're not the ones who put you in this predicament, you did!" she stood to leave, "Take your medicine, I'm going to report to the Queen and I'll check on you're mannerisms later. Do I make myself clear?"

Eponin was lying in her litter, having been completely dressed down by her Regent. Her jaw was sewn shut from when the Conqueror had broken it yesterday. She looked like a raccoon with both eyes blackened from the broken nose she received as well. Her face had swollen from the beating she had received and was almost twice the normal size.

She looked thoroughly chagrined and nodded her head in a childlike manner at the Regent having scolded her as one.

Ephiny walked out into the passageway and into the three who were standing just outside the doorway, not having wanted to embarrass the weapons master any more by their presence.

"Lord Conqueror, My Queen!" a startled Ephiny bowed.

"Regent" the Conqueror replied.

"Ephiny" the Queen replied.

"I was just about to report to you, my Queen" Ephiny stated with a bit of confusion in her voice.

"Yes, I heard..." Queen Melosa said with a smirk, "...so, how is she", pointing into the room.

"Well, she has had the healer sew her jaw shut as it was broken" she motioned towards Tidimous, "...she looks like a raccoon with both eyes blackened at having her nose broken and her face looks like the size of a melon", Ephiny replied.

Tidimous then interjected, "All things that will heal in time and leave no damage".

"Only to her ego" Ephiny and Queen Melosa said at the same time.

The Conqueror turned and entered the room with no word to the group; leaving the three of them to stand in the passageway.

Eponin looked up expecting to see the healer's apprentice bring in the herbs for pain. What she saw was over six feet of Conqueror looking down on her and she audibly gulped. She moved as if to rise and bow towards her but the Conqueror motioned for her to stay seated, "Weapons

master no need to rise".

Eponin nodded her head towards the Conqueror, but still saluted with her fist to her chest.

"The healer and your Regent say your jaw is broken as well as your nose".

Eponin nodded.

"You are in very caring and healing hands here Eponin. Tidimous is a very skilled healer and will take care of you. Do not fight what they give you..." the Conqueror walked over and sat down, "...though it will taste like Hades' horses leftovers sometimes!" she smiled which brought a grimace but agreeing nod from Eponin to which the Conqueror laughed.

Gabrielle entered the healer's rooms to see Queen Melosa, Tidimous and Ephiny standing outside one of the rooms.

Tidimous excused himself from the two women and walked over to ask Gabrielle to bring his concoction of valerian roots over to the patient in the room as his apprentice Nika was elsewhere.

As she went about getting the herbs together, Tidimous went about the room to check on his other patients.

Ephiny took the opportunity and walked over to Gabrielle, "Well met my lady Gabrielle".

"Oh, Good Morning Regent Ephiny" she smiled to her and Ephiny swore she was at the gates of Elysium.

"I ...I hope you slept well my lady Gabrielle?" Ephiny stammered, looking down to the table top suddenly finding a worn nail in the wood quiet interesting.

"Yes, I did thank you. And you?"

"Um...yes, I did too..." looking up and then back down to the table, "...I was, um...I was wondering...if you didn't already that is....I mean...if you did then maybe another time..."

Gabrielle stopped looking for the herbs and stepped closer to the Regent. She gently placed a hand over the hand fidgeting with the nail on the table top, "Ephiny?"

Ephiny stopped still. She looked at Gabrielle's hand over her own, a warmth slowly creeping all over her body.

"Did you want to ask me something Ephiny or did you want to work that nail out with your bare hands?" she smiled teasingly.

Letting out a small sigh, "I wanted to know if you would like to have the noon meal with me? I mean if you didn't already..."

"I'd love to Ephiny..." Gabrielle interrupted her, "...as soon as I am done with my chores I can be ready".

Ephiny immediately sighed in relief and smiled like a giddy school girl, "Excellent! I'll see you then!" she turned to leave but stopped when she realized Gabrielle's hand was still on hers.

Gabrielle hadn't realized she had her hand on hers still until Ephiny cleared her throat. She immediately pulled her hand back and turned back to retrieving the herbs, not without Ephiny noticing the blush to her face before she practically skipped away.

"You are a formidable weapons trainer Eponin; it took a lot of courage to spar with me. Abraxus, my second has sparred with me on occasion, he can relate to what you are going through...well almost" the Conqueror added the last as she looked at Eponin's bruised face.

"Did you learn your skills as weapons master from the Amazon's previous master?" she continued.

Eponin nodded her head slightly.

"Well they trained you well. I, on the other hand was trained by someone who knows all there is about weaponry, their use or how to fight with or without them..."

Gabrielle had placed the herbs on a tray with water and a drinking reed as she had been told by Tidimous the patient could not drink with a cup. She walked by Tidimous and Queen Melosa, stopping to bow before her and entering the room.

She did not see the Conqueror seated by the pallet until she turned around from closing the curtains. Looking up to see her sitting there, she immediately dropped to her knees with the tray in her hands still, "My Lord, I did not mean to intrude. I was not made aware you were in here. I am sorry My Lord", she apologized profusely.

The Conqueror turned to see Gabrielle enter and turn to close the curtain. A small smile played at the corners of her mouth at seeing her enter the room.

She stood and walked over to Gabrielle, picking up the tray from her hands and extending her own to help her up, "Gabrielle..." a shiver of goose bumps raced along Gabrielle's body at the sound of her name from the Conqueror's voice.

She looked up to see the hand of the Conqueror extended in offer to her, tentatively taking it and being helped up.

Once again, the were both lost to a dreamlike state; this time Gabrielle was pushing errant ebony locks of hair from the Conqueror's face whilst she laid in her lap, then leaning down she kissed her passionately.

The dream was broken as the Conqueror released her hand and both their faces showed the same expression of confusion and bewilderment.

"I...I leave you to your medicine, weapons master" the Conqueror went to leave but heard a muffled sound, turning to see Eponin swallow and try again, "Whoof?"

"Who? Oh who trained me?" the Conqueror stated as she realized what she was asking, "Ares, God of War" and then exited the room.

She did not get to see the color drain completely from Eponin's face nor the cold sweat that broke out on her forehead.

Gabrielle went to Eponin's side and began mixing the herbs into a cup, not knowing the context of the Conqueror or Eponin's conversation, "You really don't look so good, I hope this helps you".

Eponin could only whimper and look to the doorway with a look of absolute stunned shock.

Queen Melosa and Tidimous waited for the Conqueror to exit.

"Tidimous, make sure she is made comfortable and taken care of well", the Conqueror said to Tidimous who bowed and entered the patient's room.

"She will heal, its probably the mouth wired shut that will cause her more grief cause she won't be able to talk back" Queen Melosa stated, "Oh well, I have troupe arriving today with some more scrolls. They come from one of the Southern Tribes. Let's hope we get some sort of information out of them".

"Okay, I'll see you then" the Conqueror stated and Queen Melosa took this her queue to leave.

The Conqueror waited in the corridor until Gabrielle came back out of the room, "Oh, My Lord" she went to bow, "No, don't..." the Conqueror said, "...I mean, its okay. I mean you don't have ..."
Gabrielle looked up, confused, "Never mind, forget it...I just was wondering if ...well if you already didn't that is...I mean if you did then maybe another time..." the Conqueror began to fidget with a corner of the table.

"My Lord?" Gabrielle asked.

"Huh?" she stopped in mid rant, looking up.

"Does my lord wish to ask me something?" Gabrielle continued.

"Well, I have to meet...and before...well I just wondered if I could...would you mind chatting with me...at the noon meal? I mean before? As I have to meet with the Amazons but I have to eat first and ..."

"As my lord wishes," Gabrielle replied with a smile, "I will bring the noon meal to your chambers early enough so that you may dine before your meeting. I will advise Ophelia at once, with your permission?" She looked up to the soft sea of blue smiling back at her.

"Yes, I wish very much so..." looking into the twinkling emerald eyes with a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth as well.

"My Lord" Gabrielle bowed her head and promptly turned, walking towards Ophelia's domain. A tiny limp still noticeable in her step to the Conqueror's observant eyes; 'What was it that caused your pain, little one?' the Conqueror thought to herself at Gabrielle's retreating figure.

Chapter 13

The Conqueror paced in her chambers, she had cleaned herself up a bit and closed the doors to her bed chambers as she self consciously tried to tidy up.

She ran her hand through her hair again, sighing "Okay, calm down! Just sit down and talk to her. She's not going to turn into Medusa...you helped kill her three seasons ago!" she smirked.

Just then a knock on the outer chamber doors, "Enter" she replied while sitting down at the chair in front of the fireplace and taking a calming breath.

Gabrielle entered and stepped to the side whilst the guard closed the door behind her. She promptly bowed and waited for permission to move forward.

"Please, come and sit. I'm sure that tray is heavy enough without having to hold it like a statue", the Conqueror stated while rising and taking the tray from her which brought a look of shock to Gabrielle's face.

The Conqueror placed the tray down onto the table top, pouring two cups of water from the pitcher. All while Gabrielle stood looking on with bewilderment.

"Oh, where are my manners? Would you like to sit and chat with me, Gabrielle?" the Conqueror asked motioning towards a chair next to the fireplace, the same one from the previous night's conversation.

"If it pleases you, My Lord" she replied and sat down.

"Um, would you like something to drink? I've poured some water" the Conqueror stood to the side of her chair and offered her a cup while looking a bit timid.

"Thank you My Lord, you are most kind", taking the offered cup from her hand.

The Conqueror moved towards the other chair and sat down, taking a very long drink to try and quench her dry mouth.

Looking into each others eyes they both said in unison

"Gabrielle"

"My Lord"

"Forgive me, My Lord" Gabrielle immediately said.

"No, please. You go first" motioned the Conqueror with one hand.

"Thank you My Lord, you said you wanted to chat?"

"Well, um...I...well its just that...I did not get to talk with you much...the other night" stammered the Conqueror.

Gabrielle sat waiting, a small soft smile playing at her lips.

"I, um...well...how are you feeling?"

"My Lord?"

"How is your leg?" asked the Conqueror motioning with her hand to her leg.

"Oh, it is going well my lord. Tidimous tells me that I owe my life and my ability to walk to you, My Lord" Gabrielle said while rubbing her hand down her knee and leg unconsciously.

"No, he's the one who did all the work", the Conqueror said modestly.

"My Lord is most humble, but I know by Nika that you did indeed save me from..." she stopped, visibly shuddering and turning her face from the Conqueror as the thought of where she had been still haunted her.

The Conqueror could see the smile turn to tortured anguish at the memory of something in her past. She rose from her seat, and once again went to bended knee in front of Gabrielle. The Conqueror lifted her hand and with two fingers under her chin, turned Gabrielle's face to hers.

"Tell me?" she asked softly.

Gabrielle looked up to compassion filled eyes looking into her own, a soft strength comforting her. "My Lord, I do not mean to trouble you or burden you" she tried not to cry in front of her.

"Gabrielle..." the Conqueror spoke softly, still holding her chin with her two fingers, "...you would never be of trouble or a burden to me, little one" looking into her tear filled green eyes, "what was it that caused you to be put into so much pain? To put yourself in harms way?" she asked, searching her eyes for something of an answer.

The tears broke free from Gabrielle's eyes, "I had too...I couldn't let it happen again" and began

to sob uncontrollably.

"Let what happen? Do what?" asked the Conqueror as the confusion of the unknowing disturbed the sleeping beast and the anguish of Gabrielle's sobs tore at her heart.

"I...I couldn't...I couldn't stand by and let him...not again...not another one" she drew in a ragged breath, looking down into her hands that were turned palms up on her lap.

"Who?" the now agitated Conqueror asked; the beast stirring.

"Lord Conqueror!"

The Conqueror's head shot up at the banging on her chamber doors, "HERA TITS! WHAT?" she bellowed; rising from her kneeling position in front of Gabrielle who practically jumped out of her skin at the noise and the Conqueror's booming voice.

Abraxus entered the room saluting, "Lord Conqueror...another village is under attack...the town of Sicyon. We just received word from a scout".

"Gather the men, we leave right away!" the Conqueror ordered while crossing the room to grab her sword from atop her weapons chest.

She turned to see Gabrielle taking small ragged breaths in attempts to gather her composure. She walked over to her and knelt down on one knee, "Little one, who ever it was...they can no longer harm you again. I will see to that. I want to...talk...with you again, if you'd let me?"

Gabrielle nodded meekly.

"I would like to know more..." taking both of Gabrielle's hands into her own and pulling them up to her chest, "...about you" she said the last at an almost whisper and then without forethought placed a small kiss on the top of her hands, rose and exited her chambers leaving Gabrielle seated with mouth agape.

Chapter 14

The Amazons rode with the Conqueror's troops. They rode hard for two candle marks to reach the village which was in the final stages of the battle. Some of the homes still stood but most were either burnt down or in the final stages of fire. Most of the barbarians had fled already, leaving only a few stragglers who enjoyed taunting the dying before their trip to Tatarus.

When the troops came into the town, they finished off those stragglers except to keep a few alive for interrogation.

As night fell, they set about helping the wounded and putting out the fires. The Conqueror spoke with the village elder who explained that they never heard them coming, but that they used large war hammers and some chanted Wotan while starting the fires.

Abraxus spoke with the Conqueror to sort out how to dispose of the dead and set up some temporary shelters for the villagers, whilst they walked through the outskirts of the village to help set up a perimeter watch incase they came back for their stragglers.

"Something is not right Abraxus" the Conqueror felt unease and unsettled.

"Lord Conqueror?"

"Can't you sense it? The stillness" she looked about the perimeter out towards the forest.

"No, Lord Conqueror...everything seems chaotic to me right now" he replied.

"There's something out there..." she said tilting her head as if listening for some sound or clue.

"I will send some men to look..."

"No. Not now..." she interrupted "...they have the advantage of knowing this forest and the cover of dark..." she motioned towards the village, "...besides, right now we need to focus on helping them".

"Aye, Lord Conqueror" he turned and began walking towards the village when he heard a noise and turned back seeing the Conqueror standing there with her eyebrows furrowed a pained look to her before going to her knees suddenly.

He was at her side in an instant, grabbing her arm at the elbow when he felt it. It was running over his hand, so he pulled it away and turned it in front of his face with the moon eerily lighting the rich red blood dripping off and onto the ground as the Conqueror reached out to stop from falling over.

"GUARDS!" he yelled.

Immediately the royal guards were there; "In the forest, now!"

They went racing in, two stayed back to help carry the Conqueror back into the village.

Queen Melosa and Ephiny were tending to some of the hurt villagers when they heard the shout. They ran out into the center of the village just as the Conqueror was being carried in.

"What happened?" Queen Melosa asked as she ran up to them.

"Out of the forest, one shot...as we turned to come back in from setting up a perimeter watch" Abraxus replied as they carried her into one of the remaining buildings.

The Conqueror was attempting to sit up when Queen Melosa looked over and saw her, "Whoa, where do you think you're going Lord Conqueror?" while gently pushing her back to her side on

the table they had laid her on while Tidimous was summoned.

"Get that son of a Cerberus that shot me!" she growled.

"Um...Lord Conqueror as much as I know you could and would. We can not let you go into a pitch black forest, with no knowledge of who or how many are out there, with one arm wounded...though I doubt that would do anything to slow you down..." Queen Melosa stated while looking up to Ephiny and Abraxus for some form of assistance.

"Tidimous!" exclaimed the Queen as he stepped into the room.

"Oh, another one eh, Lord Conqueror?" Tidimous said and walked over to the table, examining the arrow sticking out of her shoulder.

"Not my fault this time!" she growled back.

"Uh huh" he murmured offhandedly back, opening up his medical kit and pulling out items he needed.

"Look, I wasn't in a fight. I was minding my own business this time" she said exasperated.

"Mmhmm" he continued washing his hands and then motioning for Abraxus to leave as he began unclasping her breastplate and cutting open her shift.

"Um, I'll go...um...see if Abraxus needs help!" Ephiny squeaked and promptly exited; leaving the Conqueror and Queen Melosa looking at the door then each other with smirks and arched eyebrows.

Tidimous removed the arrow, giving it to the Lord Conqueror for her to inspect while he stitched up her shoulder.

"No poison, that a good thing. But why go through all the trouble to shoot me if you didn't want to kill me?"

"Maybe the intent wasn't to kill you but either send a message or just wound you?" Queen Melosa replied.

"OUCH! Tidimous?!" the Conqueror's head snapped around to look at the healer.

"My apologies Lord Conqueror, I forgot to tell you I started stitching" he replied meekly.

She rolled her eyes at Queen Melosa who stifled a smirk as she stood with her arms crossed against her chest, leaning against a far wall.

"Okay, Lord Conqueror. All done, please leave it in the sling for three days minimum this time?" he pleaded as he cleaned up.

"Yes, alright...I learned from last time" she grumbled back.

Queen Melosa looked at Tidimous then the Conqueror with a questioning look.

"She..."

"I..."

Both the Conqueror and Tidimous started and she gave him a look. He promptly bowed, picked up his kit and left without another word.

"I took the sling off after one day last time and wound up pulling all the muscles and not being able to use it for almost a moon" she sighed.

"Uh huh" was the only reply she heard from Queen Melosa.

"Anyways, we will ride back at first light. I want to see what information we can get out of these raiders and get some plans in place" the Conqueror stated as she rose.

"Oh, Ophi!" Gabrielle's anguished cry rang out as she ran into the kitchen and straight into Ophelia's arms.

"Child! What's wrong? Why are you crying? What's happened?" she asked, holding her in her arms as she sobbed.

"Oh Ophi! I...I ..." a hiccup escaped her.

"Shhhh...its okay child. Calm down" pulling her over to a stool close to the fire pit where she had a stew cooking, "Sit here and let me get ya sumthin to drink", she patted the stool and walked over to a pitcher, poured some water out into a cup and came back to Gabrielle.

"Here ya go child; drink up and take a couple of deep breaths" handing her the cup.

Gabrielle lifted the cup and drank deeply all the water in huge gulps which Ophelia heard causing her eyebrows to furrow in concern; "Now child did someone hurt you?" Ophelia asked as she leaned against one of her huge cooking tables.

Gabrielle shook her head back and forth.

"Good, did or has something happened to someone?"

Again, a shake no.

"Good, good. Now tell me what has caused ya to cry like this?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath, exhaling shakily "I was about to tell the Lord Conqueror what

happened in Trachis..."

"Tell the Conqueror...Why on Olympus would you do that?" asked a shocked Ophelia.

"She asked me" replied Gabrielle matter of factly.

"She asked you? When?"

"Yes, at the noon meal"

"In front of all the Amazons?"

"No, alone. When I delivered her meal to her chambers, she had asked me to earlier".

"Oh..." Ophelia said, "...so what happened?"

"I was about to tell her but had started crying and then she was kneeling in front of me ..."

"WHAT?" Ophelia yelled while propelling herself forward from the table she was leaning against still.

"I was crying..." Gabrielle started.

"No, no...I heard that part. She was what...kneeling?" Ophelia asked with a completely shocked looked on her face.

"Y..yess?" Gabrielle more questioned than answered.

"The Lord Conqueror? Kneeling in front of you?" At this point both of Ophelia's eyebrows where lost in her hairline and her eyes were the size of saucers.

"She was trying to comfort me and stop me from crying...she wanted to know; but before I could tell her, her second Abraxus came in saying there was an attack in a village" Gabrielle replied.

"Okay, before you say any more.....I do not want you repeating any of this to anyone!" Ophelia said sternly causing Gabrielle to flinch at her tone.

Ophelia noticed the flinch and took a deep breath, "I am sorry child...I did not mean for it to sound so harsh..." Gabrielle nodded and listened, "As that bit of information about the Conqueror could have dire consequences to the both of ya and the person who learns it...and another thing, ya have no need to cry over what happened child. What ya did was braver than what most Gods on Olympus have ever done", this statement made Gabrielle lower her head in a blush as she had not be accustomed to being complimented.

Ophelia went over to Gabrielle and hugged her, "Child ya have a good soul, ya do. Don'tcha forget that!" Gabrielle hugged her back, feeling secure as a child in a mother's embrace.

"Oh before I forget, one of them Amazon warriors came down here looking for ya. Gods she about scared the daylight from me. Snuck up on me like the Conqueror used to do", Ophelia laughed at the memory turning from Gabrielle she reached up to the top of the fire pit and took a small message scroll down, handing it to Gabrielle.

"Now, off with ya. I have to ready the meals" Ophelia said turning to the table to knead the dough for tomorrow's breads.

Gabrielle scooted off the stool to leave but turned back around, walking up to Ophelia and kissed her on the cheek. She then exited the kitchen, leaving Ophelia with a smile on her face and a tear in her eye.

'My Lady Gabrielle' the scroll read, 'I have had to leave as escort with Queen Melosa to a village that is under attack and I do not know when I will return. I am saddened that our noon meal together will not take place...today anyways. Perhaps upon my return, you will grace me with your presence? Till then, I wait with anticipation. Your Amazon warrior'

Gabrielle smiled while reading the scroll and tucked it with her personal possessions, which were few.

Chapter 15

It was midday by the time the Conqueror and her troops returned from Sicyon. Abraxus ordered everyone about as the Conqueror made her way to her chambers.

"Sephina?" Abraxus called out and she was promptly at his side. "The Lord Conqueror has had an injury, an arrow to her shoulder. See to it that she is properly taken care of and not disturbed. Understood?"

"Yes Abraxus, at once" she replied and went about her task.

The Conqueror entered her chambers and sat down wearily in front of the fireplace that had been set ablaze once word was received they were only a candle mark away.

A knock to her outer chamber doors caused her to turn her head slightly, "Enter" she responded tiredly.

Sephina entered quickly followed by two others who began filling the bathtub in the bath chamber with hot water as she turned down the Conqueror's bed, "Lord Conqueror" Sephina bowed, "Tidimous has ordered me to ensure you drink this as it is to help you rest and heal", the look on Sephina's face showed the apprehension she had at making such a statement to the Lord Conqueror, as she was not one to be told what to do.

"Uh huh, okay Seph" the Conqueror barely whispered.

Sephina's eyebrows shot up in confusion and astonishment at such a quiet response. She walked

around to the front of the fireplace in curiosity and what she saw shocked her.

The Conqueror was as white as a sheet, sweating profusely and had blood soaking her shift, pooling down into a puddle at the floor and her eyes were half closed.

"LORD CONQUEROR?!" she fell to her knees in front of her, "GUARDS! GET TIDIMOUS!" she shouted.

The next thing the Conqueror became aware of was waking up to Tidimous hovering over her as she lay in her bed, Sephina at the foot of the bed with her hands wringing her tunic and someone standing off to the side of the bed...half hidden in the shadows of the canopy posts.

She attempted to sit up; "Oh no you don't Lord Conqueror" Tidimous said as gently as possible while tentatively pushing her back down, "It seems there was something more to that arrow. I have not figured out what it was just yet. You must stay here and rest for the next few days until I am assured your body has started to heal and I can find out what was on that arrow...I don't want there to be any chance of something happening to you" the last he whispered so that only the Conqueror would hear.

"But I..." she started.

"Umm, I would do as he says Lord Conqueror" this came from Queen Melosa who had just entered the room and was walking around the bed to his side, "everything is being taken care of by Abraxus and myself. We are here to assist in any way possible".

"Ugh" sighed the Conqueror, resigning herself to the next few days in bed.

"Okay, I will check on you in a while Lord Conqueror" Tidimous said, bowing and exiting the room.

"I will be with my encampment Lord Conqueror. Abraxus will keep me updated and has been advised to call me with any need. Rest well" Queen Melosa gave a small bow.

Sephina moved to the edge of the bed, "Lord Conqueror, Gabrielle and I will tend to your needs as you see fit".

At Gabrielle's name, the Conqueror sat up a bit to see her, but she had already gone.

Sephina pulled the blankets up a bit for the Conqueror, "One of us will always be on hand, in the outer chamber at all times. Is there anything you require?"

"I'd like some water Seph, I feel parched".

"At once, Lord Conqueror" Sephina filled a goblet on the table by the bedside and handed it to the Conqueror, helping her up a bit so she could drink.

"Thanks Seph"

"You are most welcome Lord Conqueror" stepping back, placing the goblet back on the table "I will leave you to your rest then" bowed and exit the chambers.

Looking about the room, the Conqueror slowly took in the vast space and quiet stillness "A few days of this...I'll go raving stackers!"

The next thing she knew was waking up in a semi-darkened room, only the fireplace lighting the darkness and the crackling causing sound.

"Tidimous! I'll get you!" she growled to herself as she realized he had put something in the water to get her to sleep.

"Sephina?" she called out.

"My Lord?" came the response as the chamber door was opened, at once knowing who it was.

"Do you wish me to summon Sephina, my lord?" Gabrielle asked while bowing to her.

"Uh no, I um...could you....would you mind getting me a cup of water, please?" stammered the Conqueror.

"At once, my lord" Gabrielle came around the bed and picked up the pitcher and goblet to give to her.

"NO!" the Conqueror shouted while reaching out, causing Gabrielle to jump and spill the water over herself and the Conqueror.

Gabrielle froze.

"OH MY LORD! I am sorry, I did not mean to..."

The Conqueror looked up through her now dripping bangs of hair and started to laugh, and then seeing Gabrielle dripping with water as well threw her head back and laughed harder, a rich deep belly laugh.

Gabrielle, at first scared, then shocked began to snicker as well. She stood at the bedside, face and blouse soaked from the water taking in the laughing Conqueror and the beautiful smile she had on while laughing.

"Oh Gabrielle, why is that every time I'm around you I always wind up wet?" the Conqueror stopped suddenly, realizing what she had just said and then turned scarlet in the process.

Gabrielle stood there, shocked at what was just said but she felt compelled not to embarrass the Conqueror. Not just because of what she could do to her, but something inside told her...don't,

"My Lord? Are you alright?"

"Um...yeah...sure....I just...could you get a fresh cup and pitcher?" she ran her hand through her wet hair absentmindedly.

"Yes, My Lord. At once" Gabrielle turned to leave.

"Um... Gabrielle. Could you get me a towel first?" the Conqueror asked, causing Gabrielle to turn beet red at having left her there, water still dripping off her hair.

"Ahh, much better" the Conqueror said as she sat by the fireplace, drinking a fresh cup of water and having had dried herself off, "Thank you Gabrielle".

"Is My Lord feeling better?"

"Yes, now that I am dry..." she winked at Gabrielle who blushed, "...and sitting up" a pause "I am only teasing Gabrielle, its okay".

"Are you in any pain, my lord? Do you want me to fetch Tidimous? Would you care for something to eat?" Gabrielle was now fussing about the room.

The Conqueror smiled at the concern she could feel coming from Gabrielle, it was sincere, "Gabrielle, stop. You're making me dizzy..." she smiled up to Gabrielle to let her know she was not mad, "No, I am not in a great deal of pain. No, I don't want Tidimous...though I will have words with him later. I'm peckish but not hungry so it can wait. Thank you" she finished.

"Yes, My Lord" Gabrielle stood, head bowed.

"Come and sit down Gabrielle, I want to talk with you" the Conqueror pointed to the chair again.

Gabrielle gulped and walked over, sitting down in the chair with a feeling of trepidation on her.

"So, you came from Potidaea eh?" the Conqueror asked.

"Y..yes My Lord" she smiled wearily.

"Have you been able to go back at any time?" the Conqueror asked, looking from her to the fireplace.

"No my lord...never" she replied sadly.

"Um...how do you find yourself here?" the Conqueror asked.

"My Lord?"

"How are you being treated here in the palace? Is everyone treating you okay?" the Conqueror

went on to clarify.

"Oh Yes, My Lord!" she brightened, "Everyone is so kind. Tidimous is showing me so much though I am no apprentice and Nika is so helpful in explaining what he teaches me. Sephina has shown me throughout the palace and how to get around when there are things going on about Ophelia..." she released a sigh, "...she has shown me nothing but love and kindness..."

Gabrielle sprouted all this animatedly which the Conqueror watched in rapt fascination.

"...She's been the mother I never had..." Gabrielle saddened at this last statement.

"Please, I meant not to cause you any pain in asking you these questions" the Conqueror said as she reached over to hold one of Gabrielle's hands, "It seems every time I speak with you, you wind up crying...for that I am sorry".

"Oh no My Lord; it is not you. I have had a sad past, My Lord. And I have not coped with it all yet, please My Lord...the apology should be from me" she replied looking down to the Conqueror's hand on hers with a small smile.

"Dreams? Um, do you have good dreams Gabrielle?" the Conqueror asked abruptly as she pulled her hand away.

"Dreams? Uh, well I don't remember any of mine My Lord. I sleep quite soundly. Well according to Nika, she and I share a room..." 'Now why did I say that' thought Gabrielle to herself, "...she says I could sleep through the Persian Army walking over me" shrugging her shoulders.

The Conqueror laughed at this which caused Gabrielle to smile and giggle.

"Oh, if only I could do that. I wake at the sound of ants walking across the floor" replied the Conqueror with a smile.

"Oh that must be dreadful My Lord..." Gabrielle replied, "...I must get the cleaners in here at once!" she said seriously looking about the room causing the Conqueror to laugh out loud again.

'My, she is beautiful' thought Gabrielle, 'that smile is so sweet, those lips look so soft and her eyes...those deep blue sparkling eyes'.

Gabrielle was just staring at the Conqueror's features, not seeing the Conqueror looking back at her.

'My, she is gorgeous. Her smile and that laugh' thought the Conqueror 'her emerald eyes just sparkle, her smile is so beautiful and those lips...they are so full and luscious'.

Without realizing the others actions, they each both licked their lips simultaneously.

A knock on the outer chamber door brought both of them back into reality, each flushing at

having the other catch them staring.

"Enter" the Conqueror growled at having been disturbed yet again.

Gabrielle rose from her chair and stood near the table silently, as protocol dictated no slave be seated in the Conqueror's presence.

"Lord Conqueror" Tidimous said upon entering the room and bowing.

"Ah, Tidimous...I was hoping you'd come by as I wanted to have a word with you regarding the drinking quality of the water" the Conqueror stated with an arch to her eyebrow and an evil smirk to her lips.

Tidimous was chagrined enough to shrug his shoulders in acknowledgement of having been caught out in drugging the Conqueror's water.

"My Lord, if it pleases you, I will go and arrange your meal for this evening" Gabrielle asked.

The Conqueror looked to Gabrielle, softening her look but barely hiding the sadness in them from her leaving, "Oh, okay...Yes, thank you".

Gabrielle bowed and exited the room, stopping in the corridor with a perplexed look on her face 'What was that look for?'

Chapter 16

"Well, that confirms it!" said Queen Melosa handing Ephiny a message scroll, "She has emerged from her seclusion and is now preparing for her journey here".

Ephiny read the scroll as Queen Melosa began to pace inside her tent at their encampment, "She has to first send a formal request to the Conqueror for a meeting, doesn't she?"

"Yes, she must. As a suitor it is protocol. Only a dire circumstance will allow that to be foregone".

"Yeah, like us getting her to let her know right?"

"Exactly"

"But, can't the Conqueror deny this meeting with her thus avoiding this whole situation?" Ephiny tried to reason.

"Well yes and no..." Queen Melosa stopped pacing and looked up to Ephiny standing in the entryway to her tent, "...Yes, she can say no; but only to excuse her for time arrangements. Not to forestall her forever because when a formal request comes in, the Conqueror must meet with

the petitioner eventually".

"Ooh" replied Ephiny, "Well, at least it will give us some more time to figure something out...Has the Priestess said anything?"

"Yes and ...um...no" the Queen answered with a hesitation which caused Ephiny to look at her with a confused look; "...she says that on a good note there is to be a challenge..."

"Excellent!"

"...but not until Solstice" she finished flatly.

"What? Not until Solstice? But that's almost three moons from now; what do we do til then?" asked Ephiny who now started pacing in the tent as the Queen sat down.

"That's what I said" Queen Melosa responded, "The Priestess had no more answers as of that time".

"Have you told the Conqueror this news?" Ephiny stopped and turned to face the Queen.

"No, not yet as I know she will have more questions than I have answers for...and I really don't want to be locked on the inside of the study with her again when she gets mad..." the Queen ran a hand through her hair, "...it's not a pretty picture".

"Understandable My Queen. I will leave you to your thoughts as I know you have much on your mind. Goodnight My Queen" Ephiny bowed and exited.

"Goodnight Eph" Queen Melosa said to her retreating back, "Well Priestess, let's hope you are right about your dreams" she said to herself.

"Noooooooooooo..." screamed the Conqueror causing Gabrielle to run to her bed chamber door as two royal guards rushed in besides her.

"LORD CONQUEROR, LORD CONQUEROR?" they shouted.

"Stand down...it's alright" came the reply.

Gabrielle knocked and did something very dangerous and punishable for a slave; she entered without permission, "My Lord?" she asked in the most softest of voices.

When she entered she saw something she swore was unimaginable, the Conqueror sat on the edge of her bed, drenched in sweat and shaking...no trembling...but from what she did not know.

"My Lord?" she asked again gently, knowing she had broken a law and the penalty could be her death but she proceeded anyways.

When the Conqueror looked up, Gabrielle saw something unexpected in the face looking back at her; she saw a look of relief.

"My Lord, forgive me. But...it sounded as if you were..." Gabrielle tried to explain while walking up to her at her bedside.

"You're okay...you're okay" the Conqueror said in a relieved voice with a glazed look in her eyes, reaching up and touching Gabrielle's cheek with her fingertips.

"My Lord?" Gabrielle queried with a small tilt to her head and her forehead furrowed in confusion.

As if touching her cheek and Gabrielle's calling her were a cold bucket of water thrown over her, the Conqueror shook her head to shake of the last vestiges of the nightmare and realized where she was and what she was doing.

"My Lord?" again that gentle voice.

"Um....wha...its okay...I...bad dream...IMorpheus must be on a rampage or something" running her hands through her hair she could feel the sweat soaked locks and then looked down to see her shift was just as drenched.

"Is My Lord feverish?" Gabrielle asked, moving closer and placing a gentle hand on the Conqueror's forehead as if checking her, not even realizing what she was doing to the Lord Conqueror of Greece without her permission.

The Conqueror looked up into the most caring emerald eyes and feeling the cool touch of the back of Gabrielle's hand to her heated skin she closed her eyes to relish the feeling as she unconsciously opened her legs to accommodate Gabrielle a bit closer.

Gabrielle could feel the intense heat emanating from the Conqueror and as a moth drawn to a flame, when the Conqueror spread her legs, she freely stepped in closer sliding her hand down from her forehead and turning it over in the process to slowly caress the Conqueror's cheek.

She looked at the beauty of the Conqueror's face which was so close to her now, as if seeing it for the first time. Her eyes drank in the olive color of her unblemished skin, unmarred by time or hand. The soft yet perfect arch of her eyebrows that mirrored reflection in color to her ebony hair. The exquisitely long eyelashes that trembled with each ragged shallow breath. The finely shaped nose that accompanied the chiseled cheekbones of a graceful face and her lips...so full and enticing that she had to brush her thumb over them gently in awe. Their softness and sensuality made her feel like she was discovering an undiscovered treasure and Gabrielle licked her lips as these unconscious thoughts went through her mind.

When the Conqueror felt Gabrielle's thumb draw across her lower lip, she opened her eyes to see Gabrielle looking intently at her lips with what she could only perceive as smoldering passion in her eyes and instinctively her own lips parted slightly.

The Conquerors stopped breathing at this sight. She didn't want to move a muscle in case one tiny movement would dare cause this fantasy to disappear from in front of her. She sat watching Gabrielle etch every aspect of her face, the touch and feel of it to memory, except one part...her eyes for they had been closed and she was not looking into them.

Gabrielle's eyes worked their way back up to see cerulean eyes looking back forlornly yet lovingly at her. Her mind screamed for her to drop to her knees for forgiveness for such an assault to the Conqueror as to touch her without permission, but her heart told her not to fear...not to run...there would be no harm from her. At war with each emotion and thought, she stopped her thumbs motion and removed her hand from the Conqueror's face, stepped back and lowered her head.

At once the Conqueror felt the loss, it caused an ache in her chest and she did not know why. She looked at Gabrielle with a hurt and confused look in her eyes as to why she would pull away and was about to ask when...

A knock on the chamber doors caused the Conqueror to take in a deep breath and bellow "ENTER!" angrily, which caused Gabrielle to step back quickly.

"Lord Conqueror?" Tidimous said as he entered, "I was informed you had awoken. I came to see if you were feeling alright?"

"Yes Tidimous" she let out an exasperated breath, "I'm okay. I just..." stopping to look at Tidimous, "...bit restless that's all. I'll be fine. Go get some rest".

"If it pleases you Lord Conqueror, I will ask Gabrielle to bring you something to help you sleep?" he inquired.

"No, its okay...dawn is approaching and a good bath and hot drink will help. But, thank you anyways" she replied.

"As you wish Lord Conqueror" he bowed and exited the chamber, leaving the two of them.

Gabrielle stood with her head bowed, not looking up for fear of what might happen, with her hands clasped in front of her.

The Conqueror looked at her, wondering what she was thinking. But knowing what had just transpired, even she didn't know herself. So rather than ruin what they had just experienced she chose another route, "Um Gabrielle?"

"Yes My Lord" Gabrielle replied hesitantly looking up and then back down quickly.

"I, um...well...would you get Sephina to arrange for a bath and I know Ophi is up by now, would you mind asking her to send up something hot to drink and maybe a breakfast roll?"

"Yes My Lord, at once" she said bowing.

"Oh and Gabrielle?" the Conqueror said as Gabrielle went to exit the room, "Thank you".

She blushed and nodded her head then promptly exited the room.

Ophelia was just entering the kitchen when Gabrielle came in "Good Gods on Olympus child. What are ya doing up at this candle mark?"

Looking tired and confused Gabrielle gave her a wan smile, "The Conqueror...um...she asked for a meal to be sent up to her with a hot drink. I have been tending to her; I've been in her outer chamber as Sephina took first watch".

"Okay child, off to be with ya. I'll make sure it gets there" she said while tying off her apron.

"But, I..."

"NO BUTS, child" Ophelia cut her off; "...you look as tired as these old bones feel. Now get before I have you dragged to ya room and have Tidimous make ya drink his medicine!"

"YUCK! Okay, okay...I'll go" Gabrielle said while raising her hands in mock surrender.

The next few days things ran quite smoothly and quietly as Abraxus had made it known the Conqueror wanted it that way. Queen Melosa had not had any further information from the scrolls brought in by the other tribe. Nor had the Priestess had any more revelations from the Goddess Artemis. Queen Melosa was still awaiting a messenger to arrive with a formal request for Satori to meet with the Conqueror and was becoming more and more anxious with the passing of days.

"Ephiny?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yes My Lady Gabrielle" she replied.

"What makes...how does one become a warrior?" she asked as they walked across the courtyard heading towards the Amazon encampment as Gabrielle had agreed to join Ephiny for the noon meal with them.

"Excuse me My Lady?" Ephiny replied as she was a bit startled by the question.

"Well, you were chosen by your Priestess's dreams, yes?"

"Yes"

"That happens for all Amazons. What about other warriors? How do they become warriors? Are they just soldiers who have more experience? Or is there more to it than that?" Gabrielle continued to walk with her towards the Amazon tents.

"Well...some of it yes and some of it no. You see, though my Priestess said in her dreams I was to be a warrior, it doesn't mean I would. There have been others who were to be warriors such as me, but due to illness or injury that befell them, they never became one. So they then became something else in our society".

Leading Gabrielle to a tent that was open, she handed her a plate and motioned for her to follow as they picked food off trays laden with all sorts of fruits, meats and cheeses. Once fully loaded, she pointed towards a set of trees for them to sit by.

"Now that is for us, but for others...well it is more of a personal choice. Some men choose to become ruthless warriors who prey on the weak and helpless while others become noble warriors who help instead by protecting and defending. But they all start as men with no experience, slowly gaining it as time goes on, if they survive the ones who already have it" she stopped to drink some water and eat some more of her food.

"So anyone can become a warrior?" Gabrielle asked.

"Well, I never really thought about it but yes, they just have to know how to defend themselves and then go from there" Ephiny shrugged her shoulders.

"So, how do you learn how to defend yourself?"

"Well, everyone has some sort of weapon they favor. Take for instance Eponin, our weapons master. She knows about all the weapons but her specialty is the chobos".

"What are they?" Gabrielle asked with a slight tilt of her head.

"They are two wooden clubs that are held in each hand and used basically like an extension of your own arms and hands. If you hit someone with them, you can really hurt them". Ephiny responded with an extension of her arm to mimic the weapon.

"Is that what she fought the Conqueror with?"

"Um, yeah...though that I still don't understand. Eponin has never, ever been beaten with chobos; not even by our previous weapons master who trained her. It was like she was born with them" Ephiny shook her head as if still disbelieving it.

"So, what other weapons can you use?" she asked as they continued eating.

"Well, I prefer my short sword and hand dagger while my Queen prefers the staff, but there are so many weapons that it really goes to personal preference" she finished, putting her plate down on the ground and holding her water cup with both hands, "My Lady Gabrielle, why are you asking?" Ephiny now was curious.

"I...Is there a way to protect children or is there a warrior who does?" Gabrielle asked, not

looking up to Ephiny's face.

"My Lady Gabrielle, is there a child being harmed?" Ephiny asked, putting her cup down and turning to face Gabrielle and putting a hand on her forearm.

"No, no...not now...not anymore" she whispered the last part.

"I do not know of a warrior that only protects children, but it is up to all of us to be their warriors, as they can not fend for themselves" she replied.

"Ephiny, I know I am a slave; but...would you...show me...show me how to protect and defend a child...if they needed it?" Gabrielle said in a pleading soft voice.

"Oh My Lady...what would cause you to risk swift punishment of death to learn such?" she took one of Gabrielle's hands in her own and tilted her head down to see into her face.

"Please do not ask me Ephiny, I can not tell you without great pain..." she held back tears threatening to spill at any moment.

"Oh My Lady, please do not cry...what you ask of me...it is a great price we both would pay" Ephiny said still holding her hand.

"I understand...forgive me Regent Ephiny...I meant no offense..."

"Shhhh...My Lady Gabrielle please; I did not say I would not teach you. It must mean a great deal to you for you to risk such a great price".

Gabrielle sobbed quietly with a small nod to her head.

"Yes, My Lady Gabrielle...yes, I will show you" Ephiny said while watching what she thought to be agony that Gabrielle was going through and still trying to understand her request.

"Oh Ephiny! Thank you!" Gabrielle said lunging into Ephiny and nearly knocking her over while hugging her dearly, "Thank you so much!" she pulled back and without thought kissed her on the cheek and promptly left, leaving a startled and bewildered Regent touching her cheek.

The rest of the day passed very quickly and the evening meal as all but a past memory. The Conqueror was walking Queen Melosa through the palace corridor, "So how fares the shoulder Lord Conqueror?" Queen Melosa asked.

"All back to normal, I've gone through my drills and not a hitch to it at all" she replied.

"Excellent to hear Lord Conqueror, did Tidimous find out what was on the arrow?"

"No, not yet...but he has a suspicion he is working on, so I have faith he'll let me know soon enough" she replied while slowing down on their walk.

"Have you any news from your other tribe scrolls?" the Conqueror asked distractedly as she saw Gabrielle walk across the courtyard, captivated by the winter moon's play on her skin and hair.

"No, we have..."

The Conqueror, not hearing a word Queen Melosa was saying, watched Gabrielle walk towards the end of the courtyard and stop and turn. She stood there, wrapping her arms about her under her cloak, as if waiting. Then the Conqueror saw the reason she stood there; she saw the Amazon Regent walk up to Gabrielle. She took her hand and brought it to her lips and kissed it.

At once the beast...of jealousy was awakened. She grabbed on to the stone wall ledge with one hand; the knuckles blanching white with the force she held onto it. She watched Gabrielle slowly pull her hand back and from the distance, she could still see a blush come to her fair face.

After a few minutes of exchanged words, the Regent gave Gabrielle a slight bow and left. Gabrielle, as if sensing someone, looked up and around. Not being able to see anyone, she turned the collar of the cloak up further on the back of her neck and returned to the palace.

"...so we hope to do more with those" Queen Melosa finished.

"Huh? Okay...Goodnight then" the Conqueror said as she turned and walked away.

Queen Melosa looked up to the Conqueror's retreating back then out to the courtyard to see it empty 'What was that all about?' she said to herself, 'She really needs a break!' turning about and heading towards her encampment.

Chapter 17

The next morning before dawn, Gabrielle was up and out of her room and headed to where the Regent had told her to meet her.

"Okay, first things first; we need to figure out what weapon will be best suited to you and be your preference" Ephiny stated as she had brought a few things in a bag, "Alright, let's start with the chobos" she said while handing them to Gabrielle.

As Ephiny let go of them when placed in Gabrielle's hands, both the Chobos and Gabrielle's arms fell to the ground nearly toppling Gabrielle forward face first into the dirt.

"Ooookay...maybe not" Ephiny said picking them back up out of her hands and returning to them to the bag.

"Let's try this" she stated pulling out a wooden sword.

"A wooden sword?!" Gabrielle said incredulously.

"Yes, a wooden sword. It helps us train our young ones how to defend themselves without losing any important body parts in the process" Ephiny replied while rolling her eyes.

"Oooh....got it" replied Gabrielle sheepishly.

"Okay, now this here is the hilt" Ephiny pointed to the end she held in her hand, "This end bit is the pommel, the middle is the grip and the end is the quillion".

Gabrielle nodded in understanding.

"The rest is the blade..." Ephiny finished with a sweep of her hand, "now when you hold the sword, you hold it like this" she demonstrated as she took the sword in her grip, "Now, there are several hundred moves, all of which I can not show you now. They come with seasons of practice and battles. But, I can show you a few here today; enough to get you comfortable holding the sword, protect yourself and some even to kill the attacker".

When she said *kill*; she saw Gabrielle blanch.

"My Lady...are you alright?" she reached over and touched Gabrielle's elbow with her hand.

"I ...um...Ephiny, have you ...killed someone?" Gabrielle swallowed hard.

"Yes, in battle. I've had no choice. It was either me or them, and I really prefer it this way personally" she tried a bit of humor which did not work, "Hey, it was a joke...My Lady...come and sit here for a moment" Ephiny led her over to a boulder.

"When we pick up a weapon, it is a conscious choice we make to either use it or put it back down. Anything can be a weapon...if you put it back down; you are saying you choose to do no harm to another. But, if you use it you are doing so by choice; regardless of whether it is in self defense or not" Ephiny said while squatting down in front of Gabrielle.

"But what if you are attacked?" Gabrielle asked.

"You still have a choice; you can defend yourself or someone without taking a life or you can be the victim of the violent act. You can use many things as a weapon without killing someone...a chair to block and protect, a table to thwart them getting close, you can..." she stopped in mid sentence tilting her head and getting a small smile to her face.

"Ephiny?"

"Um...hold that thought...I'll be right back!" and she was up and running towards the Amazon encampment.

Gabrielle sat on the boulder, watching her run away. She turned her face towards the rising sun, bringing with it another day. She closed her eyes and relished the warmth of its greeting rays on her skin.

She heard running steps and opened her eyes while turning to see Ephiny approaching with a grin on her face, "Ephiny? Is everything okay?"

"Yep, I ...let me ask you a question. You have never killed anyone, right?" a bit out of breath.

"Oh no! Never!" Gabrielle replied a bit startled at the question.

"It's okay; I just want to make sure of something" Ephiny put a hand up in halting motion in attempts to explain, "... The idea of killing someone bothers you?"

"Oh yes!" Gabrielle shuddered involuntarily both from the notion of killing someone by her own hand and the cold.

"Then I have the perfect solution to all our needs!" Ephiny stated proudly.

Gabrielle looked at her with a questioning shake of her head.

"My Lady Gabrielle, this is now yours!" Ephiny announced while handing Gabrielle a staff.

"What is it?" she asked as she took hold of it and looked at from one end to the other.

"It is a staff and it can be one of many things. It can be used to aid you walking, it can be used to feel out the depth of water in a creek..." she demonstrated by taking the staff back and walking several steps forward, turning and walking back while then poking in the ground as if in water, "...it can be used for a lot of things...you can get really creative with it...but for you ..It is perfect. You see since you do not have neither heart nor inclination to take a life, this can solve that bit of problem but still protect you or someone you choose to defend".

"Let me demonstrate", she stood back and twirled the staff the began a series of blocking moves, thrusts, jabs and sweeps that captivated Gabrielle's attention completely.

"Wow, Ephiny. This is great, please show me!" She approached Ephiny.

"As you wish, My Lady. But, I can only show you a few things this morning as I must return soon and resume my normal duties for the day" Ephiny explained, "If you wish to learn more, we can meet here in the mornings".

"Oh yes, thank you Ephiny. And I completely understand, I too have to get back before I am noticed late for my duties" she looked to the Regent with admiration.

"Um...it is my honor My Lady, to be able to help you in any way" she lowered her head slightly to hide the flush she felt on her cheeks.

Gabrielle returned to her room, stowing the staff in the corner and going to the kitchen to help with the morning duties that were well underway. Ophelia asked her to prepare the Conqueror's

tray as she would be back soon.

"From where Ophi?"

"She's out on the training grounds child. She was there last night and then again this morning before the start of the day. Something has possessed her right through I tell ya" Ophelia said shaking her head sadly.

"Why do you say that?"

"Child, I've known her for too many seasons not to know when she is right mad and somethin's got her good right now. Go look for ya self child and see with ya own eyes. If ya can sees her that is...she's nuthin but a blur o speed...then get ya bums back here toot quick!" she shoed her off.

The Conqueror was on the training grounds, the rest of the troops were no where to be seen. Only Abraxus stood by, watching in silent awe at her skills. When Gabrielle came about the corner, she peered through one of the arches and watched in rapt fascination.

The Conqueror had a sword in each hand, of which Gabrielle could only see a streak as they were indeed nothing but blurs for the speed in which she moved. She swung and turned, parried and blocked, flipped and rolled all at a speed even an immortal would be hard pressed to keep up with.

Finally after almost a candle mark of constant movement, she began to slow down and eventually stopped. Putting the swords in their scabbards, she walked over to a barrel and lifted a ladle of water to her lips. Sensing a set of eyes on her other than Abraxus, she looked up.

She looked up directly into Gabrielle's eyes.

Gabrielle; who stood transfixed with mouth hanging open staring back in amazement.

The Conqueror's piercing steely blue eyes looking at her, looking into her... with such intensity it caused her to stop breathing. Then, she blinked at what she thought she saw. She could have sworn she saw the Conqueror wink at her. She gasped at that notion and turned about, running towards the kitchen.

Gabrielle returned to the kitchen a shaking mess.

"Child, what's happened to ya?" Ophelia asked looking up from sorting out the tray before her.

'She...she saw me...she looked right at me...right into me...' she stammered, "...and winked" she whispered the last as if trying to convince herself.

"Calm down, she won't kill ya child. She probably didn't even see ya...when she gets this way, she is so focused, she'll look through ya and not even notice ya there at all" she finished loading

the tray, "now, get this tray up there. Sephina has gotten her bath ready for her and this needs to be there for when she gets out".

"Yes Ophi" taking a deep breath, she stood up from the stool she sat on and took the tray.

"Don't worry child, once she's had her bath and some food she's not so intense...usually" Ophelia chuckled.

Gabrielle gulped, "Usually?" she squeaked.

Ophelia laughed even harder and Gabrielle took the tray, feeling her knees begin to wobble.

Sephina and Gabrielle were cleaning up the bed chamber when a knock on the outer door sounded, "Seph, tell whoever it is I'm in no mood today!" the Conqueror growled from her bath.

"Yes Lord Conqueror" Sephina replied and went to the door. Muttered words were exchanged and Sephina returned to help Gabrielle finish cleaning the room while she set the meal out.

Gabrielle was putting the Conqueror's clothes out for her to dress when she looked up to see her standing at the doorway to her bedchamber looking straight back at her. Her hair was glistening, still damp from its washing. She was wearing a long silk red robe that was tied off at the front leaving an alluring V shape opening that showed the middle of a full and ample cleavage.

Gabrielle swore she was looking upon a goddess then suddenly realized she was gawking and eyeing the Conqueror up and down like a child does with a piece of candy. Blushing profusely she dropped to her knees, waiting for some form of reprimand.

When the Conqueror did not even acknowledge her but merely walked over to her table and sat, it surprisingly disconcerted her.

She stayed on her knees, several thoughts running through her mind 'Why hasn't she said anything? The last time we were alone, she let me touch her...even stopped me from bowing. She doesn't even seem to want to know me now, why?'

Moments later she looked up to see the Conqueror looking at her again, but something in her eyes bothered Gabrielle deeply. She had not seen it there ever before when looking at her, but before she could figure it out; it was gone.

In its place was a blank, cold look and as the Conqueror turned her head away, she growled in a cold, distant voice "Leave me".

Gabrielle quickly got up and exited the room.

The Conqueror did not come out of her chambers for the rest of the day, nor did she lend counsel to anyone including Abraxus; which really concerned him.

When Ophelia sent her evening food tray up it was returned, untouched.

"Here we go again Ophi" Sephina said to her while putting the tray down that she had just brought back from the Conqueror's room.

"Oh dear, not this again" Ophelia said exasperatedly while putting her hands on her hips and shaking her head with a sad look.

"Yes, not a bite. Only takes a sip of water and stares at the fireplace or out the window..." Sephina began removing the food off the tray, "She wouldn't even talk to Abraxus".

"Okay, give her a day. If nothing changes, then I'll bring out my weapons of destruction".

That night Gabrielle lay in her bed, staring up at the ceiling, 'What was that look? Why did she sound so cold?' she thought to herself.

She was so deep in thought, she didn't hear Nika enter.

Nika walked in and sat down, "Hey Gabrielle, there is an Amazon Warrior outside in the courtyard, she asked to see you".

"Oh Nika, could you do me a great favor? Tell her that I'm asleep and you'll let me know her message in the morning. Please?" Gabrielle pleaded with her hands together.

"Hmm...Okay. But you are going to have to explain this to me young lady" she winked while rising to exit the room.

"I will Nika, I promise...just as soon as I figure it out myself" she replied which made Nika turn back to her with her eyebrows furrowed together in concern at her statement.

A few candle drops later, Nika returned "She said it was okay; nothing important"

"Thank you Nika, I owe you" Gabrielle replied and turned in bed to face the wall, thus letting Nika know she didn't want to talk anymore.

Chapter 18

The next morning Gabrielle was up bright and early, though she didn't have her heart in it. She knew she needed the practice and to learn what she could while Ephiny was there to show her. After a candle mark of training, she quickly left Ephiny with a quiet thank you and returned to her duties in the kitchen, still perturbed at the Conqueror's reaction to her the day before.

Usually talkative and animated she was very quiet and pensive, a change that was not lost on Ophelia when she went about her duties. When she was asked, she simply shrugged it off as tiredness from a bad night's sleep.

After a few days the Conqueror finally emerged from her self imposed seclusion; looking haggard and lost. But that was the least of the changes in her as the time alone had done nothing but brew her ire and set her temper on the edge.

While walking across the compound to find Abraxus, she came upon some soldiers mock playing with their swords and acting out a previous evening's revelry.

"Oh my pretty little slave girl, what have we here?" said one of the soldiers, a young man with dark hair who was near 20 or so seasons. The second soldier, another one of similar age but with blonde curls replied back "Oh please kind lord, I will do anything to repay for my mistake" holding up his hands as in prayer for forgiveness.

A third soldier threw his head back in laughter, "Yeah, then he took her in the back room and she prayed out loud!" he slapped the first soldier on the back.

"So, you think it funny that a woman begs forgiveness do you?" Came the feral growl of the Conqueror and all three soldiers turned in the direction of the growl, as the color drained from each of their faces.

"I asked you a question!" she hissed

"Uh..uh..n..No...no, Lord Conqueror" the black haired youth stammered, "We...we meant no disrespect Lord Conqueror!" each of them now facing her and looking up to her piercing stare as they were all a head shorter than her.

Abraxus was crossing the compound in the opposite direction when he saw the Conqueror looming over these men and saw the look of absolute horror etched across their faces.

"No disrespect?! What do you call laughing at some poor woman's begging for mercy? Fodder for your entertainment?" she was moving forward now, the tension in her body uncoiling as the beast began to awaken.

She grabbed the one who laughed by his tunic and threw him against the courtyard wall as if tossing a rag into the wind, where he slid down to the ground unconscious. She then picked up the blonde one and held him up by his throat with her left hand while reaching across her own chest with her right and backhanded him across the jaw and pushed him into a horse trough. She then turned on the black haired man who was more boy than man, "So, you think you're a man?" she hissed, "Cause you make a woman beg for mercy?" she stalked him, "Then stand up now and take it like a man!" She drew back and punched him in the stomach, causing him to drop to the ground doubled over and retch.

Abraxus was now standing there; unable to do anything ...this was her army...her punishment for whatever crimes she believed were done... and he really didn't want to get on her bad side anyways.

She lifted the boy up by his hair and reeled her right arm back, hitting him with a under cut fist to

the jaw that heard bones crush under it as it flipped him over onto the ground unconscious.

She drew in a deep breath, taming the beast back.

Walking up to Abraxus she told him, "They are to be demoted to scrubbing stables and digging privy trenches" looking him square in the eyes which caused him to flinch and lower his gaze she waited for his response.

"Aye Lord Conqueror" he said as he turned away and called for help to have them taken to Tidimous.

She stormed into her private study and paced back and forth. Willing the beast to return to its hold as it had been given it's free reign for the time being. Once she had calmed down, she sat and began going through her scrolls of requests with a heavy sigh.

"Lord Conqueror?" Abraxus knocked on the outer door.

"Enter" she replied without looking up from her scrolls.

"Seems as though we have been asked to assist several towns with sentries to protect them against these growing attacks" she told him as he walked in and stood.

"Aye, I can see that they would want that now as word is spreading of the damage these bastards inflict when they attack" he said with an edge of anger in his words.

"Well maybe Rome can handle the Northern border and we can then focus on our own territories; this way we might be able to slow down or prevent any more from happening" she sat back in her chair and motioned him to sit.

"Aye, would you send word to Rome of this as a request or suggestion?"

"Neither," she replied "I'm calling in a marker".

"Oh" was all he said and started to fidget with the hilt of his sword while looking down to the ground.

"Out with it Abraxus," she sighed heavily "I don't have the patience today". *'I really hate when they dawdle'* she said to herself.

"Well, um, Lord Conqueror...I ...we ...well there is a concern about...how..." he stammered.

"Abraxus" she started in a growl.

"Well, we are a bit concerned about you Lord Conqueror..."

She merely arched one eyebrow and waited.

"You seem a bit edgy...off ...Lord Conqueror. Has something happened that we can assist with?" he asked with sincerity in his voice now.

Taking a deep breath, "While I appreciate everyone's concerns Abraxus; no...Thank you. This is something I need to sort out on my own" she replied with an acknowledging nod of her head.

He knew that was the end of the subject and rose, "I'll see to your orders then".

She nodded and went back to her scrolls as he saluted and exited.

The next few days were uneventful as the Conqueror kept to her own company, working in her study in the day and staying in her room at night. She had taken a few meals but nothing of note.

Gabrielle had stuck to her training with Ephiny who was seeking her out more and more but to no avail as Gabrielle was still perplexed as to why the Conqueror was so cold towards her that one time, and had since ignored her causing Gabrielle to retreat into herself as well.

One night, while sitting in her room looking out at the newly fallen snow, the Conqueror took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. When she exhaled, a single lonely tear ran down her cheek. She reached up with her fingertips and touched her cheek, pulling her fingertips back she saw the tips glisten with the wetness of that tear.

Then she suddenly felt a presence that made the hair on the nape of her neck stand up. With one fluid movement, she turned and drew her sword.

"Whoa! You really have got to put that thing away before you hurt someone...namely me!" said Aphrodite as she disappeared and reappeared on the other side of the room.

"Goddess Aphrodite?!" the Conqueror blinked, quickly wiping the tear away.

"Well with a welcome like that, no wonder people are afraid of you" Aphrodite tsked.

"My apologies Goddess, I thought..." she did not finish.

"Oh don't worry love; he knows not to set foot around here right now. Daddy has him under strict orders and a very watchful eye" she replied.

The Conqueror sheathed her sword and walked over to the hearth, sitting down quietly. "Xena, what's wrong?" Aphrodite asked while walking over to her side and sat down.

Her response was a shrug.

"Still no luck putting it all together then, huh?"

"Goddess, when I thought I had a possible piece to the puzzle I wind up being all wrong!" the

Conqueror rose while putting a hand through her hair in a frustrated action, "...and it hurts like Hades" she said in almost a whisper.

Aphrodite did not reply as she wanted to hear the Conqueror's words to see if she was right.

"I thought I had met my dream mate; but it seems she is already spoken for..." she said sadly while staring into the fire.

"WHAT?" asked a bewildered Aphrodite.

"Nothing...just made a mistake. I think I figured it out now though. This suitor, Satori; she must be the one in my dreams that Morpheus sends me. I just presumed ..." she trailed off, looking into the fire forlornly. The crackle of the wood brought her out of the trance of the flames, "...but that'll teach me. When she sends word for a request for a private audience, it will be all done but final" the Conqueror said as if passing a sentence of death on herself.

"No, no, no, no, no!" Aphrodite said while rising from her seat, "All WRONG! Explain to me Xena what has happened. Step by step and don't leave ANY detail out!" she commanded in a voice that left no room for misinterpretation.

After explaining all that she knew to the Goddess since their last encounter, Aphrodite turned "Xena, I want you to hold off all thoughts of accepting a meeting for the moment. I need to speak with my sister about something of utmost importance" she walked a few paces while straightening out her gown, "Do yourself a favor Xena, put all thoughts out of your head and listen..." she approached the Conqueror and placed her hand over the Conqueror's chest, "...to your heart, okay?"

Then taking her hand and placing two fingers under the Conqueror's chin, tilting her head up to meet her eyes, "Trust me on this, Xena...and the only tear you'll ever shed again will be for joy" Aphrodite said gently as she wiped away the remnant trace of the tear and then disappeared.

After a restless night, the Conqueror rose early and spent the morning in her usual manner, going over petitions in her study.

Gabrielle met with Ephiny again in their now familiar training grounds, hidden from roving eyes.

"My Lady Gabrielle, you are getting remarkably better with your staff" Ephiny said, getting a bit winded at having to block Gabrielle's offensive moves.

"I have been training at any moment I can. Even if I can't use the staff, I use the hand movements" Gabrielle replied with a smile at the acknowledgment she was getting better.

"Well, it shows" Ephiny said while putting up a hand in a stopping motion to halt the day's training session, "At this rate you won't need me to train you, you'll be able to spar on even ground" motioning to sit down and take a drink of water.

After a few moments Ephiny rose and turning to Gabrielle said, "Well, I know you must get to your duties so I won't keep you, My Lady. I shall see you in the morning then, good day" leaving behind a stunned Gabrielle sitting on the boulder.

"Um...wait...uh...Ephiny. I thought we could...we'd sit and talk abit, but if you must go..."

"My Lady, I have always greatly enjoyed any time with you. It just seems as though you did not want to talk with me of late" Ephiny could not look at Gabrielle as she said this.

"I'm sorry Ephiny. I have had some things on my mind of late...and with my duties...I really have no time for anyone...anything. But I am free this morning," she asked tentatively "will you sit and take some time with me?"

"Once again, it would be my honor My Lady" Ephiny said as she sat down next to her.

"Ephiny? Why was it that you and the Amazons came to see the Conqueror?"

"Queen Melosa had to tell the Conqueror something that pertained to her of high importance" Ephiny replied while leaning forward and placing her elbows on her knees.

"Oh, was it bad news?"

"Well she didn't think it was good news, but it could be if she so chose"

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle mimicked her posture.

"It is not for me to say...I'm sorry My Lady. It is for the Conqueror to know and deal with".

"I didn't mean to pry, sorry".

"No need to apologize, My Lady. But...can I ask you something?"

"Sure Ephiny, what is it?"

Taking a deep breath and looking at the ground, "Will you dine with me tonight?"

"I, um...well..." Gabrielle stammered and could see the dejection in the slump of the Regent's shoulders, "Sure. Let me get done with my chores and I'll meet you".

Ephiny looked up shocked she'd actually accepted, "Excellent! I'll see you this evening" she rose and extended her hand to help Gabrielle up.

Gabrielle smiled nervously and nodded her head, 'What am I doing?' she thought to herself.

Chapter 19

The rest of the day went too quickly as far as she was concerned and before she realized it, all her duties were done and she was due to meet Ephiny for dinner.

Ephiny sat at a small table in the dining hall worrying a bit of the table with her fingernail when she saw Gabrielle come in out of the corner of her eye. She rose as Gabrielle came nearer and pulled out a chair for her to sit, which Gabrielle cordially accepted and did not go unnoticed by those in the dining area.

The meal was being enjoyed in companionable conversation. Eponin had been given permission to start eating soft foods after having the wires removed from her mouth and asked if she could join both of them at their table to which Ephiny was about to object to but Gabrielle accepted before she could reply.

"...so she staggers in; mind you about nine Amazon feathers to the wind at this point and says to them she'd heard it on the grape vine" Gabrielle broke out in laughter joined by Ephiny once she finished telling the story about Eponin who was now a scarlet color and had even started laughing herself.

"Oh, Eponin. You did not ...did you?" asked Gabrielle while trying to wipe tears from her eyes from laughing so hard and began laughing again when Eponin grew a deeper shade and nodded up and down, "...oh you are too much!"

They had finished their meals and the warriors shared a goblet of wine or two while talking about stories that had happened at the Amazon village. Gabrielle had begun to relax and actually enjoy herself, admonishing herself for her earlier feelings of trepidation.

After helping clean up their dishes for the night, Ephiny asked Gabrielle if she would mind walking around the Palace grounds in attempts to settle their meal and enjoy the rest of the evening before saying goodnight.

Eponin made herself scarce at this point with a wink towards Ephiny before leaving.

Gathering up her cloak, Gabrielle walked along the pathway leading from the Palace towards the Amazon encampment with Ephiny at her side.

"Thank you for having dinner with me tonight, My Lady" Ephiny began, "It was actually quite nice to laugh for a change".

"Oh no, thank you Ephiny. I have never heard stories like that and didn't even realize those things actually happened" Gabrielle snickered at the memory.

"Yeah, with Eponin around you never really know what's going to happen. She's a character alright, but a good stick and I would always like to have her on my side when things happen" Ephiny adjusted her cloak.

"Has she helped you out before?"

"Yes, saved a few of the others in our last battle against an attack when we were traveling back from winter trades..." Ephiny looked to Gabrielle, "They ambushed us but we managed to survive with only minor injuries thanks to her helping two of our newest warriors from getting skewered".

"Oh...was everyone okay? Did you get the people responsible?" Gabrielle asked while rubbing her arms over each other to get warm.

"Yeah, we were okay. Can't say the same for our attackers..."

"Why? What happened to them?"

"Amazon Justice. They were tried, sentenced and punished".

"Bet they won't do that again" Gabrielle replied.

"No they won't, they're dead" Ephiny stated matter of factly which stopped Gabrielle in her tracks.

"Are you okay?" Ephiny turned to Gabrielle when she realized she had stopped and was no longer walking by her side.

"Uh, yeah...just didn't expect that".

"It is our law, My Lady. If we are attacked without provocation and there are any survivors, they are given a defense council and then they must stand trial for their crimes" Ephiny explained as she walked up to Gabrielle, "It is our laws that protect us and as warriors we make sure these laws are enforced to protect our way of life".

"I...I understand" she stated back.

"Do you My Lady? Do you see that I am a warrior and these are my people that I must protect and laws that I must uphold?" Ephiny asked while coming closer to Gabrielle, "That I will do what I can for those I care for?"

Gabrielle nodded.

Stepping closer to her she continued, "Even if it means my own death?"

Again Gabrielle nodded.

"Do you know...I care for you My Lady?"

Gabrielle did not respond, she did not move.

Ephiny reached up with her hand to Gabrielle's face, cupping her chin gently she lifted it to face her as the winter moon cast its light upon it, "And I will do what I can for you?" Looking into her eyes, she leaned down and had just barely touched Gabrielle's lips with her own when Gabrielle pulled away.

"I...I haven't...I've never..." nervous and embarrassed Gabrielle turned away.

"My Lady, its okay..." Ephiny could see how distressed she had become, "I did not mean to presume or to rush you. I am sorry" she walked up next to her after a candle drop of silence, "Let me walk you back to the Palace, it has gotten late and you must rest".

They walked back to the palace in silence, unaware of the eyes that watched them.

At the door to the servant's quarters Gabrielle turned to Ephiny "Um...thank you Ephiny, for dinner and our talk. I...um...if it would be okay with you, I'd like to sleep in tomorrow" she said while looking to the ground, unable to lift her eyes to meet Ephiny's.

"Of course My Lady, when you are ready. I will wait" Ephiny said reaching for Gabrielle's hand, and not wishing to distress her anymore, giving it a gentle squeeze and letting go. She watched Gabrielle enter the room and close the door.

'I hope she realizes what I meant' Ephiny said to herself, letting go of a sigh and turning to walk towards her encampment.

Chapter 20

"Sephina, after my bath is drawn I would like for dinner to be sent up immediately" the Conqueror requested.

"Yes, Lord Conqueror".

The weather had begun to turn to its cold counterpart. Winter was creeping over the last vestiges of summer's warmth, turning the once colorful landscape into its dull and drab lonely world of cold. All of the fireplaces were stoked continually throughout the palace and all the windows shut tight to keep in the comfortable warmth.

The Conqueror had invited the Amazons to join her in the palace, but Queen Melosa had declined stating that they were used to living in nature's elements.

After her morning drill session, the Conqueror had met with Queen Melosa and Abraxus to try to figure out a way to get reinforcements for some villages and any updates from the Priestess.

Stretching, she rose and entered her bath chamber, discarding her clothes in a pile and stepping into the steaming water.

'Oh this feels good, I am getting to feel parts I thought frozen off' she thought to herself.

Once the water had started to cool, which wasn't very long, she exited the bath and dried off quickly dressing into a clean shift and soft boots.

The Conqueror walked over to her dining table, her mouth watered from the scent of one of her favorite things, a puff pastry dessert Ophelia knew she loved. Lifting the lid she found only one piece with a note, 'Lord Conqueror, I knew you would pick this tray first over your meal, but you need to eat something substantial first. Once I know you have, I'll send the rest up. Ophi'

"Why that little..."

'P.S. I know you could have my head but I made these for you and...' written on a very small note, rolled up inside the first one was the rest of the note, 'I care and love you - Ophi'

"Damn, I hate when she blackmails me like that!" the Conqueror said with a smirk, popping the pastry into her mouth and sitting down to eat her dinner.

After finishing her meal to what she believed would be satisfactory to Ophelia and hoping for the release of the hostage desserts, she sent the tray away and requested Gabrielle.

"Gabrielle, child...take this tray up to the Conqueror" Ophelia asked.

"Okay Ophi" she replied not really caring about what chore she was doing. Once again Ophelia noticed her distractedness throughout the day and made a mental note to talk to her about it upon her return.

Gabrielle knocked on the door to the Conqueror's chambers as she had not been summoned for quite some time. Recalling that her last encounter with the Conqueror was when she had been told to leave and the vision of the Conqueror's haunted eyes still remained in her mind.

"Enter" was heard by her and the door guards.

Gabrielle walked in, placing the tray on the table by the fire place and waiting for the command to be dismissed. But the Conqueror was not in her chair as normal, nor for that matter did she see her upon entering the room. Not looking about, she stood with her hands clasped in front of her and her head bowed.

After a few candle drops, she was startled by the velvety voice "Gabrielle"

"Y..yes My Lord" she replied shakily.

"I am going to ask you some questions and I want you to answer them" the voice said, but she could not see where the Conqueror was as only then did she realize the room was pitch black. All the candles had been put out and the only light in the room came from the fireplace flames.

"Y..yes My Lord"

"I want you to tell me what happened in Trachis" commanded the Conqueror.

Gabrielle stiffened at this command; she knew she could not avoid telling her as it was an order. It felt like it was a candle mark before she could get her throat to relax enough for her to swallow, but in reality it was only a candle drop.

Swallowing audibly, her body began to shake and she closed her eyes in an attempt to calm her beating heart. The images came flooding back into her mind, "Yes, My Lord..." she finally said shakily.

"I...I had been taken as a slave several seasons prior to that and had been sold to two or three different masters by then. I was lucky in that they were wither too busy to notice me, always drunk or very lousy gamblers and lost me in a game of chance as form of payment or debt. On the last change of masters, we were all taken when he was killed. All his possessions were taken and brought to Trachis"

The Conqueror was circling around the room, walking stealthily so as not to startle the young girl as she watched her struggle to get her words out.

"When I arrived at Trachis, our new master was not known to us. We were told our duties and went to work immediately..." she stopped and took a very deep ragged breath, "I had heard of the many proclivities of men and women by other slaves but had always been spared of finding out firsthand. With this monster though, I was very afraid. It was just something in my feelings. One night I was awoken by a child screaming. I tried to find out what was going on but was told by the other slaves to mind my own business and be grateful to the gods that I was seasons older than the rest".

The flames from the fireplace reflected in the tears now escaping their barriers and running freely down her cheeks. The Conqueror watched from the shadows, the scene being told to her stirring the dormant beast.

"This went on and off for several moons and no one would tell me what was happening. Then I began to notice some of the children were gone for long times on end, only to return with a broken arm, leg or severely beaten. Then I realized it was only the little girls that were suffering, they would shrink back at any sudden movement and freeze when touched".

Then something the Conqueror had not seen before caught her attention, she watched as Gabrielle's disposition changed to unleashed anger and frustration. Her hands were clenched into tight fists at her sides, their white knuckles clearly evident to the Conqueror's sharp eyes.

"One night as I finished my duties outside, a few of the slaves carried a litter by on the way to a section of the fort where a room was used to treat injuries. When I followed them out of curiosity, I saw with my own eyes what had caused their anguished screams in the night. A little girl no more than seven seasons old, lay in the litter. She bled from her..." Gabrielle lowered her head at the vision before her mind's eyes, "...she was covered in blood below the waist. Her eyes

were half closed but I could see the emptiness in them even though she still breathed".

Gabrielle stopped and took a steadying breath, "This happened every time there was a new change in slaves or when he returned from a trip away in one of his *moods*".

Suddenly, Gabrielle felt cold. She could not see anything but felt there was a change in the room. It was as if the fire had been doused and the windows thrown open to the winter night's air. She swore she could hear a caged animal's breathing...panting and pacing back and forth in the room, but could see nothing.

She rubbed her arms to fend off the chill though the fireplace was roaring only steps away.

"There was this little girl, her name was Lucindas. She was only six seasons old when she came to us. She had small curly blond locks and blue green eyes the color of the sea..." the tears were rolling down her cheeks again and her breathing had become ragged, "...I always thought that if I had children, I would want them to look like her, but ...now I don't! She was taken one night about three moons after being there. I didn't even hear when they took her. All I remember is her scream...her absolute horrifying scream and then silence.

I ran towards where I heard her but was stopped by his two Nubian slaves and given a beating. I was brought back by the others when they heard and saw what happened to me. They helped me with my cuts and bruises.

The next day I could not find Lucindas...or the next after that. It was three days until I saw her and it was the last time I saw her. They had released her from her sick bed in the treating room and she could barely walk along the fort. I called for her but she simply stared vacantly out to the ocean..." a gulp, "...she stared through me with dead eyes. She walked toward the edge of the fort out towards the bay. It was too late before I realized where she was going..."

Gabrielle sank to her knees, crying into her hands that now cradled her face "She jumped into the bay from the cliff wall...she was only a child and she chose to kill herself!" Gabrielle shouted looking up and into the blackness of the room.

The Conqueror was at her side in an instant, gathering her up from the floor in a supportive embrace. Gabrielle's sobs were muffled against the Conqueror's chest as she held her, her tears soaking the soft shift that now caressed her face. The Conqueror held her with strong gentle arms, willing her strength and calmness.

Gabrielle wrapped her arms around the Conqueror's waist unconsciously holding on to her for dear life as the tears came uncontrollably, every sob wracking her body until she was spent.

The Conqueror's arms held Gabrielle's now exhausted body. Strong arms that held her firmly but comfortingly. One hand began rubbing her back in soothing motions up and down while the other cupped her head and gently held it to her shoulder, "Its okay...I've got you" the Conqueror kissed Gabrielle's head, "Let it go...let it go....once you've freed this burden from your soul, you'll feel better" she kissed her head again and breathed in the soothing scent of her hair.

"Are you alright?" the Conqueror asked a candle mark later, still holding Gabrielle in her arms. She felt her nod her head. "Do you want to finish?" she asked her.

"Y..yes I...I need to" came the raspy reply.

"Okay" was all the Conqueror said, waiting for Gabrielle to gather her thoughts, strength and continue.

The Conqueror continued stroking her back in a soothing motion. Holding her so close she relished in the feel of having her in her arms, feeling her warm body against hers.

"I...I was stunned. I was lost; all the others accepted her death as a normal part of their lives as slaves. I could not. At first I became sullen and quiet. I wouldn't talk to anyone and was always angry at them for not caring and then I realized they couldn't because it hurt them too much," she took a deep breath while bringing up a hand from around the Conqueror's waist to wipe her eyes, "I swore there and then, that not another child would suffer that horror...no matter what".

The Conqueror gave her a small squeeze, giving her comfort and strength to go on.

"Then one day he returned from one of his trips. He sent one of his Nubian slaves to pick out the new child. I was out doing my chores when I heard her pleading with him to let her go. I pretended to take up a tray of food and wine for his enjoyment. When I went in, he was trying to take her and ... I went towards him and when he turned I kicked him in the groin".
The Conqueror gave a small snort at the thought of her doing that, though she knew it was not a humorous story. This caused Gabrielle to smile meekly and embarrassed at what she had done.

She continued, "He let go of her and dropped down to his knees. I grabbed her and tried to get her out when he grabbed me instead. All I remember was yelling for her to run and being hit across the face...the rest...I ...I don't remember" she shrugged her shoulders in an attempt at explaining why she was stopping.

"Its okay, you don't have to worry about that...unless you want to know?" the Conqueror said above her head that was tucked under her chin now.

Gabrielle nodded her head.

"I heard when he hit you. I was walking up the corridor when it happened. He must have picked up a chair and that's how your leg was broken, when he hit you with it" the Conqueror could feel her shudder in her arms.

"When I came in, they had put you to the whipping post and he was drawing back for another strike but I took the whip from his hands...that's when I sent you to Tidimous" she finished, still rubbing Gabrielle's back.

"No one will hurt you little one, not while I breathe" she whispered into her hair, kissing the top

of her head again.

After a few candle drops of silence, the Conqueror spoke to her again, "Is that why you asked your lover to help you?"

Gabrielle pulled back from the Conqueror, confusion written on her face "M..my Lord? My lover?"

"Yes, the Amazon Regent Ephiny" she replied, releasing Gabrielle and turning to walk to the table.

Gabrielle stiffened at that remark. Confusion and dread at the implications of what the Conqueror had said, "M..my Lord...she is not ...I don't...I've never..." she stammered.

"Is it the reason you asked her to help you break the law? The law that clearly states no slave is to be taught to use a weapon under penalty...of death?" she continued flatly, her back to Gabrielle.

"My Lord..." she dropped to her knees pleading, "Please my lord, spare her. She only did so on my beseeching her. She only meant to help me".

"You love her that much to plead for her life?" the Conqueror asked, attempting to mask the hurt in her voice at what she believed she saw.

"My Lord, she is my *friend*. Nothing more. She offered me her kindness and help. I could not ask someone to pay for my mistakes. Those are mine to bear" she continued to cry, "I only wanted to be able to protect the children My Lord. She has trained me only to do so; for I can not hurt anyone...I...I...." she tried to control her breathing and tears.

"What would your lover say if I asked her?" the Conqueror asked, needing to know if this was indeed the truth.

"She is not my lover!" sobbed Gabrielle.

"But she kissed you!" the Conqueror's jealousy finally winning out over her resolve.

"She tried, My Lord" a brief pause, "But I could not...I have never...I didn't want....I don't know how..." Gabrielle stopped. She was hurting, confused and embarrassed and didn't know how to sort out her emotions. Her crying was uncontrollable and her emotions were wrecking havoc on her already spent body, "Oh my lord please" she pleaded in a strangled and anguished voice.

The Conqueror turned to see her on the floor crumbled into a heap with her face in her hands, on her knees, begging. It tore through her, wrenching her heart at having had caused this picture now before her. She knelt down, picking Gabrielle back up and into her arms.

"I am sorry...so, so sorry" she whispered into her hair, "I just had to know" she continued in the

hushed tone as she place a kiss on the head tucked under her chin again. She wrapped her arms around Gabrielle, pulling her more into her body with a gentleness that belied her strong appearance.

She could feel how weak Gabrielle's body was; as if there was no strength left in her from all the emotional drain. The Conqueror leaned over and scooped Gabrielle up into her arms, carrying her over to her bed and laid her down gently.

Gabrielle stirred, her eyes closed from lack of energy.

"Shhh....its okay, its okay....please don't cry" the Conqueror said in a soothing voice. She tentatively sat on the edge of her bed, reaching over to the small bedside table and taking a small cloth, she wet it with water from the pitcher that sat there and squeezed it out make sure it was only damp. Taking the cloth, she wiped the tears from Gabrielle's face and then wiped her forehead.

"Rest little one, rest...you are tired" the Conqueror soothed, wiping the hair away from Gabrielle's eyes, "Rest, you are safe here". The Conqueror covered her with a blanket and began caressing her hair, lulling her into sleep.

As Gabrielle began to cross over into Morpheus's realm, she swore she could hear the faintly whispered words "I will never hurt you Gabrielle, for I have found my dream mate in you" and felt a feather light kiss to her forehead just as she crossed over.

Chapter 21

Stretching, Gabrielle felt tired but rested in an odd sort of way. She snuggled down further into the very warm, soft covers as a smile touched the corners of her lips. Then, her eyes snapped open.

The realization of the previous night's confession and revelations coming to her in a breath, causing her to bolt upright into a sitting position, practically into the concerned face of the Conqueror.

"Hey, hey...easy..." the Conqueror said easing her back onto the upright pillows with a gentle hand, "Where's the fire?"

"MY LORD, I....I" Gabrielle tried to speak, her eyes the size of saucers as she looked about the room and realized she was in the Conqueror's room....in the Conqueror's bed.

"Shh...it's okay Gabrielle. I put you here last night. You were exhausted and pretty much passed out from it".

"I...I should get up...I've taken your bed...I need to tend to your needs, my duties...I beg your forgiveness My Lord" she prattled on as she sat up to remove the sheet covering her.

"Gabrielle, take a breath!" the Conqueror interrupted.

Gabrielle stopped all motion and closed her open mouth in mid sentence.

"There. That's better now" the Conqueror stated with a slight twinkle in her eyes putting her at ease and watched as Gabrielle sat back.

"Yes My Lord"

"Okay, now if you are feeling better you can try to get up" The Conqueror said with a bit of concern to her voice as she herself rose from the edge of the bed and walked across the room to the table.

Gabrielle pulled the covers back and swung her legs off the bed only to discover her shoes were off. Looking down to the floor, she saw them neatly placed by the edge of the bed.

"I...um ...took them off...last night...when you were asleep" the Conqueror stammered after seeing Gabrielle's confused face look from her feet to the floor, "Thought you'd sleep better with them off".

"My Lord is most kind. I do not deserve such kindness" Gabrielle said reaching down and putting them on.

"No, you deserve better" was whispered back.

Gabrielle cocked her head at that statement and curious at why it was whispered.

"My Lord, may I get you your breakfast and prepare your bath?" Gabrielle asked now that she was standing and bowed her head.

"No, no thank you Gabrielle. I have someone I need to see first thing and I'd rather not have a clean refreshed feeling for this encounter" she replied solemnly.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts for the moment, she crossed the room to where Gabrielle stood. Trembling slightly, she reached for Gabrielle's hand and pulled it up and ran her thumb across the tops of her fingers "Gabrielle, I am sorry...for the pain you went through...I ...um...well...um..." she looked up from their joined hands into Gabrielle's eyes looking at her.

They stood there entranced; neither moving. They just stared intently into each other's eyes as if transfixed by a common bond.

The Conqueror reached up with her other hand and cupped Gabrielle's face ever so gently, tracing a thumb over Gabrielle's lips and then leaned closer to her.

Gabrielle closed her eyes as if waiting for this moment was a dream finally coming true, it was here.

But not what she expected.

For the Conqueror placed a soft kiss to her forehead and abruptly left without a word.

Absolutely confused at what had transpired last night and this morning had left Gabrielle emotionally spent and physically exhausted. She made her way down to the kitchen to begin her chores for the day.

Upon entering, she saw Ophelia stop what she was doing and walk over to her while wiping her hands on her ever present apron in the process.

"Gabrielle, are ya alright? I was worried about ya child" Ophelia said softly with concern in her voice and eyes while looking at Gabrielle from head to toe as if looking for something amiss in her condition.

Gabrielle smiled tiredly, she knew Ophelia was concerned as she only called her by her name when she was either troubled or worried, "I'm okay Ophi, just tired".

Taking her by the hand, Ophelia led her to a chair and sat her down then set bustling about to get her a mug of hot cider and warm bread fresh from the bake "Sit here, eat and drink child. Ya eyes seem swollen and puffy. What's happened to ya? Nika was just as concerned when ya didn't return last night and had her suspicions, but when that Amazon came looking for ya this morn...well we all got's to worrying".

Their concern touched her heart as Gabrielle never had had anyone care about her that she could recall in her recent life but at the mention of the Amazon Regent, Gabrielle's head shot up and she nearly choked on the cider, "Ephiny! Oh Gods!" the previous night's conversation came rushing back '*Your Lover*', '*Breaking the Law*', '*Penalty of Death!*'; then this mornings words spoken with bitterness "*I have someone I need to see first thing and I'd rather not have a clean refreshed feeling for this encounter*".

Bolting up from the seat, she ran from the kitchen not saying a word to the shocked Ophelia as she flew past her.

She ran through the palace corridors first, looking about as she did. Then she ran through the courtyard, each step causing her heart to race more from fear rather than use.

Gabrielle ran through the training grounds, which only had the Conqueror's soldiers in practice.

Not finding the reason for her search, she ran towards the Amazon encampment.

Many eyes turned to follow her, not for her frantic actions but for the mere fact she wore no cloak in the near freezing temperature.

As she approached the Regent's tent, she could hear a voice and then see a shadow behind the material, "You didn't listen! It has now cost you dearly!"

Blindly screaming she rushed into the tent, "Noooo....please!" When she stopped suddenly, she saw the Regent. She was seated opposite Eponin, playing the board game King's men. Both women staring back startled at the wild woman before them.

Ephiny heard the scream just a moment before Gabrielle ran into her tent, having not had a moment to even react. She looked up at Gabrielle, standing there looking at the two of them with a wild look about her.

She then looked over to Eponin who just shook her head and shrugged in confusion at her unasked question.

"My Lady Gabrielle!?" Ephiny said gathering her senses and rising with concern, "Is something wrong? Has something happened?" as she moved towards Gabrielle and reached for her, putting a hand to her forearm.

Gabrielle's eyes rolled up and back as she passed out.

Ephiny grabbed her just in time as she went limp and fell to the ground. Eponin jumped up to help her Regent with the now heavy burden and move her to sit over at the table.

"Pony, get some water and cloth quick!"

Eponin quickly went over and retrieved the pitcher and a goblet. Pouring some, she handed it to Ephiny who bent down and shook Gabrielle awake, "My Lady....Gabrielle".

Gabrielle stirred and opened her eyes.

"Here, drink this" she handed Gabrielle the goblet, "Are you okay?"

Gabrielle brought the cup up to her mouth and quickly drained it.

"Okay, what's going on? What is this all about?" Ephiny began once she saw that Gabrielle was alert and had put the goblet down.

Looking up, Gabrielle looked to Eponin and then back to Ephiny.

"Oh, hey Pony, give us a candle drop will you?" Ephiny asked her weapons master who nodded and left the tent.

"Okay, what is going on?" Ephiny asked as she stood up from in front of Gabrielle to sit down on the chair she pulled over next to her.

"I thought....Oh gods!" Gabrielle put her face into her hands.

"Hey, come on. You're scaring me here" Ephiny put a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder.

"She knows Ephiny" Gabrielle stated finally.

"Who? Knows what?"

"The Conqueror...she knows about you training me. I thought....I thought she was..." she was interrupted by Ephiny.

"You thought it was her, saying what Pony said?"

She nodded.

"I can see how that would seem and how it sounded," she leaned back "So you came in to save me eh?" Ephiny felt a bit of cocky elation at thinking Gabrielle cared enough about her to rush in and stop what she thought to be her punishment for breaking the law, her death.

"How could I let you suffer for my choices? That would be cowardly and you only trained me because I beseeched you, not by your own doing!"

"I did so of my own accord My Lady Gabrielle. Remember what I said, we make our own choice". Ephiny tried to reason, "But it is nice to know you care. Care enough about me to risk your own life to try and save me" She leaned forward as to kiss Gabrielle but was thwarted when Gabrielle abruptly stood up.

"I asked you to break a law Ephiny. A law that could cost us our lives" she stood looking down into Ephiny's face, "I didn't think clearly enough to realize what the meaning of that penalty was until this moment. I should never have asked such a thing. I had no right to ask you to possibly forfeit you life for the sake of training me".

"My Lady Gabrielle, I told you ...as a warrior I do what I have to. To protect those I care for and you My Lady...I care a great deal for" she made to reach for Gabrielle but she pulled away.

"But you also said as a warrior you must uphold laws and we just broke one. Not just any other warrior's law but the Lord Conqueror's Law. That was wrong Ephiny" Gabrielle turned to face the entrance of the tent.

"My Lady...Gabrielle, I'd do anything to protect you. Even if it meant breaking the law" she rose and put a hand on Gabrielle's left shoulder, turning her around to face her, "Even if it meant my death" she put her other hand up on Gabrielle's right shoulder, "Don't you see? I lov..."

"No! Don't!" Gabrielle pulled away, "Please Ephiny, I can't".

Gabrielle stopped her from continuing, "I care for you a great deal Ephiny. But...please....don't ask any more of me".

Gabrielle left the tent without saying another word.

Walking back to the palace, she felt nothing. She did not feel the cold wind as it blew her hair about, she did not feel the bitter cold chill her skin and cause a blue tinge to set about her.

She walked slowly, getting back to the kitchen and to a very concerned and somewhat annoyed Ophelia, "OKAY Young Lady! Ya sit that tiny hiney on that stool and don'tcha dare move one cheek off of it til I says ya can!"

"But I..."

"No BUTS! Aside from tall dark and brooding, I rule this roost. So when I says sit it..." Ophelia glared at her.

"I sit it" Gabrielle whispered back.

The next moment everyone froze. They all heard the blood curdling scream which echoed throughout the palace ground, reaching even to the Amazon encampment.

Chapter 22

"Hello Timeon" purred the Conqueror as she strolled into the dungeon corridor.

"Well, well. Come down from amongst most high to mingle with the commoners eh Xena?" he sneered.

"Oh Timeon, you are by no means common" she walked over to one of the guards, "Take all the others out, prisoners and guards alike. Get Tidimous and also set a blade to the coals for me".

"Aye Lord Conqueror" he saluted directly and motioned for the other guards to assist.

After a few candle drops of shuffling prisoners and guards out, only the Conqueror and Timeon remained in the now deafening silent dungeon.

She entered his cell and made a great show of leaving the cell door open as if inviting him to try and escape.

She walked around the cell, inspecting the surroundings "A bit different from your previous residence, don't you think?" she asked condescendingly.

"What do you want?" he sniped back.

"Now, now Timeon. Is that a way to greet someone?" she purred back, "I've heard something about you Timeon. I thought that you and I could possibly ...talk a little. Get to know one another on a more...shall we say...personal level?" she strolled over to him and brushed her fingertips down one of his arms.

"What did you hear? More lies conjured up by Laertis? That coward!"

"Oh no, but maybe I'll visit him later and find out what he has to say about you", she walked over to one of the walls and leaned against it as she watched him stand there, next to his cot.

To one end of it was a small table where a cup and pitcher sat, at the other end she could see a chamber pot.

"Then who? What lies have they said?" he started to get angry at her being there and grew frustrated at her lack of answers to his questions.

"Seems digging ditches and mucking out stables hasn't taught you anything about patience" she said sweetly.

"What does any of that have to do with it?" he snapped.

"Oh, you see, digging and mucking teaches you so much, It teaches you that for all the sweat and hard work and effort you put in, your reward is a neatly dug hole or pile of manure" she replied with an edge of sarcasm in her voice.

"Well thanks for the philosophy lesson, Plato" he snidely remarked.

"Oh, is the great big man not happy to have the company of a woman? Oops..." she said placing a hand to her mouth in mock surprise, "I almost forgot...that's right....you don't prefer women, do you?" the last words were said with an evil glare at him.

"Wha...?"

Before his very eyes he saw her transform. Her eyes became piercing cold steel, her facial features became chiseled. Her lips were pressed tight into a thin line, jaw set and pronounced. All semblance of a controlled human lost.

He heard a low growl and looked about the cell as if an animal had snuck in.

"You prefer to prey on innocence, don't you?" she growled through clenched teeth while walking up to him and pushing into the wall.

He gathered himself and threw a fist at her.

She simply side stepped and laughed as he hit nothing but air and stumbled forward, spinning around at the last moment to face her.

The beast was set free and she let it go gladly in its hunt for vengeance.

She paced in front of him, then stopped and walked up to him. Putting a fist to his stomach, "You prefer little girls..." another fist to his stomach, "...children..." a knee up to his bent over face, "...defenseless creatures who deserve better", a fist to his jaw saw him stagger back to a wall and

slump to the floor, breathless.

She stalked over to him, picking him up by his shift and put another fist to his face. This time hearing and feeling bones crumble beneath her knuckles as they connected with his nose and shattered it.

"Argghhh"

The sound was the only thing escaping his mouth as he slid down the wall again, grabbing to his face.

"Don't you want me Timeon?" I am all woman. Or can't you get it up for a woman?" she taunted him while pulling back with her leg and kicking him in the stomach, causing him to rollover on his side and curl up.

"Oh come on now Timeon, you were all man with those little girls. Aren't you man enough for me?" she continued to taunt him.

"You bitch!" he struggled to his feet.

"Ah, that's much more like it..." she smiled, an evil grin to her lips, "Show me how much of a man you are" she motioned with her hands for him to come forward to her.

He spat blood at her, not knowing that he was just feeding the beast what it wanted.

Swiping the blood with his hand from off his lips, he lunged at her. Both hands open in an attempt to grab at her throat.

She let him grab her and then she brought her knee up, hitting him hard in the groin and smiling when she heard the air forcibly expelled from his lungs.

He doubled over, dropping to his knees with a grunt.

She picked him up and began to pummel him with a flurry of fist to his face and into his stomach.

Every time he doubled over, she hit him with an uppercut that brought upright only to slump down to the ground.

Grabbing him by his shift again, she stood him up "You'll never harm another innocent girl again!" and threw him against the wall.

He knew he was going to die, so he threw a lame punch at her.

She caught his fist in her hand and spun him around, bringing his arm back up and around then levering it with own arm she broke his upper arm with a sickening snap.

He screamed and grabbed at it with his hand.

The beast wanted to exact vengeance and it wanted to taste more blood.

She pinned him against the wall with a strong forearm across his throat, "Never again!" she growled and releasing him for a moment she reached down with both hands and grabbed his groin. In one fluid movement she wrenched his groin down, separating his parts from his body.

The beast felt all the muscles tear, but it was not enough. It wanted more. Vengeance was done but the blood debt yet repaid.

She walked back out of the cell, picking up a wooden bench. Carrying it in, she placed it down with one end against the wall. She then picked Timeon up and ripped his trousers down with one hand and pushed him onto the bench. She kicked one of his legs over so that he sat straddling the bench and pushed him back against the wall.

She walked out of the cell again only to return with the red hot sword that was placed in the coals earlier by one of the guards.

Raising the sword up above her head, the beast exacted payment on behalf of those entire girls' sufferance with one sickening thud.

The Conqueror walked out of the cell, tossing the bloody sword to the ground as she passed Tidimous on the way out of the dungeon.

Climbing the stairs, she walked out into the training grounds. The beast still in full control and exulting in the indulgence it had not received in such a long time.

The Conqueror walked through the ankle deep snow covered ground, stalking up to a straight iron bar that was chained in the middle by an iron loop to the palace wall. It was used to tie prisoners at each end for holding before either being sent to the dungeon or to their deaths.

The Conqueror took hold of the iron bar at both ends with each hand, the span of it causing her to stretch out her arms. With a howling yell she began to bend it into a U shape, attempting to exhaust the beast's energetic hold on her.

Smashing it against the wall, she fell to her knees to the ground. Her bloodied hands a stark contrast to the clean snow, now melting into bright red pools of water from the heat of her hands.

They all heard the scream as only the deaf were spared its horror. Running to where they thought was its source, most of the palace inhabitants looked through the arches to see what had happened.

After less than a few candle drops, they witnessed as the Conqueror emerged from the dungeon. They could see the aura of darkness surrounding her and watched in shocked fascination as she bent the iron rod.

At seeing her fall to her knees, Ophelia began barking orders "Sephina! Get the Conqueror's bath; make it hot and put eucalypt and jojoba in it".

"Yes Ophi, at once!" Sephina replied as she turned and ran back into the kitchen.

"Marcus, get wood and stoke the fire. I want the Conqueror's room as comfortable as possible" she ordered the man who turned and grabbed another servant to get more wood.

"Where is Milanti?" Ophelia asked looking about the corridors as she walked towards her kitchen.

"She is due to give birth Ophi" said a servant girl scurrying about.

"Oh HADES!" Ophelia said exasperated as she scratched her head. Just then she saw a shimmering light in the corner of the storage alcove and walked towards it. Upon looking into the alcove itself, she smiled at what she saw and entered.

After a few candle drops she exited with a small knowing smile at the edges of her mouth, "Oh dear, what to do?" she said softly but loud enough for Gabrielle to hear.

"What's wrong Ophi?"

'Oh this is just too easy' Ophelia thought to herself. "Milanti is the Conqueror's masseur for whenever she needs one...and it looks very much like she'll need one" she replied.

"Oh" Gabrielle said as if thinking something over. "I...um...I could...I could help" she said shyly as she put a trembling hand to play with her lower lip nervously.

"That's sweet of ya child, but I need someone who knows how to massage muscles that ache and strongly at that" Ophelia continued, 'Aphrodite, you owe me!' she thought.

"I can, I have...with the children and with my previous masters" Gabrielle looked up from her stool and with a bit of indignation in her voice.

"Are ya sure child? The Conqueror's body is neither those of a child nor those of kept people"

"Yes Ophi, I can do this. Let me help her".

"Okay. First go clean ya self up. You look as if you've come through a dirty snow storm" looking up and down Gabrielle's dirty clothed body, "then put on clothes that are soft".

This brought a questioning look from Gabrielle.

"You'll be giving the Conqueror a massage child. The last thing you want is to be rubbing her muscles down and have harsh clothes scrape her" explained Ophelia as a plausible excuse.

"Oh yes...of course" Gabrielle said getting up from the seat.

"When you're done, head up to her chambers. Take this bag with you. It has the oils she likes and some candles that have been mixed with scented oils to relax her" she handed Gabrielle the bag, "Now off ya go" she finished with a shooing motion of her hands.

Chapter 23

After a quick wash and change of clothes, that part took the longest as she did not have many clothes to her name so she borrowed a green silk wrap around that came down to her hips and a soft skirt from Nika.

Gabrielle headed up to the Conqueror's chamber and was met by Sephina bringing in a tray of Ophelia's pastries and a hot mug of tea, "She's in the bath still" setting the tray on the table and motioning towards the back room, "You can set up in her bed chamber as there is a table there for when she gets a massage and then wait for her there" Sephina finished.

As Gabrielle rummaged through the bag, she could hear Sephina set the food out on the table and then leave. She set the candles along the edges of the room, close to give light to the table and receive their scent but not to intrude.

The Conqueror finished her bath, walked into her bed chamber and laid upon the message table without even looking up.

Gabrielle, totally unaware of this, turned to see a Goddess laid before her. The Conqueror had lain face down onto the table, arms draped over the sides with her face turned away from Gabrielle; completely naked.

Gabrielle could not move. She stood transfixed at the beautiful body before her. The contrasting features of beauty and strength mesmerizing her. It was the fluttering of one of the candles that broke her reverie and she went to the bag to retrieve the oils.

Setting them down on a small table next to where the Conqueror lay, she rubbed her hands together to make them warm as she did not want to touch the body before her with cold hands. Gabrielle picked up one of the oils and poured a generous amount into the palm of her hand, then rubbed her hands together again this time to warm the oil.

Taking a deep breath she turned and place a hand on the Conqueror's back. They both jumped from the shocking spark.

"Milanti? What was that?" the Conqueror asked turning her head to look as Gabrielle spoke, "M..my Lord".

The Conqueror froze, slowly then, ever so slowly she turned her head to look up to green eyes looking back at her with fear and trepidation.

Gabrielle did not move a muscle. One hand on the Conqueror's lower back, the other poised to join it. She looked down at the Conqueror and then back to her hand, "M..my Lord I, Ophelia...um...Milanti is due to give birth and ...well I....I am experienced..."

At those last words, the Conqueror arched an eyebrow causing Gabrielle to stop and then blush when she realized what she had said and attempted to cover her mistake, "well...I have done this before. I mean I know how to use my hands...Oh Hades! OH, Sorry My Lord!" she clamped her eyes shut as well as her mouth.

She felt her hand shake but not by her own movement. Peeking open an eye, she saw it was shaking harder now. Looking up she saw the Conqueror stifling a laugh and failing as when she saw Gabrielle's face she burst out laughing, causing Gabrielle to exhale and then start to giggle also.

After a few candle drops, they both stopped. The Conqueror turned to Gabrielle with a mischievous grin, "Well, since you are...*So Experienced*" and "know how to use your hands", she couldn't resist teasing as she thought '*Gods she is so beautiful when she blushes like that*', "Show me" with a very flirtatious wink at her, turning and laid her head back down.

Gabrielle actually shuddered down to her toes and shook her head to try to regain her composure.

Putting her other hand on the Conqueror's back, she took a deep, calming breath and began stroking up and down to loosen the muscles and warm them up. She put her hands on either side of the Conqueror's back and worked her way up to her neck and then back down to just above her hips with fluid movements.

Extending her reach she worked across the shoulder closest to her and down the arm coming back up the same way. She continued this pattern until she could feel the muscles become relaxed. Leaving her right hand on the center of her back, she reached down and poured more oil into the palm of her upturned hand, then walked around to the other side and began the same ministrations.

Once she felt both sides were pliant, she positioned herself at the Conqueror's head and placed both hand just behind and below her neck. Using mostly her thumbs for pressure, she pressed down alongside the spine and out.

"Mmmmm" the Conqueror moaned softly.

Gabrielle did it again and continued to work the lower neck and shoulders in the same pressure fashion.

Gabrielle then walked to one side and slowly drew her hand down until she reached the Conqueror's foot. There she began massaging the ball of her foot, working slowly up until the arch and pressed firmly on the heel. She rubbed the back of her ankle between her thumb and index fingers slowly, applying more pressure as she worked up the leg to her calf.

Gabrielle kneaded and pressed, releasing tense taught muscles. She moved further up to the Conqueror's hamstring doing the same until it felt loose. She then stroked down the entire leg and moved to the other foot, doing the same in turn.

When she reached up to the top of her hamstring she hesitantly put a hand on the Conqueror's hips and massaged there a bit and thinking herself finished, she stopped and stepped back.

The Conqueror sensed Gabrielle hesitate, a small smile graced the outer corners of her lips.

When Gabrielle stopped and stepped away, the Conqueror wondered 'Should I or shouldn't I? Oh the Hades with it!'

Gabrielle had turned to wipe her hands on a towel after wiping her sweaty face, thinking 'Gods, I need to go sit outside in the snow or an ice pool for a candle mark after this! Her body! Oh dear Gods, what her body is doing to me to sweat like this!'

When she put the towel down and turned to get the oil from the table, she nearly fainted.

The Conqueror had rolled over onto her back, arms to her sides and one leg slightly raised with a knee bent.

Her ebony hair draped off the end of the table, her body shone with a slight perspiration from not only the heat of the room but having Gabrielle's hands all over. Her body had almost lost its tenuous control at the sensations of having them on her.

Her full, round breasts rising with each breath then dipping down her sensual ribcage to her taut muscled stomach. Her voluptuous hips enclosing a valley where a patch of ebony curls lay glistening.

Sculpting down her body were her two strong and firm thighs that lead to her fine legs.

Gabrielle stood there, mouth wide open with eyes the size of saucers. She drank in the sight before her, from foot to head and back again.

"Gods on Olympus you are beautiful", she said out loud not realizing she had.

The Conqueror turned her head slowly and with deep cerulean eyes she smiled, "I'm waiting for you" she purred causing Gabrielle to shiver involuntarily.

"I...um....did you want me...um..." Gabrielle stammered looking everywhere but at the Conqueror.

"Yes" was all the Conqueror said.

Gulping audibly, Gabrielle picked up the oil and began at the Conqueror's feet. She slowly

worked up the leg to the thigh, stroking along the outside and kneading the mid muscles up towards the hip. Avoiding all temptation to look at her exposed sex, she rubbed up the side of the ribcage carefully avoiding her breast. Reaching her arm she massaged the shoulder down until the hands.

Taking the Conqueror's hand in her own, she massaged the wrist, going to the palm and then out to the flesh between thumb and index. Rubbing and pressing a pressure point when she reached that spot.

She then took each finger and rubbed it out until reaching the fingertip.

She placed her hands on her should and then walked over, around her head, to the other side and did the same.

Gabrielle worked down that side along the Conqueror's ribcage and stomach, over her hip and down her thigh and leg.

The Conqueror watched her every move, the sweat running down her face, feeling her strong yet soft hands ply her muscles to her desire. This thought alone caused a stirring deep inside her, something much deeper awakening to her touch.

When Gabrielle finished, she stopped again and stepped back; wondering if she indeed was finished.

The Conqueror sat up slowly; sitting upright she looked at Gabrielle. Both of them sweating and confused at their body's reaction to each other.

"Gabrielle," the Conqueror said in a sultry but hoarse voice causing Gabrielle's lower belly to clench in a spasm "you are indeed experienced and know how to use your hands...Thank you" she reached for Gabrielle's hand and pulled her closer.

"Is there anyway..." the Conqueror leaned down, "...that I can..." she was a mere fraction away from her lips "...repay you?"

Gabrielle watched as the Conqueror took her hand and pulled her closer, thanking her and leaning down in front of her. Her sensually luscious lips before her very own; deep cerulean eyes drawing her into her more as she spread her legs and pulled her close.

She nodded.

"What can I do for you Gabrielle?" the Conqueror whispered, daring not to move at all.

"M...may I ...Please My Lord..." she licked her lips, "Might I Please be so forward My Lord..." her breathing had quickened and her breaths were shallow, "...as to ask for..." she was too frightened to continue.

"Ask whatever your heart desires, little one and if I can grant it, it is yours" the Conqueror spoke softly, looking into viridian eyes.

"Y..your lips...I...your lips" she barely spoke above a whisper as she stared with a look of want at the Conqueror's mouth, which smiled at the words.

"As you wish little one" the Conqueror replied.

It was near a candle drop and yet Gabrielle had not moved, so the Conqueror took it upon herself and closed the distance between them. She watched as emerald eyes turned darker in anticipation of soft lips.

Closing their eyes, they almost moaned simultaneously at the feeling.

That awakened feeling came to full alert at the softness, the fullness of both their lips pressed together so tenderly, filling the emptiness in both their hearts.

Pulling back to gather her self composure before losing it entirely, the Conqueror looked at a sight that threatened her resolve. Gabrielle stood, eyes closed, breathing slightly heavy with the most sensual flush to her skin.

Feeling the loss of their contact, her eyes fluttered open to see azure eyes smiling back at her.

"Wow" Gabrielle said under her breath thinking the Conqueror didn't hear it only to hear "Uh Huh!" from her in response.

"Is that all?" the Conqueror asked, hoping Gabrielle would ask for more but not wanting to pressure her.

"Another?" Gabrielle timidly replied, which earned her a response from the Conqueror of "Good Answer!" as she leaned back down with a mischievous smile on her lips as she kissed her again.

Pressing slightly harder into her lips, the Conqueror leaned in a bit more and then parted her lips to run the tip of her tongue across Gabrielle's lips, silently requesting entrance.

Gabrielle parted her lips and was immediately shocked by another spark of energy as the Conqueror's tongue entered her mouth and touched hers.

Moaning aloud at this new exquisite feeling, Gabrielle opened her mouth more to grant complete access to the Conqueror.

At first, soft and gentle probing of tongues sought each other out to taste and feel the newly found gift. Gradually and almost bitterly slow their tempo began to increase, becoming more demanding in the process.

Unconsciously Gabrielle moved as close as she could get to the Conqueror, putting her hands

atop of her thighs and running them up to the juncture of her hips.

The Conqueror had released Gabrielle's hand and ran both of hers up Gabrielle's forearms. When she felt Gabrielle's hand on her thighs, she put one hand on Gabrielle's waist and pulled her further into her while her other hand slid up to her arm, over her shoulder and settled at the base of her neck.

Gabrielle's leg grew weaker by the candle drop until she felt as if she would faint.

Sensing her trembling legs, the Conqueror drew back again so that they could drink in some much needed air.

Gently rubbing the back of her neck with her strong hand, the Conqueror searched Gabrielle's eyes for some affirmation of what she was feeling. She found it when Gabrielle's eyes reflected the same thing she searched for; the feeling of belonging.

"Are you okay?"

Gabrielle nodded her head, still looking into the sea of blue before her.

"Would you mind getting us both some water?"

Gabrielle nodded again and turned to walk over to the table where the pitcher and goblet sat, but before she could move she was pulled back by the Conqueror and given a quick kiss, "One for the trip" winked the Conqueror.

Gabrielle smiled and retrieved the pitcher and goblet, pouring it as she returned and handing it to the Conqueror who shook her head, "No, you first" she motioned to Gabrielle with her hand".

"Where did you learn to massage like that?" the Conqueror asked as she took the goblet from Gabrielle's hands when she was done refilling it for her.

"M...my ..." Gabrielle cleared her throat, "My second master's wife was sickly and he had heard that massage helped ease aches and pains. So he had a visiting friend's healer teach us". She took the goblet, refilled it and drank again, "Then when I was in Trachis, I helped the ...I helped the children from their painful injuries" she lowered her head in mournful thought.

"Well, you were taught very well little one" the Conqueror complimented while tilting Gabrielle's chin up.

"Thank you, My Lord" she looked up and then quickly back down, "My Lord?"

"Yes?"

"My Lord, could I possibly ask you a question?"

"You just did" winked the Conqueror with a smile causing Gabrielle to smile back, "You know, you have a beautiful smile Gabrielle", putting the tip of her index finger to Gabrielle's nose in a comforting gesture.

"Thank you My Lord" Gabrielle blushed.

"Okay, what is your question?"

"Um...My Lord, we heard a scream this day..."

"Gabrielle..." the Conqueror interrupted, "What you heard was vengeance being exacted for innocent children who could not protect themselves from pure evil. What was done to them will never happen again" she stood, putting on her robe and walked to the fireplace.

Gabrielle watched as the Conqueror walked away. Suddenly, the realization that what she told the Conqueror the previous night and the Conqueror's actions today came upon her, "Oh My Lord" she said sadly as she knew the burden it had placed on the Conqueror's shoulders.

"If I had only known; those children should never have had to suffer...or to die" a heavy sigh came from the Conqueror's lips as she closed her eyes and hung her head.

Gabrielle walked over to where the Conqueror stood and with no forethought; put her hand on the Conqueror's back in a soothing gesture, "I am responsible for that My Lord" her voice breaking.

"NO...no Gabrielle" she softened her voice" turning around she placed a hand on Gabrielle's waist and with the other cupped her face, "that was happening before you had been taken there and would have continued if it weren't for the plot that was discovered", looking into her emerald eyes with the fire dancing in their reflection "But that is over now and there is no further need to discuss this, okay?"

"Yes, My Lord" Gabrielle replied at the same time her stomach growled.

"When did you last feed that thing?" joked the Conqueror to a now thoroughly embarrassed Gabrielle.

"I haven't eaten today My Lord. It has been a very...um...busy day" she replied.

"Well then, I suggest you march straight down to the kitchen and have Ophi put something on a table a few feet away from you just so she doesn't lose any limbs as you feed that thing" chuckled the Conqueror.

"Oh My Lord; your evening meal...you haven't..." she started to protest but was cut off by a pair of fingers to her lips "That's all right little one. I am quite tired and not really hungry" 'Not for food anyways' thought the Conqueror, "I would just like to rest now. So you go and get some food okay?" while looking into Gabrielle's eyes while waiting for a response.

"Yes My Lord, as you wish" Gabrielle bowed and turned to leave.

"Gabrielle?" the Conqueror called out to her.

She turned back around as the Conqueror walked up to her, suddenly scooping her into a passionate kiss and embrace. She finally let go and uttered "Goodnight".

A very dizzy Gabrielle held on to the Conqueror's strong forearms, waiting for her head to stop spinning. Then squeaked "Goodnight My Lord" and exited the room with an unsteady walk, leaving the Conqueror smirking as she walked towards her bed saying "It's good to be the Conqueror".

Chapter 24

The next morning, the Conqueror was up early as usual and in her study.

"Ah Abraxus, Good Morning!" she cheerily said which caused him to do a double take at her as he bowed to her.

"Uh...Good morning Lord Conqueror; you seem very...um...you seem better" he replied with eyebrows furrowed.

"I slept well and yes I feel better. I would like to speak with Queen Melosa today and then go over some plans with you regarding reinforcements" she said as she sat at her desk and perused through some scrolls.

"Aye Lord Conqueror; I will send word to the Amazons. Also, Tidimous would like a candle drop of your time if possible?"

"Yes, send him to me right away" she motioned with her hand.

"Aye at once" he saluted and exited the study.

"Queen Melosa, I have more interpretations from Goddess Artemis" the priestess said to Queen Melosa who had stopped by the makeshift temple each day in the hope of getting some more information before telling the Conqueror what little she actually had.

"Priestess that is excellent news, please tell me" Queen Melosa enthusiastically asked.

"The Goddess Artemis has revealed that the suitor is to arrive shortly..."

"I was told she had come out of seclusion and we are expecting her formal request for counsel with the Conqueror soon" Queen Melosa interrupted.

"Yes, but she will ride with an escort of one. The Goddess Artemis wants Regent Ephiny to be

the suitor's escort" the Priestess finished.

"Ephiny, the suitor's escort, why is this Priestess?" Queen Melosa asked with a quizzical look.

"That was not revealed to me; only that this was to be. The Goddess Artemis did reveal that the challenger would be of royal lineage".

"Royal lineage? What does that mean Priestess?"

"She will be of Royal Amazon blood. Thus, she will be the challenger of the Amazon Nation" the Priestess replied.

"Oh this just gets better and better" Queen Melosa said as she began to pace, "Not only is the suitor an Amazon but the challenger will be of Royal Amazon blood and this is all to happen in the next two moons around solstice and then my Regent has to play guard duty for the arriving suitor" Queen Melosa threw her hands up in the air, exasperated.

"Priestess, was there any clue as to how the royal challenger is to be revealed or identified?"

The priestess shook her head stating "Only that the Conqueror and you will have a vested interest".

"Well that helps....NOT!" Queen Melosa rubbed her face with both hands, "Oh well, better go prepare for the inevitable questions. Thank you Priestess" Queen Melosa stated and left the tent only to see one of the Conqueror's messengers coming towards her, "So much for preparing".

"So Tidimous how fare things today?" asked the Conqueror.

"Good morning Lord Conqueror" he bowed upon entering the study, "We have no patients in the healer's rooms bar one; he will recover in time".

A dark cloud crossed the Conqueror's face but she willed it away with a thought of her previous evenings massage.

"I have some idea of the poison used on the arrow that I removed from your shoulder. Upon researching my ancient medical scrolls, I came across a notation of a poison from a far off land. When first introduced, it seems a though there is no poison but after almost a day in the body it causes the wound to start to bleed again. If not properly attended to, the victim usually bleeds to death" he told her.

"So, it was intended to do harm. What far off land was mentioned?" the Conqueror queried.

"It did not mention name, only that the people were very big and broad. The weather very cold..." he shrugged, "I am sorry I could not help more that this Lord Conqueror".

"No Tidimous, you might just have given us the missing link" she told him, "Thank you".

He rose and bowed a little more deeply at receiving her praise and left her to her thoughts.

A knock to her study door caused her to stir from her wandering mind.

"Lord Conqueror?" Abraxus called.

"Enter"

"We just received another Amazon to the Palace. She states she has a message scroll that is to be delivered directly to you".

"Bring her in Abraxus"

Abraxus motioned to the door guards to let the Amazon enter.

She was a small, lithe Amazon of maybe sixteen seasons. She had a small pouch draped across her shoulder to her opposite side waist. She entered the study, turned to face the Conqueror and dropped to bended knee with a fist to her chest, "Lord Conqueror".

The Conqueror motioned for her to rise, "What message is it that requires to be delivered directly to me?"

"Lord Conqueror, the contents are not known to me. Only that this sealed scroll..." she reached into the pouch, produced a small scroll and handed it to the Conqueror, "was to be given directly to you".

"Thank you; you may join the Amazon encampment. My second, Abraxus will show you the way" the Conqueror motioned to Abraxus.

They saluted and exited the study.

To the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire (it said)

Salutations

I, Satori of the Northern Amazon Tribe, humbly request a private audience with you at your convenience.

The matter to discuss is a proposal of a personal nature..

Your humble Amazon subject'

"Well, she must have come out of seclusion for this to have come" the Conqueror said to herself, "I'll talk with Queen Melosa and decide what to do from there".

"So tell me child, did ya treat the Conqueror well last night?" Ophelia asked Gabrielle who sat at the table chopping vegetables for the evening's meal, "Did she enjoy her massage?"

Gabrielle was day dreaming, she was not listening to a word Ophelia was asking her.

Clearing her throat, Ophelia began again "Hellooooo?" waving a hand in front of Gabrielle's face.

"Wha..? Oh sorry Ophi....I was just....um...thinking" she said with a smile on her face.

"Ooooh ooooh child, with a smile like that...ya needs to tell me who put it on there" Ophelia said rubbing her hands together as if about to receive some juicy bit of information.

"Ophi, you are horrible!" Gabrielle raised a hand to her face to hide in attempts to hide her blush while slapping Ophelia's arm in jest.

"Child, I invented the word!" Ophelia laughed wickedly, "Let me ask ya this, was she happy with ya?"

Gabrielle nodded.

"Did she treat ya well and ya did the same?"

Again a nod.

Then turning serious for a moment; "Do ya care for her child?"

Gabrielle could see the serious look on Ophelia's face and heard it in the tone of her voice, "Yes, I do Ophi".

"Okay child, just don't go breaking her heart...she hasn't given it nor will until it gives itself" Ophelia turned to the fire and said no more, leaving a bewildered Gabrielle to finish her duties.

"Well met Queen Melosa" the Conqueror welcomed as Queen Melosa entered her study.

"Well met Lord Conqueror" replied the Queen bowing to her.

"There are a few things I'd like to go over with you Queen Melosa..." motioning for her to sit, "and I felt we needed to be uninterrupted for a while".

"Of course Lord Conqueror, as you wish" Queen Melosa sat.

"So what information, if any, have your scrolls been able to yield to us?" the Conqueror asked.

"While all of the scrolls have not been read yet, we have only been able to find something about some guy named Attila or about some big people from a far away land".

"Any mention of the name of this far away land? Or let me hazard a guess as to only it being very cold?" the Conqueror said with a bit of sarcasm in her voice.

"No name, but yes to it being very cold. How did you know that?" asked a perplexed Queen Melosa.

"I had a visit from Tidimous earlier. He said he found a mention of the poison in his old medical scrolls and they pointed to the same thing you just said".

"Oh, now that is no mere coincidence Lord Conqueror"

"No, it's not. So now I will ask for our librarian to research our scrolls for any lands that I might have invaded or fought with over my time to see if we can find out what this is all about..."
reaching for the message scroll, she tossed it to Queen Melosa "speaking about finding out, I just received this a candle mark ago...so, what is it I do from here again?"

Queen Melosa read the message scroll and nodded, "Well Lord Conqueror, you have the two options I stated before. You can either accept her proposal..." this brought an arch to the Conqueror's eyebrow in a knowing negative response to Queen Melosa who raised her hands up in surrender "...I'm just repeating the options here. The other is to deny her proposal; in that regard she then will challenge to the right to be your Champion and Consort. If no one challenges, then she automatically is granted that title. Though you do not have to consummate the relationship, she essentially blocks you from having another royal suitor until her death".

The Conqueror took a very deep breath and exhaled.

"Of course you have some time on your side as you can forestall your meeting with her" Queen Melosa said to the Conqueror in an attempt of some consolation.

"Only a limited time as royal protocol only allows me to forestall her for one moon unless in time of war" the Conqueror sadly said.

"Well you could always go with your option..." Queen Melosa said with a smirk, "...behead her yourself when she arrives".

"Great idea... a bit problematic over the long run though as its just not good practice to behead someone who requests a private audience with me. That would really wreck all forms of communication I have in this land. Besides, it was a bad day for me when I said that" the Conqueror half shrugged, "Anyways, I will postpone our meeting for that moon entitlement and see if we can find a solution to this by then".

"Now, I have a problem that also concerns you and one of your Amazons. As you know I have certain rules and laws in place for obvious reasons".

Queen Melosa nodded in acknowledgement and agreement.

"Now, people might not agree with the reasons but as Conqueror I must do as I see fit for all in my realm".

"Of course Lord Conqueror, no one in Amazonia questions this" Queen Melosa replied with a curious look.

"Hmm, well no one might question it but someone has disregarded it" the Conqueror responded while putting both hands in front of her in a steeple configuration.

The Queen's face hardened, her jaw began to clench at having been told one of her Amazon's had broken a law. She knew that these laws carried heavy penalties, some required prison time, some banishment or the harshest; death.

"Lord Conqueror, I assure you I do not know what you speak of but do not take idly what you say as truth" she said tersely.

"I know you have no involvement in this or knowledge of Queen Melosa. I am assured of your fealty and know if something of this nature were to have been brought to your attention, it would have been dealt with expeditiously" the Conqueror stated while holding up her hand in a calming gesture towards the Queen.

"In my realm, I have say in all matters. I decide what penalty shall be paid for any infraction of the law. Now, by my own view the penalty of this infraction is death".

The Queen simply looked at the Conqueror. She could not say anything in defense of the person as she did not know who it was or what law they had broken. But, it was the law that the Lord Conqueror herself had established and could not be forgiven.

"I am sure you are curious as to what law was broken..." the Conqueror continued as the Queen nodded, "...well, my laws were specific and ideally enforced to protect all in my realm, especially when it was in regards to vicious slaves. The law broken is that no slave shall be shown the use of a weapon or allowed access to a weapon under penalty of death".

The Queen clenched her jaw and nodded, "Lord Conqueror, whoever of my Amazons would know that to disregard a law they would face Amazon Tribal prosecution and possibly forfeit their life".

"Queen Melosa, I know you rule the Amazons with the highest regard of dignity and honor. But, it will cause you distress to know that the one Amazon you entrust to enforce those qualities in your stead; your regent, is the one who broke the law".

The Queen's eyes went to the size of saucers as she digested what the Conqueror said. She was clearly angry as she began to clench her hands into fists, "What?! It can't be! She would not! She would not jeopardize her life unless it was to save a life in the process".

"Therein lies our problem" the Conqueror said, "It seems that the slave she assisted; one of my servant slaves had a valid reason to ask to be shown. I have it on good authority but it does not negate the law".

The Queen sat shaking her head back and forth in disbelief, "But she knows better! She ...she

would only do something with honest integrity. She is level headed in the most heated of times and knows that when something happens, there is always a consequence for an action".

"Might there be another ...shall we say...ulterior motive?" the Conqueror cryptically asked.

"Lord Conqueror, might I hazard a guess as to who the slave is?"

The Conqueror gave an affirmation with a tilt of her head and a sweeping motion of her hand.

"Is it the slave girl, Gabrielle?"

"Yes".

"Oh Ephiny...what have you done?" the Queen said to herself out loud, lowering her gaze to the ground.

"Queen Melosa, you know I have the upmost respect for your leadership of the Amazons..." the Conqueror rose from her seat and stood in front of the Queen, leaning back against her desk "...it is because of that and the reason she was requested to show her that I have thought long and hard on how to handle this predicament".

Dreading what she surely believed to be her order to turn Ephiny over to the guards for summary trial and execution, the Queen sat sullenly.

"That being said, I do not want it to seem as I am showing pardon or favor. So, I am requesting that you handle this as you see fit".

The Queen did a double take at the Conqueror, "Beg your pardon Lord Conqueror. But could you repeat that last bit again? I think some snow got in my ears on the way here causing me to hear things".

"No Queen Melosa, you heard correctly. I do not wish to see your Regent die. I truly believe she had good intentions...and possible another reason why she was so willing to disregard my law..." the Conqueror rose from her leaning position and walked to the window, "...as honorable warriors, we abide by a code. She felt that she was helping and in some way she has. But, none the less, she should have sought your guidance and ultimately my consent. So, I leave it to you to decide what punishment she should pay. Only you and I are aware of this infraction and I want it to remain that way, am I clear?"

"YES Lord Conqueror!" the Queen quickly replied as she knew a gift such as this only occurred once in an Amazon lifetime. "Lord Conqueror, I would humbly and sincerely wish to extend my gratitude at the sparing of my Regent's life and profusely apologize for her actions" she stated as she went to bended knee with a fist to her chest and head bowed in sincerity.

The Conqueror knew it was a supreme gesture for the Queen of Amazonia to bow in such a manner. She accepted it with the grace and dignity it deserved by walking over to her and

placing a gentle hand on her shoulder, "Queen Melosa, as you said upon first arriving here. I consider you a friend and it is the least I can do for one".

The Queen smiled and rose.

"So, have any ideas what you might consider for her?" the Conqueror motioned towards some hot mugs of teas that had been brought in for them.

"Funny you should as that Lord Conqueror. I had visited the Priestess before your message came. She told me of the messages that the Goddess Artemis had revealed to her..." she drank her tea and relished in its comfort, "...it seems that Goddess Artemis wants Ephiny to be guard escort for Satori while she is here. I personally know that Ephiny abhors and detests having to play escort to visiting Amazon royalty. Now it seems that this all falls in line with what Goddess Artemis had intended".

She grinned mischievously, "So I think escort duty for someone whose ego thinks her worthy to be the Conqueror's suitor would be in line as appropriate punishment. Would that meet with your approval?" the Queen finished with a smirk.

"Oh Queen Melosa, I like how you think!" the Conqueror laughed.

"Excellent then Lord Conqueror, she is to be the permanent full time escort until the suitor matter is resolved. Then when we return to the village I will have a long chat with her about laws and their abiding of them. But before we leave, I will have her see you and personally apologize so that she knows how lucky she is".

"Okay then. Matter resolved. Um...curiously ...did the Priestess mention anything about my situation?" the Conqueror returned to her seat.

"Well yes and no. She alluded to there being involvement of another person but did not say who or when" the Queen tried to avoid any more detail yet as she did not want to have to tell her she had no answers, "So I have asked her to pray to Goddess Artemis in hopes of more detail".

"Then let's hope that Goddess Artemis sees fit to grant her petitions. Thank you for your time Queen Melosa. I will see you later perhaps".

"No, Thank you Lord Conqueror. I am indebted to you for your compassionate handling of this situation" the Queen rose, gave a bow to the Conqueror and exited the room.

Chapter 25

Gabrielle finished helping Ophelia in the kitchen and went to help Nika in sorting linen and herbs for the healer's room.

She stopped by the outside garden to look at the rose bushes which were now merely empty spindly trunks as their blossoms had long withered from the winter's cold.

She sat quietly in reflection, 'How has this all happened to me? One moment I am a slave to the darkest of evil men on this land and then in the servitude of the most beautiful woman ever to grace my eyes and then being wooed by an Amazon warrior'. Taking a deep breath, 'Oh Athena, I am so confused to what the Fates have spun my life's thread to do'. Unconsciously she put her fingertips to her lips, 'They were so soft, so full and sensually inviting. And her eyes, oh her eyes; they were...oh I could lose myself forever in them. And that shock every time we touched?!'

A stinging gust of wind broke her from her musing, 'I had better get to the healer's' she thought, rising and walking briskly towards that direction.

"See, she needs to be shown something girls. She hasn't a clue as to what is going on or the role she plays in all of it" Aphrodite said to Artemis and Athena as they materialized where Gabrielle just stood.

"She does have a pure heart and is brave enough to want to protect the children..." replied Athena; "...and she did call out to me".

"Yes, she deserves to be shown some of her future role in all of this. She has done everything with good intention and has a fortitude that I see will lead my Amazons to greatness" Artemis smiled, "Let's go talk with Morphy and ask him another dream favor but for her this time" as they all nodded in agreement and shimmered away.

After evening meals had been cleared away and most of the diners had made their way back to their quarters, Gabrielle sat with Ophelia enjoying a hot mug of tea in the warmth of the kitchen.

"Child, ya troubled. What's wrong?" Ophelia asked in a kind motherly fashion.

"Oh Ophi, I feel so...I don't know...lost" Gabrielle shrugged.

"What's makin ya feel so child?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath, "One candle mark I am a slave in a pit, then I come here and see a different world. I ask a great favor of someone I had no right to..."

"Child, was it that other warrior who came lookin for ya?"

Gabrielle nodded her head, "Yes, I asked her to do something that could have cost us our very lives".

"Does the Conqueror know about this?"

"Yes, I told her of the reason and how it seemed to be a misinterpretation when she saw us..."

"Misinterpretation? What do ya mean child?" Ophelia interrupted.

"When the Conqueror had asked me about what happened in Trachis; I told her of the children. She then asked me if that was why I asked my lover to help me" she replied shaking her head.

Ophelia sat back with a look of confusion clearly evident on her face, "Your what?!"

"She though Ephiny to be my lover as she saw her try to kiss me" Gabrielle sat staring at her mug.

"Well, is she?" Ophelia asked in a matter of fact tone.

"NO!" Gabrielle snapped back angrily, "Sorry Ophi, I did not mean to snap at you..." she lowered her head again and softened her voice, "It's just that...well, I am...I've never...Oh Hades!" she put her head in her hands.

"What is it child?" Ophelia asked while pulling Gabrielle into a hug.

"I am innocent still. I have been spared by many a master and fortunate in that I was never touched. I am a virgin still" Gabrielle said, a bit embarrassed at that fact.

"Child ya indeed fortunate and blessed by the Gods to go through what ya have and be free to choose your first love" Ophelia hugged her tighter.

"But why is it that people presume so much of me Ophi?" Gabrielle began to cry.

"Oh don'tcha cry child. It is because it is rare of a chance for a slave girl to be spared such a treasure" she soothed Gabrielle's back with her hand, "Now, it seems to me ya've had enough excitement for a while. I want ya to go to bed now. Don'tcha dare come out of there until those bags under ya eyes go to Hades himself!"

Receiving a kiss to her head and a final hug, she stood up to leave "Thank you Ophi".

"Hush child and I will let everyone know I said for ya to rest and no duties".

The next morning Ephiny went to the secluded training grounds that had been where she had trained Gabrielle in hopes that she would show up. It had been some days since their last meeting, but she still held out hope that she might show.

Queen Melosa had kept Ephiny busy at the Amazon encampment with scrolls and other duties but she still managed to get out in the morning to see if her hope was not futile. She was not afforded even to go to the palace for food or any social call as it seemed the Queen was intent on her not going there.

"She's not coming" Queen Melosa said as she walked out from behind one of the trees and into the clearing.

Ephiny spun around, her hand going to the hilt of her sword in automatic reflex, "My Queen?!"

she said startled.

"She will not be coming Ephiny..." Queen Melosa continued, walking towards a boulder and sitting down "...she knows that to be shown the use of weaponry is in direct violation of the Conqueror's law and that it could cost you your lives".

"So you know?" Ephiny said in more of a statement than a question.

"Yes, I have seen you come out here looking for her. And have been duly notified by the Conqueror herself. You disappoint me my Regent! You above all other Amazons know that as honorable warriors we abide by laws and their enforcement", she looked away from her "You chose to disregard that law".

The Queen leaned forward putting her elbows to her knees and placed her face into her hands. Then tiredly she rubbed her temples "What were you thinking Eph?"

"That I was helping her in her wish to protect the children if they needed it..." Ephiny sat on a boulder a few feet away; watching the stream rise from her breathing faded into the cold crisp morning air "...I made the choice not her. She is not to be blamed for this".

"Ever the noble warrior eh Eph?" the Queen smiled slightly at her, "Tell me of the other reason you did this".

"My Queen?" Ephiny asked in a confused tone.

"Eph, I know you too well. You're a stickler for rules. Why else did you choose to break a law, the Conqueror's law that could cost you your life?" the Queen tilted her head slightly in question to her Regent, "Do you have feelings for her Eph?"

Ephiny lowered her head, staring at the ground in silent affirmation of the comment her Queen had made.

The Queen acknowledged this silence as such, "Oh Eph" she said in a comforting yet sad tone.

"I just...she just...everything about her. She's a beautiful woman, easy to talk with. She is brave enough to ask for such a supreme thing not for her but for those who can't, even at the possible cost of her own safety and life..." Ephiny looked up and then away, "I love her".

They sat in silence, each not looking at the other; Queen Melosa giving her Regent the time to compose herself.

"Is the feeling mutual?" Queen Melosa finally asked.

Ephiny lowered her head again; then slowly shook her head no. "Her last words to me were 'I care for you a great deal, but please don't ask more of me' her voice cracking.

"I am truly sorry my friend".

Ephiny nodded and took a deep breath, "I am sorry for disappointing you, My Queen. I accept I have broken the law. I submit to Amazon trial and punishment" looking at the Queen directly.

"Very well Ephiny, but it will not be by Amazon trial. Meet me in the Elder's tent at dusk. In the meanwhile, I do not want you leaving the encampment until then" the Queen rose as did Ephiny, who saluted her and headed back towards her tent.

'Oh my dear friend; if only you knew how lucky you are' Queen Melosa thought, heading in the opposite direction towards the palace.

Silently walking into the kitchen and up behind Ophelia, "Ophi, can I ask you a question?" asked the Conqueror. This scared the old woman so much she yelped and threw the bread dough she was kneading up into the air which the Conqueror caught just before it hit the ground and put it back onto the table with a small snicker.

"Why you little..." Ophelia started, turning around to glare at her.

"Oops...sorry...I forgot you hate that" she smile meekly and gave an attempt at an innocent look.

"UGH!" Ophelia exclaimed in exasperation, "I thought you grew out of that!"

"Old habits are hard to break" the Conqueror replied giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Shaking her head, "Sit down ya rotten imp. I'll fetch a mug-o-tea and ya can ask away" Ophelia pointed to a stool and walked over to the fire pit for the water.

Seating themselves down near the pit and sharing a bit of warm bread, Ophelia waited. She had known the Conqueror for almost the entire time she had been a warrior. Having joined her camp once she needed a cook and never looked back.

She knew when something was on her mind and when to bide her time as the Conqueror was never one to confide in anyone of her feelings; so when she came to her she let her set the pace at what she wanted to discuss. No matter how long it took.

After a few candle drops the Conqueror cleared her throat, "Ophi, how do you know when you've met the right person?" she asked not looking up and began working her thumb along a seam in the table next to her.

"How do ya mean?"

"Well, I've been having these...I don't know...messages...sent to me in dreams".

"How do ya know their messages?"

"Because Goddess Aphrodite told me they were" the Conqueror replied casually.

Ophelia did not question her on that as she had found out seasons earlier that the Gods chose to be involved in the Conqueror's life even to the extent of one of them trying to get into her bed
"So what did these messages reveal?"

"They give some detail on different things each time. At first it was that I was a captive of someone who had overtaken me in battle and taken my realm. Then it was of a woman as yet unknown to me being killed. Then it was that I could see glimpses of her before being killed" the Conqueror took a very shaky breath at the last sentence.

"Who was it Xena?" Ophelia rarely if ever called her by her name unless it was in times of illness or injury.

"Gabrielle" she replied sadly.

Ophelia barely nodded, not wanting to keep interrupting the Conqueror lest she stop.

"Goddess Aphrodite told me she could only give me these so called *pieces of information*. I had to put it all together and figure it out on my own. I'm just...well...I don't want her to ...what if...." she was growing frustrated.

"Ya worried that if it's her, then these dreams could come true and she'd get hurt?" Ophelia finished for her.

A nod.

"Xena in answer to ya question, how do ya know? Well, it's simple. When you don't have to ask!"

The Conqueror shook her head "I don't understand Ophi".

"That's alright child, it's because ya've never given ya heart before an here ya are havin to sort it out" Ophelia said while gently placing a hand on the Conqueror's chest above her heart, "Let me try to explain it to ya the easy way. Do you doubt how ya feel about her?"

"No"

"Do ya trust her?"

"Yes"

"Do ya feel protective about her?"

"Yes"

"Do ya love her?"

"Yes"

"Are ya in love with her?"

"Yes"

"So as I said earlier; in answer to ya question of how do you know...when you don't have to ask. She completes you...and I see it in ya eyes my child, when ya look at her...ya in head over heels love" Ophelia said happily as tears glistened unshed in her eyes "It has finally given itself away".

"What has given itself away?"

"Ya heart child" Ophelia rose and gave the Conqueror a kiss on the forehead with a small hug then turned and went back to kneading the dough on the table, wiping away the tears that ran down her cheeks.

The Conqueror sat there dumbfounded. How could she, the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire, have given her heart away without knowledge or forethought?

Then, very slowly, a small smile crept up from the corners of her mouth. The smile then proceeded further up along her olive colored skin until her eyes sparkled brilliant blue with its joy. There it settled as her face became illuminated and she radiated pure happiness.

The realization of what Ophelia had said had sunk in, *'I don't have to ask!'*

The Conqueror rose without a word and picked up Ophelia in a great big hug spinning her around, gently placing her back down to the ground and left the kitchen, leaving a shocked but smiling woman behind.

Chapter 26

Gabrielle sat on her bed, a message scroll and quill in hand *'I am a coward! How am I to do this? I asked her to break a law for me and I can't even face her'* she thought to herself putting the items down, *'No, I will face her...just not now. I need to get my words and thoughts in order'* she laid down on the bed, exhaustion overcoming her mind in the battle to stay away.

"Keep your right side guarded, you're letting it down when you turn and sweep" the Conqueror tapped her with the staff where she indicated.

"Okay, but how do you cover as you twist and sweep then?" Gabrielle asked as she moved in the motion she asked about.

"You drop your staff end down then bend and twist; this way even though your flank is exposed you're coiled and ready to snap back when you're done with the hit" the Conqueror demonstrated.

"Oh...Okay, got it" she tried once more as she saw her do it.

"That's it. You've got it now" the Conqueror then started a set of parries with her and suddenly struck her staff into the ground, flipping over it easily and grabbing Gabrielle by the waist.

"Hey! No fair...I haven't been taught that move" Gabrielle squawked shocked.

"No, it's my little secret way of getting my hands on you" leered the Conqueror.

"You're incorrigible!" Gabrielle slapped at her arms.

"When it comes to you, oh yeah!" nuzzling into her neck.

"My Queen, Lord Conqueror..." Eponin was on bended knee in front of them, "...the Elder council is ready".

"Um...oh...hi Eponin. Okay, thank you. Let them know I will be there shortly" Gabrielle turned in the Conqueror's embrace to look at the kneeling Amazon.

"As you wish, My Queen" Eponin saluted and left.

"I really can't get used to that" Gabrielle said looking at the retreating Eponin's back.

"What? Me or her?" asked the Conqueror.

"Them, all the Amazon calling me their Queen" Gabrielle leaned into the Conqueror's embrace.

"Give it time. It will take a while for the shock to wear off. But you must always remember, you are their Queen now..." turning Gabrielle around in her arms to face her, "...and will be mine as well on the morrow" she looked into loving emerald eyes.

"Are you sure Xena? I mean I don't feel I have a right to be your Queen Wife nor Queen to the Amazon nation" she looked away.

Pulling her chin back to look at her the Conqueror looked into her eyes, "It is because you don't think or feel you have a right or deserve to be that you do. No more better a quality in a leader, companion or mate than humility could one ask for. That is one of the reasons I love you little one" she then leaned to her and placed the softest of kisses to her lips.

"Hey sleepy head; wake up! You're going to sleep the day away!" Nika said loudly startling Gabrielle out of her blissful yet confusion dream.

Sitting up right with her legs off the bed she looked very bleary eyed at Nika, "Wha...What's going on?"

"Nothing, just thought you'd like to get up before sunset, that's all".

"I only got to bed a couple of candle marks ago" she dropped back down onto the bed.

"Yeah, right...that was yesterday. I've been to bed, up and worked all day and just come in to fetch something when I thought to check on you since you missed morning meal and were out for all dinars" snickered Nika.

"You mean I've slept all night and mid day?" Gabrielle sat up with an incredulous look on her face; tousling her hair.

"Yep, so before all the mid day meal is gone; I figured I'd wake you to get some" Nika waved as she exited their shared quarters.

"Thanks" Gabrielle replied, 'Wow, what a dream. Me...Queen Wife to the Lord Conqueror and Queen to the Amazon Nation' she scratched the back of her head; 'I have definitely got to lay off Ophelia's nut bread before bed' she laughed at herself.

"Well hello there sleepyhead. How ya feelin?" Ophelia asked as she put more vegetable into the boiling pot.

"Very well, thanks to you Ophi" Gabrielle replied while sneaking a bit of carrot into her mouth.

Ophelia slapped her hands as she reached for another, "Well go sit ya self down with some food befores ya eat all my dinner fixins".

Gabrielle pouted, then smiled and grabbed a plateful of food, "Ophi, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure child, whats ya got on ya mind?"

"How much do you believe about what we dream to be true?" Gabrielle forked another mouthful into her mouth.

"Well, according to old scrolls, it's said that dreams are the way the Gods talk to us and tell us what they either see for us or what they want us to do. Why child?"

"I just had a very out there dream..." finishing the last morsel of food and looking about for more, "...and was a bit curious".

"Do ya wants to tell me about it? Maybe I can help?" Ophelia offered as she filled another plate for Gabrielle.

After telling Ophelia of her dream, Gabrielle sat quietly as Ophelia thought things out "So, first ya sparing with the Conqueror, then ya in her arms being kissed by her..." this brought a blush to Gabrielle's cheeks, "then ya being called Queen by one of them warriors..." she stopped and scratched her head, "Well, we know the Conqueror knows about the training that other warrior

gal showed ya so it could be just ya mind replacing one warrior for the other. Then since the other night when ya had some time in her company alone...it could be ya wanting more that's all. Maybe the Queen thingy is just ya wanting to be in charge for a change?"

"But, I said I couldn't get used to them calling me that Ophi...Why would I want it but not?"

"Hmm, I don't know child. Just guessin, that's all I'm doing" Ophelia shrugged her shoulders and kept peeling potatoes.

"I know Ophi. Thank you though".

"No needs to thank me child, but ya could take up dinner to the Conqueror later for me; Seph's not feeling well...that time o the moon".

"Okay, I will. I'll take her a mug of rosemary with berries so maybe it will help her cramps" Gabrielle rose and set about getting one ready for her.

"Regent Ephiny; the Priestess, Elder and I have discussed a matter of importance concerning you. With their counsel I have determined a necessary course of action" Queen Melosa stated from a chair inside the Elder's tent, "As you are aware, we expect Satori's arrival shortly. She will arrive by escort of one. As the Conqueror has advised me of the request received to her for a private audience by Satori, we are to know that this request is being forestalled for a moon until the Conqueror has made a decision on how to approach this delicate matter.

Ephiny stood in the tent, her back to the entrance. She had one hand clasped over the other in front of her in a relaxed stance.

"For the time that she awaits a reply and the time this matter is resolved, Satori will stay here at the Amazon encampment. Now, as she will be considered a royal suitor she must have an escort. But her arriving escort will not fulfill this requirement as she is only a traveling companion escort.

Ephiny stiffened.

The slow realization of what was coming became evident with each word.

"She will require an escort at all times. From the encampment for meals, bathing, social calls, training...everything. Her escort now will be with her, but now in the capacity of attendant until this matter has a resolution. So, with that being said; you are to be her guard escort for the duration" Queen Melosa finished by looking directly at Ephiny.

Ephiny's jaw clenched so tightly the Queen could have sworn she heard bits of teeth breaking off. Her nostrils flared and she took in a few very deep breaths to calm herself.

"I am sure you *fully* understand the gravity of this situation and the reason for this" the Queen tilted her head slightly in silent communication with Ephiny to which Ephiny nodded her head

once subtly.

"You are to make all necessary preparations for her arrival and will take charge of any needs that arise as soon as she arrives. Otherwise, you are to stay at the encampment. That is all".

Ephiny understood her punishment. She was to perform the one task she despised; escort duty for a second rate function. Saluting the Queen, she exited the tent and went towards the training clearing.

'Of all the Hades' forsaken punishment! I'd rather have shoots put up my nails than escort duty for a royal suitor, at least it would be done and over with! She thought to herself as she paced back and forth, 'I know I broke the law' but Hades!' she ran a hand through her hair, 'Why this? I'm a warrior! Not a babysitter! She finally sat down on a boulder, deflated.

'I deserve it. I let My Queen down...for what...for the sake of what I thought was the most noble reason...love....yeah right! How wrong was I? Just suck it up and take your punishment!' She stood, wrapping her cloak around herself tighter and looked towards the palace "Goodbye My Lady Gabrielle" she whispered the words into the wind, turned and walked slowly towards her tent.

Chapter 27

"Enter" the Conqueror said as Gabrielle had knocked on the chamber door.

"Good evening My Lord" Gabrielle replied as she carried in the tray Ophelia had put together once the guard opened the door.

Waiting until the guard exited and closed the door behind her, the Conqueror replied "Good evening little one, how are you?"

Gabrielle looked a bit confused, "My Lord?"

"I have not seen you about the grounds today, are you unwell?" the Conqueror rose from her chair behind her desk and walked towards the table.

"Oh, yes...I mean no...I mean..." Gabrielle was flustered and nervous.

"Gabrielle, it's okay. Calm down" the Conqueror put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Looking up to her, she could see the smile touching the strikingly beautiful face before her, see the depth of her actions, and see...more.

They stood looking at one another, no words or movements. Just a searching of an inner bond they both shared and wanted to reconnect.

Finally shaking her head, the Conqueror took a deep breath "So,um...what have I been allowed to

have?"

Gabrielle gave a quizzical look at the statement the Conqueror had just said, "My Lord?"

The Conqueror laughed, "Ophi has been holding my favorite pastries hostage until she feels I have eaten properly", lifting the lid to the food tray "Oh well, it's not bad. I can do steak and vegies. Have you eaten already?" she asked as she turned to Gabrielle then took her seat.

"Yes my Lord. And I was sent to rest by Ophi as she felt I was looking haggard, which was my reason for not being about the palace. My apologies if I was lax in attending to your needs My Lord".

"Good, you should not over do it. Especially in weather like this, it saps your strength and leaves your body aching deep inside. Would you care to join me?" the Conqueror looked up with hopefulness in her voice, "I could always share?"

"Oh no My Lord, you eat please. Thank you for the kindness", hesitantly she asked "But, might you mind the company?"

"I would greatly enjoy your company. Please, sit" she motioned to the chair.

"Thank you My Lord".

After eating and enjoying small talk, the Conqueror finally put the lid back on the tray "I've got an idea, would you care to join me Gabrielle?"

Feeling very at ease and trusting the Conqueror completely Gabrielle easily said "Yes, thank you My Lord".

The Conqueror rose and grabbed her cloak and stopped to think a moment, bringing a smile to her face then walked out followed by Gabrielle.

She headed down to the kitchen and directly into it, "Ophi, could I have a satchel..." then she walked up to the surprised woman and whispered.

Ophelia was surprised at the voice she heard and turned to see the Conqueror and Gabrielle right behind her. When the Conqueror whispered to her, she smiled and nodded.

Ophelia bustled about quickly and a few candle drops later handed the Conqueror a satchel.

"Come on, I want to show you something" the Conqueror said as she held out her hand to Gabrielle who took it without thinking.

They walked hand in hand through the palace corridor, totally at ease in holding hands and the Conqueror completely oblivious to the tiny smiles coming to the faces of some of the guards along the way.

Letting go of Gabrielle's hand, she handed her the satchel "Would you hold this for me for a candle drop?"

Gabrielle held the satchel and watched as the Conqueror searched the stone wall for something.

Finding what she looked for the Conqueror struggled to open a door which was apparently quite heavy and unused. Taking a torch off of one of the wall sconces, she reached down and took hold of Gabrielle's hand again, "Just be careful as these steps are quite slippery as they haven't been used in ages".

They ascended a spiral staircase in one of the furthestmost towers in the palace. If the Conqueror had not stopped to open the heavy door, Gabrielle would not have known it was there as it looked to be part of the stone wall for it was hidden so well.

Reaching the top of the stairs, the Conqueror replaced the torch into the sconce and opened a small trap door above her. It was just at the top of the landing where they were standing and the Conqueror had to bend down a bit to fit through, "Okay, come up. Give me your hand first so you don't slip".

When Gabrielle stepped through, she realized where she was.

She was on top of the world.

The Conqueror had taken her to the uppermost and highest point possible of the palace, in a small room in the tower. It was open by four windows, each in the directions of the compass points so that the view was never obstructed.

Gabrielle stood with her mouth agape. Turning around in a complete circle, trying to take it all in and not miss anything should it all disappear before her.

The Conqueror took the satchel from her hands and stepped back to allow her to look. In the meanwhile she closed the trap door so as neither one of them would fall through and put the satchel down against the stone wall.

She stood and watched the awe on Gabrielle's face as she drank in her surroundings; simply enjoying the beauty of her and her face.

Gabrielle shivered noticeably and the Conqueror draped her cloak over her shoulders.

Gabrielle turned her head to look up to the Conqueror and put her hand over the Conqueror's which still rested on her shoulder.

"My Lord, this is...amazing" turning back to look out over the land, "Thank you for your cloak, your time and ...this" her eyes glistened with the joy she felt.

"I'm glad you like it and you've no need to thank me. I've..." she did not finish, instead she turned herself away.

"My Lord, is there something wrong?" Gabrielle grew concerned as she felt her take her hand away and watched her walk up to one of the windows.

Taking a deep breath, "No, there is nothing wrong. It's all right...I've never felt it so all right before".

"My Lord, what is this place?"

"No where in particular. I found this one day when I first came to live in this palace. It was never mentioned to me nor did anyone else know of it. I could not even find it mentioned in any of the plans or scrolls for the palace. It has been seasons since I came up here. I used to come up when I was back from some campaign or other" she walked to the other window, "It's were I would get away from everyone when..." she took a deep sad breath "...there wasn't anyone but me" she whispered.

Gabrielle walked up besides her and gently took the Conqueror's hand into her own, "My Lord, it may be a little comfort...but if I could...with your permission, might I...be company to you?"

"Only if you so wished it little one" replied the Conqueror with a small smile as she turned around to look at Gabrielle. She took her hand and gently traced Gabrielle's cheek with her knuckles, "Would you wish such a thing Gabrielle?"

"Oh yes My Lord. Very much so" she replied as she leaned into the caress, turning her face and placing a kiss to the top of her knuckles.

"Then, might I ask something of you Gabrielle?"

"Yes My Lord, of course".

"Would you, of course only in private and between us, call me by my name?" the Conqueror looked into Gabrielle's eyes.

"Yes My Lord, if you so wish it" she lowered her eyes slightly.

"I would greatly...from you" the Conqueror slipped her hand to the base of Gabrielle's neck.

"Then so be it...Xena" Gabrielle softly said as she watched the Conqueror close her eyes, waiting to hear what would be a balm to her soul. A small tear escaped her closed eyes and ran down her cheek.

Gabrielle took the initiative this time and cupped the Conqueror's face in her hands, pulling her down and sealed their agreement with a gentle kiss.

At that moment, a shooting star flew across the skies sealed the fate of the two souls.

Pulling back from the kiss, the Conqueror's eyes fluttered open to see viridian eyes tenderly looking into hers. She pulled Gabrielle into an embrace and breathed in her scent in a fulfilling and satisfying deep breath as she rested her chin upon her head

"Here, I've got something ..." the Conqueror went to the satchel they had carried up and brought back a flask of hot tea and a wrapped parcel; "...I asked Ophi to release a few hostages" she joked as she handed Gabrielle the parcel still a bit warm with her favorite pastries, "...have you ever had one of these?" she began to open the parcel as Gabrielle held it in her hands.

"No, My L...Xena" Gabrielle corrected herself and the Conqueror heard the gesture causing her to smile.

Picking up a pastry from the package, the Conqueror held it with her fingertips and with a questioning look, offered it to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle could see that the Conqueror was hesitant and nervous as was she, but she wanted to start some trust and comfort between them. She wanted this very much so she looked directly into the Conqueror's eyes and opened her mouth.

The Conqueror shakily placed the morsel to Gabrielle's mouth and as Gabrielle closed her lips around the pastry, she took the Conqueror's fingertips into her mouth as well.

The Conqueror watched in absolute fascination as Gabrielle closed her mouth around her fingertips and gently nipped at them in the most innocently exotic and sensual gesture she had ever experienced.

Gabrielle slowly closed her eyes, reveling in the soft sensuality of the Conqueror's fingertips in her mouth which caused a set of spasms in her lower belly not to mention the food explosion in her mouth.

The Conqueror withdrew her fingertips ever so slowly, looking at them as if they were bolts of lightning forged by Hephaestus himself. Then she watched Gabrielle as she experienced the puff pastry for the first time.

The little moans and mews she didn't realize she was expressing herself with were undoing the Conqueror, *'Gods on Olympus! I am glad it's cold out here...otherwise I'd be a puddle on the floor by now!'* The Conqueror thought to herself.

"Um...would ..." she stopped and cleared her throat as it had come out as a squeak, "...would you like some tea to drink?" while she poured out a very warm mug of tea "I had Ophi make some hot tea for us".

"Yes, thank you. That was..." looking directly into the Conqueror's eyes with an almost predatory look, "Divine" Gabrielle purred.

The Conqueror gulped audibly, "Um...look, see that mountain over there?" she pointed and stepped over to the window through which the mountain could be seen as she attempted to control whatever was happening. "Goddess Aphrodite, give me strength so that I might not ravish her here and now, for I truly believe that I am in love with her and would only wish to honor her", the Conqueror implored the Goddess silently as she quickly closed her eyes and willed her body calm.

"That is Acrocorinth, where a temple to Aphrodite is located..." then pointing to another window, "...that road there leads via Lechaison Road to the Agora..." as she took a calming breath, "...that is where the Peirene fountain is".

Gabrielle smiled at the flustered actions of the Conqueror and walked over to where she stood, taking her hand in her own and looking out in the direction the Conqueror pointed.

The Conqueror looked down to Gabrielle and was greeted with a warm smile and sparkling green eyes. The moon shone through the window casting a ray of ethereal light over the two of them.

"Have you always come here...when you sought solitude?" Gabrielle leaned her head on the Conqueror's shoulder.

"Sometimes....others I would walk the grounds or simply lock myself in my study".

"I know I have no right to ask, but you could have anyone...any woman in the world. Why did you not seek out the company of one of them?"

"I could and did" she somberly replied, "but only to fulfill my physical needs. Of that I had many bed warmers..." the Conqueror turned her head to look out over the Isthmus of Corinth that was off in the distance. She recalled a few of those women who shared her bed but never her heart. Each of them hoping to win the favor of the Conqueror's eyes and thus her heart, "...but no one could fulfill what my heart needed or wanted".

"Oh" was the only response she heard.

Sensing Gabrielle was thinking herself to be another one of those to fulfill her physical needs only, the Conqueror turned to face her again. She saw that Gabrielle had lowered her head and felt her hand had gone limp and lifeless in hers, "Gabrielle, little one...you are not one of them..." she waited a candle drop for Gabrielle to register what she had said, then proceeded "...you could never be one of them. I have never brought anyone up her before you...nor will I ever again. Do not think so little of me to take your virtue and honor in such a manner".

"I am sorry. I meant no disrespect My Lord" Gabrielle lowered her head even more.

"Are you wishing to take back your offer of company now? I will hold no ill towards you and would understand" the Conqueror's heart was breaking as she spoke the words but wanted

Gabrielle to know she was free to make her own decisions.

"N..no...I just...you have..." Gabrielle could not explain herself. She brought a hand up to cover her face as she closed her eyes in frustration at having judged the Conqueror so wrong, "Please forgive me" as the tears began, "I did not mean to judge you and do not wish to take back my offer...if you would still have me?"

"Oh little one, do you not see? I have no choice in this..." she looked into the confused eyes looking back at her, "...My heart gave itself already..."

Gabrielle's shoulders slumped and sagged at having heard this, once again mistaking.

"To you".

Gabrielle looked up into the brightest sparkling sea of blue eyes she had ever seen, "Wha...?"

"I am in love with you Gabrielle".

"Me?"

"Yes, little one. You".

"But I am a mere slave My Lord" she began, shaking her head to try to comprehend what was happening.

"There is nothing mere of you Gabrielle. And do not worry yourself over your status. That will be amended soon enough" The Conqueror put her index finger under Gabrielle's chin, tilting it up "I love you Gabrielle. From my first dream of you, the moment I met you I knew you are my other half. My heart has never led me before and now it has given itself to you absolutely".

The tears flowed freely from Gabrielle's eyes "Do you not wish this to be?" asked the Conqueror confused at the reaction and tears.

"Oh I do so much..." placing her forehead on the Conqueror's chest then turning her head so it rested there, hearing the fast beating heart "...I also am in love with you...I love you Xena".

As the words were spoken, the Conqueror held her tighter. She closed her eyes while embracing her, 'Thank you Aphrodite and any other Gods above who have allowed me this gift'. She pulled back from Gabrielle slightly and leaned down to place the gentlest of kisses to her lips.

Gabrielle looked up to the Conqueror, who leaned into her for a kiss. When she closed her eyes and felt the gentlest of kisses, she thought 'Thank you Athena and any other Gods who have allowed me this gift'.

They stood in the moon light just holding each other without any words being spoken. Each enjoying the moment for what it meant to them; coming home.

After half a candle mark the Conqueror could feel Gabrielle shift slightly. Her body sensing the tiredness in the lithe body it held in her arms, "Hey, it's getting late. Let's get you back so you can rest".

Snuggling in a bit further to the Conqueror, "Don't wanna" she replied in a childlike muffled manner causing the Conqueror to laugh.

'Gods that sounds so nice' thought Gabrielle of the sound of the Conqueror laughing.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I don't want to have to face Ophi as the cause for you dragging around tomorrow all bleary eyed and exhausted...not yet anyways!" winked the Conqueror with a wicked grin.

This caused Gabrielle to blush a deep shade of scarlet and bury her face into the Conqueror's chest which caused her to laugh even harder.

"Come on," taking her by the hand and retrieving the satchel "We've got a lot of things to do tomorrow and I'd prefer to do them with full alertness and rest...besides, you're the one who could sleep through a Persian Army walking over you if I recall?"

"Oh, that's not fair...I was tired..." Gabrielle tried to defend herself.

"Uh huh" was all the Conqueror said as she opened the trap door and helped Gabrielle down the stairs, closing the door behind them.

Escorting her to her room, the Conqueror let go of the satchel and pulled both of Gabrielle's hands up to her lips. Placing a kiss to each, "Thank you ...for everything..." she looked up from their joined hands, "...I ...I don't want this night to end...but I must...sort some issues first".

Looking to the left and the to the right to see if anyone was about, Gabrielle stood on her toes and leaned close to the Conqueror's ear "I understand...Xena" and then lowering herself back down to look into her eyes she whispered, "I love you, My Conqueror".

This brought a slow and beautiful smile to the Conqueror's face, such a term of endearment. "I like that and I love you too little one. Now, off to bed with you" then she leaned down and softly kissed her "Goodnight".

"Good night" Gabrielle replied, entering her room with a smile filling not only her face but her heart as well.

Chapter 28

At the sunrise, the Conqueror was already out and riding on her stallion Cirion. He was a magnificent creature of dark brown with a small white patch on his forehead. He stood 18 hands and had been chosen by her out of a herd of horses she encountered upon returning home from

her campaign in Northern Thrace.

He had stood at the lead of the herd. Almost defiant of her troops movement across the field.

The Conqueror had walked up to the plateau he stood on, slowly. She had removed all her armor and battle gear in the process and approached him with only her battlefield shift on. As if showing him she meant no harm or possibly...disrespect for his status in the herd.

She extended her hand to him and waited for him to allow her to approach. When he did, she was stealth and action. She swiftly grabbed his mane and mounted him bareback.

He immediately reared up and she clamped her strong thighs around him while wrapping his mane around her hand and holding on with sheer strength.

He bolted forward at a fascinating speed that caused her eyes to water as the wind rushed by. She leaned into his stride and gave her wild battle cry at the pure adrenaline rush she was enjoying, encouraging him forward even more.

After a candle mark at breakneck speed, he began to slow and neigh at her. She then spoke to him in a soothing manner and something she had never encountered happened, it was as if he understood her and shook his head.

From that moment on, they were inseparable.

Cantering back into the palace ground, she directed him towards the familiar stables. Once dismounted, she reached into her cloak and took an apple from a hidden pocket. She then drew a small dagger from between her breasts, diced the apple and held it out for him to take.

"Brush him down for me and make sure he's well rested Demus" she handed the reins to the stable boy.

"Aye Lord Conqueror" he bowed and led the horse into the stable.

Once in her study, she asked that Abraxus be requested to her study.

"Good Morning Abraxus! Pleasant day is it not?" she stood looking out over the palace from her study window.

"Good Morning Lord Conqueror, I take it you have had another good night's rest?" he bowed and saluted.

"An excellent night Abraxus, an excellent night" she smiled broadly. "I want to convene my council this morning".

"Aye Lord Conqueror; I will advise them" he went to leave.

"Abraxus, have them there in the next candle mark".

"Aye Lord Conqueror".

"Hellooooo? Gabrielle your skirt's on fire!" Ophelia said, waving her hands in front of Gabrielle's face.

"That's nice Ophi" she replied, still splitting peas into the crock pot.

"Okay, that's it girl....spill it!" Ophelia said, wiping her hands on a towel and pulling a stool up next to her.

"Hmmm? What did you say Ophi?" she asked distractedly.

"Snap out of it child. I wants to know and I want to know now!" she grabbed Gabrielle's chin with her and turned her head to face her "Oh Gods on Olympus! It's happened!" she said in shock.

Gabrielle looked at Ophelia with a glowing and radiant smile. Her eyes sparkled and she had a dreamy air about her.

"Did ya share the evening with the Conqueror?" Ophelia asked.

"Yes..." she said dreamily, and then she realized what Ophelia really was asking "Oh NO! Not like that Ophi!" she blushed, "We talked ...up in the tower. She was very respectable and would do nothing to dishonor my virtue in any manner".

"No, she wouldn't. Do ya love her child?" Ophelia took both of Gabrielle's hands into her own on the table top.

"Yes Ophi, with all my heart. I am in love with her. I can't get her out of my mind and I don't want to" she sincerely answered with glistening eyes.

"Then I am happy for ya child and for her, finally. I wish ya both blessings of Aphrodite" Ophelia pulled her into a hug.

"Ophi, can I ask a favor of you?" Gabrielle asked as she pulled back from the hug.

"Sure child, what?"

"Can we keep this a secret until I ask her if it's okay to tell anyone? I don't want to break her confidence in me and we really haven't discussed whether I can say anything or not".

"Ya can trust me child...ya knows that".

"Yes Ophi, I know. Thank you" she gave her a quick kiss on the cheek "You've been my mother

to me the whole time I've been here and if I had known my true mother, I would have wished she'd been you".

"Oh child, don't do that. One of me is bad enough!" chided Ophelia, getting up and wiping her eyes. Trying to hide her embarrassment at such a compliment she'd never received.

"So as she was kidnapped by illegal slavers; which I had confirmed a moon ago; I am enacting my law that if any slave found to have been forced into slavery illegally petitions this counsel and is proven innocent, that slave shall receive their freedom immediately with recompense from the royal coffers for years lost in servitude" the Conqueror said to the council.

"You have confirmed this story Lord Conqueror?" asked Levidious, an elder member of the council.

"Yes, I wanted to be sure...for reasons I chose not to disclose, that the story was true" she replied.

"And this was done through a priestess?" another member asked.

"Well it wasn't really a *priestess*" with the Conqueror emphasizing the word priestess with air brackets.

"Lord Conqueror, are you saying it was not confirmed?" Levidious interjected.

"No, only that it wasn't by a priestess" she looked at them.

"Then by whom? We need to know this Lord Conqueror as you yourself set down the requirements of openness of records for proof" a third council member demanded.

"It was by the Goddess Aphrodite" the Conqueror said matter of factly.

"THE Goddess herself?" Levidious asked.

"Yes".

"Then we are in no way to disregard the Goddess's statement lest we bring down any of their wraths" Levidious stated, turning to the other five members, "Are we in accordance?"

"Aye" they responded in unison.

"Scribe, make note of the following..." she waited for the scribe to get parchment and quill ready "...Per order of the Lord Conqueror and her counsel; effective immediately the slave known as Gabrielle of Potidea is granted her freedom. All records of her slavery to be eradicated or made known as illegal. She is to be afforded recompense for the years she was held illegally" the Conqueror waited for the scribe to finish, "So be it" she ended thus making it law and officially proclaiming it.

Taking her signet ring off her small finger on her left hand that she only wore for such occasions, the Conqueror poured wax from the red candle that was on the table for this purpose alone and indented her seal into the cooling wax, officially sealing the parchment.

"I also want to advise counsel of a new law that I am enacting. Any child at or under the age of eleven seasons are not to be forced into slavery. Those coerced to be assassins or thieves without reason, shall be tried for their crimes. All those in slavery at the moment are to be returned to their immediate family. Should this cause burden on payment of debt, the family may petition counsel for a hearing. If no family exists, they will become wards of the realm until age of reckoning".

"Lord Conqueror, though this is a grand gesture it will cause some dissent amongst some of the nobles" a member stated.

"Then they can petition to see me with their reasons" she replied with an authority that put off any challenge, "This counsel is now adjourned" she finished.

That evening, the Conqueror requested Gabrielle's presence in the Official Meeting Room.

"Ophi, what's going on? Why would she summon me there?" Gabrielle asked Ophelia worriedly as she paced back and forth.

"Child, whatever the reason ya best not keep her waitin. Now off ya go before ya winds up in trouble".

Gabrielle straightened her skirt before knocking on the door to the meeting room. A royal guard opened it and she was led into the room where Abraxus stood next to the seated Conqueror.

Gabrielle looked nervously to the Conqueror and then looked about the room. She saw that Ophelia was already inside next to Sephina, Nika and Tidimous and the rest of the staff. On the other side of the room sat the Lord Conqueror's counsel.

Gabrielle was led to the front center of the room. She looked frightened and felt lost as to why the Conqueror, who only last night confessed her love to her, would summon her in such a manner.

Once the guard stopped at the front of the room, Gabrielle bowed "My Lord, you summoned me?"

The Conqueror did not respond, but motioned with her left hand for the palace scribe to come forward. With a nod of her head the scribe began, "The Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire convenes this court this evening to announce official proclamations" he waited and was given a nod to proceed.

"Effective immediately, any and all children in slavery at or under the age of eleven seasons are to be given their freedom. Under new law enacted today, any child illicitly forced into servitude with exception to few are to be set free and returned to any family they have. If no family exists

or is of unsound bearing, they will become wards to the realms until age of reckoning".

Gabrielle stood perplexed, 'Wow...but why? What does this have to do with me now?' She thought to herself then it dawned on her, she was illegally enslaved before that age.

"The second proclamation; the slave known as Gabrielle of Potidea ..."

At the sound of her name being said Gabrielle's head snapped up to look directly at the Conqueror.

The scribe unfurled a parchment scroll, "Per order of the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire and her counsel, effective immediately Gabrielle of Potidea is hereby granted her freedom from slavery and servitude. All record of enslavement will be stricken from the archives. For all the years of enslavement counsel will recompense and provide means to begin life anew" the scribe turned to the Conqueror and bowed.

"So be it!" the Conqueror's commanding voice resonated in the hall.

With that proclamation those gathered erupted into cheers and ran towards Gabrielle, engulfing her in hugs and kisses. Gabrielle was still in shock at what had just transpired. She tried to collect her thoughts as she was being turned around by each close friend to congratulate her.

When she was finally able to look up, the Conqueror was gone.

"You knew!" Gabrielle said to Ophelia as they all sat in the dining hall.

Ophelia had suggested a small celebration in honor of the special occasion.

Abraxus and Tidimous sat discussing war injuries and their affects while Sephina and Nika were talking about the newest troops expected in the next few days for training camp, the rest of the staff were mingling about in discussions of their own.

Gabrielle had Ophelia cornered as she went to get some more food from the table opposite them, "Fess up!"

"Child, I only knows I was told a candle drop before ya to be there and only that I was to come in through the side door. Not what it was all about. I swears to ya" she held up her hands.

"Why didn't she stay? Why didn't she come and say something to me?" Gabrielle suddenly sat down, very sad at the thought.

"Oh sweetie" Ophelia sat down next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder "she is the Lord Conqueror child. Not only does she have an image to maintain, but she has duties. She overseas the entire realm that she fought so hard to create" giving her a little hug, "I'm sure it was nothing to do with ya, she more than likely had something come up that had to be attended to. Even if she didn't, she couldn't just come down off her chair and hug ya in front of the others".

"Yeah, I guess you're right" taking a deep breath, "this is all so new to me...being in love".

"But it is the best things ya'll ever feel my child. Cherish it every day".

"I will Ophi, I promise. So, what happens now?"

"Well, I don't rightly know child. Never been around when sumthin like this happened. I guess ya can do what's ya want, when ya want to now. But for tonight, ya come and share with ya friends and go to ya own room as usual. I'm sure one of them stuffed shirt nobles will send word on what goes on from here" Ophelia rose for her seat and led Gabrielle back to the others.

"Goddess Aphrodite?" the Conqueror called out in her private study. A shimmering light cascaded down into a chair.

"Hello Xena, how are you doing?" replied the Goddess once she was fully materialized.

"I am well Goddess Aphrodite. Thank you for coming. I ...um...wanted to ask you a few questions if I might?" the Conqueror had bowed slightly in deference to the Goddess.

"Yes Xena, go ahead".

"I know you said you could not tell me things directly but can you tell me if my heart has chosen correctly? As I really am in love with her but..."

"Would you stop loving her if I told you she was not the one?" the Goddess interrupted.

"No!" she replied instantly, "I couldn't nor would I want to" the Conqueror said shaking her head.

The Goddess smiled, "I heard your prayer the other night, very admirable".

The Conqueror blushed at the memory.

"My sister tells me you have made a few proclamations this evening. A noble gesture Xena. It did not go unnoticed by a few of us" Aphrodite straightened out her gown.

"Forgive me Goddess Aphrodite, but I don't understand why it would even matter to the Gods?"

"Because you are trying to change Xena. You are changing what you were and also how others are treated. That is truly a courageous thing to do. Much more so than any battle you have ever fought" the Goddess inclined her head, "Xena you are now following the path the Fates have somewhat chosen for you. And with your actions, have corrected several others's path so that they may fulfill theirs".

With a puzzled look the Conqueror gave, the Goddess continued "There were several people who had their path altered by someone we have yet to uncover. I, however, have my suspicions. But

regardless, your actions have put them back in order. Do not concern yourself with who they are or how they will be involved in your life's thread. Know that it is all in accordance with what we Gods approve of" leaning closer to the Conqueror she whispered "And between you and me...you have a few of us watching over you who are on your side" she winked.

The Conqueror did not know how to respond so she merely nodded her head slightly.

"There will be more to come Xena. Pay close attention to details, both present and past. For there are clues in them" she rose, "If you still need me, as before, just call and if I can I will answer".

The Conqueror bowed to her, "Thank you Goddess Aphrodite".

"Oh, before I forget" she snapped her fingers and a shimmering golden staff appeared on the table next to them. The glow faded to show a normal looking bamboo staff with an inscription and mark carved into the top corner of one end.

"Goddess Aphrodite, what is that for?" the Conqueror looked to the staff and then back to her.

"Something Artemis has asked me to leave her with you. She said you'll know who it belongs to and when to give it to them" she began to fade "Good night Xena and yes, it chose wisely" then disappeared.

The Conqueror smiled broadly and took a very deep breath, her eyes glistening with joy.

Turning to fully face the staff but not wanting to touch it just yet 'Hmm...I'd know?' she thought to herself as she placed both hands on the table and looked down onto the staff.

Chapter 29

"We have received word that she is only a few days ride from arriving" Queen Melosa said to Ephiny who stood in her tent, "Do you have everything arranged?"

"Yes, my Queen. She has her own tent with one next to it for her attendant".

Ephiny had taken her punishment quite seriously although she despised it and wished it over with. She had no desire to travel onto the palace grounds and stayed busy either going through possible scenarios of the new arrivals, sparring with Eponin and other warriors or reading through scrolls.

"Good, the Conqueror has already advised her through return message that she is unable to meet her for another couple of days so we know that she'll be here for that long at least. Then depending on her response; another possible moon".

"We will be at or near Solstice by then My Queen. Should I prepare the encampment to that awareness?"

"Yes, I do not wish to be traveling at that time and we must be here for the decision, whatever it may be".

"Yes My Queen".

"Ephiny?"

"Yes"

"I know this has been grueling for you and it's only going to get harder from here. But, I want you to know that I am proud of you for doing it without protest".

"My Queen thought I am Regent to your reign, I am not above law. I broke the law and like any other that I or you would have to pass judgment on for doing the same, I deserve no better" she humbly replied.

"And I expected no less from you Eph. I..um...wanted to ask...how are you doing?" she looked with true concern at her Regent.

Caught unaware at this question, Ephiny faltered "I...I...uh...I'm okay, I guess" and shrugged her shoulders".

"If you want to talk, my tent is always open to you. You know that don't you?"

"Yes, My Queen. Thank you" bowing, she turned and exited.

'Oh Eph, I hope you find someone who completes you and heals your aching heart' the Queen thought to herself.

"So, Rome has sent word that they will start sending legions to the outer borders. They have heard some of their villages being devastated" Abraxus spoke with the Conqueror in the study.

"Yes, but more so they are concerned for the loss of their tax revenue not any caring aspect" she said in a disgusted tone "Caesar is nothing but predictable".

"Well at least there is some protection for the innocent. Regardless of whether his intentions are for the good of the people or not" Abraxus took in a deep breath.

"I want to get some of the troops out to patrol these areas here..." she pointed to the map "...and here. Set up a patrol. I don't want them running into any great number of these attackers and then not be able to defend themselves. I also want a scout with each patrol. At the first sign of trouble they are to send word for reinforcements".

"Aye Lord Conqueror. Where would you want to have them?"

"It seems the attacks are getting closer according to the marks on the map. So within one to two

days ride at most. This will give ample time to lend aid if need be".

"Aye, I'll get a formation plan and let you review it before the day is through".

"Good, send for Queen Melosa. I want to meet with her and see if we can gather some assistance from any other tribes should the need arise. I also want to send word to the Centaurs".

"The Centaurs? Would they be willing to assist us? I thought they preferred not to deal with us in any matter?"

"They normally leave us to deal with our own problems at it were, but I have a long standing alliance through chance of fate with one of them and if ever I truly needed their assistance all I need to do is ask".

"I will send your message with our best runner then".

"Make it so. I will have the scroll to you when you return".

"Til then" he bowed and left the study.

Leaving the study, the Conqueror made her way to the library to follow up on the research of the illusive *far away lands*.

"Amarinas, how fares thee today?"

"Lord Conqueror" the withered old lady stated and bowed.

"Oh Amarinas, how many times have I asked you not to do that?" the Conqueror went to her side and put a gentle hand to her back, helping her into as much of a standing up position as she could go. The Conqueror led her to a seat "It does your body harm and you don't need to do that".

"Forgive an old woman Lord Conqueror of her habits" smiled the old woman with ancient eyes.

"I was hoping to hear you have found some good news for me?"

"Yes and no Lord Conqueror...yes and no. Come sit with me; bring that scroll over there with you first if you please Lord Conqueror".

She retrieved the scroll she had mentioned and handed it to the old lady, sitting next to her and opening the scroll.

"There was a land you campaigned against when you first began. It was across the sea and covered in ice; do you recall this?" she asked as she scanned the scroll looking for something.

"Barely Amarinas, I campaigned against so many in the beginning in so many far away places. Some where across the sea, of those a few were to recruit while others were to vanquish those who would challenge me creating my realm here in Corinth".

"In your campaign you looted as part of the spoils of war, yes?"

"My men were given reign over those who they defeated. Some of the spoils were given to me in my honor, so yes to your question".

"One of these warlords was no warlord. When you seized his lands, he was fighting elsewhere. You took something he prized. When you took it, you took not only its meaning but also its power that yielded only to him".

The Conqueror searched her memory, trying to figure out what it was "Amarinas is there any description to this far away land? A particular castle, sea or even landmark?"

Ash she scanned through the scroll, "Ah here it something I wanted to ask; Do you recognize it...Asgard?"

The Conqueror sat with eyebrows furrowed together in concentration. Then in a slow process of realization that became apparent, her eyes widened "Asgard" she repeated.

In her mind the visions returned of her journey there; the crossing of the seas in hopes to gather forces to her side, the annihilation of those thinking to best her and then take her work for their betterment in war. Then in one fog filled morning, as her troops crossed one of the mountain ranges, they happened upon a castle up high. From the vantage view it had she could see most of the land, covered in winter's blanket.

The warriors there were unlike her men for they were women. But these women were not Amazons though they were equal in strength and skill.

They lacked the edge she had, the desire that drove her to conqueror. They lacked the power that foretold her realm to be within her reach, the thing that harbored in the darkest recesses of her soul.

They were defeated because of that, but unlike the others who resisted she did not kill them. Her men took hold of the castle but no harm befell her prisoners, per her command.

She left within days, seeing no need come about her destroying or laying siege to the castle and its inhabitants.

She went on to gather more forces and then return to establish what is now her realm and accomplish her destiny to become the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire and Destroyer of Nations.

"Lord Conqueror?" Amarinas placed a withered hand on the Conqueror's which was clenched into a fist on the table top.

"Yes...yes...I was just starting out. I have avenged my brother's death and continued with the gift

of Ares" she turned her head as if looking at something "I destroyed what I did not see fit in my plans to be my destiny as told to me by the God of War. It mattered not that they were in a far off land, only my realm and its creation mattered".

Turning her head to look at the old librarian, "But what was it that I took? I do not recall taking anything from them. My men took few baubles, nothing more".

"The scrolls do not mention anything except that you were possibly given a very small token, something to fit in your hand as large as it is, as a gift upon your return to the realm by your men".

"I have no idea. I do not recall anything so small to fit in my hand given to me. If it were jewelry or such an item, I would have no use for it as I wear no jewelry. For all I know it could have been smelted for use in something else or put into my coffers without my knowledge".

"Perhaps it is such an item this man seeks. That and revenge for attacking his castle. I do not know, only that the scroll says of this journey you did not become anything more than what you were destined to be already" the librarian rolled the scroll up as there was no more to be garnered from it, "That is all that I have been able to find Lord Conqueror. I hope that this has helped somewhat" her withered hand tapped the Conqueror's as she rose to put the scroll back.

"Thank you Amarinas, you have helped me a great deal".

Chapter 30

Apollo's chariot had gone by nearly two candle marks ago bringing in the new day, yet Gabrielle slept as if night had only just fallen.

Nika had risen quietly and left so as not to disturb the now free woman to sleep, free in the knowledge she did not have to rise and commence her daily chores.

Turning over to her other side, Gabrielle mumbled in her dream "You need all of those...I can fight at your side right now. Do not dismiss me...though I am no longer your slave, you can send me away...but please don't" she pleaded.

"This is no sparring match Gabrielle. If you come up against these attackers, they will not go lightly on you" the Conqueror told her while placing her chakram on her belt.

"I know that, but I need to be there. I have to be by your side...I can do this, do not turn me away Xena".

"I don't want to have to worry about you in battle little one...are you sure?"

"How can I not be? I was taught by two of the best warriors" she smiled and then realized the look of hurt on the Conqueror's face...or was it jealousy?

"Yes, you were. In that knowledge I place my trust...and in you" without another word the

Conqueror walked away, heading toward Cirion and battle.

"Nooooooooooo!!" her scream was muffled into her pillow. A woman lay in her arms as she cradled her head to her chest. Pulling her right arm away for a moment, she glanced down to her hand to see it covered in blood.

The woman's face was covered by bloodied and matted hair. She lay limp in her arms and was gasping in short ragged breaths, struggling for air.

"Please don't die, please" she cradled the woman warrior, tears running down her face.

"Gabrielle? Gabrielle!"

"No...noooo"

"Gabrielle...wake up. It's okay, wake up" Nika gently shook her shoulders.

Sitting up quickly, Gabrielle looked around the room. Bringing up a hand to her face, she realized she had been crying in her sleep.

"Hey, are you okay?" Nika sat at the edge of the bed looking concerned at her.

"Yeah, just...uh...Morpheus must have had an off night" she tried to joke.

"Uh huh..." Nika didn't want to push her "Ophelia wants to know if you want any breakfast for lunch?"

"Oh she's a riot! I get the message...I get the message. I'm up, I'm up!" just then her stomach growled.

"Yep, that's for sure. I'll tell her you'll be down soon" Nika got up and left Gabrielle to her thoughts.

"Goddess Athena, what does it all mean? Please let it not be so" a shiver run down her spine and she shook involuntarily.

As the Conqueror's counsel had not sorted out her recompense yet, Gabrielle was in limbo. She was not a slave, thus was not required to do chores but felt the need to not only do something but to earn her keep until it was all sorted out.

"Can I do anything for you Ophi?"

"Child no. Ya just sit and enjoy for a bit. Ya'll have to work soon-nuff" Ophelia told her while mixing the ingredients for the nut bread Gabrielle loved so much.

"I just feel lost not having chores to do. I could help you...on a volunteer basis?" she pleaded.

"Nope, I want ya to go for a walk and take in what's been given to ya. Getcha self a good dose of what it is to live ya life" she had stopped and taken Gabrielle by the shoulders with both hands "Maybe take care of anything ya need to or just sit".

Looking to the woman she had grown to love as her mother, Gabrielle nodded as she understood what she was telling her to do,

She stopped by her room to get her cloak, a few pieces of parchment and quill and then headed off to her favorite spot as it had grown to be; the tower overlooking the rose garden.

She sat down, putting the items on the bench besides her and wrapped her cloak tighter. She watched in silence as her breath floated up a stem into air before disappearing into nothing then closed her eyes, *'If there is any Goddess out there who would hear my prayer, would you please let the rest know I thank you all for where I am in my life right now'*.

She picked up a piece of parchment and wrote a note to Ephiny just in case she didn't want to speak to her when she went to see her. Then she wrote another note and rolled it up, took a strand of her hair and tied it around the scroll with a smile.

She just sat there for almost a candle mark and rose with a determined look.

Exiting the palace grounds she headed towards the Amazon encampment knowing this would not be a visit she had ever intended.

She walked passed the training ground she and Ephiny had used and she grew solemn at what had nearly happened between them.

Once she reached the tent she wanted, she knocked on the outside support post "Ephiny?"

The Amazon warrior did not expect to hear that voice as she watched the shadow in the sunlight walk to her tent and knock *'What is she doing here?'* Her heart began to beat fast and ache all at once as the sad memories of what she felt and wanted flooded her mind.

Another knock, "Ephiny?"

Standing up and going to the tent flap, Ephiny opened it up and looked at the visitor with a blank face, not saying a word.

Startled back when the flap was thrown back, Gabrielle smile hesitantly up to her but saw there was no smile to greet her nor was there any familiar greeting at all, *'What did you expect!?''* she admonished herself.

They stood there in silence. Ephiny not inviting her in nor uttering a word and Gabrielle simply looking up to Ephiny's face then back down, finally "Ephiny, I came to speak with you if I may?"

Ephiny did not reply or make any motion; she simply stood there with her hands clasped in front of her, face still as impassive as before.

"I came to speak about what happened ...or did not happen".

Still no response, so Gabrielle continued "I wanted to apologize if I hurt you Ephiny. You have come to be a very close and special friend to me and it was never my intention as you know me not to be deceitful".

Ephiny's heart broke into more pieces at the words '*close friend*' as it was final confirmation that she would never love her as she did.

"You are a very handsome warrior Ephiny and any woman would be crazy not to want you to court her. You took a very big risk for me and broke the law to help train me so that I could help the children..." she turned away and walked to the side of the tent as standing there with Ephiny not moving or talking was very disconcerting to her, "...I am and will be forever in your debt and I am flattered that you thought of me in that way, but I am fated to another's life. I don't know how or why but it is the way the Gods have decided it to be. I do not want to hurt you or your feelings..." she took a deep breath and looked up to see if Ephiny was even listening to her still. She caught the look of anguish on her face before it became blank again.

"I miss our friendship and our talks Ephiny. But, I understand if you don't want to talk to me or to be around me anymore...and possibly even set eyes on me" Gabrielle walked back to the front of the tent and back in front of Ephiny.

Reaching into her cloak, she took out the small scroll and reached for Ephiny's hand.

The warrior at first stiffened at her touch then beguilingly let her lift her hand up.

"If you never want to speak or see me again, it will hurt me greatly as I admire you not only as a friend but a warrior as well. But I will respect and understand your wishes" she placed the scroll into her hand and closed it around it, "Thank you for everything Ephiny. Take care".

With that Gabrielle looked up into her eyes once more, holding back the tears that threatened to escape. She gave her hand once last gentle squeeze, let go and turning about she walked away leaving the warrior standing there.

Ephiny watched her walk away and fade into the distance, returning to the palace and her life.

She finally let go of the breath she didn't realize she was holding. She closed her eyes and dropped her head; her shoulders slumped as if the weight of the entire Amazon Nation lay on them.

Ephiny turned and entered her tent slowly. Feeling completely drained as if she'd just fought a hydra on her own. Dropping down onto her cot, she cradled the scroll in her hand. Staring at it as if it were about to come to life before her eyes and finish her off.

Slowly, she turned it over in her hand. Wondering if she should open it, 'should I just do as she said, leave her to her own and never speak to her or set eyes upon her again? HADES! It hurts so much!'

A tear escaped without her permission and ran down her cheek, leaping on to her upturned right wrist.

She blinked in shock, she'd not cried since she was a child.

Wiping at her cheek, 'Oh Goddess Artemis, I have served thee with honor and integrity. Only doing what I thought to be your bidding. Please, I ask you to help me through this. Give me the strength of a warrior to harden my heart so this pain is forgotten and never returns again!'

She took a deep breath and opened the scroll to read her words:

Each friend represents a world in us,
A world possibly not born until they arrive,
And it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.¹

The tears came freely that afternoon and she let them. No one was the wiser except for the three shimmering figures outside her tent.

Chapter 31

"Oh there ya are" Ophelia said as she gathered something into a bundle and placed it on a shelf "I made ya something ta eats. Sit with me for the evening meal".

"Um okay Ophi. But I'm not too hungry" Gabrielle said.

Ophelia did a double take and raised an eyebrow in questions "Ya alright child? Nothing ever affects ya tummy!"

"Yes Ophi, just a bit sad that's all. And no..." she put up a hand, stopping Ophelia in mid opening of her mouth "I don't want to talk about it please".

Ophelia closed her mouth and nodded her head.

They sat together, idle chat between the two of them over their meal on everything going on in the palace and people, just enjoying the friendly time and warmth.

A messenger appeared "Gabrielle I have a message for you" said the young lad handing it to her. Ophelia got up and gave the youth a small packet of biscuits and sent him on his way.

"Well, of ya go child. I've got to clean up this mess and get some rest. These ole bones are feelin the weather more and more".

"I can stay and help Ophi" Gabrielle picked up the plates.

"No, no child. Shoo. Ya gots to read and do whatever ya gots to do" she took the plates and walked across the room to begin washing up.

"Okay, thanks Ophi. Goodnight".

"Night sweetie" Ophelia said over her shoulder as she began washing.

Gabrielle wandered back to her room, tired from not really having done anything physically at all but mentally too much. After putting her cloak away she sat on her cot alone as Nika still had a candle mark to return.

She opened the scroll.

Gabrielle (it said)

I want you to meet me at the stables before the sun rises.

It was in the Conqueror's handwriting.

"That's strange. Why would she want me there at that time of the day? She thought to herself, 'Oh well, I'd better get some sleep. I don't want to be late. Gods on Olympus would she be mad!'" she snickered.

Cirion pawed at the ground, he awaited his mistress with eager anticipation as he had been brought out and made ready for her.

The Conqueror stopped just outside of the walkway that led to the stables. She closed her eyes and raised her head, taking in the new morning crisp air deeply into her lungs. "Thank you Goddess Artemis, I pray I am doing your bidding". With that, she opened her eyes and headed into the stables.

Cirion snorted and pawed the ground in a manner that the Conqueror knew to be his greeting to her. "Hello Cirion, ready for a bit of fun?" she said as she scratched his forehead. He nodded his massive head up and down and she laughed, "Yes, you would be wouldn't you?"

Gabrielle had woken up every so often in the night, paranoid she would over sleep. Eventually seeing the sky start to lighten up, she resolved not to go back to sleep as she knew she wouldn't get back up again, "Ugh. Now I remember why I don't get up early in the morning".

After her morning ministrations she dressed and put her cloak on, making her way towards the stables.

When she got there, a beautiful sight greeted her. The Conqueror stood, gently brushing a magnificent horse. The two looked totally at peace with each other, as if they were companions

of long ago.

Not wanting to interrupt such a special moment, she stood quietly.

Cirion neighed and pawed at the ground again, "That's just Gabrielle" he bobbed his head.

"Morning Gabrielle" the Conqueror said not turning around.

"Morning My Lord" she walked closer, "How did you know I was here?"

"I can sme...um, I'll tell ya later. Gabrielle come here and let me introduce you".

Gabrielle walked up to the Conqueror, bowed and stood besides her, but slightly behind as she was intimidated by Cirion's height and size.

"Gabrielle, this is Cirion. He has been with me for many seasons. Cirion, this is Gabrielle" at this the horse neighed, stepped back and then leaned down, bending one foreleg and lowered his head giving the illusion he was bowing.

Gabrielle gasped in awe.

"Come closer and meet him up close".

Gabrielle walked up to them again, shaking a bit.

"Cirion, do you like Gabrielle?" the Conqueror asked as she loosened his reins.

He bobbed his head up and down, "Would you mind if Gabrielle rode astride you?" he shook his head.

"Would you like to give him a pet?" the Conqueror turned to Gabrielle.

"Y..yes, My Lord. Would he mind?"

"No, he loves it...especially right here" she replied pointing to the bridge between his eyes.

Cirion lowered his head as Gabrielle approached and then began scratching him, eliciting a giggle from her when he blew his breath onto her stomach.

"Ready?"

"My Lord?"

Gabrielle watched as the Conqueror climbed atop Cirion in one fluid movement with her panther like grace, then leaned down and extended her arm towards Gabrielle, "Come on".

"B..but, I've never ridden My Lord?!"

"That's okay. I'll hold you. It's very easy and I'll sit you sidesaddle so it won't put a strain on your back...side".

Gabrielle took a deep shaky breath and reached up tentatively taking hold of the Conqueror's arm and being easily lifted to sit across the front of her.

Once settled, the Conqueror turned Cirion into the direction she wanted to go and he strode off in an easy cantor.

Taking advantage of the positioning, Gabrielle leaned into the Conqueror. Enjoying the warmth and comfort as big, strong arms surrounded her and giving her a sense of security and tranquility...a sense of being complete.

The last few days' events came to mind as well as a multitude of questions which kept her from dozing off in the embrace.

Sensing a bit of hesitancy in relaxing completely in her arms, the Conqueror began to speak "Gabrielle, I know you must have some questions for me regarding the last few days..."

Gabrielle turned her head and looked up in awe as to how she would know.

"...so when you wish to ask, you can".

"Thank you My Lord".

"Are you angry with me Gabrielle?"

"My Lord?"

"Are you angry with me or with something I have done? As you have not said hello to me or called me by my name in these few days".

"Oh" putting her hand up to her mouth at having forgotten their agreement, "I am sorry My Lord. I am so used to calling you My Lord that I just fell back into it. Forgive me, Xena?" she said with a shy smile.

"Only if you say hello..." she arched her eyebrow with a wicked little smirk.

"Good morning and Hello, Xena" Gabrielle said as she cupped the Conqueror's cheek with her hand.

The Conqueror leaned into the hand and then further in to tenderly kiss her, "Okay, forgiven".

Breaking the kiss, the Conqueror leaned back in the saddle and looked up to the road.

"So, where are we and why are we here?" Gabrielle asked as she turned back from their kiss to

look around.

They had ridden for a candle mark at a steady cantor and finally the Conqueror had pulled Cirion to a halt. They were at an enclosed clearing next to a small mountain. To one side of the mountain was a waterfall that emptied into a crystal clear lagoon. On the other side, it was as if someone had swept an area clear of all trees and brush.

Gabrielle looked upon the sight before her and thought that it would be a magnificent place to camp one night under the stars in the spring summer time. To stay by the lagoon all day as it seemed secluded from all eyes.

"This is a little spot I found one day when Cirion and I went for a ride. When I want to drill in peace and quiet, I come here".

"Drill?"

"Yes, when I exercise with my sword through a series of moves to keep me sharp and in shape".

"Oh" she looked around, "um...can I ask you a question?"

"Sure" as she slid off Cirion and helped Gabrielle down.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you free me?"

"Ah, well....um...I had some research done and found out you were taken illegally into slavery and I...well I didn't believe it was right" as she let go of her waist and took a bag off of Cirion.

"Did it have to be so...formal?"

"Yes, when a proclamation is made official, it must be announced with my counsel present".

Then quietly, Gabrielle turned away and asked in a small voice "Why didn't you stay?"

The Conqueror could see that it had hurt her "I couldn't. I had to appear to do what I did because it was right and the law had been broken. Not because I have feeling for you..." she walked up behind her and gently put both hands on her shoulders, "...I can't let people see that I would change a law just because I cared for you. It would not be wise".

Gabrielle never turned around to face her, she just nodded.

"I am sorry Gabrielle. I truly wanted to see your happiness".

Gabrielle took in a ragged breath, willing no tears to come.

"I...um, well...since I...you started...." running a hand through her ebony locks, "I thought perhaps that since you were training with the Amazon, that maybe you wouldn't mind training with me instead?"

"Me? Train with you?!" a startled and clearly frightened Gabrielle spun around as the words came out in a squeak.

"Uh...yes. That's if you want?"

"But...you are the Lord Conqueror! I could never...." She stopped while pointing at her and shakily mimicking a sword motion.

"Gabrielle, I know that you have trained with the Regent Amazon and it was for almost a moon cycle. I also know that it comes naturally to you. I will not harm you little one, just hone your skills and help you where you might need it".

"Yes my ...Conqueror" she smiled nervously.

She was rewarded with a beautiful smile that she had never before seen on the Conqueror's face.

"Okay, first I brought some breakfast for you so you don't pass out from exerting yourself without some food in you. So, let's sit and eat then we'll start okay?"

A grumble was heard from Gabrielle's stomach as if on cue, causing Gabrielle to blush with embarrassment and the Conqueror to laugh.

After a light breakfast, the Conqueror explained that they need to warm their muscles up before beginning so that they would avoid injury. She showed Gabrielle a series of stretches she had learned while on one of her journeys in a land called Chin.

She then went to Cirion and untied the leather straps that held two staffs to his side. One was bound within a leather wrap, the other not. She had thought of how to handle the staff ever since the Goddess Aphrodite had left it with her. This was the only way she could think of to actually handle it without touch it.

"I have something for you..." she held out the staff to her, "...If I'm right, this belongs to you".

Gabrielle gave a confused look "Me? But my staff is back in my room".

"Well, I really think this belongs to you now, so why don't you try it out for size and see how it goes, okay?"

She untied the leather wrap and held it within the loose material with two fingers, offering it to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle looked at the Conqueror and then to the staff.

Hesitantly reaching out with her right hand, she took hold of the staff and all at once it came to life in a brilliant gold shine. The inscription and markings on the end flared bright blue while Gabrielle's eyes went wide as a shock coursed through her body and settled just above her thigh on her left leg.

Her left hand immediately went to her hip as if she'd been hurt.

Then it was all gone.

The Conqueror had watched in fascination as the staff grew bright and Gabrielle's eyes glazed over with the gift the Goddess Artemis was bestowing upon her "Are you alright?"

"WOW! That was weird" she replied "Xena, where did you get this from?"

"It was given to me to present to you...to the person I felt it belonged to".

"By whom?"

"Well, the Goddess Aphrodite told me that the Goddess Artemis sent this with a message that I would know who it belonged to".

"But why me? Up until a few days ago I was a slave. Surely Goddess Artemis did not intend for a slave to own this let alone use it".

"But don't you see Gabrielle? You are now not a slave. And by the way it reacted to your touch; it was given to who she wanted it to belong to".

Gabrielle shook her head in disbelief.

"Are you sure you are okay? What happened to your hip? You grabbed at it".

"It felt like a bolt of lightning hit me, but it didn't hurt...it was like I was charged".

"Is your hip okay? I...I don't mean to ...you know?"

"Um...yeah...It doesn't hurt...so I will check it later in my room".

"Okay...so, um...why don't you show me what you've been taught so far? Then we'll go from there, okay?"

They moved into the clearing with Gabrielle then going through a series of movements and steps.

After half a candle mark, Gabrielle stopped; a bit winded from the movements.

"That's very good, yes...very good indeed". The Conqueror twirled her staff and placed it across her shoulders in a casual stretch.

"Okay, let's spar a little and put those moves into play against an opponent".

They came together with a light clash of staffs. Moving in a slow methodical manner as the Conqueror tapped very lightly against her opponent's smaller frame and strength. She observed the moves as a teacher would observe a pupil, looking for correct moves, blocking skills, strengths and weaknesses.

This went on for a candle mark. By then, the sun had risen to cover the entire mountain in a very light warm blanket that coupled with the exertion, left the combatants in a light sheen of perspiration.

"Please, my lo...Xena" Gabrielle started and corrected, "May we stop?"

"Oh, sure. Yes, sorry".

"No, it's just that I've not put into practice what I learned and I didn't realize how tiring actual sparring is" she stated out of breath.

The Conqueror lowered her staff and then casually leaned it against a boulder "Here, have a drink" offering her the flagon filled with water, "I forget that you've never done this before...well not to this degree, but you are good for having only done this for just over a moon".

"Thank you, that means so much coming from such an experienced warrior such as you".

"Gabrielle, you are a free woman now..." the Conqueror said seriously "...you can do as you please now. I know that my counsel has not gotten to speak with you as yet; and I will speak with them regarding such so that you may be able to decide what you want to do".

Taking a drink of the flagon herself "I ...um...you can stay...at the Palace...as long as you like with no obligation if you choose" she looked away sadly "Or you can take your recompense and leave to make a new life for yourself".

They were both quiet for a candle drop, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Thank you...for everything. You have given me my freedom back and the freedom of choice..." she rose and walked a few paces away. The Conqueror steeled herself for what she knew was coming and set her jaw tight.

"I ...I don't want to leave you Xena".

The Conqueror blinked and then blinked again. Had she heard right?

"I want to stay here with you" Gabrielle's soft voice confirmed.

The Conqueror rose and walked behind her, she wrapped her arms around her and rested her forehead against the back of her head, whispering quietly "Thank you".

After a few candle drops, the Conqueror drew back "I wanted to ask you if you'd like to train with me in the mornings? I'd like for you to build on what you know."

"M..mornings?" Gabrielle said while cringing.

Trying not to laugh, the Conqueror held her tongue and nodded.

"That would be ni...great" Gabrielle tried to sound excited.

"I won't make it too early...so you can still get to sleep in...okay?"

As that had sounded better, Gabrielle cheered up at the prospect of learning form the greatest warrior in history of the world.

"Well, let's head back. It's another busy day for me" the Conqueror said, letting go of Gabrielle and picking up their things.

"Oh? Is there something I can help with?"

"Unless you know history or laws, it would be a waste of your time".

"I know little of history and even less of laws, but I do love to read and maybe I can help read through the scrolls?"

"Maybe..."

"But what would I be looking for Xena?"

"Um...well...in the history section, I need to find any reference to the name *Wotan*. Whoever it is; is causing villages to be razed to the ground in his name as a possible vendetta against me".

"You? Why?"

"That is the question; apparently I took something from him...when I campaigned against their lands, my men took something. I don't know...but it must have been put into my coffers. So now I have them ransacking that to find what it could possibly be".

Gabrielle was a bit shocked but said nothing.

"If you want, you can help Amarinas" the Conqueror finished settling Cirion saddle bags.

"Okay, I'd like to help anyway I can...for you" turning to look at her, "Why do you need the law information?"

"Um, yes well...I have a possible situation coming up that I would like to avoid if possible without hurting someone's feelings and standing".

"What is it?"

"I'd, um...rather not say just yet...okay?" the Conqueror uncharacteristically stammered.

"Oh....okay, thank you for letting me help".

Chapter 32

Queen Melosa sat in her tent, looking at a scroll 'Where did she learn this archaic law? Even the elders did not know it existed' she thought to herself.

The Priestess knocked, "Queen Melosa, if I may?"

"Yes, yes Priestess. Please come in".

"Queen Melosa, I have received another message from Goddess Artemis".

"That is excellent; what do we have to look forward to?"

"There will be a time of crisis soon. There will be great change in the Amazon Nation".

"Oookayyy...that's pretty straight forward" the Queen rolled her eyes in apparent exasperation at the lack of clarity in the statement.

"Queen Melosa, the challenger is being nurtured to assume a role bequest by the Gods. You are to lend any aid you can before this change occurs".

"Priestess, how can I aid when I do not even know who it is I am supposed to help?"

"It is in your words that the chosen one will receive your wisdom. Take heart you will fulfill your role".

The Queen sat with a perplexed look on her face as the Priestess had confused her even more that she had already been concerning this situation.

The Priestess did something truly odd then; she placed a hand on the Queen's shoulder and gently cupped her face, "You have been a noble Queen, you have served the Goddess Artemis well and she is greatly pleased" she then squeezed her shoulder lightly and left; leaving a very bewildered and shocked Queen behind.

It had been a peaceful and uneventful half moon cycle.

Gabrielle had managed to struggle getting up in the early part of the mornings and get in a few candle marks of sparring with the Conqueror every day. Progressing surprisingly well in the Conqueror's eyes from naïve and tentative to a very confident and able opponent.

No more attacks had occurred in the vicinity which troubled the Conqueror even more than the actual attacks.

"Abraxus, these people just didn't fall into a hole somewhere and disappear" the Conqueror said.

"Aye Lord Conqueror, it does seem odd that the attacks have stopped and no one has seen them anywhere".

"I want all available troops made ready for immediate movement. Should something happen, I want us to be ready to handle it and finish this off once and for all".

Aye Lord Conqueror, it will be good to see this end".

"Message for the Lord Conqueror, Message for the Lord Conqueror!" shouted the little errand messenger Erestes as he ran through the courtyard headed to the Conqueror's meeting room.

"Here boy!" Abraxus stepped out into the corridor to let him know where she was.

He handed the message over to the Lord Conqueror bowed, turned and ran away.

"Well, at least one of these situations is moving forward..." the Conqueror stated looking to Abraxus after having read the message.

Abraxus turned his head slightly and waited to see if she would continue.

"...my suitor has arrived" she stated flatly while walking out of her meeting room towards her private chambers, wanting to be alone.

"Queen Melosa, well met" said the voice of the royal suitor as she went on bended knee in front of her and saluted.

"Well met Satori, rise and be seated" the Queen replied while motioning towards a chair in the tent, "How was your ride?"

"Very uneventful and actually very relaxing, My Queen".

"Your escort?"

"She is making ready our tents, My Queen. Now that we have entered the encampment, she understands her role has changed and is to be my attendant".

"Good, while you will now be considered a royal suitor, you will be under escort at all times.

This is protocol and is not a debatable issue. Do you understand this Satori?"

"Yes, My Queen".

"This means you will be escorted at all time to all places regardless of the circumstance. An example is to the Palace, to the library, to the dining hall...to the privy, etc".

This brought a bit of a furrow to Satori's eyebrows, "My Queen, so I am not allowed a moment's privacy?"

"Your escort is to be with you at all times, except of course when you sleep. Otherwise, when you are attending to personal matters, she will be within a breath's discretion away".

"Yes My Queen. Who shall be my escort?"

"It will be our best; your Regent Ephiny".

"Regent Ephiny? Oh my, this is very royal indeed".

"Do not disregard her status Satori. She is still your Regent and you will address her as such at all times. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes My Queen, I meant no disrespect. It is just a shock".

Not acknowledging the last statement either way, the Queen continued "You must be tired from your journey. Your tent is close by. Tomorrow you will go to the Palace and announce your arrival".

"My Queen, I know this comes as a shock to all...that I could do...would do such an outlandish thing as this..." in a moment of self revelation and reflection Satori spoke solemnly "...but I am driven by my mind and dreams that this is my path".

"Satori, we are not here to judge you. Should this have been any other Amazon we would support her just the same. Whatever path the Fates have chosen for you, I wish you safe journey".

Taking that as the end of their conversation, Satori stood, saluted and went to her tent.

The Conqueror sat all night in her chambers, alone. She sat in her chair facing her fireplace, 'Why is this happening? I don't want anyone to get hurt in this, emotionally or physically'.

Sleep eluded the Conqueror and she watched Apollo's chariot race across the sky bringing in another day.

"Goddess Aphrodite, Athena and Artemis. I pray you give me your guidance and strength for all that will now come, so that I may do your bidding" the Conqueror prayed silently into the

morning sky.

"Lord Conqueror" Abraxus knocked on the outer door of her study.

"Come in Abraxus" she spoke tiredly.

"Lord Conqueror? Are you not feeling well today?"

"Just tired Abraxus; of everything right now. But no, in answer to your question, I am fine".

"Well Lord Conqueror, what brings today?" he sat across from her at her desk.

"Should be interesting at least..." she said with a note of sarcasm, "... I have a private audience requested and must receive the petitioner", internally she thought it would be best to get this over with so she agreed to have the initial meeting as soon as she arrived. "Then I am to meet with counsel to finalize the matters of last court and then meet with Queen Melosa.

"You will be busy, I wanted to know if you would have me help in any matter?" he asked sincerely seeing she was very weary and distracted.

"No, I'll be fine. Have you readied the troops and has there been any information regarding attacks?"

"Yes, they are still assembling all battle gear and equipment. No, no more information regarding the attacks. Our scouts have said there is nothing being whispered anywhere".

"Okay, just make sure the extended troops are within striking distance".

"Aye Lord Conqueror, Good day to you".

"Thank you Abraxus, Good day to you also".

"Regent Ephiny, Well met. I am Satori" she bowed her head slightly in deference to the Regent.

"Well met Satori, I hope your trip was uneventful and easy?" Ephiny sat in her tent, having awaited the royal suitor's meeting with the Queen to be finished.

"Yes, it was. Queen Melosa has told me of the conditions to which I am bound by. I thank you for your role in this" Satori stood, waiting for Ephiny to decide how their interaction with each other would be handled. Whether it to be a formal affair or one of sister Amazons.

"Good, I am sure Queen Melosa has explained these conditions and their reasons. I will give you the privacy you need when attending to personal matters. Otherwise, I am to be your escort at all times. When you meet with the Conqueror, I will be outside to escort you back to the encampment. I prefer that we restrict ourselves to our encampment and avoid any potential issues by roaming outside. Of course, we will venture out so that you may become familiar with

the palace grounds".

"Thank you. Queen Melosa stated that we will...I will meet with the Conqueror tomorrow".

"Yes, meet me here in the morning once you have risen. Your escort here, has she prepared everything?"

"Yes, Daniera is finishing everything as we speak. She is quite the little Amazon, willing to do anything that is required".

"Daniera? I have not met her yet".

"She has only recently come from the Southern tribe under Queen Cyane".

Ephiny nodded acknowledgement, "Well then, have a goodnight's rest and I will see you in the morning".

Satori saluted and exited Ephiny's tent, leaving her in thought, "Well Lord Conqueror, you certainly won't miss out on anything with her".

Chapter 33

The Conqueror sat in the meeting room, enjoying the serenity of the moment. A light knock on the exterior door broke the silence, "Enter".

In strode a woman warrior, she was quite beautiful. Her hair color was auburn red, which was pulled back lightly in a mid shoulder blade ponytail. She knelt down on one knee and saluted with a fist to her chest, "Greeting Lord Conqueror"; she waited with her head slightly lowered for permission to rise and address the Conqueror.

"Rise".

"Thank you Lord Conqueror" looking up as she rose, she revealed two hazel eyes to the Conqueror. Her height was approximately on head's length less than the Conqueror when standing and she held her strong body in a warrior's stance.

The Conqueror sat in her chair at the end of the meeting room. To her side was a large square table where petitioners could place scrolls, deeds or maps as befitting their meeting with the Conqueror. Along the sides of the room were several chairs so that those petitioners could sit if she chooses to let them.

Today, a lone chair was placed in front of the Conqueror, at a respectable distance.

"Be seated" the Conqueror granted.

"You are most kind Lord Conqueror, Thank you" she strode forward to the chair and sat,

gathering her composure internally for this critical moment. "Thank you again Lord Conqueror for granting me this petition. I know that you are busy with the running of the realm".

"You are welcome" replied the Conqueror with no emotion.

"I am sure you have been made aware of the nature of this petition by Queen Melosa, Lord Conqueror?"

"Yes, she has advised me as this is an extraordinary circumstance. Do you wish to proceed or would you like time to rest and gather your words for presentation?" the Conqueror stated.

"I thank you again for your hospitality and consideration Lord Conqueror. I would like to proceed, if I may?"

With a nod of her head, the Conqueror granted her permission.

"Thank you. Lord Conqueror, I am Satori, Amazon Warrior of the Northern Amazon Tribe" she stated after rising from her seat to begin her formal petition.

"I come to see your hand in bonding", she unsheathed her sword from across her back and placed it across both her open palms facing up. "I offer you my sword..." walking forward, she knelt and laid it at the Conqueror's feet, "...to protect and defend you and the realm at all costs".

She stood then, "I offer you my body..." she motioned to her body with a sweep of her hand, "...in strength to defend, protect and if need be to lay down my life for you" swallowing now at the dryness in her mouth, "I also offer it to you in pleasure to share all intimate moments of life".

This last remark caused the Conqueror to tilt her head almost imperceptibly and raise one eyebrow slightly.

"And finally, I would give you my warrior's heart to care and nurture our bond" she finished with a small bow and then stood quietly; waiting for a response.

Silence reigned for a few candle drops as they looked at one another, neither making a sound nor any movement.

Finally the Conqueror spoke, "Satori, what you seek is a great ask. Have you thought this through? All the implications and possible scenarios?"

Satori bristled at the notion the Conqueror meant by her asking such things, but realizing that she had every right to ask, she held her tongue "Lord Conqueror, I realize this is indeed a unique situation. My month in seclusion gave me the opportunity to review all implications and scenarios and yes, Lord Conqueror I have thought this through" she adjusted her stance, "You are a very formidable woman Lord Conqueror. You are legendary and stories of your beauty do not do you justice" she eyed the Conqueror from her shapely legs all the way up to her eyes as she spoke, "Anyone would be a fool to not wish to seek your hand as their bond mate, I choose

to ask rather than be a fool".

The Conqueror sat watching Satori look at her; no...devour her with her eyes, "Any other person to look at me in such a manner would have their eyes handed to them! So take care Satori, I will not have you disrespect me as a common whore".

Lowering her gaze, "Lord Conqueror I did not mean to disrespect you and beg your forgiveness. You are the most alluring and beautiful specimen of a woman I have ever seen, all the more reason for me to seek your hand. Please Lord Conqueror, it is meant as a compliment and nothing more, I have never intended to seek another as a bond mate and do not take this lightly".

"And what caused you to seek this bonding?"

"Lord Conqueror?" Satori questioned.

"You were living in your tribe quite nicely I hear. Then suddenly this idea? So, Satori...what was it that caused you to seek me?"

This change in question took Satori by surprise, "I...I felt I needed to, Lord Conqueror. I am pulled and directed to you".

Again silence.

"Satori, I will take your words of request and give you my answer in due time. Until then, you are considered, by protocol, a royal suitor. There are certain privileges that accompany that title. My second, Abraxus, will fill you in..." rising from her seat, the Conqueror walked to Satori and stood before her at her full height. Looking down upon Satori she continued, "Abraxus will see you out".

Satori had to look up to the Conqueror's face, in awe at her beauty and steely blue eyes. When the Conqueror had finished she bowed, saluted and exited the room leaving the Conqueror alone.

"Amarinas? Hello?" Gabrielle entered the library quietly, looking about in awe at all the scrolls of parchments.

"Hello?" replied the old and tired voice.

"Amarinas? I am Gabrielle. I was given permission by X... the Lord Conqueror to come and read some scrolls in hope that I could find something to help her out" Gabrielle walked up to the old, withered and hunched over woman.

"Yes, come child. I will show you" she motioned with her withered hand.

"Did you know that she helped Odysseus return to his land of Ithaca when he was cast adrift by Poseidon's rage? And that she returned the Golden Fleece after it was stolen so that would go to the rightful heir? And that..."

"Yes child! I know... I was with her in those travels" Ophelia finally stopped Gabrielle's ranting of over a candle mark. The excitement of reading all those scrolls just too much for Gabrielle to keep inside and she had to tell someone or she'd burst.

"Oh Ophi! I never knew she had done all those things. Wow, I mean...she just...wow", Gabrielle sat on a stool in the kitchen by the fire pit that Ophelia used as a cooking furnace. Her hands were animated of their own accord, moving this way and that; pointing then swinging all in tandem with the stories she was relating to Ophelia.

Ophelia shook her head and rolled her eyes in slight admiration and joy at Gabrielle being so smitten with the Conqueror, 'Ah, to be in love again' she said to herself.

"I'm going back again tomorrow to see if I can find anything about this man they are looking for. There has to be a written account of what happened somewhere or some information".

"What man is she looking for information on?" Ophelia wiped her hands on her apron and leaned against one of the tables where the dough for the next day's bread lay in process of rising.

"Um, I think she said Wotan" Gabrielle put her index finger to her lips as if in thought.

"Why does that sound familiar?" Ophelia walked over to the fire pit and ladled a mug full of water for tea, 'Wotan, Wotan...I know I heard that before'.

"Amarinas said it was from a far away land where it was very cold...she showed me a scroll that had...what was that place? Um oh yeah, Asgard" Gabrielle snapped her fingers at remembering.

Ophelia stopped breathing. She stopped all movement. Then very exhaustingly she let out a deep breath and shook her head sadly, "Gabrielle?" she walked over to her "Do me a favor child, go and see if ya can find the Conqueror for me and give her a message for me".

"Sure Ophi" Gabrielle slid off her stool.

Ophelia wrote something on a message scroll, rolled it up and handed it to Gabrielle, "No one else is to see that okay?"

Gabrielle nodded her head, the message scroll now held firmly in her hand".

"Enter!"

"My Lord?" Gabrielle asked gently.

"Gabrielle? Come, sit. Tell me of your day" the Conqueror turned away from the window towards her.

"My Lord, Ophelia bid me to give this to you" she closed the chamber doors, "Xena, she seemed a bit distressed when she wrote this" she whispered as she came into the Conqueror's arms for a

hug that they had grown to give each other when privacy allowed. Placing a kiss to her head, the Conqueror pulled away taking the scroll and reading it, "Have you read this?"

"OH NO Xena, I would never break that confidence from you or Ophi".

A smile to the Conqueror's face was her reply, "Well it seems that Ophi has something she needs me to see and hear" the Conqueror walked over to the fireplace and tossed the message scroll into it, "but that is for tomorrow. Come, sit with me little one and tell me of your day".

Chapter 34

The next day as per recent routine saw Gabrielle and the Conqueror finishing up their sparring practice, "Now remember that when you fade back and open up for your opponent to believe you have left an opening, you must give them a false sense of assurance that they can take you" the Conqueror said.

"So how do I make them believe that?" Gabrielle stood back.

"Well, a number of ways. One is, let's say you've been hit really hard but not hard enough to disable you. They might think that they have if you favor your arm or leg. Then, if you pretend to leave that vulnerable spot open; once they commit to attack you there, you close it down. They already have the momentum behind them so it will be difficult to stop, but you can use that to your advantage and get them with much more force albeit their own..." she motioned with her hand, "...here; try one with me. Tap me on the shoulder as if you've come down with an overhand swing".

Gabrielle did so.

"Now, I've dropped my arm down and picked up the staff with one arm, barely using the other. I fake the injury more than called for. As my opponent, you will automatically attack my weaker side more. I will let you keep doing that while building your confidence until you think you will be able to finish me off. Then, and only then will I turn the table and use your finishing blow against you like this".

She swung the staff end up over and around Gabrielle's overhead attack from left to right, while stepping out of reach and flicking the staff out of her hands, then reversing the other end and swiping her legs out from underneath her, then pinning her with the end of the staff to her throat.

"OOF" was the sound expelled by Gabrielle's body as she landed heavily on her backside,

"Wow, that is deceiving".

"Yes, it works every time because most opponents are too eager for the kill to see they've been led to the slaughter" she reached down and helped Gabrielle up.

Gradually they had gone from light sparring to defensive moves, attacks and all different scenarios. Gabrielle quickly and efficiently picking up all she was being taught.

"You okay? Didn't land too hard did you?" the Conqueror asked with a bit of concern in her voice.

"No, I'm fine. I really need to learn this from all sides so I don't have it done to me" Gabrielle replied while rubbing her backside.

"That's exactly right!" the Conqueror said while thinking *'I just hope you never have to put it to practice'* as she packed up and they began to head back to Cirion to leave.

"Xena?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, if I can answer it, I will".

"There is an Amazon warrior, she is very beautiful, that is being escorted by their Regent Ephiny around the palace grounds...is she...um...important?"

The Conqueror did not move, *'How do I answer this?'* as she did not want to lie to her, "Well, she has petitioned for a private audience with me".

"Oh, does everyone who asks for a private audience get an escort?" Gabrielle continued.

"No, that is something the Amazons have done" the Conqueror replied honestly.

"Oh,..." Gabrielle wanted to ask more but could see the avoidance in Conqueror's normally open eyes and decided to let it go...for now.

Once back at the palace, the Conqueror headed towards her study and Gabrielle to Ophelia's domain, the kitchen.

"Morning Ophi".

"Hello my child. How did ya go? By the looks of ya clothes, the ground and ya were pretty close. Was that due to sparring or ...sparring?" the last word she dragged out with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

"OPHI! Behave!" replied a blushing Gabrielle "she happened to drop me with a sweep of her staff in a new defensive move".

"Uh huh" winked Ophelia.

"Ophi, I know you know about almost everything that is going on in this palace. Can you tell me who that new Amazon that Regent Ephiny is with?"

"Hmmm, which one child? There were two or three that have come in recently".

"Oh, I only saw the one who is very beautiful and tall. She seems to be a warrior as well with the sword she carries. She has auburn colored hair that is fairly long".

"Don't know much child, 'cept she had a private audience with the Conqueror and is here for a while".

"Oh, are the other ones here for the same reason?"

"One came before the other two. Messenger of sorts, that's all I know can tell ya" Ophelia walked away into her dry goods room to look for something, taking an extra drop of time to hopefully end the questions she hoped the Conqueror would answer instead of her.

Several candle marks later, "Oh hello Lord Conqueror" Ophelia was surprised to see her in the kitchen again.

"Hi Ophi. I was wondering if you have a moment. I received your message".

"Ah yes. Here, have this muga tea and we'll sit" handing the Conqueror a hot mug and motioning towards the stools by the fire pit.

The Conqueror chuckled to herself; in all the time she'd known Ophelia she always had the two same stools by the same place. It was almost as if it were her very own private counseling corner. Many a person had graced the seats in seeking out Ophelia's counsel on one matter or another. Now and again the Conqueror would speak with her regarding her knowledge of things.

"So, you know?"

"Yes Conqueror. It was by chance that Gabrielle mentioned that she was helping ya with it. When she mentioned the name, I remembered it from what Sarge told me".

Sarge had been her mate for over twenty seasons, having had gotten his name over his command of the Conqueror's troops. Ophelia met him by a fluke accident when she was introduced as the new cook. She'd been only with them for a week or so when one evening her assistant had told her that some of the men said their meals were better with the old cook.

She had been slaving over a particularly hot day's meal all day trying to make something special for them. After having heard the grumbling for the whole week, she lost it.

She went to throw a bowl of stew at the doorway where her assistant had just exited, venting her frustrations at the men. But just as the bowl was within a whisker's distance from hitting the door, Sarge chooses that particular moment to enter.

He was on his way to compliment her on the food.

The next thing he knew, he was covered and picking pieces of food from his face, beard and hair to look up at a mortified cook.

She immediately went to help him and began to profusely to apologize, explaining that she was venting her anger over the grumblings.

Instead of anger, she was responded to with a quirky and humorous "I thought it better to eat than wear, but it could be better for my complexion this way. What do ya think?"

That started the basis of their seasons joining together.

Unfortunately, he was killed at a battle in Rome when Caesar's troops ambushed the Conqueror's return from negotiations with them.

That had then led to an assault on Rome in retaliation.

Caesar was eventually killed within a moon by allies of the Conqueror who to this day, respect the Conqueror's borders and alliances.

"So, what did he tell you?" asked the Conqueror reaching for a biscuit Ophelia had conveniently left a tray of on the table.

"That when ya returned from that Asgardie place...the cold place one, that some of the men had gone to raid the private chambers. In there they found a hidden chest of goodies and looted".

"While doing that, a woman warrior happened upon them. She apparently did not know the castle had been taken and was under siege. She attacked them, but ya men were too many. They did her in, then remembering your orders not to harm anyone, they panicked. So they got rid of her body and swore an oath of secrecy amongst them".

Ophelia took a long drink of her tea and looked back up at the Conqueror, "It was only that one of the men was dying and he confessed to Sarge what happened. By then it was seasons past and ya had long left their lands. Sarge felt it best not to tell ya. But he did give me this to hold should anything ever come about that day".

Ophelia handed the Conqueror a small leather pouch that was tied shut, "I've never looked into it but he told me that they took it off her before dumping her body. They were going to give it to ya as part of the spoils of war. But one of them said it was blood booty and not something ya'd be proud of. So he convinced the others not to; he was the one who confessed to Sarge and gave it to him to dispose of once he died".

The Conqueror put her mug down while holding the pouch and with one of her small daggers, slit open the ties; turning the pouch over above her open palm.

Out fell a large golden ring.

She picked it up and could still see some of the dried blood still encrusted in its etchings, "Did Sarge say if this man described what the warrior looked like or if they found her name, anything?"

"NO, only that she had this ring on whereas no others had jewelry and she had access to the private area of that palace. Do you remember anything? Ophelia asked her in return.

The Conqueror looked away as if trying to picture the palace and its people, "No, not really...but it's as if someone was expected. I do remember that. The other warriors acted as if someone important was due and they could not be caught negligent...in their duties".

"Well, what are ya going to do?"

"Right now, put this away and go talk with Queen Melosa. I have that matter here and now, this..." she held up the pouch she had put the ring back in, "...can wait a bit". She rose from her stool, "Thank you Ophi, this just helps to clear things up a bit more".

"Ya welcome" she replied watching the Conqueror leave the kitchen 'Oh Sarge, I hope I done right'.

Chapter 35

The Conqueror was seated in her study awaiting the arrival of the Amazon Queen. It had been a few days since they had talked and she wanted the Queen's opinion of the situation with Satori.

A knock on the study doors advised her of the Queen's arrival, "Enter".

"Well met Lord Conqueror, how fares thee today?" the Queen strode to the Conqueror's desk and waited for permission to sit after saluting and bowing.

"Ah, morning Queen Melosa, please" she motioned for her to take a seat. "I am well thank you. Just a bit agitated with the lack of direct answers to these situations".

The Queen heard what the Conqueror said and understood the manner in which she was letting her know that she was aware things were being held back; with a sigh she seated herself and began "Um, Lord Conqueror, I...well I wanted to get as much information before I came to speak with you so I could answer any questions you might ask of me".

The Conqueror gave a small nod at the apology explanation the Queen gave and waited for her to continue.

"My priestess had given me a few updates and it will give you some relief to your current situation...some though is better than nothing".

"Agreed".

"Well, the good news is that there is to be a challenge so Satori will have someone to compete against. So, you can say no to her proposal request. Now, the challenger...well that is where this gets a bit grey".

"Grey?"

"Well yes, as the priestess said that the challenger is to be from the Amazon Nation".

"Really?" the Conqueror said more than asked with an arched eyebrow and a smirk.

"Yes. And no, not me" the Queen replied with a smirk of her own that brought a hearty laugh from the Conqueror. "But later on she gave me a very confusing message. She said I was to aide the challenger who is to assume the role bequeathed by the Gods".

"So you don't know who this is but you are to help?" the Conqueror surmised.

"Yep, that's it in a nutshell".

"Well that's helpful huh?" the Conqueror smirked with sarcasm.

"Yes, that's what I said".

"Well, I've at least a bit more information regarding the issue with the attacks. Apparently when I was still recruiting for my armies across the long seas, I attacked this palace and my men stole some things. In the process someone got hurt. Now I don't know which one of these is the underlying cause for the retaliation attacks or not" the Conqueror rose and crossed her study to a table, there she poured herself some water and drank, "I have to figure out if there is a way to amend all of this without more innocents getting hurt".

"Wow, you certainly have your work cut out before you huh?" Queen Melosa shook her head in disbelief.

"Yeah, you could say that" the Conqueror shrugged her should, "Oh well, nothing else to be had of it. So, tell me how Ephiny is handling her duties and what of this Satori?"

"Well Ephiny is taking her duties quite seriously. But I can see that she knows this is a punishment by the roll of her eyes sometimes when she has to sit by Satori".

This brought a quizzical look to the Conqueror's face.

"Well, it seems that Satori is a bit hung up on you Lord Conqueror" the Queen tried to say while stifling a small chuckle.

This statement brought a look of abject fear to the Conqueror's face.

Queen Melosa couldn't hold her laughter back at this and had to cover her mouth with both

hands.

"Not funny Queen Melosa" growled the Conqueror.

"I apologize Lord Conqueror" the Queen tried to compose herself, clearing her throat;
"apparently Satori is smitten by you and your beauty. She truly believes to be in love with you".

"Oh good grief! She only just met me. How could she?"

"I don't know, but his is what I've been told. Satori is a good warrior Lord Conqueror. She is a hard worker who is diligent and fair. She is pretty good with the chobos and staff. We've never had any issue with her and quite a few of the Amazons go about the tribe pining for her affections".

"But why me? She's never met me before this; she only knows of me through stories. She doesn't even know who I can be, the cruel heartless beast that resides in me and brought me to power through fear and viciousness".

"No rhyme or reason was given when she asked for your bond. Though she did not mention your name until after consent was given, mind you".

"Doesn't anyone know why she just up and researched all these laws one day out of the clear blue?"

"Nope. She was never one to cause any ruckus so when she went about her research they all left her alone".

"I just don't want to see anyone get hurt, I have a feeling...I don't question it...but when all this is said and done, the price will have been paid with someone's life".

"Aye Lord Conqueror. I too do not wish to see anyone hurt".

"Well then, let us hope we can resolve this before that happens then shall we?"

"Aye Lord Conqueror, back to the scrolls then" Queen Melosa rose and bid goodnight to the Conqueror with a bow.

Chapter 36

"So, that's who that is. Wow; she is very beautiful and so...equal to her". Gabrielle said to Nika while walking along the corridor. Nika had found out by talking with one of the Amazons when they had finished serving the evening meal and brought it up in casual conversation with Gabrielle that night on the way back to their room.

"So you've seen her too?" Nika asked.

"Yes, she is being escorted by their Regent and I asked why she would have an escort but no one told me" Gabrielle stopped in one of the archways over looking the courtyard 'That explains so much now' she thought to herself.

"Hey Gab, you going to stay here?" Nika asked as she turned around to see Gabrielle no longer walking besides her.

"Um, yeah. I'm going to walk around a bit" pulling her cloak around her tighter, "G'nite Nika".

"See ya" Nika waved as she turned to walk to their quarters.

'So, she has a royal suitor. That's who she met with and that's the other thing she's concerned about looking in the library for, I'm sure of it' Gabrielle chewed on her thumb nail a bit in thought, 'I've got to find out more...but how? Ephiny won't talk with me...ah! I know...it's too late tonight but maybe in the morning' Gabrielle looked up to the Conqueror's outer chamber window, seeing it lit with the light of the fireplace within, 'Hmm, so...you are trying to sort this out, without telling me...why? Are you afraid of what I'd say or do? Only one way to find this out. My Conqueror...my love' Gabrielle smiled to herself, determined to not let anything take away what she'd finally found; the other half of her soul.

"Daniera, would you set out my sparring clothes for me? I'm going to ask the Conqueror if she'd like...if she'd let me spar with her" Satori set about her morning ritual as she left her tent.

"Sure Satori, I'll have them out for you when you return. Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah sure, what is it?"

"Why ask the Conqueror when you could just spar with our weapons master or Regent?"

"Well, it's not just a spar per se. I want to be able to show the Conqueror I can hold my own as a warrior, even against her. And..." she looked away as if in thought "...it give me the chance to engage her physically up close" as smile to her face was the only indication of the truth of that statement.

Daniera just rolled her eyes and shook her head as Satori left, 'You should do that with our Regent. She sure is someone I'd like to see up close physically, whew' she thought to herself.

Daniera's eyes glazed over in thought of the Regent. Ever since she first set eyes on the Regent, she'd caught herself daydreaming over her.

Daniera had escorted Satori from their camp and listened to her explain all about her want to be with the Conqueror. How she was a true warrior and strategist, how she'd created her realm from nothing with her bare hands. But, she'd never heard her mention about love.

That she loved her or was in love with her, only how great she was and what a prize it would be to be her bed warmer and how she would be looked upon now as her 'bondmate'.

But when she saw the Regent, she was lost.

She'd been captivated by her handsome features. She was tall, at least a head and a half over her. She was a well seasoned warrior with the body to match. Not overly muscled but toned and efficient. She had shoulder length hair that was almost dirty blonde and hung back from her face in curls pulled into a ponytail. Her hazel eyes emitted warmth about her that put one at ease and a genuine smile that went up to her eyes.

But what was she thinking?

She was in a whole other league. She was Regent for centaur's sake! Daniera had yet to establish herself within the tribe...her tribe now...her Regent. *'If she even knew I existed, she'd not be interested in me'* she said wistfully to herself.

Daniera was a diamond in the rough...very rough cut that is what she thought. Of average height and build, she had short light blond hair that was cut in a bob style about her face. Physically fit as compared to some of the others in her old tribe is what was told gained her the slot into the exchange program between the tribes. She had deep brown eyes that would turn almost onyx when her emotions were stoked, and she was easily comfortable with those around her.

'So what would make you think she'd even look at you when she's got the likes of the Conqueror or Satori or even some of the servants walking around? She snorted to herself, 'Dream on!'

Daniera put out Satori's sparring clothes and left the tent to go for a short walk to the creek for some water and time alone, again.

"Hey Pony, what's happening?" Ephiny asked of her weapons master while waiting for Satori to return from her morning ablutions.

"Hey Eph; not much. Just going to take the trainees out for a run and some sparring" she adjusted her sword across her back, "What about you? Still on detail?"

"Yep, she wants to go see if she'll spar with her today..." she rolled her eyes, "...I swear Pony, she is like totally smitten with the Conqueror. Every waking moment is *the Lord Conqueror this, the Lord Conqueror that!* UGH!"

"How'd ya end up doing this anyways? Why not give it to one of the lower ranks?" Eponin asked in sympathy.

"Long story, but can't...so I just try to block it all out. I wonder how her escort managed with her for that long?!"

"Oh yeah, Dani something" Eponin scratched her head in an attempt to try and remember her name, "Ah, Daniera, that's it!" she snapped her fingers at the same time "She must either be deaf or have the patience of a Goddess" snickered Eponin.

"So, who is this Daniera anyways?" asked Ephiny trying to sound disinterested and as if doing nothing more than ask as the Regent would of her tribe members, but infact she had noticed her when she saw her talking with Satori earlier the evening before.

"She's from the Southern tribe, exchange program. Apparently a cross between a healer and a teacher or something of those sorts" Eponin glanced at her then back to the tent opening, "Comes highly recommended from Queen Cyane".

"Oh? That's good. The last lot we had come through couldn't start a fire in Tartarus!" Ephiny smirked.

"Yeah, glad they decided to go back. Would have been hard to get them into a routine with us" standing and walking to the entry "Well, let me go stir up the kids, small run around the palace grounds ought to warm'em up".

"Huh? Yeah. Take it easy on 'em Pony. Remember they are still new to this"

"All the more reason to break 'em in" she smiled wickedly.

"Ooooh you are evil Pony!"

"Yes. Thanks for the compliment" with a wink she was gone.

"Well, a little water ought to clear up these morning cobwebs before I get my ears plugged" she sighed to herself, leaving the tent and heading towards the encampment fresh water supply, the creek.

Gabrielle entered the forest...not sure how to go about this. Carefully walking up to the altar and placing an offering of fresh flowers on the plate and kneeling she began, "Um...I ...I don't know where to begin or what to do as this is my first time, but Goddess Aphrodite...if you please...I ask for your help" she lowered her head and began with what she thought to be the only way to...by talking, "Goddess Aphrodite, I've always said my prayers to you in my heart and to Artemis. Never once have I asked for your assistance..." *'Though I think you abandoned me for some transgression I do not know'* she thought to herself, "I have been getting weird dreams from Morpheus and my emotions are wrecking havoc on me..."

She let a few moments of silence past before she continued "Please Goddess Aphrodite, I love her and I am so afraid of it all" she pleaded with anguish in her voice while covering her eyes when she began to cry which finally got the best of the Goddess.

She began to appear as a shimmering light, while Gabrielle's emotions overwhelmed her and caused her small body to shake.

"Shhh....it's okay pumpkin...I'm here" she soothed as she materialized sitting to the side of the kneeling bard and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, which immediately calmed her.

"Pumpkin, we never abandoned you. Why do you think you've been spared the horrors of what men can do? It is all part of the path the Fates have spun for you".

Gabrielle looked down to her hands, embarrassed at having had her thoughts heard by the Goddess, "I apologize Goddess Aphrodite. I meant no disrespect to your protection over me".

"It's okay sweetie. Now, tell me all about tall, dark and brooding and what I can do for you" she winked.

Blushing a deep red, Gabrielle stammered "Um....I ...um".

"Okay, okay. Start by taking a deep breath and then" Aphrodite reassured her.

Taking a deep breath and exhaling Gabrielle began "She's just perfect. She is so gentle and caring...she thinks things out before saying or doing anything. She is so beautiful...and her eyes...I could swim in her eyes forever..."

"Um sweetie...I meant about you two" Aphrodite pointed to Gabrielle and then toward the palace "as in what's going on...I know about her looks and can I tell you congrats...she is definitely a catch" she winked at the thoroughly bright flush red of Gabrielle's face.

"Oh, sorry. Yes...um, well...she...um...we seem to be getting to know one another. She has forgiven me the error of breaking her law regarding a slave learning to use a weapon and she ahs set me free...she gave me my freedom Goddess Aphrodite...wow, I mean..."

"She's never done that for both things Gabrielle, you know this?"

"Uh no, I didn't" Gabrielle replied sheepishly.

"Sweetie, what is it that you want to know? I can see it ...your love for her and I'll let you in on a little secret..." the Goddess looked left and right and leaned down to Gabrielle's face cupping her ear so no one else would hear, "It's meant to be" she pulled back and winked at the astonished look on Gabrielle's face.

Stunned into silence, Gabrielle could only open and close her mouth like a stunned fish. Finally, "oh wow".

"So pumpkin, whatcha need to know?" the Goddess asked.

"If it's meant to be, who is this Amazon and why is this happening? Gabrielle asked as she stood and walked away a few paces from the Goddess.

"Ah yes, that. Well it seems someone is trying to interfere in a destiny...for personal reasons" the Goddess finished with tenseness in her voice.

"Who?"

"That is something that you needn't worry about pumpkin'...but I am more concerned with you"

"Me? Why?"

Goddess Aphrodite looked up to the sky, closed her eyes and shook her head slightly 'father, you made this too hard!' she thought to herself. "Gabrielle, there are many things that I can not speak of...due to the rules I am bound by. But, know this. You are to learn all that you can from everyone you can. No matter how minute a detail, take it in. It will be your savior in the end" she took a deep breath, "Do you understand what I say to you?"

Gabrielle did not respond right away, instead she wrapped her arms tightly around herself and walked back and forth in front of the still seated Goddess. After what the Goddess thought was only a moment but in fact was almost a half candle mark, Gabrielle stopped and looked up to the Goddess, "So something is going to happen. I've got to prepare for it by talking in all the lessons I can learn from everyone who has to offer them. This is going to help sort all of these problems that Xen...the Conqueror has".

The Goddess tilted her head slightly to one side with a broad smile to her face, "You can call her Xena, as you definitely are the love to and of her life. And yes, you have deciphered that correctly".

Taking a deep breath, Gabrielle looked down to her boots and then back up to the Goddess, "So when does this...when do I..."

"You have plenty of time, I've seen you sparring with Ephiny and Xena, and you take to it naturally. You'll know when it is time and what to do all on your own. The Amazon is only being led by the person interfering; she is an innocent in all of this. Do not let her presence detract you from what you must accomplish" the Goddess rose and strode the few paces to where Gabrielle stood, "We will be here along the way, watching and making sure no one interferes anymore" she placed a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder, "take care of each other Gabrielle...there is more to come before it is all over" and she disappeared leaving the warmth of her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder the only remnant of her having been there.

Chapter 37

The water in the creek bubbled by, its soothing sounds drifting over the prone figure seated by a boulder, taking in the warmth of the morning sun.

A flick of the wrist and a leaf was tossed into the stream, floating along over the smooth rocks down its unknown path to another location.

"Don't you wish life could be so smooth?"

A voice from over Daniera's shoulder startled her to jump up and reach for a rock while standing in defense.

"Sorry, shouldn't have snuck up on you like that" Ephiny said while holding her hands up in a halting gesture and then a slight one shouldered shrug.

"Oh, Regent Ephiny it's you" Daniera recognized her after her heart came down out of her throat. "I, um thought I was the only one here" dropping the rock.

"You were, I saw you sitting there and was going to turn back but...I don't know...just didn't" she looked over the flowing water, "I don't mean to interrupt, I'll leave you be" she turned to go.

"No...no it's okay Regent. I was...I just come up here to clear my mind and gather some peace and quiet before the day begins".

"Yeah, me too" taking a deep breath Ephiny continued, "I just need it before another day of..." she stopped, catching herself before she said something she might regret.

"We've not properly met Regent; I am Daniera from Queen Cyane's Southern Tribe on the exchange program" she saluted.

"Yes, I know of you Daniera. You come highly recommended".

A slight nod of Daniera's head was her acknowledgement of the compliment.

"Can I ask you a question Daniera? I don't want to interrupt your time here".

"No, please Regent..." she gestured with her hand in approval.

"First, call me Ephiny, that Regent thing is so over the top".

"Um, I was instructed to always respect and honor our Queen and Regent with their titles".

"It's okay...if it makes you feel any better you can call me that when we're around others, but when we're alone...just you and I please call me Ephiny, Okay?" 'Now why did I say that?' she thought to herself after the words were out of her mouth.

"Um, o..okay...Ep...Ephiny" Daniera stuttered at the embarrassment she felt.

A small smile to Epiny's face relaxed her a bit in return, "Well, what I wanted to ask you was when you escorted Satori, could you tell me a bit about what you discussed with her?"

"Anything specific Rege...Ephiny?" Daniera corrected herself.

"Well, did she talk about anything else besides the Lord Conqueror?"

"Actually, no. She just droned on and on. At first I was quite excited of the opportunity to escort her here. But after a few days, I began to regret it" she turned towards the rising sun and closed her eyes enjoying the warmth, "she kept on about the notoriety of being associated with the Lord

Conqueror. About all the things she accomplished, never one about I..." Daniera stopped talking, taking into account what she was going to say and to whom. "Anyways, when we arrived here, I was so relieved that I was no longer to be her escort and just help her with some tasks. I was glad she got put into someone else's lap for a while so my ears could recover" suddenly she realized it was the Regent who's lap she got dumped on "OH MY! Regent Ephiny...I apologize. That was so uncalled for" she covered her mouth with her hand and lowered her head.

"Yeah, well...it's okay. It's sort of not undeserved".

Daniera looked up with a confused look to her eyes.

"Long story...but I do understand what you say about her just not knowing when to stop".

They both stood there, looking at the water streaming by in silence.

Finally, "Well, I must get back. I'm sure she is more than ready to go to see the Lord Conqueror" Ephiny said.

"Yes, I have been asked to leave out her sparring gear. She was to seek out the Lord Conqueror for a sparring session if she'd agreed to it".

Both thought to themselves 'Maybe she'll knock some sense into her!'

"Mind if I escort you back?" Ephiny asked, "It would be the first one done in silence this week" she joked.

"Thank you" Daniera replied and they turned to the encampment, walking back in companionable silence.

As she walked through the palace corridor, Gabrielle didn't really notice the person coming in the opposite direction until they were right in front of her, "Hello...Gabrielle isn't it?" Startled from her thoughts, Gabrielle looked up "Oh Queen Melosa" she stated as she started to bow then in the middle of movement realized she was no longer a slave and required to do such a thing, so she instead gave a curt nod to the Queen, "Yes, it is".

Queen Melosa noticed the start then stop as Gabrielle readjusted her response and she smiled at the new found confidence the young lady was displaying. "Congratulations on your freedom by the way. It must feel very liberating to have your whole life given back to you to do as you choose?"

"Um, thank you. Yes, it is still very surreal to me but I am appreciating it more and more each day" she replied with a warm smile.

"So what do you foresee with your life at your feet now? And from what I am to understand, a small fortune as well?" Queen Melosa asked with genuine interest, "You can do so much now, see different places, and experience many things".

"I...I haven't really gone that far into thought about it. I guess once winter is gone I'll see what options are available. But for now, I am enjoying it here and learning so much".

"Ah yes, there is a wealth of knowledge here" the Queen nodded slightly with looking out over through the archway to the courtyard below, "You know, I almost envy you your new found freedom Gabrielle".

"Me? My freedom? Why? I mean you're a Queen. You can do anything you want" a clearly shocked and confused Gabrielle asked back.

"You have a true freedom Gabrielle. Yes, I am Queen but I am not free. I have responsibilities to my tribe and nation. I have escorts wherever I go, I have meetings to attend, elders to account to and must enforce laws. You are only responsible for yourself, mind you I don't take my responsibilities any less or begrudge my duties...but sometimes...like now...I can see the world at your feet and wonder what it would be like not be obligated" taking a deep sighing breath and then releasing it, "But oh well, I can't dawdle on the what if's of life. I am grateful at least that I don't have the burdens the Lord Conqueror has..." she looked to see the reaction of the Lord Conqueror's name being mentioned and her burdens would have on Gabrielle.

"The Lord Conqueror? What burdens?"

'Aha, so we're interested?' she thought to herself, "Well, she has the empire as her responsibility and everyone in it. I only have my tribe and my nation's interests. Plus she has other issues now".

"Other issues?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yes, with Solstice coming up, there are the festivities to arrange. Then these attacks and finding out who these men are under control of and then...um...an issue of a um...personal matter".

"Personal matter?"

"Yes, but it is not for me to discuss. Maybe you would be able to assist? I know you have been attending duties for her and she could use all the support...especially at this...trying time. That's if you're up to the...challenge?" the Queen chose her words carefully.

"Of course! I'd do...we'd all do anything to help the Conqueror out".

"Remember Gabrielle. The future influences the present just as much as the past. Good day".
"Um, Good day Queen Melosa".

Chapter 38

A knock at the door broke the trance the Conqueror was in, "Yes, enter" she replied.

"My Lord; I brought you some tea and pastry that Ophelia bid me to bring to you".

Looking up from the scrolls she was working on, she smiled a genuine heartfelt smile at the site of Gabrielle, "Hey little one".

As soon as the door was closed and their privacy ensured, Gabrielle put the tray down and walked into the Conqueror's open arms as she stood by the desk.

They held each other for a few candle drops, enjoying the tranquil moment of peace with each other.

"I didn't interrupt anything did I?" Gabrielle asked looking over at the scrolls on the desk.

"No, you didn't. I've just got to start figuring out the details for the Solstice Celebrations. Each year we have some festivities to celebrate and it's usually the empire's financial responsibility to provide".

"Oh, that sounds like a lot of work".

"Yes and no. I am given some suggestions by my council and I either approve or change them. Then I provide authority for the money I say is required. The hard work is done by the people putting it together".

"But that's still hard to do Xena. You can make or break the event with your choices".

"Well yes, but I never think about that. I just let them for the most part, do what they want".

Gabrielle stepped from her embrace and went to the tray, gathering it "Come and take a break, please?"

Looking up again Xena replied, "How can I resist?"

"Ah, that feels good" taking a long sip of the hot tea, Xena sat back on the couch against the wall in the study.

"Is your throat sore?" Gabrielle asked concerned while reaching up to touch the Conqueror's forehead for signs of a fever.

"Nah, just feeling a bit cool tonight and this has definitely warmed me up. Taking a pastry and popping it into her mouth, "Thanks for this".

"Don't thank me, Ophi did all the work".

"But you made me take a break, I forget to do that sometimes" Xena shrugged.

"Well I'll make sure you won't from now on...My Conqueror" Gabrielle teased.

"Oooh, I like that...both statements!" Xena winked at Gabrielle who blushed back.

"So have you figured out who the person is that is causing these attacks?"

"Well, I'm getting more of an idea that it has to do with my men's actions and what happened in the castle. So now I've got to find out who the leader is and what it is he intends to do" rubbing her forehead in frustration, "I don't want anyone else getting hurt....not because of me...again" she whispered the last word.

"My Lord...Xena....you aren't to blame or at fault for people getting hurt. It happens all the time".

"But it is my fault Gabrielle. Those men where under my instruction not to hurt anyone and because they didn't obey, someone did get hurt, killed. They were; are my responsibility and their actions are mine as well. Now because of that, others have been hurt...when will it end?"

Xena got up from the couch and began to pace, "No one should be harmed for the careless actions of others! I've done enough brutalizing in my life to last eons just because I wanted more. More power, more land, more control. I'm tired Gabrielle, tired".

"Oh Xena" Gabrielle rose and embraced her, "I'm so sorry".

The Conqueror laughed mirthlessly, "Funny, no one has ever said that to me in such a manner and actually meant to comfort me".

"Well, I am not everyone else and I will when I think you need to hear it!" Gabrielle responded confidently looking into her eyes.

Looking down into Gabrielle's eyes, "You are certainly much more than what you seem little one" cupping her chin, "So much more" she leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

"Thank you" straightening back up, "Now, I've got to finish this or least get some more done...what are you doing today?" She walked back over to her desk.

"Oh, just going to the library and research some things" Gabrielle replied while putting the mugs back on the now empty tray.

"Sounds about as exciting as my day" she said with a note of sarcasm while rolling her eyes.

"Well, I'll leave you to enjoy your fun as much as possible" Gabrielle winked back at the Conqueror and turned to leave.

"Will I see you later?" the Conqueror asked.

"If My Lord so wishes" she replied coyly.

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow and smiled with a grin at the seductive nature of such a teasing

response, "I do so".

"As you *wish* My Lord", Gabrielle gave a small nod while smiling suggestively before leaving.

Once Gabrielle had left, the Conqueror's entire body shuddered in response to the intimation, "Oh My!" shaking her head to clear her mind of the thoughts she knew she would sink to if she let them, "I've got to get this done....concentrate! Before I die of frustration!" chuckling to herself.

'Oh dear' Daniera said to herself.

She could see the angered look on Satori's face and the look of exasperation on the Regent's as they returned from the palace.

"I'm going to ask Eponin if I might join her in this afternoon's training session" Satori stated to Ephiny through gritted teeth.

"Okay, I'll catch you there".

Satori gruffly walked towards her tent to change her clothes.

Ephiny watched her walk away and shook her head, "Eeewwwweeeee, that's one spitfire temper she's got!"

"Who? Satori?" Daniera startled the Regent when she walked up to her in silence.

"Wha...oh, um yeah. Hi Daniera".

"Hello Regent Ephiny" she replied as they were amongst other Amazons in the encampment and she still found it difficult not to respect her with her title.

"Is she mad at you?" the idea made Daniera bristle. That Satori could be that way towards her regent.

"No, not me....the *love* of her life" she said while rolling her eyes, "the Lord Conqueror".

"Really? Why?"

"Because the Lord Conqueror said no. She would not spar with her as she had *important* matters to attend to".

"Ouch".

"Yep. It didn't go over real well. But..." Ephiny looked about and leaned into Daniera as if to whisper a private statement, "...you should have seen her hold her tongue to not smart mouth back to the Conqueror. She looked like she swallowed leeches covered in fire sauce".

Daniera was a bit overwhelmed when Ephiny leaned into her, coming so close to her ear to whisper she actually felt her breath on her.

She tried to focus on the words Ephiny was saying rather than the effect her warm breath and close body were causing on her chilled skin.

When she heard what she had said, Daniera burst out in snort laughter and quickly covered her mouth with her hands, flushing red in embarrassment at the outburst.

Ephiny chuckled at her reaction, "That's a cute laugh" before she even thought of what she was saying and to who. Then it was her turn to blush, "Um, I'm going to go get lunch. See ya" abruptly leaving a bewildered Daniera to stare at her retreating form.

The winter cold was gripping to the land with its fiercely cold tentacles. It was a very bleak and desolate time for anyone to be outside. Even the Amazon Queen was having second thoughts of their encampment arrangements.

"My Queen, surely we can manage" Ephiny was attempting to convince Queen Melosa that they could survive the weather.

"No Eph. As much as I know you are a proud bunch, I have to look at the overall welfare of the tribe; that means everyone. This weather has really started to affect us and already half the camp is fighting a cold bug..." she huddled near the fire pit wrapping her cloak about her tighter, "No Eph. I've made my decision. I'm going to go speak with the Conqueror and ask to move our camp into the palace until this passes. Maybe even just use the facilities there as she originally offered" she stood and exited her tent, heading towards the palace.

Ephiny sighed heavily, rolling her eyes upwards to the top of the tent "Great, not only do I have to babysit Ms. *I am so in love with the Lord Conqueror and my leathers don't stink.* But now I run the chance of seeing her again". She exasperatedly thumped her hands on her thighs and exited the tent.

"Sure, by all means Queen Melosa. If you need any help moving, Abraxus will get my troops to assist" the Conqueror said encouragingly.

"No, no Lord Conqueror. That's not necessary. The last thing I would want is to get their feathers in a knot more that they are now. They're a good group of Amazon women, but proud. Last thing they would want is to have a man bail them out. It would make them feel...well, kind of like helpless and that a man has to come rescue them" Queen Melosa said begrudgingly.

"Well, I can understand that. Okay, but if it is too much at least let me get Abraxus to have all the female servants and guards assist if needed".

"Thank you Lord Conqueror. It won't be but just in case okay. I'll get them started right now. We should all be in by tonight".

"Great, tell you what. I'll get Ophelia to put a big spread on and make it festive so that your Amazons will have their minds taken off having to move and be inside, how does that sound?"

"Grand. Thank you once again for your hospitality Lord Conqueror. They'll definitely appreciate warm food and atmosphere" rising, Queen Melosa bowed and left the Conqueror's study.

Chapter 39

The move hadn't gone as well as planned as the weathers fury came down on the Amazons with a vengeance. A few of the Amazons were caught mid-thigh in a snow drift while trying to dissemble their tents.

Queen Melosa had to send for the Conqueror's servants and guards to help those weak with the cold bug while others went to the aid of those stuck in the snow.

When the final few Amazons had arrived with Queen Melosa, as she would not leave them until the very last one was in, they looked wretched.

"I want everyone changed into dry clothes before coming to evening meal Eph" Queen Melosa stated while removing her own extremely heavy snow drenched cloak.

"Yes, My Queen" Ephiny turned to get them settled in.

"That includes you too Eph. I know you are very stoic but I don't need you dropping with the bug as well and then have to contend with Ms. Personality running around loose".
A sigh, "Yes My Queen" and went to do her bidding.

It was two candle marks later than expected when the Amazons finally made their way to the dining hall.

"Queen Melosa, is everyone okay?"

"Yes Lord Conqueror. Thank you for everything. I didn't know there were so many servants and guards here, and some of them quite strong".

"Well, they do a lot here. A few are members of my guard, a well trained and fit group".

"Ah, I was wondering. I saw two take a litter up and move with ease through the drift. They were dressed similarly".

"Yes, even though they were not on duty, they volunteered and it's quite normal to see them dress alike. It's easier to maintain uniforms and clothing plus identify who they are".

Taking a long drink from a warmed cup of cider wine, "Ohhh that feels so good" Queen Melosa closed her eyes as the warmth of the drink eased down her throat.

A murmur of agreement came from Ephiny who sat silently at her side.

"Glad you finally came in; that weather is not fit for anyone to be out in" the Conqueror listened to the howl of the wind.

Across the hall, Gabrielle sat with Nika amongst a few of the Amazons. Seeing a newly arrived member Gabrielle presumed her to be one of the three Ophi had mentioned.

"Gabrielle, tell us a story" Nika asked, "something to get our minds off of this weather".

A few heads lifted up to look from Nika to Gabrielle, wondering who it was that was asked to storytell.

Gabrielle could see the solemn look in the eyes of those watching her. They looked so sad and almost...defeated, "Okay, what type would you like to hear? A drama, romance? Oh, I know...adventure!"

Clearing her throat Gabrielle began, "There once was a young blonde haired girl who lived in a small farming village. She and her younger sister had gone to the village markets when a group of slavers happened upon them. The men made it known that they intended to enslave them to be sold in lands afar.

The young blond girl did something noble, she offered herself up in hopes that her sister be set free. A passing warrior heard commotion and came over to investigate and listen.

This warrior was no average sword wielder, for she was as beautiful as one of the goddesses and as tall as the day long. She had raven hair that was pulled back and draped long past her shoulders and eyes the color of the sky.

Upon hearing what was going on and watching this young girl make such a sacrifice, the warrior who had only just made the life altering decision to give up being a warlord warrior, advanced on the slavers who had begun to grope the valiant young girl".

The entire dining hall was quiet as Gabrielle wove her magic. Her voice was like honey and drew the listeners like bees to a hive.

Her story took them through a maze of emotions; gratefulness, sadness of rejection, hope of salvation, yearning for redemption to ultimately elation of love.

Gabrielle had all eyes focused on her and attention to her words.

Looking up one moment, she caught the Conqueror's gaze and was the recipient of such adoration looking back at her; she flushed with timidity and then embarrassment when she was also given a wink.

When she finished there was a tiny moment of absolute silence before the hall erupted into applause.

"My, she is a talented and interesting young lady. Don't you think Lord Conqueror?" Queen Melosa asked as she leaned slightly over to her side to ensure being heard over the applause and kudos.

Looking still at Gabrielle, the Conqueror could only nod while smiling lovingly at the young girl.

"Interesting indeed" the Queen muttered to herself only to look to her other side and see a puzzling look on her regent's face.

She tracked her gaze and it seemed she was looking first forlorn at Gabrielle but then her gaze shifted slightly and a small smile came to her lips edging towards her eyes as she focused on the Amazon who was trying to engage Gabrielle in conversation with the dozen others who wanted her attention as well.

"Gabrielle, I am Daniera. Well met".

"Oh hello Daniera, nice to meet you" Gabrielle replied.

"That was a most intriguing and suspenseful adventure story. Might I ask where you learned of it?" Daniera asked as the inquisitive side of her tutorial mind sought out more knowledge.

"Oh it's not something I've ever read or heard" she replied while reaching for a drink, "I made that one up" taking a drink from her cider, easing her parched throat.

"That is a true talent, it was well rounded with all one could ask for in an adventure".

"Thank you. I am glad everyone enjoyed it".

"I am or was a teacher at the Southern Tribe and wish I could make stories such as that to entertain the little children when in class" Daniera said with a wistful tone.

"Oh, a teacher. That is great. You get to mould and sculpt minds that have no preconceived notions into being that can do so much good in this world" Gabrielle said animatedly.

"You make it sound such a noble cause" Daniera chuckled.

"Oh but it is. Where else could you give them the tools and put them to practical use that will be carried by these little individuals for the rest of their mortal lives" she said with sincerity.

"I...wow...I never looked at it in that manner. I just took it as time to occupy them until they were old enough to be assigned their roles within the tribe" Daniera replied while reflecting on the deep statement.

"No, no Daniera. It is an opportunity of a lifetime" Gabrielle enthusiastically encouraged and finished her drink, "an opportunity of their lifetimes!".

"Well thank you once again Gabrielle. You've given me much to think about. Good night".

"Good night Daniera, maybe we can talk again some time".

"I'd like that very much, yes. Thank you".

The hall emptied as late was the hour and exhausted were the bodies that occupied it.

"Daniera, would you spare a moment?"

"Regent Ephiny, of course".

They waited until they were almost alone to continue talking.

"Would you mind if I walked back with you to the quarters?" Ephiny asked after watching Gabrielle leave with Sephina and Nika.

"No my Regent, thank you but isn't Satori expecting your escort?"

"No, she chose not to attend this evening. She did not want to...never mind. So did you enjoy the story?"

"Yes, was it not excellent? She has a gift of the bard and quite a different view on life" Daniera praised with appreciation in her voice.

"Ummhmmm" Ephiny nodded.

"I never thought to look at teaching from the perspective she put it in. It makes me feel as if I have such a responsibility now. It is refreshing".

Ephiny did not know how to take Daniera's reaction to Gabrielle as either praise or idolization. But she could feel herself getting protective, angry and jealous at what she believed to be as Gabrielle luring her away. Shaking her head to clear herself of such thoughts and pay attention to Daniera, she almost missed a question to her.

"So, do you think the story she told was good?"

"Um, I don't know. I've never heard it before but it was entertaining to say the least".

"Yes, it was. She seems to be level headed and so full of life, does she not?"

"Uh, yeah, sure" Ephiny replied awkwardly as she still did not know how to talk with the woman lest talk about her.

"Well, it will be nice to sleep warmly tonight. It is the coldest I've seen in such a long time. I am

glad the Queen chose to finally come in".
"Yeah, I must admit it is nice inside".

"Well, here I am" Daniera motioned to the door of her shared quarters she was to be bunked in for the duration of their stay, "So, where are you housed?"

Rolling her yes with a look of aggravation, "I actually have to share my quarters with Satori. Since we have taken up so much of the palace and her being considered as a royal suitor, the Queen thought it would be more practical for us to share".

Daniera was quite shocked at this news tidbit. She did not take it well. At first it was the shock of finding out but then something started in her that she could not identify right away. It felt like anger but not towards Ephiny. No, it wasn't toward the Queen for putting her there either. Then it finally dawned on her, it was jealousy.

'What?!' she thought to herself as she shook her head while Ephiny watched the change in her face with concern.

'Me jealous...of her...but yes! She is getting to sleep with her. To see what she wears on that muscular and smooth body...to see what she looks like as she rests and dreams...to hear her whispers in her dreams...'

"Daniera? Daniera?" Ephiny called out.

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"I said are you okay? You went somewhere just now".

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was lost there for a candle drop" as she turned her face away to hid her emotions, "I...um...well goodnight..." she looked around the corridor "Ephiny".

A puzzled Ephiny quirked her head but did not question her further, "Good night Daniera" as she watched her turn and enter her quarters.

'For a moment there I could have sworn she was...nah' shaking her head as well to dispel the thought she took a deep breath, "Well let's go see if the wicked witch is home".

Chapter 40

The first few days the Amazons were inside took a lot of getting used to by everyone. Not only were there over twenty of them but they were twenty restless warriors which often led to higher tension and shorter tempers.

"I am so not putting up with another night of her snoring! I will be the first Regent in history to kill not only another Amazon intentionally due to lack of sleep but a Royal Suitor at that! And I'd gladly die to do it!" Ephiny stalked back and forth in the Queen's room while furiously spouting

her anger over her lack of sleep, "She even snores on her stomach. NO-ONE snores while lying on their stomach!" she cried out incredulously.

The Queen stifled her outburst of laughter seeing that her regent was very well near her breaking point.

"I need sleep My Queen. I need to rest...after three days...I ...I just can't do it anymore! Just kill me now...Please!" she implored her Queen who sat in near tears, trying not to laugh at her distress.

"Oh Ephiny. I'm sorry. I really am not laughing at you...honestly" but she was holding her sides in pain from the stitches of laughter.

"Oh hardee har har My Queen. Laugh it up. It's only that I will be laughing in the end when I kill her then myself and you have no regent to take care of your duties for you".

"Oh Eph, don't be so melodramatic. It's not that bad..." she hesitated "...is it?"

"I've not slept in three whole days My Queen. Three! Count them" as she held up three fingers in the air to emphasize the point.

"Okay, okay. Tell you what. I'll get you to swap with Daniera. She can bunk with her until this weather passes or this matter of her suitor business is resolved".

"What? No!" Ephiny replied and upon seeing the shocked look at her outburst tried to explain her reaction, "I mean...um...no...um that won't be necessary My Queen".

"But you just said..."

"Well, Daniera's suffered enough with her already don't you think? She had to travel with her and all" she tried to explain...weakly.

"Ookay. So how about I put Pony with her? They can try to out snore each other but that'll mean you bunk with Daniera, is that okay?"

Ephiny diverted her eyes nervously and very imperceptibly nodded her answer as she bit her lower lip.

This did not go unnoticed by the Queen but she wanted to find out a bit more before she asked her Regent about her response and her actions every time she was around Daniera.

"Alright Ephy. Make the necessary changes so that you can..." she stopped and looked directly at Ephiny "...rest tonight".

Ephiny caught the direct look and figured deep down the Queen had her suspicions but was not saying anything at the moment.

"Thank you My Queen" she saluted and left before Queen Melosa would ask her anything else.

"Hey Pony" Ephiny called to her weapons master.

"Yeah?"

"You've got my bunk now. We're swapping".

"What?"

"Yup, I get your bunk and you and the human sucking cyclone can try to pull the palace stones down on yourselves".

"I don't snore!"

"Yeah, right. And I'm your fairy godmother with wings on".

"No fair. How come I have to? Why not Daniera or some other helpless mug?"

"Nope, she's royal suitor..." Ephiny said while making quotation marks in the air with her fingers, "so since I guard escort her during the day and Daniera's already done it coming here, we get a reprieve. When I sleep she still has someone to watch over her and that will be you" she finished by pointing at her.

Eponin grumbled some unintelligible words that Ephiny could have sworn had her doing something with a cow but said nothing as she was getting out of it easier than she was.

"Fine!" Eponin finally exhaled, grabbed her things and exited the room toward her new sleeping quarters.

"Well that went well" Ephiny said out loud to herself.

Daniera was out and about the palace grounds so Ephiny did not have to explain the move to her right now which suited her just fine considering she need to work on the explanation she was going to give her regarding the new sleeping arrangements.

"So little one. Now that you've gotten all your money from my counsel..." the Conqueror said but thought to herself, *'I am going to have a little chat with them about dragging their feet for so long...maybe a little hard work will remind them of their responsibilities and it's perks'* she smirked and gathered her thoughts back to where she was "...what are your plans?"

The Conqueror and Gabrielle sat in her private study. Gabrielle was seated on the soft bench nestled with her back against the Conqueror's chest as she had her wrapped up in her arms. The Conqueror sat with her right leg fully extended casually to the floor and her left leg bent at the knee up on the bench with Gabrielle in between them.

She had her strong arms protectively embracing Gabrielle.

"I know that I don't want to leave you Xena or leave here. But, I'm confused as to what I can do or should do" she stared into the fireplace across from them "I just can't do nothing all day. I haven't all the money in the world to be expecting to live the life of a royal noble nor would I if I did. I have to do something".

"Yes, I can see that you are not one to lounge about. It would drive me crazy not to be able to have a purpose and do some work. Do you like working with Ophelia or maybe Tidimous?"

"Oh I like working with both of them. But, I don't know if I want to do what they do..."

"Well, you don't have to rush. It's not like I'm throwing you out into the street" she tickled her to ease the tension she felt in the lithe body in her arms.

After a few giggles, "Thank you Xena. For not only that but being so supportive".

"Anything to see you happy little one. Now with that in mind, what say to going to bed?"

"Oh, um...uh" panicking Gabrielle began to stammer.

When she felt Gabrielle tense at the words, Xena mentally kicked herself "Not with me Gabrielle. I meant for you to go to bed and get some sleep. Morning comes fairly quickly for you and I have things yet to do this evening".

"Oh," blushing embarrassed at what she believed to be the Conqueror wanting to bed her she apologized, "I am sorry. I did not mean to..."

"It's okay Gabrielle. I hold you in too high a regard to sully your virtue in such a way" the disappointment came as a new emotion for both of them.

'Well I guess that won't happen with her by any gauge of her reaction' thought the Conqueror sadly.

Gabrielle was admonishing herself at the same time as being terrified.

Terrified at the fact that it was the Conqueror, the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire and what an immense connotation that carried.

Admonishment of presuming the Conqueror would do that after proclaiming her word to her in the tower that night.

Finally, disappointment of not being with the Conqueror in that aspect.

Gently lifting Gabrielle and both of them standing, the Conqueror led her to the door of her

private study. She took Gabrielle's hand in her own and looked down into confused eyes, "Good night little one" and placed a gentle kiss on her hand.

"I..." Gabrielle started.

Placing a finger to her lips, the Conqueror stopped her from speaking, "Rest little one" she said looking deep into Gabrielle's eyes with a voice that held no malice or anger but Gabrielle could hear sadness and disappointment in her ears.

The Conqueror opened the door and Gabrielle bowed and exited knowing the evening was at an end.

No one rested well that night and many blamed the cold cloud covered moonless night the next day.

Ephiny had explained to a shocked Daniera, who entered her room to find her there, that Satori was keeping her awake at night snoring and that she had reached her limit of going without sleep so the Queen let her swap with Eponin as she had not been given the pleasure of her company as of yet but Daniera had.

That was accepted eagerly by Daniera who had come to terms with her new found jealousy over her regent being with her. But it did nothing to assuage the discomfort they both felt at having to change clothes with each other in the room or sleeping when they each felt the other would be watching.

The only comfort came when Ephiny met Satori the next morning and found the normally composed and relaxed looking warrior disheveled and haggard with dark circles under her eyes complaining of no sleep due to the weapons masters snoring.

"I have to buy Pony a flagon of wine for this" she thought.

"Ophi, I am so mad at myself!" Gabrielle fumed.

"What for child?" Ophelia replied while cutting vegetables for the noon meal.

"I am such a ...a ...I don't know what!" she exasperatedly threw her hands up in the air.

"Oooh child, what's got ya bee in ya bum?"

"I stuck my foot into my mouth up to my knee that's what. I presumed the Conqueror to want to take me to bed and she practically threw me out!"

"What? Okay, okay..." Ophelia stopped cutting, wiped her hands on her ever present apron and took Gabrielle by the arms pushing her down onto a stool by the fire pit, "Start from the beginning".

Taking a deep breath she began, "we were seated cuddling by the fire place in her private study and she said about going to bed and making me happy. I thought she meant...you know..." she blushed, "...but she saw that I froze at the words and then explained to me she meant for me to go to sleep...on my own..." she ran a hand through her hair frustrated, "she didn't even kiss me good night like usual and then opened the door for me to leave".

Ophelia shook her head in a manner that Gabrielle took to be a bit of exasperation and mild scolding all rolled into one.

"Child, ya don't really knows her yet do ya?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gabrielle replied indignantly.

"She had a look on her face when ya left, right?"

"Yes"

"What did that look say to ya?"

"She was..." Gabrielle looked away, "..sad and disappointed" she whispered.

"Uh huh. She did not get mad at ya did she?"

"No"

"She didn't yell or get angry, did she?"

"No"

"Child, she was hurtin. She cares for ya somethin fierce. But she's right honorable when it comes to ya innocence. She won't do harm or wrong by ya no matter what and to top it off...she loves ya child".

"I know".

"More than likely, she's hurt of ya reaction. For what it meant".

"But I ..."

"Child, in her eyes ya afraid of lying with her".

"But ...but I'm not! I just have never..."

"I know, I know. And she knows that too. But she is a passionate woman...very passionate and intense. She wouldn't want someone who doesn't want to be with her, even if it were just for physical pleasure" Ophelia tried to explain.

"Oh Ophi. I do not not...I mean I want to be with her...it's just that I don't know how".

"Oh sweetie, I wish I could help. But that's somethin I can't help ya with. It's somethin between the two of ya to sort out. But just know this me dear, she loves ya".

"I know Ophi, honestly I know".

Just then a huge clamor outside stopped all speaking and brought an eerie silence throughout the palace.

"Abraxus? Where is he?" the Conqueror bellowed.

"Lord Conqueror, General Abraxus is on his way in from the field" a soldier replied as he ran towards one of the barracks.

The Conqueror had been walking along the courtyard pathway towards the palace library when the sound rolled over them. It had stopped the Conqueror mid step, as she knew the sounds from distant memory; the sound of a siege engine wrecking havoc from an open field to plunder.

The Conqueror turned abruptly and stalked quickly to the courtyard where one of her battle commanders had come out from the barracks and awaited her arrival.

"Bruton, report" she barked.

"Lord Conqueror, scouts report seeing movement from Lechaio and Loutraki. But we haven't confirmed them yet".

"Confirmed them? What do you think that noise was earlier? Confirmation of movement!".

"Aye Lord Conqueror. What orders?"

"Get the troops mobilized. I want Abraxus to lead the 2nd and 4th battalions to Lechaio, I will lead the 1st and 3rd to Loutraki. You will stay here with ground troops and ensure the palace is secure. Gather all troops and set up two perimeters, archers to the walls, phalanx to the rear and front bridges. Should the 1st line falter, withdraw the troops inside the walls then reinforce the 2nd perimeter and stand fast".

"Aye Lord Conqueror, Done!" he saluted and ran in the direction needed.

"Lord Conqueror" Queen Melosa greeted with a salute and nod, "Where do you want us?"

There was a mere moment when the Conqueror looked to the Queen in acknowledgement of the oath of fealty to the Realm and her during time of conflict or peace.

With a smirk of appreciation, "Half your Amazons to go with Abraxus, the other half with me".

A salute, nod and she turned to her approaching regent to explain their orders.

Abraxus came in full gallop, not slowing down as he dismounted. The horse kept going toward the stable and the handlers.

"Lord Conqueror," he said out of breath, "They're back!"

Chapter 41

"How many?"

"From Loutraki word is three legions, from Lechaio one".

"Okay, you go to Lechaio with 2nd and 4th and what Queen Melosa lends you. I'll take Loutraki".

"But..."

The Conqueror's head snapped up with glare at his protest.

Abraxus gulped audibly at the look emanating from her but forged ahead, if he were going to die today he'd rather have it be at her hands than some swine, "It's exactly what they want".

"Speak" she gestured with her hand for him to continue.

"They're making us divide to face them. United we stand, divided they have the advantage".

She raised an eyebrow to him and he took it as consent to continue, "We're playing right into their hands".

The Conqueror smirked and her eyes twinkled, "Good Abraxus, very good" she praised him, "that's what I wanted to hear from my second! So you're not just an ugly face, eh?" she winked.

"Um..uh..no?" he replied a bit confused.

"It's exactly what they think I'll do and for all intents and purposes it will seem that way" she strode to a table that had been set up for her as a command point, "But what we are actually going to do is lure them in. I have sent messages out to the outlying troops. They are to stand fast; we are going to send a quarter of the troops to each city with the battalion commanders in place. You, I and the Amazons are going to join the outlying troops in secrecy outside of Corinth. We will leave the palace troops in charge here. When they make way into the outside reaches we will surround and pin them against the palace troops".

"Oh"

"I have amassed almost four legions to the south of Corinth. They are in candle marks of each other with what seems to be warlords at the head of a group of mercenaries. You will take the south and I the north. As we speak they are spreading out to entrap them".

"Uh..."

"Never, ever underestimate your enemy" she clasped him on the shoulder, "mount up, we ride".

As all the palace was in chaos, Gabrielle took time to find out what was going on through Tidimous as he always traveled with the Conqueror as the healer. She managed to convince him to let her accompany him as one of his assistants.

Making sure that the Conqueror didn't see her as they loaded the medical cart that would be their supply for the battle ahead, Gabrielle hid her staff inside.

Within a candle mark the Conqueror rode out with Abraxus and the Amazons behind. In the troops and caravan that followed, Gabrielle sat hidden in the medical cart.

It was near dusk when the troops made camp. They had marched for almost three candle marks, but did not go a far distance from the palace as the Conqueror had made them scatter in smaller groups and travel lesser known roads in a south easterly direction. This ensured they could meet the reinforcements at the rendezvous point and make ready.

"Make sure it is a dark camp Abraxus. I want reports every candle mark and have scouts rotate so they are not recognized by someone" she strode to her tent, "we will break camp in the dark with you taking to the south with Queen Melosa's half of Amazons".

"Aye Lord Conqueror. I will get them ready to move at your word" he saluted and turned to meet his battle warlord commanders.

The Conqueror entered her tent and sat at the map table assembled for her. She had just unfurled a map when a knock on the exterior post sounded.

"My Lord?" a timid voice asked.

The words made her freeze and her blood ran cold. With a startle look to the tent flap, she jumped up and flung the flap open, "Gabrielle?!" she cried out in a shocked angry voice, "What are you doing here?!"

Gabrielle flinched at the tone, cowering unconsciously at the glare of shock the Conqueror was giving her as she loomed over her in the entry way.

The Conqueror reached out with her left hand, grabbing Gabrielle by the right wrist and pulling her in as if saving her from some unforeseen danger, "What are you doing here?! You should be

back at the palace! This is no place for you to be!" she began pacing inside the tent while waving her arms up and down in a frustrated manner, "Don't you realize how dangerous this is? This is war Gabrielle, people are going to get hurt and die!"

Gabrielle stood in the middle of the tent, head bowed and eyes closed with her hands clasped in front of her. She had never been dressed down by the Lord Conqueror and felt she was well and truly in the deep end now.

"How did you get here? Never mind!" the Conqueror stopped Gabrielle from answering with a hand up in a halting motion. "I've got to get you out of here, but you can't go back to the palace..." she began pacing again, "...okay, I've got it. You will stay here with Tidimous until when all this is over and it's safe for you to return".

Gabrielle's head popped up, "No!"

The Conqueror's head in turn snapped to her face, "What?!"

"My Lord...Xena...no please...I came to fight by your side".

"No Gabrielle, that is too dangerous even to consider" she shook her head to emphasize her point.

"But I can fight and you know that. You've even said it yourself".

"No Gabrielle, this is different. This is war".

"Please Xena".

"No Gabrielle. It is for your own safety".

"My Lord, I am a free woman now" she stood straight, "and as such, able to make my own decisions".

The Conqueror stopped and looked at Gabrielle with incredulous wide eyes, "You *dare* presume to tell me what you can do?"

Suddenly Gabrielle realized she had over stepped her position, "I...I...MM..My Lord" she gulped at what she saw now. The Conqueror was seething at having been spoken back to yet held her tongue.

Anyone who dared attempt such a thing usually never finished their sentences as their heads rolled by their feet, having been severed by the Conqueror's sword mere seconds before.

But this was Gabrielle. The woman she loved and would protect with her life. The conflict of emotions was showing on her face as it turned red with rage and restraint.

"Forgive me, My Lord...Xena...I misspoke and dare not presume your rights over me" she lowered her head and then, doing something she had not done in months, she knelt down to the ground.

This broke Xena.

"Get up Gabrielle" her voice hoarse and strained.

Gabrielle stood.

"Yes, you are a free woman Gabrielle. And as such are able to make your own decisions. But," taking a deep breath, "as the Lord Conqueror, I decide who can fight in my armies and who can do what, where and when".

Gabrielle did not raise her head, but nodded.

"I do this for your own safety..." she walked over to Gabrielle and cupped her hand gently under her chin, raising it so that their eyes met, "You mean everything to me Gabrielle. Everything..." she took a shaky deep breath again, "I will not put you in harms way, nor let any harm come to you by my neglect. So I must order you to stay with Tidimous".

"As you wish....My Lord"

The words cut through Xena's heart. Had she, in the guise of protecting her, done irreparable harm to their tenuous relationship?

She closed her eyes as her hand fell from her chin; her shoulders slumped seemingly with the weight of the world now upon them.

A knock on the tent post.

While turning away from Gabrielle so she could not see the hurt on her face, she answered in a sad and defeated voice, "enter".

Queen Melosa opened the tent flap and stepped in looking up to see Gabrielle standing in the center of the tent facing the entrance with her head down, tears dripping from her eyes and her arms wrapped about her waist.

The Conqueror behind and to the right of her, facing away from her, her back to the entrance with shoulders slumped and resigned.

The Queen could feel the tension in the small space.

"Lord Conqueror, I didn't know..." she stopped.

"By your leave My Lord" Gabrielle sobbed.

The Conqueror could not reply but nodded her response yes.

Gabrielle did not acknowledge the Queen as she hastily exited the tent as the sobs turned into wails willingly.

Chapter 42

"Lord Conqueror, I..."

"What is it Queen Melosa?" she said with effort.

"Lord Conqueror, if I may be so bold...are you alright?"

"Fine".

"But it..."

"I said fine, I meant fine. Now what is it you need to speak to me about" her voice was laden with hurt and repent anger.

"Yes then. I have sent my Regent and your suitor with Abraxus. One half of my troops to them as well, I will escort you with the other half at your mark" she replied in an official tone.

The Conqueror nodded and Queen Melosa turned to exit.

"Melosa?"

The Queen stopped at the tent flap she had raised to exit, turning slightly she waited, "Yes Lord Conqueror?"

"Thank you...for your concern".

"Anytime...my friend" and left the Conqueror alone.

It was nearly pitch black as they camp broke in the freezing cold night air. The Conqueror had given Abraxus his order and he had taken his command with the Amazon Regent, the royal suitor and the rest of the Amazons in tow heading in a northwestern direction to produce a semi circle of entrapment against the enemy.

The Conqueror rode with Queen Melosa, the weapons master and the rest of the troops in a northeasterly direction to do the same.

"So Tidimous and the rest will wait for the arrival of the injured?" Queen Melosa brought up in conversation as she tried to gauge what she had born witness to in the tent.

"Yes and no..."

At this response, Queen Melosa looked over with curiosity at the Lord Conqueror riding on Cirion.

The Conqueror smirked in thought, *'Even royal kittens die of curiosity'*.

"He will advance to within a half candle mark's distance to the fighting. There he will set up his medical tent for the wounded to arrive. This will keep her...them out of the way but within distance to help".

"So," the Queen looked to the Conqueror then ahead to the road, "...is Gabrielle assisting the healer?"

"Yes"

"It was very noble a gesture to help...in this moment. Was it not?"

"With any luck, they won't see much coming as regards to wounded" she replied without answering the baiting question she knew the Queen was trying.

"You seem very protective over her" this was more of a statement than question to the Conqueror.

"I am protective of all people not belonging in the chaos of war" she continued, "whether they realize it or not".

"Hmmm" was the only response she heard from the Queen.

They rode in silence until the outskirts of the enemy's encampment under the cloak of darkness.

The Conqueror motioned with hand signals to the battalion leaders to position themselves before engagement with them and to wait for her signal.

The Conqueror took in a deep drawing breath, releasing the evil beast from its cage that she called her deep dark soul. This was her curse to carry; her cross to bear for wanting ultimate power and control.

It had not always been this way. It was only at her most vulnerable point that the so called gift was presented to her...and she accepted it willingly.

Now it was her power to wield and she used it when only required and only by her choice and command. No longer under the control or influence of Ares or his desires.

'Ha' she thought to herself, 'he never really had control, I got what I wanted and so did her. It was of mutual benefit at the time, but now it's all about what I need. Not him!' she sneered, 'no.

now it's about her' her thoughts turned wistful, 'Oh Gabrielle, I only did it to protect you...don't you realize how much you mean to me? I could never let anything harm you little on. Forgive me'.

The Conqueror shook her head clear before the battle commenced; raising her sword up into the air she looked to her right and then left, took a deep breath and let out her war cry thus beginning the battle.

At once the forest came alive and descended on the enemy's encampment catching them off guard, still asleep in the dark.

It seemed like an eternity to Gabrielle. She had helped Tidimous and Nika set up the medical tent and cots along the outside for the wounded as they were to arrive when the battle began. But she was only going through the motions. Her mind was elsewhere, troubled at what had happened between her and the Conqueror. 'She said I could fight, she said I was good...very good. So why not let me fight? She let everyone else...Queen Melosa, Ephiny...their weapons master...but not me!'

Placing some rags near a bucket of water to wipe blood off some helpless soldier who'd need them soon, she continued to the next cot. 'My own safety...huh? I can fight but only within the palace under her eyes and against no one else! How is that fighting?'

She threw the rags down frustrated, "**Don't you realize you mean everything to me Gabrielle...**" she heard the words and looked around for Xena as she swore she was standing next to her, "**Forgive me**" again the words and then she felt a warmth caress her; then it was gone.

Before she could understand what had just occurred a shout from Nika brought her attention to the group of men approaching.

"The first injured are coming in" Nika said.

It was some time when Gabrielle could take a breath, "Wow, there are so many" she said to Nika.

"Yeah, it's not going to be an easy battle. There are so many this time" Nika finished wrapping a bandage on a soldier's thigh.

Dawn had come, bringing with it the brutal reality of war. Men laid about in various stages of injuries. Some had deep cuts to their arms or legs that required stitching for them to continue and bandages so they could return to the battlefield. Others were wounds that required Tidimous's care and decision, if the limb could be saved or they were to lose it or even survive it.

One soldier sat holding his thigh that was bleeding profusely from a spear that had been imbedded in an assault and pulled out. "Hey, hey...someone...stitch me up. I've got to get back!" he ranted trying to get one of the helper's attention.

"We'll get to you in a moment. We're attending to the others who are injured" Nika snapped as

she held pressure to a man's neck where an arrow had just been removed by Tidimous.

Gabrielle was briskly walking by on her way to the medical cart for more supplies when he grabbed her by the wrist, "Please, stitch me up. I've got to get to the Conqueror" he pleaded.

"They'll get to you in a candle drop. Honest. Just give them time" she replied trying to loosen his grip on her wrist.

"You don't understand; I've got to tell the Conqueror. It's a trap!" his grip weakened and he started to teeter backwards, "...it's a trap. They know about her...her maneuvers to get them in the circle pinned from behind" he faltered, the loss of blood was starting to affect him.

Gabrielle's face drained of color at the words she heard, "What do you mean?!" she knelt by him and attempted to get his attention, "Tell me!"

"Som...they know...somehow..." he closed his eyes, "They are going to do the same to her" and he passed out.

Gabrielle took only a blink before deciding what she need to do, "Nika, I've got to go!" and she was off running before Nika could even reply.

"Heeeeyaah!" the Queen pushed her mount forward through the battlefield littered now with bodies. She brought her sword down onto the shoulder of an enemy soldier who had just swiped at her leg and felt it slice through him and hit bone. Turning she saw the Conqueror off of Cirion and battling a group of four soldiers, each attacking her at the same time at different angles.

She decapitated one with a swing of her sword and kicked one's leg out from under him in the follow through turn, "Ha, ha, ha...come and get some" she laughed, the beast in her enjoying the battle.

They battled for candle marks, easily defeating the battalion and moving the enemy further back toward the castle and Abraxus's encroaching group.

The Queen was now off of her horse as well, as the bodies made it very difficult from keeping her mount in control.

Gabrielle had taken one of the horses and jumped on it, kicking it forward to the ongoing battle without thought of what she was headed towards.

It took only a few candle drops to reach the end fringes of the battle but she continued further in search of her Conqueror.

The battle was in full gore.

Men hacking at each other and striking sword to armor or shield.

Gabrielle pulled up suddenly as an enemy soldier stood right in front of her horse, "Oh, a little girl wants to play eh?" he sneered.

He never saw her whip her staff from around her right side and knock him to the ground with a crack to his head. But she didn't see the soldier sneak up to her left and pull her off the horse by her forearm.

With a thud she hit the ground hard and immediately brought her staff up in a defensive gesture, barely blocking the sword aimed for her head.

Another swing and block and she rolled away just enough to get to her knees and swing at her attacker. He blocked the low swing to his leg and pulled back for an overhead strike. Now Gabrielle was able to get to her feet and in the moment he had his arms above his head, she took the end of her staff and hit him in the throat, causing him to gasp, drop his sword and grab at his throat. Gabrielle reeled back and hit him across the temple, rendering him unconscious.

Taking in a deep steadying breath, she looked about realizing she was in the middle of a battle and ...a target.

She had to find the Conqueror and tell her what awaited her, but first she had to stop the man coming at her with a spear.

Queen Melosa had lost sight of the Conqueror in the melee. She and her Amazons were battling two and three soldiers each while trying to press their advantage.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw something that made her take a second look; she could have sworn she saw Gabrielle being pulled off a horse. But a sword strike near her face caused her to turn away.

After several exchanges of sword clashes and a few scrapes and cuts, the Queen was able to look around and gaze the direction of the battle.

It was then that she realized she had indeed seen Gabrielle. And she was now doing battle with a soldier intending to spear her.

Gabrielle was holding her own against the soldier except when another one attacked her at the side. He lunged at her with his sword causing her to block his attack to her stomach right side. When she blocked his sword from stabbing her, the soldier with the spear lunged forward.

Queen Melosa yelled out, "Gabrielle look out!"

Chapter 43

Just in the nick of time, Gabrielle turned receiving a glancing blow to her hip, thigh and shearing off some of her skirt as he followed through with the momentum past her.

The Queen was nearing at a run as the soldier with the sword turned to attack her again now that

she had been injured by this blow.

Queen Melosa impaled the spearman with her sword and looked up to see Gabrielle on one knee blocking the sword swipes.

The Queen continued forward and with a few parries dismissed the soldier with a cut across the throat.

"Gabrielle? Are you alright? What are you doing here?!" the Queen asked as she helped her up.

"Arrgh...yes...it d.d.doesn't seem bad" Gabrielle replied gritting her teeth as she took the hem of her skirt and wiped away the blood from the wound to see how badly she was injured, "I've got to get to the Conqueror...it's a trap Queen Melosa. They know of her plan! They're going to do the same to our troops and her!"

The Queen looked at Gabrielle and then down to her hip and her mouth dropped open, "You...you've...that..."

"What?" Gabrielle was perplexed as to what the Queen was trying to say or point to.

"You...you've got..." but she was cut off as a soldier of the enemy attacked her. After a few candle drops, the Queen was able to dispatch him to Hades and returned to Gabrielle who still clutched at her hip.

"Gabrielle, that mark. Do you know what it means?" the Queen finally asked.

"No, it's just a birth mark".

"Gabrielle, that mark is as ancient as the Amazons" the Queen told her while pulling her over to a tree for her to lean against and have some shelter against the ongoing battle.

"What do you mean Queen Melosa? That's just a birth mark, that's all" Gabrielle said as she continued to stem the blood loss and wipe it clean.

"No Gabrielle. That is the mark of Artemis herself. It is written in the ancient scrolls that there will come a Queen to rule the Nation with the mark of the Goddess upon her from birth".

"I am no Queen, Queen Melosa. I am a freed slave who was born to parents of humble means. Nothing more".

"I can not tell you how it has come to be Gabrielle, only that this has been foretold".

Just then a band of enemy soldiers came across the two of them and attacked.

Gabrielle ducked as a sword struck where her head had been only a second before, rolling away to jump up into a defensive stance with her staff against two men.

Queen Melosa had three men attacking her from all sides.

One engaged her sword from an overhead strike while another took a swing at her right leg which she only just lifted in time to have his sword swipe and hit nothing but air.

When she lifted her leg, the Queen managed to hit the third in the stomach and turn to punch the first in the face with the pommel of her sword, causing his head to snap back and knock him unconscious.

Gabrielle had blocked the attack of the two with her staff, keeping them at bay and herself safe. Finally she landed a hit to one that knocked him down and out leaving only the other to contend with.

"I'll get you, you little bitch" he snarled while launching into a series of strikes knocking Gabrielle back and down to her knees with their force. Barely holding onto her staff from the force, Gabrielle knew she had to do something or she was going to be killed.

She took a shot at him by his left knee making him stumble back and then try to come at her again, but it was the breath she needed to get back on her feet to better defend herself.

Queen Melosa was fighting two enemy soldiers who were equally as skilled as the Queen causing her to push her skills with the sword. Just then another enemy soldier came upon them and entered the fray, easily causing the shift of the tide in whose favor the fight would go.

Gabrielle took a minor cut to her right bicep as the soldier took a wild swing at her while trying to regain his balance with his bad knee. When he was pushing himself back up to stand from his near fall, he never saw her staff come down on the back of his head.

Gabrielle turned to see Queen Melosa fighting the three men and ran towards her in aide. As she was about to reach her she saw another man come running up and stop. He reached up and pulled a small crossbow from across his back with his left hand pointing it at the Queen.

"Look out Queen Melosa!" Gabrielle screamed as she saw it unfold before her eyes.

The Queen could not turn to see what it was she needed to do but instinctively ducked and rolled to avoid whatever it was.

The crossbow whizzed by her right shoulder as she went down and embedded itself in the chest of an enemy soldier.

But she could not avoid the sword strike from one of the others. It caught her across the back going from her shoulder blade down across to her left hip.

"Arrrrggghh" she screamed out dropping to the ground on one knee.

Gabrielle jumped up and kicked out with both feet to one of the soldiers, knocking him to the ground. As she was able to get to her feet quicker, she was able to hit him across the jaw with one end of her staff and with the momentum of her turn, catch him across the temple. He went down never seeing the ground come to his face.

The soldier who stuck the Queen was now trying to finish her off as she struggled to block his strikes while trying to get back up on her feet.

Gabrielle was battling the crossbowman. He was a very big brute of a man, but she had quickness from her size to disadvantage him.

Blocking several of his strikes with a sword, he began to get angrier and take wild swings. On the third swing, Gabrielle was able to hit his shoulder and then reverse and take out his kneecap.

He dropped like a sack to the ground, howling in pain while grabbing his knee.

Gabrielle took that moment to crack him across the back of the head, "Oh shut up!" she said through gritted teeth.

Going back to Queen Melosa, she saw her failing to hold against her attacker. "Nooo!" she screamed and ran to her only to see the Queen have her sword knocked from her hands as she stumbled to the ground.

Eponin had been watching from a distance as she battled several men as well. When the Queen was struck across her back, she started to run to her only to be blocked by two other men attacking her, "Get out of my way!" she growled as she swung her sword and slashed one man across the throat. The other engaged her in a sword fight, holding her back from moving forward.

"Hades!" she grunted trying several different hits to him.

"Ha, can't get through my defense little girl. This is a man's war. You should be home taking care of children and listening to your lord husband, not here!" he sneered as he hit her with his sword, cutting her right thigh.

"Arrgghh!" she grunted out, putting a hand immediately to her thigh, "you'll pay for that you pissant!" she growled.

"Ha, ha, ha" he laughed as he let his defenses down thinking he'd beaten her already. She took the opportunity and simply lunged forward with her sword, sinking it into his chest below his heart, "told you" she spat in his face as he sunk to his knees with a look of shock on his face, "besides...my future wife wouldn't like me with someone else" and she yanked out her sword, the momentum pulling his body forward to thud to the ground.

Eponin looked up to see the Queen's sword being knocked from her hand and the enemy taking his arm back for the final blow. She could hear Gabrielle's scream as she ran towards her Queen.

Gabrielle ran in front of the man's sword to try and deflect him, but it was too late. He'd already plunged the sword into the Queen's stomach and Gabrielle's body knocked them all to the ground.

Rolling off and onto her feet, Gabrielle saw the man starting to get up. With an anger she'd only felt one time before, she swung her staff and smashed him in the head as hard as she could. Never bothering to see what she had done to him she turned to the Queen and knelt down.

Eponin was now running up and skidding to a halt by them, "My QUEEN!" she struggled to keep her voice.

Gabrielle let go of her staff and she gently cradled the Queen onto her lap, "Queen Melosa" she choked out as the tears began to fall.

Eponin pulled out the sword from her Queen's body and tossed it to the ground in disgust, immediately placing a pressure compress to the wound.

"Ga...Gabrielle" the Queen's strangled voice came in short breaths, "y..you tried ..to save me".

"But I failed, I am so sorry Queen Melosa" Gabrielle cried while brushing the hair away from the Queen's eyes with a gentle hand.

"It's..okay...Gabrielle...I knew...this could ...happen" she took a deep breath, "Pony".

"Yes My Queen".

"You are...to bear witness...Gabrielle has...the mark...on her hip..it ...it is...the mark...of Artemis"

Eponin's face changed from sadness to shock as her head snapped up to Gabrielle's face.

Eponin knew of the mark the Queen spoke of as all Amazons were told this story by their elders.

"Gabrielle...I know...I will...not see another...day..." a tinge of pain struck the Queen causing her to grasp both Gabrielle's and Eponin's hands in reflex. She cried silently while her breaths came shallower, "Ga..Gabrielle...I give...my right of caste...to you..." she took another breath, "...please accept" she said with pleading eyes.

"Oh Queen Melosa, I can't..." Gabrielle sobbed.

"Please...Gabrielle...so that ..." a shallower breath, "...I may rest...easy...knowing they are...safe" the Queen was struggling with her breaths now.

"Yes Queen Melosa, I accept" Gabrielle replied solemnly.

"Pony..." Queen struggled.

"Yes My Queen....I bear witness" Eponin looked into the eyes of her beloved Queen with tears

streaming down the normally stoic warrior's face.

Reaching up with a weakened trembling hand, the Queen caressed Gabrielle's face, "She...loves you...take care...of her..." a very weak breath, "thank you" in a whisper and then her hand fell, she closed her eyes and was gone.

Chapter 44

It took a moment before what had just occurred registered in Gabrielle's mind, "Noooooo!" Gabrielle cried pulling the Queen's body to her chest and sobbing openly for the Queen she knew had so much more to give.

Eponin closed her eyes and prayed to Artemis that her Queen be given safe and easy passage to the Amazon Land of the Dead.

The battle still raged on around them and finally Eponin broke the silence of mourning, "We must go".

Gabrielle look to her and nodded, "Let's move her away from this".

Quietly, they gathered the Queen's body and laid her out of the battlefield into a copse of trees. They crossed her arms at her chest and tucked her sword under them in acknowledgement of a warrior who died in battle.

They both looked down at her body in silence for another moment before Gabrielle spoke, "I need to get to the Conqueror. She is in danger. They know of her plans".

"Yes..." Eponin hesitated a moment as she looked down to Gabrielle's exposed hip and saw the mark for her own eyes, "...My Queen" she formally acknowledged Gabrielle as Artemis's chosen and the receiver of Queen Melosa's Right of Caste with a bow of her head.

Gabrielle closed her eyes, sadly lowered her head and took a deep breath.

They made there way through the battlefield heading towards the frontline as they knew the Conqueror would be leading the charge.

It was nearing dusk and the battle had gone for a full day by the time Eponin and Gabrielle heard of where the Conqueror was located. Eponin had remained by Gabrielle's side the entire battle through their search. Gabrielle knew that was her duty now to try and protect her as she had tried with the Queen.

The Conqueror had just finished fighting two men, dispatching them to Hades.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to will the beast back into her dark soul as they had defeated this encampment and were pushing the enemy in the direction they wanted.

The small break in the battle engagement did not require the services of the beast and it would give the troops time to regroup, take a much needed break for food, water and able to sort out the wounded.

The Conqueror's body still thrummed with the energy of battle and the beast but she did not let it control her completely, finally willing it to its recesses just under the surface to recall for the upcoming battle.

"Lord Conqueror!" a voice called out.

She raised her head from the moment's breath to see Eponin making her way towards her. Gabrielle was behind her so she could not see her as yet.

Saluting her, Eponin began "Lord Conqueror, we must speak with you".

"We?" the Conqueror queried with a raised eyebrow.

Just then Gabrielle walked around and up from behind Eponin, "My Lord" Gabrielle bowed her head.

"Gabrielle! What are you doing here? I gave you direct orders to stay with Tidimous!" the Conqueror pointed in the direction of the medical tent as she approached her.

"Yes, My Lord. Please forgive me your anger but I had to warn you" Gabrielle sighed and leaned on her staff.

"Gabrielle, you're hurt! Sit down" the Conqueror immediately was at her side helping her to sit at the base of a tree; she ripped off a piece of cloth from under her own leathers and began to tend to her wound.

"What happened to you?" she asked with concern.

"I had a man lunge at me while fighting off another to get to you" Gabrielle said tiredly, "but My Lord I need to tell you...they know!" Gabrielle placed a hand on top of the Conqueror's, looking into her darkened blue eyes.

"They? Who? Knows what?" she looked up to Gabrielle and then Eponin in confusion and no patience.

Eponin looked to Gabrielle, but did not speak as this was not her place now. Gabrielle was now her Queen and she was now talking with the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire.

"These men, they know of your plans; some how they know about your plans to pin them in".

"Impossible. Only Abraxus, Queen Melosa and I were aware of the plans" she shook her head.

"My Lord, one of your soldiers was at the medical tent, he'd been speared through the thigh. He

heard from their leaders as they fought. He passed out from blood loss trying to get back to inform you".

"But how could they know? Queen Melosa is amongst us here and Abraxus to the north in battle".

Eponin sadly lowered her head when the Conqueror spoke.

"What? What is it Eponin?" the Conqueror asked when she saw her movements.

Eponin looked to Gabrielle, who nodded imperceptively "Queen Melosa has fallen in battle Lord Conqueror" she said with heavy heart.

The Conqueror blinked, then her shoulders sagged with the burden of having not only the Amazon's Queen die in her battle, but her friend as well "No!" she whispered and turned her head away so neither of them could see her sadness, "I am sorry" she said to no one in particular, "You being here tells me the ones responsible have been brought to justice!" she said angrily.

Eponin and Gabrielle said nothing but nodded.

"Have you sent word to your Regent?"

"No, Lord Conqueror. Our first concern was to get to you" Eponin replied.

The Conqueror acknowledged this with a nod of her head, "Very well, I guess I'll have to put my other plan into motion".

"My Lord?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yes, I have two back ups that I have kept hidden from everyone. No one knows of them except me and now you two".

"What is it?"

"I have two legions at my disposal by sea and I have the Centaurs at my call" she paused and took in a deep breath, willing the beast to stay at bay.

Gabrielle watched as her love's face darkened and her eyes turned steely. The hand she still had on the Conqueror's began to heat up as the Conqueror's temperature rose in anger. Gabrielle withdrew it quickly and shuddered at the transformation occurring before her eyes.

"Now, I've had enough of being the diplomatic defender of the realm. They've done enough damage in my lands and this ends NOW!" she growled.

"Eponin, you are to go to Abraxus with this..." she handed Eponin a message scroll, "he'll know how to contact my troops and what I need done. You, Gabrielle..." she turned to her, "...are to head back to the medical tent until this is over".

Eponin stood and looked at Gabrielle, waiting for her Queen's decision.

The Conqueror turned to see why Eponin was still there.

Gabrielle barely nodded her head while the Conqueror had her head turned.

Eponin saluted with a slight bow, unbeknownst to the Lord Conqueror that it was to both of them and took off at a run in the direction of Abraxus's legion.

When the Conqueror turned around, Gabrielle was standing up again, "Xena, I know you are only trying to protect me..."

"And obviously you seem determined to make that as difficult as possible for me" the Conqueror cut in.

"Please Xena, be practical. I am capable to fight in this and have for more than you know. You need all the swords you can have at your side".

"You are injured because you could not defend yourself Gabrielle!"

"And you are not without injury either. I did defend myself, otherwise I wouldn't be here arguing with you!" Gabrielle replied tersely.

The Conqueror was struck at the irony of the situation. Here she was in the middle of a battle, arguing. She'd never argued with anyone, anywhere. Her orders were followed implicitly to the letter without question and no one dared disagree or argue.

Gabrielle truly must have fought well to survive the soldier's attacks which have befallen many men already and she must truly have a hold on the Conqueror to be arguing with her.

"Please Xena. I'd have to fight to get back to the medical tent anyways. Let me fight by your side".

"Gabrielle..."

"Xena, I can do this. Besides, you need to trust me to get your message relayed for the Centaurs".

The beast growled from within her chest as it felt its master's frustration. Here was the Lord Conqueror stuck with the only option but to agree.

She sighed and shook her head, "Here, take this..." she handed her a key, "Go back to Cirion. He has a saddle bag and in it is a locked box. Open it and there is a flutehorn. Though you will not hear sound come from it, blow hard. Only the Centaurs will be able to hear it. They are awaiting this signal to reinforce my troops and come to my aide".

Gabrielle said nothing; she held the Conqueror's hand and squeezed it tightly as she looked up to her eyes. Before releasing her hand, she stood on her toes and whispered "Thank you for your trust and faith", kissing her lightly and turning away toward Cirion.

"Athena, please protect her!" the Conqueror said before turning towards the battleground and back into the melee.

Eponin took the road as if fleeing the wrath of Zeus himself. It took her over a candle mark but she could see the battlefield as the fighting still raged heavily. Working through the enemy to reach the frontline, she asked a few soldiers where Abraxus was.

She found him and her Regent leading the assault and leaving no prisoners, "Abraxus!" she called out to him. He glanced over and saw who it was, knowing she had been with the Conqueror's group he made his way over.

"Weapons Master, what news?" He asked gathering his breath.

"The Lord Conqueror sends this to you. Apparently her initial plan to point them in has been found out by the enemy. They're forming now to do the same to us" She said in between gasping for breath.

Abraxus unfurled the message scroll, read it and nodded to himself; "Well done" he admired his Conqueror's forethought.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a coin with a small leather strap attached to it. The coin had the Conqueror's image stamped on one side and on the other was a lion's head.

Reaching out to the nearest free standing soldier he pulled him towards him, "Find me Ereastes".

"Aye Abraxus" the man ran off and returned a few candlemarks later with the small messenger in tow.

Putting it around the messenger's head, he spoke "Being that you are a child yet, no one will try to harm you. That being so, you are thus protected and by that end I know you will not fail the Conqueror" Ereastes stood a bit prouder, though he was but only ten summers old he was the trusted messenger of the Conqueror on imperial matters.

"Take this and head back towards the palace. At the bay, you'll find a ship with a Lion's head mast. Go to the Captain and hand him this with the message 'The Lion Calls', do you understand?"

Ereastes nodded and with a small tap to his shoulder by Abraxus's hand, he took off.

In the meanwhile, Eponin called to her Regent Ephiny to speak with her, "Eph, we need to talk...now!"

Chapter 45

"Okay, go over there" Ephiny pointed to a copse of trees that was behind the fighting line and a bit dense so they could talk privately.

Once they were there, "Okay Pony, what's up?"

"Eph, I...I failed!" she hung her head in shame and defeat as the tears sprang forth.

"What are you talking about Pony?"

"I couldn't save her, I didn't protect her!" she wailed out in anger, "She's dead cause of me!"

Ephiny grew scared at this statement and at the fact she didn't know who Eponin spoke about, "Who?"

"Our Queen!"

Ephiny stared at Eponin with a blank look. The shock of what she'd just said robbing her of the ability to react.

"She's dead cause I couldn't get to her in time".

Shaking her self from her stupor, Ephiny asked "What happened?"

"She was fighting three of the enemy when another shot a crossbow. She ducked and it hit one of their own but one of the others caught her across the back. Gabrielle did one of the three in as the Queen tried to defend herself. I was fighting to get to her but couldn't get to her side in time. The three of them went down in a heap as Gabrielle tried to block her from his next blow, but it was too late" she sobbed, "She'd been stabbed".

Ephiny just listened in shock. Her Queen was dead, Gabrielle had tried to save her, her weapons master was a wreck and for all intents and purposes...she was now Queen.

"Pull yourself together Pony. I know you would never fail our Queen. This is a battle and she died a warrior's death. You did not fail her!"

Eponin took in several deep breaths trying to calm herself.

"Where is she?"

"We moved her from the battlefield and laid her in tradition".

Ephiny nodded.

"There's more Eph".

Ephiny looked at Eponin with a look that said 'What more can there be?'

"Queen Melosa bid me to bear witness".

Ephiny's eyebrows furrowed at the words, she know that those words were only used for official declarations.

"She gave Gabrielle her Right of Caste after telling me she had Artemis's mark".

Ephiny's eyes snapped wide at this, "What!?"

Eponin nodded as she spoke, "Gabrielle accepted after the Queen pleaded with her dying breath..." she paused, "...I've seen it Eph. She is Artemis's chosen Queen and now ours".

Ephiny stood frozen.

Her world was turning upside down before her eyes.

"Eph? Eph?" Eponin called to her.

"Huh? Uh...yeah..." Ephiny was struggling with all of this information.

"Eph, I've got to get back to our Queen. I can't leave her".

"No...uh, yeah. Um...Pony let me get that leg re-wrapped and then get ya out of here" Ephiny replied.

Eponin nodded and they walked quietly out into the battlefield.

After attending to her leg, Eponin went back to the Conqueror's group with instructions from Ephiny on not disclosing this information to anyone until they could secure the Queen's safety.

Gabrielle had managed to find the box the Conqueror had described and true to her word, when Gabrielle blew into the flutehorn, no sound was heard. Not willing to tempt fate, Gabrielle blew it again with all her might...getting a bit dizzy in the process.

She returned the flutehorn to its container and proceeded to make her way back to the Conqueror.

Midway through the battlefield a small rumbling began. Dismissing the noise at first, its intensity increased until Gabrielle finally turned to see what was causing it.

When she did, she saw men approaching on horseback. But then blinking and refocusing, she noticed they were not on horseback but were part of the horse.

They were Centaurs.

Lots of them.

Gabrielle had only just reached where the Conqueror was doing battle when they came upon the scene.

They rode right by Gabrielle and up to the Conqueror.

She heard them coming at first rumblings and knew her Gabrielle had completed her task.

Turning from the battle, she walked toward their leader.

"Lord Conqueror" their leader Kaliepus saluted with a bow of his head.

"Kalliepus, you are a sight" the Conqueror smiled while reaching up to extend her arm in a warriors hand shake.

Gabrielle walked up and stood behind the Conqueror, not interrupting the discussion.

"We heard your call Lord Conqueror and as sworn, we are here" he shook her arm.

"Yes, thank you for this..." motioning to Gabrielle to come forward as she had sensed her presence; "...this is Gabrielle, I asked her to summon you" turning to look at Gabrielle as she said the next words, "I trust her with my life".

Gabrielle lowered her head demurely as a blush rose to her cheeks.

Turning back to Kaliepus "My plans were discovered, I shall not have that happen again!" she said letting a bit of her anger rise forth, "Kaliepus, I want you and your troops to circle around in a northeastern directions coming up behind and around the back of them".

"Aye Lord Conqueror" Kaliepus saluted and made his way back to his troops. After a few words with them, they turned in the direction instructed and thundered off.

"Wow" Gabrielle said.

The Conqueror turned to her and surmising by her reaction, guessed that it was the first time she had seen a Centaur. "So, first time seeing a Centaur huh?"

Gabrielle nodded, "Yes, and they work...for you?"

"Well, kind of. They have sworn an oath to come to my aide if ever the need arises".

"Why?"

"Because I saved their children from a group of warlords back when I first started out; amongst

them was Kaliepus's son. I took an arrow in my leg and chest defending them. So they swore should ever I need their help, no matter how many times or where, to be there as I was for them".

"Xena, you are truly a changed Conqueror".

This comment struck the Conqueror deep in her soul and caused her confusion on how to react to her emotions on it. Trying to cover up her distress, "Um, let's get a bit of rest as there is a lull in the fighting. We'll start up again soon".

Gabrielle could see something bother her, but did not wish to push the issue just now "Okay".

Early morning before Apollo's chariot crossed the sky; the Conqueror was up and surveying the casualties of the battle. Eponin had arrived in the night and let the Conqueror know she was back and would be by Gabrielle's side today. The Conqueror thought it to be that they had shared something in the death of the Queen and felt comfortable in each other's sorrow. The knowledge someone was looking out for her Gabrielle comforted her.

The reports confirmed what Gabrielle had said of the enemies' troops trying to pin them in against their own, and the Conqueror felt confident that she could trust in those plans she set into action.

By the time the sun was up, the battle had been going for a candle mark at the frontlines. The Conqueror felt that the enemy had not yet realized what was going to happen as they continued to vigorously push her troops further in and around.

Meeting a sword clash head on, the Conqueror found herself surrounded by a half dozen enemy soldiers. "Ah, time for a little one to one I see" she taunted them.

They rushed her all at once causing her to buckle under their combined assault and weight.

The beast felt caged and enraged at the sudden turn and she let it loose to do her bidding.

Bodies went flying off in opposite directions as she emerged from under their attack.

"Come on you pathetic boys. Can't even fight fair lest alone" she bellowed and motioned them to come at her again. This time two drew their swords and lunged as the others circled looking for an opportunity to strike.

This exchange lasted only a few candledrops as another two would switch places and begin again, "Aha, trying to wear me down? Bring it on!" she was aware of their tactics and used to fighting in all sorts of situations.

But she didn't see the fact she'd been steered into a trap; only when the floor gave out from under her feet and all went dark.

"Come now Xena, time to wake up" a voice in the distance called to her, "That's it, wakey,

wakey".

Struggling to open her eyes, everything was shadowed and blurry.

Blinking slowly and trying to shake her head, she realized it caused a great deal of pain "Ugh" she moaned.

"Well, well. It took you long enough" the male voice began again.

Drearily she looked up and saw a man turn and walk away. She then began looking around the surroundings, feeling a sense of de ja vu.

Two men were supporting her up by her arms but she was on her knees on the ground. She could feel that she was restrained but tried not to move just yet as she regained her senses.

"It is nice of you to join us on this momentous occasion Lord Conqueror, or shall I call you Xena?" he spoke again with his back still towards her.

Trying to clear her throat, she grunted and swallowed "Who are you?" she finally croaked out.

"Oh come now Xena. Surely you must remember me. The man whose life you tore apart and left in misery?"

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion, "No, I don't" she answered honestly but with no remorse.

At this he turned and stalked up to her.

Without preamble, he reared back with his arm and backhanded her across the face, "You should you unscrupulous bitch!" his anger evident for the first time.

The impact snapped her head back and to the side, finally falling forward as she lost the tenuous grasp at consciousness for a few moments.

"Come on now, you expect me to believe that you have passed on to Hades realm? No, no, no" he grabbed a bucket of water and dowsed her in it bringing her to consciousness.

"You destroyed my life..." he strode around the tent regaining his composure with every step.

"You're Wotan?" she finally said in more of a statement than question.

"Yes, amongst many other names" he said with no emotion, "So, you claim not to remember?"

"Yes, I don't".

"You don't remember storming my castle? Disabling my guards?" he waited for a response but none came forth so he continued "You don't remember destroying my one precious possession

and then ransacking the castle before you left in your quest for power?"

Again no response as the Conqueror began to piece together what he was saying.

"There were many lands, many places..." she paused "...I tried to stop all of that" she said now with a tinge of sorrow in her voice.

"That doesn't change what was done to me!" he snapped.

"No, it doesn't. But why the innocent villagers who have nothing to do with this?" she asked trying to make sense of the carnage he had done.

"Funny, don't you think you should answer that yourself first?" he asked back.

She could not answer as she was caught off guard at having to answer for her own actions.

"But being that you could have cared less, I felt the only way to hurt you was to destroy what you had built. Little by little, even getting you to come down from amongst so high to fight. You see yourself as a kind and benevolent ruler now, but you can never erase what you have done. Those lives you have destroyed to get you to where you were. So, we planned. We set about in motion what would be your final undoing" he was walking around the tent they were in as he spoke, circling around her and the men holding her.

"I planned this for so long, my revenge. It has been very long mind you not only in time but anguish over what has brought me here to this".

Xena struggled to keep herself still and focus, the beast wanting out, wanting freedom to wreck havoc.

He began walking again and she tested the restraints subtly that kept her captive.

Realizing they were indeed good, almost as good as what she'd use as sense of foreboding started in the bottom of her soul.

"It has now come to this Lord Conqueror, to your finish. I have exacted my vengeance with only two things left to do..." he paused to give his words time to sink in, "...to cause you the same anguish you did to me and then rid us of your presence".

Xena tried to understand what he was saying as she knew he would kill her but what anguish?

"How did you find out about my plans?" she asked, not giving him the pleasure of a response regarding his statement.

His only reply was a deep dark laugh.

Once he recuperated, "That was truly humorous for someone so close to dying...you don't know

do you?"

Seeing that she indeed did not know and as she was now a condemned woman, he relented "You remember me now?"

"Yes, you're the one all the barbarians are killing and razing villages to the ground for".

"Yes, as well as the man whose castle and life you violated".

No response back.

"But I am known to others by another name; in the name of my lands, where I am no mere mortal. My name is ODIN".

Her eyes widened, giving physical evidence to the shock that came upon her, "The Norse God" she stated to herself.

"Yes" he replied letting that bit of information sink in and lead to the answer she sought.

"Though I am bound by the laws that rule our powers as Gods, I am not without certain privileges of which one is being known as a God in other lands. In that I have always had comrades in arms amongst the other Gods of your lands.

Though I am bound to not have my powers here in their lands and have to maintain this façade come aura of a mere mortal, I am afforded certain liberties. Being that I have a friend who was once someone who cherished you, I now had my vengeance at hand".

Xena's feeling of foreboding began to surface more, causing some anxiety to settle in.

"This is a battle Xena. Who do you think would grant this to happen? Hmmm?"

There was a moment of searching in her mind of all the discussions with Aphrodite over the past four moons when it dawned on her, "ARES!" she hissed through gritted teeth.

"You should know better than to dismiss the affections of a potential mate, especially a God".

"He was never a potential mate and they were never affections merely lustful wants".

"Nevertheless, you did the wrong thing. Any woman would have given herself willingly to him for his attention".

"I am not any woman" she sneered back.

"No, you never were" Odin responded.

Just then a soldier came in and whispered to Odin before he replied angrily, "Bring her here!"

The soldier left immediately as he turned back to her, "Well, I might not have my revenge the way I wanted but I will have it nonetheless. Just to witness your anguish will be pleasure enough even though I would have wanted to do it myself".

"What are you talking about?" she said with a bit of exasperation now.

"You took from me my most valuable and precious possession. The only thing I valued in this world, the only think I ever loved...you killed my wife!"

All of a sudden the images of what Ophelia described flooded her mind. The castle, the warriors expecting someone, the men battling an unexpected intruder in the private chambers, "Oh no!" she hung her head.

"I have had someone watch you from afar, to see who your bed warmer was", suddenly that panicky feeling surfaced and Xena could feel a stirring deep in her dark soul.

"You've certainly been scarce in your entertaining lately, though there have been quite a few women coming and going from the palace".

The stirring became more evident and pronounced to Xena; she knew it had truly been awoken.

"Though I can not take from you personally what you took from me, I will at least enjoy seeing the look on your face..." commotion outside the tent alerted him to the soldiers return, "You see Xena, your bed warmer has already had done to her what you did to mine..."

A cold sweat was profusely seeping down Xena's wet skin at these words and as he continued she looked up to see two soldiers drag in a woman's body, "My men have killed your mate!"

"Noooooooooooo!" she howled as the men threw the bloodied body to the ground.

Chapter 46

"Morning Eponin" Gabrielle yawned as she stood up and stretched. She had woken up to the low stirrings of the camp where she and the Conqueror had retired for a few candlemarks. The Conqueror had gone almost a full candle mark before so as to gather information regarding the troops and battle.

Eponin stood up and shrugged her shoulders to try and stretch her muscles, the ride back in the night and the two candle marks sleep wrecking havoc on her back, "Morning My Queen".

"Eponin, can't you please stop that? Call me Gabrielle, that's what I was before and am now".

"But My Queen, it is your title and respect" Eponin made a gesture with her hands in a sort of supplication towards her.

"Please Eponin?" Gabrielle gave her a sincerely pleading look.

"As you wish My..." she paused and sighed, "Gabrielle".

"Let's get something to eat before this all starts again" Gabrielle pointed with her thumb towards the food rations station.

After a mug of hot tea and a small pastry, that made their way towards the battlefield engagement lines.

The enemy was already heading towards them, "My Qu....Gabrielle, please...should you not be heading towards the medical tent" Eponin asked nervously as the enemy advanced.

"Eponin! Are you saying you don't think I can take care of myself?" the indignation in her voice told Eponin she'd gotten her Queen very miffed already this early in the day.

"No My Queen...I mean Gabrielle...I mean that with all the injuries from yesterday, I am sure they could use all the help they can get at the tent" she tried to placate her while looking at the enemy.

"Well, then maybe I should send you!" Gabrielle retorted.

Eponin's shocked face and her mouth gaping open let Gabrielle know she'd set the Amazon straight.

"Uh, I, well...but"

"Eponin, I am quite capable and I will not let anyone down. Trust me, please..." Gabrielle looked to Eponin's eyes "I have to do this Eponin...for so many reasons" she laid a gentle hand on Eponin's forearm.

Seeing the determined set of her eyes, Eponin knew of what Gabrielle spoke of. She needed to prove to herself she could, that she was Queen Melosa's right chosen as well as the Goddess Artemis's and worthy of such a title. Nodding, Eponin bowed "Yes My Queen".

Gabrielle acknowledged what had just transpired "Thank you Eponin" with a light tap on her arm she turned back towards the now engaged fight, "Let's go!"

They had been fighting now for over two candle marks.

"Eponin?" Gabrielle called out looking for her as she took a swing at a soldier's legs, knocking him to the ground and then out.

"Here!" she heard her in the distance, turning and seeing Eponin engaged with two of the enemy. One was pushing her back with overhead strikes while the other was making short thrusts to her mid sections which she would jump from side to side to avoid.

Gabrielle ran over to her aide, taking out the man with the short sword with a blow to the back of his head.

Eponin took the reprieve and dispatched the other man with a solid hit to his chest.

"Are you alright?" Gabrielle panted to Eponin.

Eponin nodded her head as she was bent over resting her hands on her thighs as she caught her breath, "Thank you".

"No need Eponin" Gabrielle smiled at her, "Have you seen the Conqueror anywhere? She asked as she looked around those fighting.

"She was up at the front the last time I saw her. She was laughing at a group of men surrounding her..." Eponin shuddered, "I hate to think what fate befell them".

"Oh? Why?" Gabrielle asked perplexed as she started walking unconsciously in that direction with Eponin following her.

"The beast My Queen, it possesses her and knows no other. When it takes hold of her, she is...not herself...she is..." Eponin shook her head sadly.

"What Eponin?"

"Not human...but a maniacal killing thing. Have you not heard of the stories? Of how she was supposedly given this power by the God of War himself and when it comes out, it consumes her?"

"No, I have heard of exploits and travels but nothing of this beast you speak of".

"She knows neither friend nor foe when the beast is let loose".

"I saw her features change earlier when she became angry" Gabrielle kept walking while looking about.

"No, that was only her anger. When the beast takes full control, it is as if the Hounds of Hades himself would turn tail and run from her".

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" a man's voice broke their discussion short.

Eponin immediately stepped in front of Gabrielle as they both had walked into a group of four men without realizing.

"Stand clear and put down your weapons!" Eponin ordered, "We will ensure your safety as prisoners of the realm".

The man threw his head back in laughter followed by the other three, "That's truly funny Amazon wench. When we are through with you, you can entertain us some more with jokes like that" he egotistically crowed.

"I don't think so!" said Gabrielle attempting to step forward.

"No, My Q....Gabrielle please!" Eponin said in a hushed voice.

"Oh ho! Lookie here boys, a pixie" the men laughed, "Well, I definitely will get praise from Wotan himself for this little treasure" he reached out to stroke her hair and face but had his hand slapped away by Eponin.

"Don't you dare touch her!" she hissed.

"Oh? A bit jealous? There's plenty of me to go around" he cockily said to both of them.

"Yuck" both Eponin and Gabrielle said in unison as the pudgy, bald man with half a mouth full of yellow teeth leered at them.

His leer turned to a sneer, "Yeah, that's right ...you Amazons are all dykes. So, what...you afraid I'll get your little girlfriend here to like me more than you?" he grabbed his crotch in a rude and suggestive manner.

"For that remark alone, you will never see the light of day again!" Eponin said as she lunged at him.

The men jumped in to the fight, three against Eponin while the other went for Gabrielle.

Eponin was too busy with her own fight to see another enemy soldier sneak up behind Gabrielle.

Gabrielle was too involved in holding the soldier at bay as he had also taken out a short dagger, so she never heard the club come swishing down onto her head before everything went black as she her body hit the ground.

The Centaurs had made remarkable time throughout the night to reach behind the enemies lines and start driving them in towards the Conqueror's troops and the palace essentially pinning them in against their own pinch.

The enemy general did not see them advance until they were right on top of them. All chaos broke loose as the Centaurs managed to kill off the general first.

Kaliepus had ordered his troops to take them out first as they approached, "Remember, the body can not function when there is no head to lead them".

Not expecting the unexpected or even Centaurs to join the battle, the soldiers quickly became disorganized. Those that stayed to fight were quickly defeated and killed, while those that ran

away were herded into groups of prisoners.

"Kaliepus" a man's strong voice called out.

"Who speaks?" Kaliepus replied as he turned about.

"Kaliepus, I am Abraxus" a very bloodied and bedraggled man stepped forward.

"The Conqueror's second" Kaliepus stated more than asked.

Abraxus nodded and extended his arm in a warrior's handshake to which the Centaur leaned down and shook it, "Thank you for coming".

"It is a debt never to be repaid for the Conqueror's actions" Kaliepus said proudly.

"Speaking of which, have you spoken to the Lord Conqueror?"

"Aye, last night. We arrived at the call of the flutehorn but not since then".

"Odd. I thought she'd be through that section of the enemy by now" Abraxus wondered out loud, "Our seaside reinforcements helped us finish the smaller battalion".

"When we left, there was a break in the fighting. Maybe they resumed later than expected?"

"No, I know the Conqueror wanted this over and done with the most urgent of expediency. Something isn't right"

"Then let us finish here and seek her out" Kaliepus said with no question as to his intention.

"Satori, enough!" Ephiny finally said in frustration, "Yes, the Lord Conqueror knows you're here fighting in her battle. Yes, the Conqueror knows you are a strong and capable warrior. Yes, the Conqueror knows of your desire to be her bondmate and yes, we all know about the Conqueror!"

"What are you all uptight about?" Satori miffed back at having been chastised by the Regent in such a manner.

"Enough Satori, enough. That's all I've heard come out of your mouth since this started. Give me a break, okay? Just some peace and quiet please?" Ephiny asked as she gestured with her hands in a fed up manner.

"Don't have to get so huffy about it!" Satori pouted as they made their way to the Conqueror's encampment.

As they came through the carnage that was strewn about, they heard swords still clashing further ahead.

"Come on Satori, let's help whoever it is out. The sooner this ends the better!" Ephiny said as she began running towards the melee.

Chapter 47

They came upon approximately one hundred soldiers fighting in earnest against each other.

Satori and Ephiny jumped in, each helping a soldier who was outnumbered in the process. As they fought along, they made headway towards the frontline.

Each of them fought with a determination to finish the battle soon.

Looking up from just finishing off another combatant, Ephiny looked about to get her bearings and gauge the tide of the battle direction.

Scanning the field she caught a glimpse of Eponin doing battle against three men and as her eyes turned slightly behind Eponin, she froze. There, on the ground was the Queen with two men lifting her to take her away.

They did not hear the wail over the growl that came from the Conqueror's body.

All the two soldiers realized were that the arms of the woman they held up had started to vibrate and heat up dramatically.

The noise was a guttural rumble that turned into an angry roar and echoed off the tent and its inhabitants in a wave of intensity.

The Conqueror's head was lowered and facing the floor and as she lifted it, there was not way to describe what the beast had transformed her into.

For the first time in her life, she gave herself completely over to the beast to do as it wished, willingly.

When her head was completely raised and facing the men, all that looked back at them where the black eyes of the beast and its snarling teeth.

The Conqueror was gone, Xena was gone.

Only the maniacal beast controlled the now super powered body before them.

As if the leather bracers across her arms were mere strings of cotton, the beast snapped her arms down and in one fluid movement flung the two men backwards as if they were puppets.

The beast then braced her body forward on her now free arms and snapped the ties on her ankles as well.

With another guttural growl and with the powerful feline grace of a panther, the beast rose from the floor to stand to her full height.

Normally any mortal would have the after effects of being tied up so long affect their limbs, but the beast merely shrugged her body to shake off the lethargy and awaken dormant muscles.

With a shake of her head, the beast loosened her neck muscles, also causing her black hair to shake about her like the mane of a lion.

The two soldiers who had dumped the bloodied body to the ground drew their swords and lunged at her.

With incredible dexterity and strength, the beast reached forward and grabbed the grill of their swords over the top of their hands, squeezing the bones on their hands and breaking them.

The viselike grip never relented as she turned their swords with her palms out and with a blink of their eyes; she thrust each of their swords into the other's stomach.

As a final measure of revenge, the beast reached up and crushed their windpipes as they slumped lifeless in her hands.

The beast flung their bodies to the floor towards where Odin stood watching the scene unfold. "So, this is how you deal with anguish?" he stated as if trying to communicate to Xena or the Lord Conqueror.

Vacant black eyes stared back to him with no response.

The two men who had been holding her up that she had flung away when after breaking free stirred and rose up to attack.

The beast turned around with a feral smile and stalked towards them.

The men looked to one another nervously as they fidgeted with their swords at her approach.

With no preamble, the beast pulled one man towards her, disarming him in the process. She took his sword arm and wrenched it back behind him in an unnatural angle that caused it to snap at the shoulder. The man shrieked in pain which caused the beast to smile.

She reached up and with a fluid motion, snapped the man's neck in mid shriek, tossing him to the side as well.

She then looked to the second man who was frozen to the spot in fear at her smiling evilly at him. Surprisingly, he dropped his sword and ran from the tent in fear for his life.

The beast merely smirked at his actions and turned back towards her now intended victim, Odin.

"You seem to think I would fear you by your actions but you forget that I am a God Xena. I don't feel fear" he confidently spoke to her.

"I have seen all sorts of creatures and their capabilities and they are only intimidating to mortals..." he casually walked across the tent as if in a meeting with any other person, "I am not a mortal to cower at the growl of a kitten" he taunted her now.

"Besides, it is you who is mortal Xena, and you must know there is nothing mortals can do to Gods. You are toys for us to play with as we choose".

The beast stood still during his ramblings, not even following his movement with her eyes. The beast had become hypersensitive when released to control her body and could sense things beyond comprehension. She could hear the battle going on far away, could smell the blood surrounding her in the tent and the sweat of the horses as they plodded the wet earth beneath their hooves. She could see the shadows cast through the tent, she could taste the metallic tang of the blood in the air on her tongue and finally she could feel the unrestrained strength and anger in her body, coiled and wanting release.

More of a growl than actual speech was what came out of her mouth, "You forget Odin here the law is different in many aspects. You are no *God* and I am no *mere mortal* woman".

He faltered in his walking about the tent as the realization dawned on him, "Y..you can not harm me Xena. The other Gods will not allow you to harm a God!" he tried to sound confident in his words but the beast could smell and feel the fear beginning in him, "I...I am still a God and there are the laws of the Gods!" his bravado wavering with each word.

A wicked sneer to her lips caused him to take a step back, unconsciously.

"The Gods only protect themselves, you yourself said you were under the laws surrounding the powers of the Gods and that you are a mere mortal. So as you said, you are a toy for them to play with as they choose..." a truly evil smile spread across her lips, "...and they've chosen to give this little kitten a play toy".

"No...no....stay back. I order you!" he began to back away from her, pointing one hand to her and putting the other one up in a halting motion. He wiped at this sweat that had started to fall from his forehead into his eyes as he looked about for his sword in panic at what was about to happen.

The battlefield was slowly lessening in its intensity and numbers as the second troop reinforcements finished off the battle to enclose the enemy and cause their defeat.

Ephiny was jostled from her moment of panic as Satori bumped into her when a soldier tried to swing his sword into her head.

"Hades!" she admonished herself as she ran towards the two men lifting the Queen up from the ground, "Let her go!" she shouted as she sprang over some battlefield casualties to get to them.

Both men turned at the words and while holding their captive up with one arm each, they drew their swords to engage her.

Eponin heard and saw the commotion; a wave of relief came over her at seeing her Regent but was short lived when she looked to where she was headed. There was her Queen being taken by two men and she was unable to stop them, again.

A strangled cry of frustration came out of her as she'd finally had enough, severing the head of the soldier she had been fighting and then turning her rage on the tow that remained.

With a scream of anger she sliced one across his throat, causing him to drop his weapon and grasp at his throat in an attempt to top the loss of his life's force. Failing as it slipped through his fingers he teetered to the side, dead.

The last one she turned to and without hesitation she shoved her sword up to the hilt into his chest. Not even waiting for his body to succumb to the sword's actions, she retracted it and ran in aide towards Ephiny.

The beast stood in the carnage of what had just occurred, sated and truly content for the first time since its conception. She had an almost blissful look to her face as she rubbed her thumb across the bloodied pads of her fingertips as if feeling the texture of fine silk gliding across them.

Finally looking up and about the room, she came across the body of the woman who they had dumped to the ground. The beast began to loosen its hold on the body as it was no longer needed now. What remained left to do had nothing to do with the beast's capabilities and besides, it was completely satisfied and content to go back to its dwelling for future desires use. This encounter would keep the beast happy for many, many moons.

With a deep all encompassing breath, the beast relinquished control of the body, causing her to fall to all her hands and knees in exhaustion.

After a few candle drops of regaining her bearings, Xena looked up and fixed her eyes on the bloody body of the woman.

She scrunched closed her eyes as if wishing all away and that that when she opened them it would be nothing but her reoccurring bad dream. But when she opened her eyes, the truth was there. This was no bad dream but a living nightmare.

Slowly she crawled over to the body and when she was next to it, she sat back and took in a very shaky breath.

Xena reached across the body that was face down on the ground and closing her eyes turned her over.

When she looked upon the face, her breath was stolen from her in shock, as the face looking back at her was not that of Gabrielle.

Ephiny had at least stopped the men from getting away with her Queen and within a candle drop Eponin was at her side helping.

The men unceremoniously let go of the Queen, dumping her to the ground as they tried to protect themselves from these two Amazons Hades bent on killing them.

With a few quick parries from each, they had backed the men away from their Queen and were now letting their anger vent at such an insult to their Queen and nation.

A shrill, blood curdling scream echoed above the din of the battle, causing many on both sides to stop their fighting actions in wonder of the cause.

Without any hesitation, when the men heard the scream they threw their swords down and surrendered.

Ephiny called Satori over and told her to take them over to the prison ranks and motioned to Eponin to help check on their Queen who was just now stirring from being dropped.

"My Queen....My Queen....Gabrielle? Come on...wake up!" Eponin helped Gabrielle sit up, "Are you okay?"

"Unngh...owww....what happened?" Gabrielle asked as she gingerly reached for the back of her head.

"You were knocked out and almost kidnapped" Eponin replied.

"Well I feel like I was run over by a Cyclops sized chariot and they backed up for special effect!" Gabrielle winced as she felt the huge knot on the back of her skull and when she looked down at her hand, noticed there was blood on it, "Eponin could you get me some cloths? My head's bleeding" she looked up from her seated position.

"Yes My Queen, right away" she ran off to grab some.

In the meanwhile, Ephiny walked over to her, "Are you going to be alright...um....M..My Queen?" the last two words she said with a bit of awkwardness.

"So, you know?" Gabrielle asked looking down to her hands.

"Yes, Pony told me".

"Ephiny, I..."

"No, please My Queen...you did the most noble and honorable thing by trying to save Queen Melosa at the possible cost of your own life. She must have thought very highly of you to bestow her Right of Caste. And besides, she could not go against the wishes of the Goddess Artemis

herself".

"I...I don't know Ephiny" Gabrielle looked up to her "this is all a shock and revelation".

"Yes, it would be. To find out you are of royal Amazon blood by Goddess Artemis's blessing and then having the Queen of the Amazon Nation place upon you her Right of Caste....that would be a bit of a ..." she paused searching for the right words, "wake up call" she finished.

"Yeah, you could say it that way" Gabrielle agreed.

"Gabrielle, if I may still call you that?" Ephiny asked.

"Please Ephiny, you needn't ask".

"You and I had a ...um...auspicious start for lack of better words..." Ephiny was nervous but wanted to clear the air once and for all, "...and for my part I apologize".

"Ephiny, you have nothing to apologize for" Gabrielle reached out with a hand and Ephiny bent down on one knee to come to eye level with her.

"No, I do. You tried to explain and apologize and I was nothing but a cold bitch to you. For that I am sorry".

"Well, if you accept my apology I will accept yours" Gabrielle tried to lighten the tone of the conversation.

"Deal"

"Okay, deal".

"Well, anyways, in light of the recent change of events..." she motioned around them to emphasize the point, "I want you to know you have my complete support and sword".

"Thank you Ephiny that means a lot to me" Gabrielle squeezed her forearm reassuringly.

"Yes, well, I wanted to clear the air and let you know that you have nothing to worry about over what happened in the past".

"Thank you Ephiny" Gabrielle smiled up at her, "So does this mean I can call you my friend again?" Gabrielle asked tentatively.

"If you would have me as one?" Ephiny said guardedly.

"I'd be very proud to".

"Thank you Gabrielle, now while Pony seems to be taking an awfully long time to get you some

cloths, here..." Ephiny ripped some cloth from off her tunic and placed it to the back of Gabrielle's head, "put this there until we can get you to the healer's".

"Ouch!" she winced at the contact.

"Sorry"

"No, its okay...expected".

"Now, My Queen there is a lot to be done and sorted regarding this change. People will want to know who's in charge and what's going to happen".

"Ephiny, I don't know the first thing about being an Amazon let alone being Queen" Gabrielle replied in an almost frightened tone.

"Well, we could let everyone believe that I'm in charge; which would have been the rule had a Queen not be appointed or chosen".

"Oh Ephiny, I'm sorry" Gabrielle put a hand to her mouth in covering the shock at the revelation.

"No, no My Queen. That is the rule only until a new Queen is chosen. Besides I don't want to be Queen, Regent is good enough for me".

Gabrielle just nodded in acceptance of this response.

"Anyways, it will give me and Pony time to bring you up to speed on things and also time to prepare for the announcement. What do you think?"

"Sounds like a great plan all around" Gabrielle agreed.

"Okay, I'll tell Pony and she and I will be the only ones to know about it until then, okay?"

"Know about what?" Eponin asked as she returned with bandages.

Ephiny and Gabrielle began explaining the plan.

Chapter 48

Xena held the body of Queen Melosa in her arms not having expected such a thing. Her mind was flooded with a magnitude of thoughts "That bastard must have seen her with me during our meetings, she died in a battle due to my men's erroneous actions and mine. But where is Gabrielle then?"

Her mind swirled with the emotions of relief, guilt, sadness, elation and fear.

"Forgive me my friend. You were truly an Amazon Queen. May you rest in peace amongst your

friends in the Amazon Land of the Dead and may they be equal to the Elysian Fields" the Conqueror said in prayer to her friend's spirit.

Gently laying her body down with respect, she rose and left the tent.

When she exited, she could see in the short distance the battlefield carnage and the remnants of the enemy being herded towards prison ranks.

She made her way towards her camp in a somber silent walk.

The men of her troops were in various stages of clearing and helping. Taking the wounded and assisting them towards the medical tent or sorting bodies out for disposal.

As she entered their ranks, they parted the way for her and looked on to her with awe and concern as she was covered in blood and cuts, her face nearly unrecognizable from the matting of her ebony hair and the bruises and swelling of her face.

But they all knew the Lord Conqueror and her unmistakable aura of battlefield command.

She made her way towards the command tent encountering Abraxus on the way, "Lord Conqueror?" he asked as he skidded to a halt next to her.

She did not trust her voice yet so she only nodded her reply.

He looked into her eyes and could see the maelstrom of emotions swirling in their depths, "the battle is over Lord Conqueror. We have done Ares proud today!" without knowing what the meaning of those words would have on her.

"He had nothing to do with this but BETRAY US!" she snarled, "I never want to hear that name again or have anyone pray to that bastard whilst on my lands!" she finished through gritted teeth.

"Y..yes Lord Conqueror" he backed up.

The Conqueror closed her eyes and took in a calming breath, "he betrayed our plans Abraxus, to Wotan ...and it cost us all dearly" she pinched the bridge of her nose with her eyes closed in attempt to ease the tension, "I'm going to get cleaned up, then I want a full debrief" she turned away and began walking when she saw Ephiny and Eponin carrying Gabrielle on a stretcher towards the healer's hut with a grim set to their faces.

Her heart nearly crumbled.

"Gabrielle!" she ran full out towards her.

Eponin and Ephiny had decided that it would be easier to carry Gabrielle on stretcher than the two of them try to maneuver her over the scattered bodies that littered the battlefield even though she protested greatly.

When Gabrielle heard the anguished cry of her name shouted she told them to stop.

"Gabrielle, Gabrielle!" the Conqueror ran up, "What's wrong? What's happened? Are you alright?" she flew questions at all of them, looking to Gabrielle with fear in her eyes.

"My Lord!" Gabrielle started to sit up as they placed the stretcher to the ground, "My Lord" Gabrielle called out again, reaching for the Conqueror and pulling her into an embrace, forgetting all propriety to protocol regarding the Conqueror which caused both Amazons to look at each other in question.

"What's happened to her?" the Conqueror asked angrily to the two Amazons to which Ephiny took the lead in response, "She was hit on the back of the head, quite nasty a bump and cut Conqueror. We felt it safer to carry her rather than run this obstacle course and her trip over a body and fall".

"It is true My Lord, but I wanted to walk..." she looked down sheepishly, "...they made me be carried".

"Good for them!" replied the Conqueror which brought both Amazons eyebrows to their hairline.

"My Lord? Are you alright?" Gabrielle asked pulling back from her embrace and seeing the state she was in, "My apologies My Lord for ..." she motioned with her hands about the embrace.

Disregarding the embrace, "Yes, I was dealing with Wotan" she said grimly.

"Oh My Lord..." Gabrielle started but was stopped by the Conqueror, "Anyways, you need to get that seen to" she pointed to Gabrielle's head, "So, on your way as you were..." Gabrielle squeezed her hand in quiet support, "...I will see you back at the palace when all this has been sorted" this was said with no brokering to question what happened or was to happen.

"Aye Lord Conqueror" the Amazons replied picking Gabrielle up which the Conqueror still found odd as she was not a warrior or Amazon to expect such treatment but let it go for now.

"Yes My Lord. As you wish" Gabrielle lowered her head and eyes as a show of respect to her authority.

The Conqueror headed back to her command tent where Abraxus had already arranged a series of three baths for her and a change of clothes. The baths were for her to clean off in levels of the gore. The first took off most of the gore of blood and skin, the second cleansed wounds and removed the dirt, the final one was to soothe, refresh and clean.

Once she'd step through all of them, the Conqueror towel dried and dressed, a candle drop later on time Abraxu knocked on the exterior tent post. He'd already cleaned up a bit and had made provisions for the troops.

"Lord Conqueror?"

"Enter"

Abraxus saluted upon entering.

The Conqueror stepped forward and offered her arm, "Well done today Abraxus, to you and the troops".

Abraxus stood a bit prouder, "Thank you Lord Conqueror".

"Please, sit" she motioned to the table and chair and began pouring some wine. She handed him a goblet in for a tribute, "To Queen Melosa, may she rest in peace".

Abraxus raised his goblet in silent tribute and drank; afterwards he said solemnly "I am sorry for your loss and the Amazon Nations".

The Conqueror nodded, "So, how fares the troops?"

"Well, initial reports confirmed over 300 of ours dead and over 1000 of theirs so far. We have over 1500 being rounded into the prison ranks at this side with no word yet on the seaside reinforcements"

"Any Centaurs killed?" she asked somewhat hesitantly.

"Good news there Lord Conqueror, none killed. They did have 14 injured but not life threatening. The seaside has not reported their figures yet".

The Conqueror exhaled the deep breath she did not even realize she was holding.

Abraxus let the silence permeate the tent. He knew the Conqueror had something to say but would only do so on her own time.

After a half a candle mark, the Conqueror had sorted her thoughts and emotions regarding the course of battle and the events that occurred.

"As I fought a group of men..." she began "...I let myself be led by my eagerness to finish off the enemy. In that mistake, they trapped me. I finally got to meet this Wotan and found out the reason for his actions. Abraxus, did you know of this Wotan's history aside from your village?" she stopped and drank her wine.

"No Lord Conqueror, only the account of that slaughter".

"Well, Wotan was actually none other than the Norse God Odin himself. Apparently my men, in their overzealous actions, killed his wife and stole her wedding ring; this ring." She tossed the pouch on to the table, "he wanted nothing more than what I would have, which was revenge. That in itself I would have honored in the notion of a well fought battle, but to take innocent lives for the accomplishment of a plot and then mere folly, no" she drank more of her wine.

"He told me of Ares betrayal at revealing our pinch to him so that he could reverse it on us. But I always expect the worst in battle, unfortunately he surprised even me".

"Lord Conqueror, what happened?" Abraxus asked.

"He thought to take something from me that I only just recently found...." She walked across the tent, "...the other half of my soul".

Abraxus sat, listening pensively and not interrupting for fear of her stopping.

"His so called spy Ares apparently mistook my meetings with Queen Melosa to be liaisons of an intimate nature and thus he presumed her to be my lover. He used that thought to punish me into feeling the anguish he had before he finished me off".

The Conqueror turned towards the open flap of her tent for some fresh air.

Abraxus could see the cuts and bruises starting to color her skin, but more so he could see and sense the burden on her shoulders of this cost of this battle "He paid for that mistake, didn't he?"

"Yes, I do not remember what happened, only that when I regained my senses; there were bits of flesh and body strewn about the tent. I suggest men of strong fortitude be sent to collect the Queen with the utmost to respect and regard to her status, the rest to be razed to the ground".

"Aye, I will see it done" Abraxus said with conviction.

"Give the men time to rest then order to head home. I want all injured men and women seen to by the Tidimous and his helpers. The prisoners are to be camped in the training rotunda with provisions until counsel can assemble court and see to them at trial".

"Aye Lord Conqueror".

"Once this is all done, I want to call an assembly to thank everyone. Make it so".

Abraxus rose and put his goblet down, before exiting he turned "For what it is worth, Lord Conqueror, you did nothing wrong and I am sorry this burden is on your shoulders" he saluted and exited the tent.

The next few candle marks were full of movement throughout the fields. Bodies were piled and set ablaze in a funeral pyre in respect of the soldiers fallen in battle. The barbarian's bodies were set into a pit with no ceremony as they had fought with no honor or regard for life.

The Amazons had gathered and set Queen Melosa's body on a covered litter to be escorted back for her funeral ceremony.

"My Queen" Ephiny whispered to Gabrielle, "How are you feeling?"

Gabrielle had been tended to by Tidimous and given the all clear to travel back.

"Aside from sore all over and a massive Cyclops sized headache, just perfect!"

"Okay then, tell me how you really feel" Ephiny bantered back, "Listen, do you feel up to walking back with the Amazon escort? It will start them getting used to seeing you amongst them".

"Oh Ephiny, I don't know. What would I say if someone asked why I was with them?"

"The truth, you tried to save the Queen's life and as such, you are afforded the honor of escorting her back for your noble deed. That is custom amongst us, so we are just following custom. Besides, that little bit of information will make them see you in a different light. That you tried to save our Queen's life is a great and noble gesture amongst us. They will admire the courage for they are warriors".

"I..I never looked at it that way" replied Gabrielle.

"Well, there's one lesson down" Ephiny smiled, "Come on, it's along way back".

The procession of Amazons, soldiers, wounded and prisoners extended for almost a mile and were very slow going. It took almost six candle marks to make it back to the palace. By then the bitter cold night air had made everyone numb with pain.

"Get everyone settled in; I want Ophelia to set up food tables for the soldiers and Amazons. Rations sent to the prisoners and send them to the training rotunda as soon as possible" the Conqueror ordered as she headed towards her meeting room, "Abraxus, I'd like to meet with Kaliepus and the ship's Captain Cycrops in the next candle mark".

"Aye Lord Conqueror" he acknowledged as he ordered the troops and servants about.

The Conqueror sat in her meeting room, staring into the flames of the fire. When she heard motion outside in the corridor she rose and stood in front of the fire place facing it.

"Come!" she said exhaustedly.

"Lord Conqueror" both of her requested attendees greeted in salutation.

She turned to them, "Gentlemen, thank you for coming" she walked over and poured three goblets of wine, handing two to them, she took her own and toasted "To ending the chaos and war" and they drank.

"I want to thank you each for your part in this. Kaliepus, as usual, I say your debt is by far paid but I know you will not accept this, so I say thank you once again".

"It is our honor and pleasure to serve the realm's needs and your calling Lord Conqueror.

Besides, where else would we get such training experience for the younger ones?" he lightened the mood with a chuckle.

"Fair enough my friend" she turned to the sea captain, "Cycrops, you have come to my aide once again as well. Thank you for your sword to help defend the empire".

"No need Lord Conqueror, you saved me from an eternity on sea not of my own choosing, I too, will never consider this debt paid in full".

Both Kaliepus and Cycrops toasted the Lord Conqueror and then they discussed the battle and numbers.

Chapter 49

Later that evening, the entire palace had bedded down finally for the night. Tomorrow was to be another long day in a series of long days yet to come.

Yet the Conqueror stood at her bed chamber window, overlooking the palace grounds in somber silence.

The hair on the back of her neck tingled and she made movement to draw her sword form the chest it laid upon, but then stopped and instead turned back towards the window.

"Well, that's certainly an improvement" said the soft voice of the Goddess Aphrodite.

"I just don't have it in me right now" the Conqueror tiredly replied.

"Yes, I can imagine. After all you've been through" she walked up behind the Conqueror, "Come sit with me" she spoke softly enough that the Conqueror almost thought it a whisper of wind on her ear.

She closed the window shutter and turned towards the fireplace chairs where the Goddess was already seated.

"You should be happy this battle is all over Xena" the Goddess began.

"But at the cost of a dear friend, I can not be happy for such a loss....II have to apologize to Goddess Artemis and her Amazons for my part" she hung her head.

Just then another simmering light appeared turning into solid form.

There stood the Goddess Artemis "You wanted to speak with me Conqueror?"

The Conqueror's head turned to the second voice to see the patron Goddess of the Amazon standing there in all her splendor. The Goddess was wearing a short leather plait skirt and matching halter top embroidered with steel rings of armor. Across her back was her bow and quiver and on her left hip hung her sword. Her hair was auburn and hung around her shoulders in

ringlets and curls. On her toned arms were two bracers, each matching the embroidery on her halter top.

The Conqueror rose and bowed her head to the Goddess, "I owe you and your Amazons an apology. Due to my inability to control my men, this war was waged. In that process, your Queen Melosa lost her life. There is nothing I can say to tell you the sorrow and regret I feel for the loss you and your nation have suffered and will now face" then doing something that took both the Goddesses by surprise, the Conqueror went to bended knee in front of Goddess Artemis, "She was a noble and highly regarded warrior and she was...my friend. Forgive my inability".

The two Goddesses looked down at the Conqueror and then to each other with shock on their faces. As this was directed to Artemis, Aphrodite nodded towards Xena and said nothing.

Clearing her throat, Artemis began "Rise warrior".

Xena stood but did not raise her head.

"I know about what your men had done but I also know that someone interfered in this battle who should not have!" she turned and paced a few feet before turning around again, "Yes, your men did the wrong thing, but my Queen would not have had to pay the ultimate sacrifice had there been no interference! Trust me when I say he will pay for that affront!" she said in a seething tone.

A dark aura surrounded the Goddess but just as quickly disappeared.

"Do not worry that my nation will be without a Queen for the Fates had foretold of the Queen coming but it was just moved forward by circumstance".

The Conqueror quirked her head at this statement but did not question the Goddess.

"I ask that you allow a full Amazon funeral ceremony. My priestess will direct and instruct what is required".

"Of course Goddess Artemis" the Conqueror replied.

The Goddess had started to disappear but then re-emerged, "Conqueror, rest easy that I accept your apology as do my Amazons and in regards to your prayers...she rests well amongst our greatest".

"Goddess, before you go..." Xena held up a hand in supplication, "...a boon if you please?" This caused the Goddess to rematerialize again with a look of concern furrowing her brow.

"It is not rally a boon for me Goddess but merely a message if you could. Just ...if you could...tell Queen Melosa...that a friend...said thank you...for everything".

A smile and nod was her reply as the Goddess disappeared.

"That went well" Aphrodite said out loud from her chair.

The Conqueror returned to her chair and sat down, "Thank you" she looked at the Goddess.

"No need, you did that all on your own and she knows it took a lot for you to do that".

"Nevertheless, thank you" the Conqueror reinforced kindly.

Goddess Aphrodite nodded her head, "So Xena, now what?"

A very long deep sigh came from the Conqueror before she replied, "Tomorrow we will see to the wounded and sort the prisoners out. I will advise Ephiny that they have complete support and use of all facilities for the preparations for the funeral in a few days time".

"Uh huh, so what else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you've still got your stalker chick girlfriend courting you...." The Goddess teased.

"Ugh! I forgot about that" she rubbed her forehead in exasperation, "Hades!" she thought for a bit, "She'll just have to wait until all this is sorted".

"So, are you going to accept?"

"What?! No way!" Xena replied hastily.

Goddess Aphrodite laughed at this reaction which caused her to scowl, "You just wanted to get a rise out of me, didn't you?"

"Can't I have a little fun?" snickered the Goddess.

Xena just shook her head in amusement.

"Anyway, I know you've got a lot on your mind so I want to help a little with what I can. First of all, come here" the Goddess told her.

Xena rose from her chair and stood before the Goddess who also had risen, "This will help your body deal with the stress you're going to put your mind through". The Goddess pressed her index finger lightly to Xena's forehead and a surge of energy went through her, healing all her injuries.

Then placing both her hands on either side of her temples, the Goddess closed her eyes for a blink in time "That will help put your guilt in perspective". With that gesture she had helped Xena reconcile her emotions over her men's actions regarding Wotan's wife and Queen Melosa's death.

She felt the energy surge through her and then the overwhelming sense of relief in her mind accompanying it, "Um...thank you....I ...I"

"No need darlin" the Goddess finished for her, "You've done a lot to try and correct your mistakes Xena, "It's the least I could do".

"Can I ask you something Goddess?"

"Sure"

"Wotan, I mean Odin and his so called spy Ar..."

The Goddess put up a hand to stop Xena, "Xena, come ...sit down with me. This needs some explaining" the Goddess pointed to the seats.

"Yes, Wotan is/was Odin. Yes, he was a Norse God and yes, you killed him...a God. But he agreed to come into our Greek Realm and abide by our laws, thus; making him mortal. He willingly gave up his powers and any privileges and protection in his quest for revenge".

"But it was justified" she attempted to protest.

"Yes and no Xena. His initial justification for revenge was warranted but your army did not harm thousands as did his, your men did not kill innocents as did his. It turned to nothing but a free killing spree in a land not under his domain and it secretly thrilled him".

"I didn't know".

"You are not to know the thoughts of the Gods Xena. Then there was his minion, the one who sometimes I detest having to call brother. Because his little...um...ego...got bruised when you turned him down, he resorted to a despicable act even for him. Betrayal by revealing your plans to another combatant is a breaking of one of the cardinal rules of war".

Xena just sat there listening to the Goddess's explanation of everything.

"He not only broke a law set by a God, he made it! That is an offence in the eyes of Father. Then there is the matter of his actions causing the death of one of Artemis's chosen people. Even in the casualties of war, his interference altered the course of the fates and again an offense in the eyes of Father. It won't help his cause much that Father guaranteed her chosen people's protection from the God's interference for a favor she did for him once".

"Uh oh"

"Yeah, big time. If you could hear what I hear going on right now...well, let's just say Mr. Bad Ass Leather is shaking in his boots cause Father is well and truly pissed off".

Xena grimaced at the thought.

"Don't even flinch over it Xena. He deserves what he gets".

Rising from her seat, the Goddess walked over to Xena who stood at her approach.

"I hope this eases some of the stress you had intended to put yourself through?"

"Yes, it clears up so many things. Could you take this...?" Xena reached over to the table and took the pouch that held Odin's wife's ring, "return it to their lands. It is not meant to be here".

The Goddess smiled at her gesture, "Yes, I will return it to them. You have a few things to do so I want you to get some rest. As usual if you need me, just call and I will try to answer if I can".

"Once again, I can not begin to thank you for all that you have done".

"A small price to help undo some of the wrongs committed and still in play".

This statement caused the Conqueror to furrow her eyebrows in question.

"It will soon be over my warrior, soon. Oh, one last thing" the Goddess then shocked the Conqueror's boots off by leaning down and kissing her passionately yet gently. Breaking the kiss, she started to disappear, "I always wanted to know and before you're completely spoken for, I just had to" and with a wink she was gone leaving a completely bright red faced and embarrassed Conqueror to get some rest.

Chapter 50

The morning brought with it not only the bitter cold but the somber reality of the after effects of war, as the Conqueror surveyed the damage while walking amongst the wounded.

"Abraxus, what number do we have this morning?"

"Lord Conqueror, the figure had risen to 450".

She closed her eyes in silent prayer for their spirits and the loss of good people.

"Good news though that the rest are expected to pull through in the next few days according to Tidimous".

"That is indeed good news" she replied, "I want the Amazons given free reign over arrangements for the Queen's funeral. Spare no expense or assistance".

"Aye Lord Conqueror, I'll see it done" he saluted and left her side.

The Conqueror made her way towards the healer's rooms and then towards the Amazons.

"Tidimous, I see we've given you some work to do?" she knew how the jest would be taken. Tidimous had been with her long enough to know she felt each and everyone of her troop's anguish at their injuries.

"Aye, that they have Lord Conqueror, that they have" he replied placing the blame on someone other than her, "But these will make a good recovery Lord Conqueror and be back on their feet soon enough".

"No rush Tidimous, they have all earned a well deserved break and rest".

He nodded at her in acknowledgment of her understanding for them to recuperate.

"I am sorry for all this..." she motioned her hand in a sweeping manner towards the countless amount of bodies laid out in stretchers all along the rooms and corridors.

He looked his tired old eyes to her, "No need Conqueror. No need" he tapped her hand in a gentle manner before turning to tend to another patient.

The Conqueror knocked on the Regent's door before entering, "Ephiny?"

Ephiny was seated with the Amazon priestess and elder going through some scrolls, "Lord Conqueror, please come in and sit" she said as she rose and saluted her.

"Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt, I can come back" the Conqueror waited in the doorway.

"No, please. Actually, its perfect timing. We are discussing the arrangements for the Queen's funeral and your input would be most valuable".

The Conqueror nodded and took a seat with the two of them.

The next two candle marks were spent discussing the arrangements and protocols.

"Well, I must take my leave" the Conqueror rose, "You have much to do, as do I. If you should need anything, I have instructed Abraxus to assist you".

"Thank you Lord Conqueror. It is much appreciated" Ephiny rose to walk her to the door, "Lord Conqueror, could I ask you something?"

"Yes, please speak freely".

"You...you look completely untouched. But yesterday I saw...well...how?" she asked perplexed.

"Ah yes, I had help. A gift from a kind and benevolent Goddess".

"Wow" Ephiny shook her head in awe, "I didn't...I wouldn't have guessed they..."

"Trust me, it was truly and unexpected surprise" a small blush rose to her cheeks at the memory of the Goddess and her last gift of that soft exquisite kiss, "Um...yes....well good day".

"Good day Lord Conqueror, until tomorrow then" Ephiny gave her a curious look while bowing having never seen the Conqueror blush.

Gabrielle had spent the day recuperating from her injury and resting from such a swirl of emotions and thoughts.

A light knock on her door brought her a little more out of the sleepy haze that was clinging to her, "Come in" she replied groggily as she sat up.

"Oh, so ya managed not to get ya self killed" came the gentle rebuke of Ophelia.

"Ophi" she went to stand and give her a hug but Ophelia stopped her.

"Tut, tut" she leaned down and give her a gently squeeze, "stay put child, I came to see ya okay and bring ya some fixins".

Sephina snuck in behind her, settling a tray down and coming over Gabrielle and giving her a hug also.

"So child, tell me what trouble ya got ya self into" Ophelia asked as she sat herself down and Sephina moved over to sit by Gabrielle.

"Well..." Gabrielle regaled the events of her escaped, leaving out the section on the Queen's death and her inheriting the title of Queen and her marking by Artemis.

"Wow" Sephina exclaimed, "You sure were brave to go through that".

"She was stubborn and foolish to go through that" admonished Ophelia, "Ya know ya could've been killed lass. What got into ya head? Especially to go against the Conqueror's orders like that!?"

"Ophi, I...I had to...I just had to" Gabrielle lover her head at the chastise Ophelia had given her. She regarded Ophelia as her mother and did not want her disappointment.

"Well, thank the Gods ya safe and home now child. Now, I've got to go get dinner started" she rose and before leaving she cupped Gabrielle's cheek gently with her hand and pulled it up to look at her, "I don't know what I would've done if ya got..." she swallowed her emotions, "I'm gonna thank the Gods for ya safety and don'tcha dare do something like this again" she wagged her finger at her and wiped away the tear that had run down Gabrielle's face, "I loves ya child" she whispered and promptly left the room.

"I've gotta go help Gabrielle, but I'll check on you later when I bring the evening meal. You rest

now okay?" Sephina hugged her again, "I'm glad you're safe" and left her to eat her meal.

The rest of the day saw everyone involved in their own chores getting things done for the next day's funeral, attending to wounded or organizing prisoners.

Ephiny had sent word to Gabrielle that she would come to get her early so that they could prepare for the funeral.

The night came with an appeasing calmness that had not been felt in a long while. Everyone took their meal in silence, each in their own thoughts.

The Amazons had lain the Queen's body out with four guards to stand watch over her, they rotated guards every two candle marks for the honor of being her guard in her last function as Queen.

In the morning, Ephiny dressed in her royal attire and went to retrieve Gabrielle, "Ready My Queen?" she asked Gabrielle after she'd answered her knock at the door.

"Um, I guess" came the nervous response.

"Come on, let's get some breakfast and I'll explain what's going to happen".

As they sat eating, Ephiny told her what was going to happen, "Well as you know, her body has been laid out over night with the royal guard and Amazons rotating watch. Her four main royal guards would be on duty now as the last watch.

We will all gather and then the funeral will begin. You, as her honored, will stand with me and the priestess. This also fulfills the obligatory rule that the successive Queen stands in watch over the Queen's final function."

Gabrielle nodded as this was explained to her.

"The Amazons will then remove her body from the stand and carry her over to the pyre. There the priestess will say her ritual words and blessings. Now this will be hard put to you Gabrielle, you have a part to play in all this".

"Me? Why?" Gabrielle asked in a near panic.

"Well, because you are the successor and you tried to save her".

"But, but I ...I don't know about any of this" she tried to protest.

"I know Gabrielle, but you must" Ephiny tried to reason.

A heavy sigh accompanied the sag of her shoulders in defeat, "So, what do I have to do?"

"Well, once the priestess has said her final words, you have to take the torch and set the pyre

ablaze".

"WHAT?!" Gabrielle almost shrieked which caused the rest of the hall to turn around in wonder of what had caused her outburst.

"Shhh...Gabrielle calm down" Ephiny tapped her hand gently in a comforting and calming manner and smiled nervously at those looking on until they grew disinterested and returned to their own conversations, "You have to commit her body to the Gods for them to bless her travels to the Amazon Land of the dead".

"But Ephiny, you're asking me to put fire to her!"

"Yes, I am".

"But...but..."

"Gabrielle, this is your duty now. Not only because you tried to save her; which is why this honor is given to you, but your responsibility now as Queen".

Gabrielle dropped her head into her hands which were propped up on the table by the elbows, "Ungh!"

"We sometimes sing a dirge, but I don't know if we have it in us. Queen Melosa was a very beloved Queen and many of us are still..." she trailed off as the emotions rose to the surface and her throat tightened as she tried to maintain control.

Gabrielle pulled her hands from her face and when she looked over to Ephiny, she could see the hurt and loss on her face.

It was her turn to comfort now, "I'm truly sorry Ephiny. I wish I could have saved her", she then laid a hand over Ephiny's in a comforting gesture.

Ephiny swallowed hard and shook her head to get her resolve back. She cleared her throat, "You did the best you could do. Do not blame yourself for you did us as Amazons and her as Queen proud. You even reinforced the blessing Artemis gave you as her chosen".

With one final tap to the hand on hers, "Come, we have to go" Ephiny put on her stoic face and stood.

Chapter 51

The entire courtyard had been cleared for this the day before and was now packed with soldiers of the realm, centaurs and seamen and finally the Amazons in the inner most circle.

The Conqueror made her way down towards the inner circle where the pyre was and for on the first time in her reign as Conqueror, deferred authority to the Amazon priestess and Regent for

this special moment by standing aside from the main aisle.

The guards who had taken turns during the night watch proceeded first, and then came the weapons master followed by Ephiny and Gabrielle and finally the priestess.

It was not until Gabrielle and Ephiny had walked up to the pyre that the Conqueror saw her for her back was facing the aisle.

When she saw Gabrielle with Ephiny she thought, "What the...what is she doing with her, here in the procession?" but now was neither the time nor place to ask.

The Royal guards turned in towards the Queen's body and in tandem with each other walked to the four corners of the stand where her stretcher lay. They picked it up with reverence and walked solemnly to the pyre, gently setting her down. All four guards went down on bended knee with a salute, rose and then stationed themselves besides the Regent.

The priestess walked forward to the pyre, outstretched her arms and began speaking in an ancient language only known to the eldest of Amazons of which there was only one present. Then she spoke to the crowd, "Today we commend our beloved Queen Melosa's body to the Gods for safe journey to the Amazon Land of the Dead. Our great warrior leader, in death, showed what true honor and nobility was in fighting for a just cause to the end by giving the ultimate sacrifice. We mourn her loss due to her not being by our side now or being there to lead us, but rejoice in that she will always be in our hearts and looking over us".

The priestess then took a powder from a small pouch on her hip, sprinkled it over the Queen's body and returned to the front of the pyre, "Our Queen did not die alone but in the embrace of a sister who tried to save her. A sister who willingly offered her life to protect her, and though she was unable to save her body, she saved her mind in peace and comfort".

Here the priestess walked to the corner of the pyre and picked up an unlit torch and slowly walked towards Ephiny.

When she handed the torch to Gabrielle, the Conqueror's jaw dropped open in shock, "As respect to your sacrifice, we the Amazons, gift to you the honor of commending our Queen".

Gabrielle did not move for a full candle drop, sheer terror had frozen her to the ground at the idea of setting another person, the Amazon Queen, afire.

"Psst...Gabrielle...you can do this" Ephiny whispered from the corner of her mouth.

Gabrielle blinked a few times then finally, with shaky hands slowly reached up and took the torch from the priestess's extended hands.

Taking a deep breath, she walked around the priestess and walked over to one of the fire pits set about the courtyard to keep the mass with some warmth. She extended the torch into the pit and it whooshed to life.

Slowly she turned around and walked back towards the pyre.

Stopping before it, she stared at the body of their beloved Queen. Gabrielle lowered her head as the tears came freely, "I am so sorry I could not save you" she whispered, "Forgive me".

Then she took two steps forward, bent down and set the fire to the pyre.

Ever so slowly the fire spread across the pyre, catching completely and engulfing the body.

For a few candle drops, the only sound was that of the flames licking up into the sky and the snap of the wood as it gave up its heat.

Then, ever so subtly, a soft melodious sound surrounded them. At first it sounded only as a distant hum, building in intensity with slow methodical caress until finally it became an enchanted voice singing a dirge.

The dirge comforted and caressed, it warmed and soothed, it calmed and healed all those listening with its soft serenity.

What mesmerized them all was that it came from the Conqueror.

At the height of the fire, a shimmering light over the body began to appear.

All of sudden the Goddess Artemis appeared by Gabrielle's side.

The Goddess raised one hand in the direction of the Queen's body and it slowly disappeared to the shocked on looking of those around.

Slowly, the Goddess turned and faced Gabrielle.

She gently lifted her chin with her hand and spoke to her, "Gabrielle, do not despair. She rests easy now with the great comfort of your deed".

Gabrielle looked up into the beautifully aristocratic face of the Goddess as tears fell freely from her eyes.

"You have a pure heart Gabrielle, but also the heart of a true warrior. That is why I chose you. You have the blessings of many little one, but you are to be my Amazon's Queen...." she paused to look up into the eyes of the Conqueror who was singing the dirge but looking directly at them, "...and someone else's".

At Gabrielle's confused look, Artemis winked "You will reveal you true identity to the one who you have already given your heart to and you will be her Queen as well" with one last gesture, the Goddess placed her hand upon Gabrielle's head and then disappeared.

The entire courtyard looked on in awe, especially the Amazons whose patron Goddess had just seemingly blessed Gabrielle.

The Conqueror had watched all this but continued on with her tribute to her fallen friend and comrade.

When the flames had started to die down, the Conqueror finished her tribute and when silence prevailed again, the priestess took out a small horn and blew one solemn note, signaling the end of the funeral.

The Amazons all bowed towards the pyre and headed back inside the palace as the rest of the courtyard turned to go about their day.

The Conqueror gave one last glance to the pyre and turned to go into the palace. By chance, she caught Ephiny looking still at Gabrielle standing by the pyre. It bothered her but she let it go as this was still not the time nor place and everyone's emotions were unsettled over the funeral.

"Lord Conqueror?" Abraxus approached her.

"Yes Abraxus"

"The Centaurs and Kaliepus, Cycrops and his seamen wish to take their leave" he informed her.

"Oh yes, let me see them off" she turned to their direction.

Meanwhile, Ephiny had walked up to Gabrielle "Hey, are you alright?"

Shaking her head, "Did all this really happened or is this just a trick by Morpheus?"

"No my Queen" she whispered, "this is all truly real".

"Figures" was the weary reply.

"Come on inside, its all over...for now".

"You know, that really is not encouraging" Gabrielle replied with a hint a tease.

"I know, but I figure....baptism by fire...oops" joked Ephiny back.

"Don't give up your day job Ephiny" Gabrielle rolled her eyes at her as they headed into the dining hall for a small wake that Ophelia had prepared for the Amazons.

"Kaliepus, Cycrops. Eager to leave, eh?" the Conqueror teased while extending her arm in a farewell handshake.

"Aye Lord Conqueror, the young ones are restless to get back and tell of their adventures"

Kaliepus replied while shaking her hand.

"Aye Lord Conqueror" Cycrops also agreed, "We make sail for the far lands. There is new trade opening and plenty of adventure to be had".

The Conqueror shook her hand as well, "Farewell my friends, safe journey and fair winds to you both. Thank you once again".

"Our honor" they both replied with a salute and assembled their groups for departure.

The Conqueror looked on as both groups marched out of the palace grounds. At the crest of one of the hills, the two leaders shook hands and the Centaurs headed north while the seaman headed towards the gulf to board ship and depart these shores.

"Great allies you have Lord Conqueror" Abraxus said.

"No Abraxus, great friends" she replied with a smile as she turned to head back to the dining hall.

Chapter 52

"Might I have a word?" a warmly whispered request at her ear startled Gabrielle from her thoughts and caused her to spill her drink.

"M...my Lord!" she was barely able to control from shrieking out.

The Conqueror merely arched an eyebrow and tilted her head slightly, waiting for Gabrielle to compose herself.

"Yes, My Lord. As you wish" Gabrielle rose and followed the Conqueror to a small room off the main corridor that lead to the dinning hall.

The Conqueror entered and held the door for Gabrielle to come in before she closed it behind her. She then walked over to a chair and sat, never saying a word.

Gabrielle stood waiting for permission to sit or speak, fearing whatever reaction she was about to receive from the Conqueror.

"Care to enlighten me?" was the soft request.

"My Lord?"

The Conqueror extended her hand palm upwards and raised one eyebrow in wait.

"Please do not be mad at me My Lord".

"Mad? Why should I be? Have you done something wrong?"

"N..no My Lord"

"Then why?"

"For not telling you about what happened out on the battlefield".

"It was not the time..." the Conqueror paused, "...but I'd hoped you were going to".

"Oh yes My Lord. But you have been so busy and I was instructed by Tidimous to rest for the entire day and Ophi....it is no excuse though".

"Is there anything else I should know?" the Conqueror asked.

"About what My Lord?" Gabrielle did not know how to explain everything and wasn't really sure how to proceed.

"About Ephiny"

"About Ephiny? What do you mean? Do you...?" Gabrielle stopped in mid question with wide eyes at the suggestion she thought the Conqueror alluded to, "NO!" she replied harshly.

The Conqueror held up a hand to stop the stirred up little blond from lashing out, "Not what you think I ask Gabrielle. I ask as in what is going on with the fact that the Amazon Regent knows about all this and you not letting me know. Nothing more".

A thoroughly chagrined Gabrielle looked down to her fidgeting hands, "Sorry, I..."

"I trust you Gabrielle, do not think so petty and shallow of me nor ever make me regret it" a hurt voice replied.

"I...I..."

"You tried to save her, which was indeed very noble but also foolishly dangerous" the Conqueror switched the direction of the conversation.

Gabrielle was a bit confused at the change but something inside her said she needed to settle this matter now, "So...it may have been My Lord. But I will never cause you to regret your trust in me nor do I think you so petty and shallow".

Without the Conqueror's permission, an emboldened Gabrielle strode to the Conqueror and stood right in front of her, "Xena, everything that has happened to me over the last few days has caused me nothing but emotional and physical turmoil. In all of it, I have had only one thing bring me solace and that is the love I have for you".

"Then why do you distance yourself from me and address me as My Lord and not your love?" the insecure and timid voice replied.

"I will always respect you and your status amidst others and I did not know here and now, how you'd react over what happened" Gabrielle slowly knelt down in front of her.

Gabrielle reached up, brushing the ebony locks away from the Conqueror's eyes.

The Conqueror looked into her eyes and could see the adoration and concern looking back to her, for her.

Gabrielle took the initiative this time and leaned forward, laying a gentle whisper of a kiss to the Conqueror's lips. Pulling back she looked up into the sky blue eyes and saw a glimmer of insecurity in them, "Only you My Conqueror, only you" she whispered the words so closely to her lips that the Conqueror could feel them on her.

Xena cupped Gabrielle's face with both her hands and leaned in, kissing her with reverence and appreciation.

They shared many such kisses, getting lost in the wonder of the feeling of each other when a noise out in the corridor caused them to bring their time to a halt.

"We should head back" the Conqueror suggested "we must go and toast our friend a safe journey and you your bravery".

"No my love, to all our bravery" corrected Gabrielle.

"Xena?"

"Yes little one?"

"Are...are we okay?"

"Yes, we are" with that they went back to the dinning hall and the rest of the entourage.

Chapter 53

A few days after, most of the soldiers had been released with only the extremely wounded staying under Tidimous's care.

Some of the normalcy of the realm had returned and a sense of relief permeated the palace.

Gabrielle had met with Ephiny, the priestess and the elder to learn a few things while not divulging to them her title to accession to the throne.

When the asked, she replied that since they were here, she wanted to know about all there was to

learn of the Amazons and what it took to reign as the Queen had done.

Ephiny explained to them that as she had tried to save the Queen, she had wanted to know what responsibility and authority the Queen lead with.

"Lord Conqueror?"

"Yes Abraxus" the Conqueror replied heavily.

"A moment of your time?" he asked hesitantly.

"Of course, come in and be seated" The Conqueror was in her study going over the upcoming Solstice Celebration festivities and the preparations.

She pushed away from her desk and gave him her full attention, "So, what has you so tentative?"

"Um...yes...well...."

"Be out with it man..."

'Hades, why do I have to?' he thought to himself. "Well, now that most of the dust has settled, there has been a request of sorts".

"Request of sorts...from whom?" she enquired with a tilt of her head.

"One of the Amazons".

"Okay, is the request out of the norm...outrageous?"

"No, Lord Conqueror. It is a request to see you"

"Well, that is okay. We can schedule that in...."

"Lord Conqueror...it's Satori" he interrupted.

"Hades not that again!" she pinched the brow of her nose.

"Uh huh" Abraxus cringe closed his eyes and peeked one open.

"Forgot about that....again" she signed, "Can't put off the inevitable can I?" she asked.

"No, not really" he tried to sound understanding.

"Alright, make it for the day after tomorrow".

"Aye Lord Conqueror, I'll see to it" he saluted and left the Conqueror to her own thoughts.

The Conqueror rubbed her face with her hands, "Well, we didn't find anything in the scrolls and even though Queen Melosa said there'd be a challenge, I don't foresee it happening. Guess I'll be stuck with her as a consort....but in name only..." she stood and began pacing, "...because in the blink of an eye that she tries anything she'll be seeing Hades the next" the Conqueror said disgustedly as the hopes of being rid of her and being able to have Gabrielle were disappearing before her eyes, "Just damn it all to Hades!" she gritted her teeth and sulked back into her chair, disappointed and defeated.

"Regent Ephiny?"

Ephiny was with the elder and Gabrielle in her quarters, reading through some scrolls, "Yes, come in" she called out.

"Oh, sorry to interrupt" Satori nodded to her Regent.

"Its okay, what do you need Satori?" Ephiny sat back in her chair.

"I just wanted to let you know, the Conqueror has agreed to meet with me day after tomorrow to give an answer to my request. You will need to be there as Regent and witness" she told her excitedly.

Ephiny silently rolled her eyes, "Okay, duly noted".

Satori fairly bounded out of the room in her excited state.

Neither Ephiny or the elder noticed the color drain from Gabrielle's face nor the panicked look to her eyes as she realized what that meeting was all about.

"Um, listen...I'm a bit tired so I'm going to go lay down for a bit. Thanks for today's lessons and teachings" she abruptly announced and left both of them sitting at the table.

Gabrielle went to her room for only a moment as she grabbed her cloak and headed out to the forest.

"Goddess Aphrodite and Artemis, I beseech your assistance" Gabrielle pleaded reverently as she knelt at the altar.

A few candle drops later, Gabrielle felt a warmth on either side of her as the two Goddesses appeared.

"Whatcha need pumpkin?" asked Aphrodite first.

"Thank you both for answering my plea" Gabrielle bowed to them.

Artemis said nothing but nodded her head in acknowledgment.

Goddess Aphrodite and Artemis...the Amazon, Satori; she has asked for her answer from Xena. She was granted a meeting with her for the day after tomorrow" Gabrielle said in a shaky and scare voice.

Artemis looked to Aphrodite and nodded.

"We know" Aphrodite answered.

"What am I to do? I don't want to lose her" Gabrielle got up and began pacing nervously.

Aphrodite smiled to Artemis.

"What do you want to do pumpkin?" asked Aphrodite as she watched Gabrielle walk back and forth.

"I want to stop this!"

"So how do you intend to?" Aphrodite prodded.

"I don't know!" Gabrielle threw her hands up in the air, exasperated.

Artemis walked in front of Gabrielle, stopping her in her tracks, "Gabrielle, are you not my chosen?"

"Y...yes" she replied timidly backing up a bit from the tall Goddess.

Artemis tilted her head and arched her eyebrow in a manner that caused Gabrielle to think of Xena at that moment.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, "So what are you saying? That I can order Satori to stop this?"

Artemis shook her head, "No, you can not"

"So what can I to do?" she turned away from the Goddess and began pacing again.

Again Artemis stepped in front of Gabrielle, "Gabrielle, you are my chosen Queen" she paused "Queen of the Amazons. An Amazon by my blessing"

Gabrielle just looked into the eyes of the Goddess wanting to understand.

"What she's trying to make you understand pumpkin is that you can challenge Satori" Aphrodite finally said getting tired of Gabrielle trying to figure it out.

"What? Have you two fallen off Mt. Olympus a few too many times on your heads? She's a seasoned warrior for Zeus' sake!"

"And you, My Chosen, have fought in the same battle she has and survived as well" Artemis encouraged.

"But I don't have the experience she does" Gabrielle protested, "And what if I lose?"

"Firstly, you do not need experience to win. Yes, you must know how to fight and have good technique but experience only enables you to gauge actions and strategize, it gives you a better understanding against your opponent" Artemis explained.

"Well, there you go. She'll have advantage over me".

"Only if you let her, for you see you have the actual advantage over her".

"What do you mean?"

"You have purpose, little one. She only sees this as a quest to become the Conqueror's bedwarmer and have the notoriety of the fiercest warrior ever being her bondmate".

"So what is my advantage?"

"You fight with your heart, for your heart. You fight for the love you have for her" Artemis said in an obvious tone.

"That's right pumpkin, that alone will make you push to ensure you don't lose" Aphrodite tried to soothe Gabrielle.

"Little one, do you not wish to be with her?" Artemis tried a different approach.

"Yes, more than I can explain" Gabrielle replied.

"Do you want to see her with another? Having her life not be with you?" Artemis continued.

"NO! NEVER!"

"Then, do you not think you can stand and defend her? That you could not be her champion?"

"I...I never thought of it that way" Gabrielle thought out loud.

"We can not sway the battle one way or the other Gabrielle, but we can advise you and encourage you. You will decide the outcome of many lives by your decision, but the faith, trust and knowledge I have in you and of you is why I chose you to be the Queen of my Amazons. Do not despair Queen Gabrielle, your fate is secure" the Goddess cryptically answered before disappearing.

Gabrielle looked over to Aphrodite, "Queen Gabrielle?" she asked.

"Yes pumpkin, get used to it. She was the first to grace you with that title and bestowed a great honor and trust with it" Aphrodite explained.

Gabrielle stood there trying to absorb everything that was being said to her.

"Pumpkin, I've gotta go. But we'll be there" Aphrodite tapped her hand in a reassuring gesture and disappeared.

Chapter 54

Gabrielle wrapped her cloak tighter about herself and slowly walked back towards the palace, deep in thought.

Rather than head back to her room she headed to a spot she'd grown fond of to think and gather her thoughts, the rose garden.

Though it was cold, barren of roses and greenery and covered in snow, Gabrielle sat at the bench and pondered all the two Goddesses had told her.

Bits of the conversation and words played over in her mind, '*Queen of the Amazons, An Amazon by Blessing, Challenge, Experience, Fought in Battle....Love*'.

Gabrielle looked deep into her heart "*Can I do this?*"

"Yes, I have to!" she answered herself out loud as if making a declaration.

"*Do you think you can win?*"

"I will, I have to!" she continued with her monologue.

She was silent for a few candle drops, finally "It is done then!" she rose and strode purposefully to her quarters; she had only one day to prepare for her biggest challenge.

The Conqueror kept to herself the next day, trying to keep herself occupied with the business of the realm and the upcoming festival preparations.

"Ophi, she's doing it again!" Sephina said exasperatedly.

"What child?" Ophelia replied absentmindedly as she kneaded some bread dough.

"She's not eating again!"

"Oh not that again! Go find me Gabrielle" Ophelia looked up and stopped kneading.

Sephina put the full tray down, having brought it back from the Conqueror's study without a

single bite eaten from it. She left Ophelia, who started to make up the Conqueror's favorites.

"Gabrielle?" Sephina called out into her room.

"She's not here" Nika replied, "She said something about being outside for some fresh air".

"Oh, okay"

"Everything okay?" Nika asked concerned.

"Yeah, just Ophi needs her".

"Want me to go get her since I'm already dressed for outside?"

"Would you mind?" Sephina asked dreading having to dress to go out and find her.

"Nah, I've got it"

"Thanks Nika, owe ya one".

"No worries Seph" she winked back alluringly which surprised Sephina.

Nika found Gabrielle going through some fighting stances and moves alone. She noticed that Gabrielle had discarded her cloak to one side, as it was cumbersome in her movements, but it gave her a chance to see that Gabrielle's body had changed from the weak slave that first came to the palace to a strong, lithe and quite attractive body that held her own in confidence.

Gabrielle looked up from a move to notice Nika standing there, "Nika? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, ..um...wow Gabrielle, that's really impressive" Nika replied not revealing she meant that in regards to her staff work as well as her body.

"Thanks, a lot of hard work by a few people to get to this stage" Gabrielle wiped her brow as she had started to perspire.

"Well, the reason I actually came up was Ophi is looking for you" Nika finally said.

"Oh, why didn't you say so? I'll go to her right away" Gabrielle grabbed her cloak as she began heading back towards the palace.

"Ophi? Everything okay?"

"Oh yes child. I just need a favor from ya"

"Favor? What can I do?" Gabrielle asked curiously.

"I need ya to get the Conqueror to eat some of this" she pointed to the tray she'd set up, "She's not eatin her meals again and I don't know why".

"Oh, I ...I think I know why" Gabrielle said hesitantly.

"Anythin I should worry 'bout child?"

"No Ophi, just a bit of tension. She's got a lot on her mind right now" Gabrielle reassured her.

"Okay, can ya take it to her and make sure she eats some of it, please?" the sincere way Ophelia asked and the concern she showed for the Conqueror touched Gabrielle and she smiled at her,

"Sure Ophi, Thank you".

Ophelia nodded her head and went back to her bread dough.

"Enter" the Conqueror sighed as she was sure the knock at the door brought yet another burden.

"My Lord?" said the soft voice.

The Conqueror looked up and immediately smiled at the voice that had come into her study,

"Gabrielle". She rose from her chair, "I see Ophi put the word out on me, eh?" she teased as she saw the tray Gabrielle walked in with.

"Yes, My Conqueror" Gabrielle lovingly replied as they were alone now, "Now, come and sit with me a spell" she motioned to the table and chairs.

The Conqueror followed her willingly and waited until Gabrielle put the tray down on the table before pulling her into an embrace.

It was a bitter sweet feeling as this was who she wanted to be her bondmate, yet now could never have due Satori's actions. Her embrace tightened as she let her feelings come to the surface not realizing Gabrielle was on the receiving end.

"Xe...Xena....um..I...need....to breathe" Gabrielle teased in shallow breaths.

Immediately the Conqueror released her, "Oh sorry".

"What's wrong love?" Gabrielle reached up and caressed Xena's cheek.

"Nothing" the Conqueror said turning her face away so Gabrielle could not look into her eyes, "Just a lot on my mind".

'Still trying to hide this My Conqueror?' Gabrielle thought to herself, "Well sit down and have this nice tea and one of these delicious pastries".

Gabrielle took her by the hand and led her to the chair. She gently pushed her down into the chair

and handed her the mug of tea. She stood there, looking at her until Xena brought the mug up and took a drink.

"Ummm".

"Good isn't it?" Gabrielle agreed with the sound the Conqueror had made, "Now..." she picked up one of the pastries and held it in front of Xena's mouth.

The Conqueror didn't open her mouth, but arched an eyebrow.

"Please?" Gabrielle asked in her softest voice, "For me?"

The Conqueror could not resist the pleading looking or voice, she opened her mouth and Gabrielle delicately placed it inside. She let her fingertip linger on her lower lip for a moment before pulling it away completely.

The Conqueror's eyes were fixed on Gabrielle's, watching her intently. When Gabrielle pulled her hand away she finally closed her mouth and began chewing.

She made the same sound of pleasure again and then her stomach grumbled.

"So, it seems you've neglected that thing" Gabrielle teasingly pointed to the Conqueror's stomach.

Xena looked down to her stomach, "Traitor" she growled and looked back up sheepishly to Gabrielle.

"Uh huh" she giggled, "Come on, dig in" Gabrielle pulled the tray over and sat down to watch her eat.

After a quarter of a candle mark, the Conqueror finally pushed the near empty tray back "Okay, I'm full" patting her stomach.

"Much better, thank you" Gabrielle looked to her.

"I just...I don't want to eat when I have a lot on my mind" the Conqueror shrugged her shoulders.

"It's okay, like I said before. I'll make sure you take a break every now and then".

"Thank you for caring enough to do that".

"It is so easy to do and besides, I like taking care of you" Gabrielle blushed a bit, embarrassed at revealing such emotion.

"Gabrielle, I...I have something to do tomorrow...something that will affect my life from here on forward" the Conqueror said seriously, "It will effect what I am able to do in the future and..."

she paused not knowing how to continue, "...I've tried to find away out of it. Truly, I have, but was not able to" she finished in a defeated tone.

"Xena, whatever it is" she stood up and took Xena's hand in her own, "it will work out, I promise you" she said with so much conviction it made the Conqueror wonder if she knew something she didn't.

"From your lips to the Gods on Mt. Olympus's ears Gabrielle, if only it were so".

"I have faith, my beloved, that you will be able to do as you please" Gabrielle held the Conqueror's hand to her heart, "You must believe in it too".

"I wish I could Gabrielle, I honestly wish I could" the sadness in the Conqueror's voice tugged at Gabrielle's heart but she would not break Xena's confidence in revealing that she knew of the dilemma she faced.

"Well, I have to get back to these financial requests. Like everything else it is inevitable". The defeated and weary tone of the Conqueror's words mirroring the emotions in her heart.

"My beloved?" Gabrielle asked before she let go of her hand.

"Yes little one?"

"Do not despair, for you will have someone become champion to your need" Gabrielle then kissed the top of her head and left the Conqueror, who sat with a perplexed look on her face.

Chapter 55

The night did not bring rest to the Conqueror nor Gabrielle as they both fretted. The Conqueror for the loss and feeling of being boxed in with no alternative out and Gabrielle for what she was about to face.

When the sun rose up into the sky, the Conqueror still sat in the chair she'd occupied the night before. Her body weary with the strain of emotions.

The only person rested and excited for the day's events was the one who instigated it and she sat getting dressed in her warrior's finest.

"Well after today Daniera, you won't have to do this for me again" Satori said cockily "I'll have the servants in the palace tending to my needs".

'Great! I'll be glad to be rid of you, you arrogant piece of ...' a knock on the door stopped Daniera in mid thought.

"Satori, let's go" Ephiny's voice sounded tired and bored of it all through the door.

Daniera opened the door and looked up to Ephiny "Morning Regent Ephiny" she said greeting her happily.

"Ah, morning Daniera. How are you?" Ephiny smiled genuinely at her.

"Great, my last day of servitude" she whispered to her regent.

"Me too! Let's celebrate afterwards" Ephiny whispered back with a wink which not only earned her a bright smile but a blush as well from Daniera.

Satori walked up to the door, "Okay, let's go. My destiny waits".

At this, both Ephiny and Daniera rolled their eyes behind her back as she strode away.

The Conqueror sat in the grand meeting room as this was now a formal matter of the realm.

To her right stood Abraxus, to the left and along the wall stood her members of counsel.

Two huge knocks on the outer room door sounded and the Conqueror nodded her head for the guard to open.

Ephiny led the way in, followed by Satori, the priestess and the elder.

Ephiny walked halfway up to the Conqueror, stopped and with a bow, she saluted "Lord Conqueror. As Regent to the Amazon Nation, I present to you Satori who seeks answer to her proposal".

The Conqueror nodded in acknowledgment and Ephiny saluted, stepped back and to the side to stand by the others.

Satori took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and stepped forward. She bowed deeply with a salute to the Conqueror.

The Conqueror nodded again, giving her silent permission to speak.

"Lord Conqueror, I, Satori of the Northern Amazon Tribe, seek formal response to my request for your hand as bondmate".

Silence hung heavy in the air while everyone waited for the Conqueror's response.

After quite a few candle drops the Conqueror cleared her throat and began "Satori, I have given your request much thought. Before I respond I will speak".

She slowly rose from her chair and straightened out her meeting garments. She was dressed in her official realm meeting clothes, which were similar to her battle outfit except that there was no sword across her back and no bracers on her arms.

"When one decides to commit their lives to another, they assume a great deal of responsibility. Not only are they making a statement to the world but to their intended also. The responsibilities include caring and nurturing their other half, taking in all their past deeds and willingness to accept their future ones. They state that by being with them, they acknowledge their faults, virtues and insecurities. They will support and condone or reprise and admonish when the need arises. Should harm come their way, they will willingly place themselves in front of their spouse to shield them. If fallen, they will desire to be the only one their spouse turns to for support. They do this not for notoriety or monetary gain, not for status or fleeting favors, but a sacrifice so intense it come from their very soul...it is done for love".

The entire meeting hall was silent and most stood with their mouths agape as they had never heard the Conqueror speak so eloquently or so long especially of a topic they believed so foreign to her.

"So, before I give my answer Satori, I will give you this one opportunity to withdraw your proposal with no shame. Do you wish to withdraw?"

Satori felt all eyes turn to her.

Though she heard what the Conqueror had said and truly wanted exactly that from her bondmate, she knew she had not proposed to the Conqueror with those intentions in mind. Yet, even though the Conqueror had given her the opportunity to withdraw with no shame, she felt that if she did so now, she would be ridiculed for her actions.

'Pride be damned' she thought.

"No, Lord Conqueror. I do not wish to rescind my proposal" she said confidently.

The Conqueror closed her eyes as her final chance of being freed of this no win situation had just eluded her.

"Very well then, Satori of the Northern Amazon Tribe, in answer to your requested proposal..." the entire hall was silent and waiting on pins and needles.

"It is very gracious and intriguing, but I must apologetically decline".

The collective exhale of the room sounded gush of wind flowing outward from the enclosure.

Satori's shoulders sagged as she was sure after all that she had done to prove herself, it would have won her favor.

Ephiny looked over at her priestess and elder with pressed lips at the expected response.

"As of this moment, you are no longer considered a royal suitor and all privileges are rescinded" the Conqueror announced.

A few candle drops of silence and no movement ensued as everyone waited to hear of any response.

Then, as if being prompted along Satori spoke "I...you have given me your answer Lord Conqueror, to my proposal but now I take my right as by law".

"Do not choose this path Satori, it will not yield you what you seek!" the Conqueror advised her sternly.

"I, Satori of the Northern Amazon Tribe, issue forth a challenge for the right to be your consort and champion!"

"Oh boy" Ephiny whispered.

"Does anyone dare take this challenge?"

A surprising and resounding knock on the meeting hall door at that moment caused everyone to visibly jump except for the Conqueror.

As this was an official meeting, all those required to be present were already in attendance.

Only urgent matters of the realm would allow interruption.

Another knock gave the Conqueror reason to nod to her guards to open the door.

"I do!" said the disembodied voice when the doors opened.

Chapter 56

This caused everyone to turn in surprise.

In strode the Amazon's weapons master Eponin, followed by Gabrielle with her staff in hand.

"What are you doing here?" the Conqueror asked Gabrielle, but Eponin stepped forward and saluted "Lord Conqueror, on behalf of the Amazon Nation, I beg pardon for the intrusion".

"Yes, yes" she frustratedly waved her off, "Gabrielle, what are you doing here?" she asked again.

"I accept your challenge Satori" Gabrielle answered Satori's question while looking straight at her.

"You can not!" the Conqueror shouted, "I forbid you!"

"Lord Conqueror?" the Amazon priestess asked.

"What?!" she snapped as she had now begun to lose her patience.

"Unfortunately Lord Conqueror, you can not forbid her" the priestess said hesitantly.

"Why not?"

"It is law Lord Conqueror that once a challenge is issued and accepted only the Queen of the Amazons may cease its progress".

At this, the Conqueror's head snapped to Ephiny's direction "Well, make it so!" she ordered.

'Oh double boy!' Ephiny said under her breath, "I can not Lord Conqueror. I am not Queen".

"Well then since you have no Queen, you as the Regent have authority, don't you?" the Conqueror asked.

"But they do have a Queen" said a soft voice.

Everyone turned back now to face Gabrielle, "I am their Queen".

"Oi vey!" Ephiny and Eponin said while dropping their faces in their hands.

At this statement Satori started laughing, "That's funny little girl. Now, be on your way" she said condescendingly.

"Priestess and elder, bear witness!" Gabrielle authoritatively ordered as she unwrapped her skirt to reveal her hip to all of them.

The priestess and elder walked forward and bent to inspect the marking.

Looking from her hip to her staff and then to each other, the elder and priestess nodded to each other before stepping back and then bowing.

They turned to the Conqueror, "It is true Lord Conqueror that is the prophesized mark of Artemis".

"Um...there is also more" Ephiny said while cringing that she had to, "If that were not enough, which we know it to be, before Queen Melosa passed she gave Gabrielle her Right of Caste. Eponin here bore witness" she pointed her thumb over her shoulder to her right at Eponin who nodded and added, "I swore oath to Queen Melosa".

Gabrielle wrapped her skirt around again and stood now with a confident authority, "As Queen of the Amazons, I grant this challenge".

The Conqueror was frozen to the spot with the shock of all that was literally revealed.

Not only was her beloved challenging an Amazon to be her consort and champion but she had

just revealed to be the Queen of the Amazons.

"Wha...how...?" the Conqueror tried to understand it all but was lost.

Gabrielle did not want to embarrass the Conqueror or have her lose face in front of all in attendance so she had to tread very delicately.

"Satori, as I am the challenger, I am granted a month's preparation" Gabrielle stated to her.

A very angry Satori, who stood clenching her teeth and flaring her nostrils nodded.

"But there is nothing to stop me from requesting this to happen sooner. That being said, I want to finish this here and now. I choose staff as weapon of challenge".

"Fine" Satori's short and curt response told everyone present she was not happy with the turn of events, but she was not the only one.

"My Lord, if I may have a moment of your time please?" Gabrielle asked with a great amount of trepidation.

The Conqueror did not answer but walked through the meeting hall to a private room on the side, leaving the door open which Gabrielle took as her answer to follow her.

Gabrielle quietly closed the door behind her and when she turned, she was facing the Conqueror's tense back.

'Goddesses Artemis and Aphrodite, If ever I need your help...it is now' Gabrielle said in silent prayer.

"Xena?"

"Why Gabrielle? Why have you hidden this from me?" the Conqueror asked while not turning around.

"Because I was afraid" Gabrielle answered honestly, "Afraid when it happened, afraid of what it meant, the responsibility of which I have only just begun to learn the tip of and afraid of this..." she motioned with her hand to Xena even though the Conqueror had her back to her, "...your reaction".

"But could you not trust me enough to try and find out?"

"When my love? Out in the battlefield? At the funeral? Or when you were not eating?"

"There has been plenty of time!" the Conqueror started to get agitated at the lack of control over this whole situation.

"But I was not ready! Doesn't that matter to you?" Gabrielle retorted, her feelings seemingly lost

to the Conqueror.

"Of course you matter, your feelings, everything. Which is why I didn't want you to do this!" The Conqueror would not turn around as she barely held all her emotions in check.

"Isn't it because you don't think I am capable to do this!?" Gabrielle snapped back.

Just then the two Goddesses appeared Artemis by Gabrielle and Aphrodite by Xena.

"Hey, hey you two. Enough!" Aphrodite admonished.

The Conqueror put her face into her hands whilst Gabrielle turned her back and began to cry.

"Xena" Aphrodite spoke so that only she would hear, "What's going on?"

"Why couldn't she tell me? Confide in me...instead of..."

"Xena, stop this jealousy at once!" Aphrodite spoke sternly with her, "She was instructed by her Regent to not reveal anything for her own safety and easier transition, nothing more. It is their Amazon business Xena. Do not read into this anymore!"

"But why not trust me to keep this confidence?"

"Xena, she was chosen by Artemis at birth. Once the wheels were put into motion, she had to run its course. She is now the Amazon Queen and part of that is to build respect and trust with her tribe. Theirs is to protect her at all costs. Do you understand she had no choice?"

A ragged breath came from Xena's chest.

"Xena, she's putting her life on the line here for the love she has for you. And you are totally wiggling out on your lack of control and jealousy. Get a grip and sort your priorities" she chastised her.

"Oh Goddess Artemis, I so screwed this up" Gabrielle cried.

"No little one, you have not. If anything you have figured out a little of what is meant to be" Artemis put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"But she doesn't trust me!"

"No Gabrielle. It's actually quite the opposite. She trusts you completely, so much so that she has left herself vulnerable to other emotions because of it".

"What do you mean?"

"The Conqueror had never loved or trusted with all her heart Gabrielle. With that comes all the

emotions attached such as jealousy, insecurity, passion and so much more".

"So you mean, she's angry because she loves me?" Gabrielle asked incredulously.

"Yes and no little one. Yes, she loves you but she does not know how to deal with jealousy as she has never experienced that. Insecure of not being what you could possibly want in a mate, passion to the point of a burning ache that physically hurts. And all this she can not control because it is all new to her as well as it is something she can't control".

"All because of me?"

"Yes little one. Your love has opened her heart to all of this".

"So what do I do to help her?"

The Goddess smiled at her, "That is why I chose you Gabrielle. Your giving heart. Here you are hurting and yet you seek to comfort your love in her time of need forgoing your own".

Gabrielle lowered her head and blushed at the compliment.

"Stay on course with your actions right now Gabrielle. Focus on what comes next. Your strength is in your heart and that will guide you through this".

Gabrielle nodded at the Goddess's words.

"I've never felt any of this before" the Conqueror said embarrassingly to Aphrodite.

"I know sweet pea, but you have got to realize what is right in front of you and not what you think could be. She loves you Xena. You, not Ephiny or anyone one else. She is a strong woman but don't push her love away because you're insecure and jealous. Embrace her to you and share it with her. That will give you control over it and show her your support. Or were those just words to fill in the time?"

"No," a heavy sigh "you are right".

"I know sweet pea. Now you two kiss and make up. We've got ring side seats and some popcorn to eat" with that they were both gone.

The Conqueror slowly turned around to see Gabrielle standing there with her back to her now. She took a deep breath, "G...Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle turned around.

"I am sorry. Would you please forgive me?"

Gabrielle ran across the room and into the Conqueror's outstretched arms.

"I'm such an ass, Gabrielle. I ...I don't..."

"Shhh.... My Conqueror. No need right now" she looked up to her, "Later, okay?"

The Conqueror nodded, "I love you Gabrielle".

"As I love you My Conqueror. Now I've got to go and stake my claim on you, okay?" Gabrielle teased.

"Lead the way Queen Gabrielle".

"You are only the second person to say that, you know?"

"Really? Who was the first?" Xena asked curiously as she loosened her arms about Gabrielle.

"Goddess Artemis".

"Her I don't mind being second to" the Conqueror held out her hand and Gabrielle slipped hers into it as they made their way to the door.

Chapter 57

When they re-entered the hall, they had composed themselves and had entered as sovereign and subject; alluding to no one of their relationship.

Satori had changed from her finer warrior clothes and was now in battle gear without swords.

She was pacing back and forth while twirling her staff off to the side away from everyone.

The priestess and elder were off to one side deep in whispered conversation and Abraxus, Eponin and Ephiny stood away from them all in silence.

They looked up as they came back into the room.

The Conqueror headed to her chair and Abraxus moved to stand by her side.

Gabrielle walked over to Eponin and Ephiny. She said something to Eponin and she was handed a small satchel.

Gabrielle took it and walked back into the room she and the Conqueror had just emerged from.

It was absolutely silent while she was gone.

The Conqueror had on a blank face and looked at everyone in the eye while she scanned the room.

A few candle drops later, Gabrielle re-emerged now dressed in a short battle skirt that she had borrowed from Daniera with a brown leather vest top laced at the front and mid calf leather boots that laced up the sides.

She walked over with her staff and stood in the center of the meeting hall, turned to the Conqueror and bowed her head.

"Clear the hall of all furniture!" the Conqueror ordered in a direct manner.

Immediately Abraxus and the half dozen guards removed all the furniture bar the Conqueror's chair.

As this was the grand meeting hall, it was quite large. It was where great assemblies gathered when the need arose.

"Priestess" the Conqueror said.

The priestess made her way forward.

"You and the elder know if the laws regarding challenge, yes?"

"Yes Lord Conqueror" she replied.

"Satori, come forth and stand center" the Conqueror ordered.

Satori shook her head, stretched her shoulders and strode forwards, standing opposite Gabrielle.

"Priestess, the floor is yours to officiate the challenge" the Conqueror swung her hand in an open gesture.

The priestess bowed to the Conqueror and turned to face the two combatants, "Queen Gabrielle" she bowed to Gabrielle in respect and acknowledgment of her status now as Queen. "Satori" she then began "These are the rules of the challenge. You will come to the center and address one another. The challenger, you Queen Gabrielle, has chosen staff as weapon of choice. You will engage each other in combat. No other weapon is to be drawn, if one of you do the combat will be stopped and you will forfeit. The first to either knock your opponent out or have them yield will be the winner. This challenge is for the right to be consort and champion to the Lord Conqueror. Do you both understand?"

"I do" they answered.

"Very well, please face each other and address".

Gabrielle and Satori turned to each other.

Protocol was for Satori to bow to her Queen but she instead sneered at her and gave slight nod at her.

"Satori" Ephiny, the priestess and the elder all hissed at her.

With an even bigger sneer Satori gave a very mocking bow to Gabrielle, "Queen Gabrielle" she said with sarcasm dripping off the words.

Gabrielle gave an acknowledging nod and replied neutrally, "Satori".

"Begin" the priestess said and stepped away.

Gabrielle stepped back one step into a defensive stance immediately with her staff up in guarded position.

Satori smirked and twirled her staff a few times as she began to walk around Gabrielle.

Satori made a few false starts towards Gabrielle to see if she would react.

To Gabrielle's credit, she stood her ground and did not flinch.

Satori gave one more start and then struck.

The first hit went for Gabrielle's right side which she easily deflected.

Satori then went into with a series of quick hits hoping her speed would catch her off guard. Head, side, leg and back to head she swung, each blocked by Gabrielle.

She tried an overhead hit and then a leg sweep which Gabrielle was able to jump over and return a hit with one of her won to the back of Satori's shoulder when she swung at her legs but Satori quickly covered.

Gabrielle figured that Satori was testing her defenses and reactions. Gauging her fighting ability with the staff, 'bring it on' she thought to herself.

Satori walked around her again and lunged with a series of hits.

They were a blur of swings and blocks, jumps and ducks as they parried back and forth.

On one swing to her hip, Satori backhanded her staff and caught Gabrielle across the back.

Gabrielle swallowed her cry of pain as she was pushed a few steps forward from the momentum of the hit.

"Ah, so you are not as prepared as you think" taunted Satori.

Not giving her a moment's rest, Satori re-engaged her with another long series of hits; overhead, arm, side, leg sweep, back overhead.

She kept the assault going until they both were starting to breathe ragged.

A few quick breaths and she attacked again, getting in a hit to her left calf and right shoulder.

"I am a trained warrior with many seasons experience. You should just give up now before I hurt you" Satori said with a bit of arrogance.

Gabrielle did not reply, she walked around Satori in the same manner she had done earlier. 'Well her hits do sting but she doesn't hit as hard as Xena' Gabrielle thought to herself, 'Well use it to your advantage' her inner voice told her.

Gabrielle waited until Satori went to strike again before going on the offensive and paring back, actually causing Satori to back up a bit.

"So, there is some fight in you eh?" Satori mocked her.

They fought for over a candle mark like this. Satori landing quite a few blows while Gabrielle stood her ground and pushed her back a few times.

"You'll never beat me! I've fought again some of the best and won" Satori said to her as she went in for another hit to her head.

Gabrielle took a chance swing back and under as she turned and caught Satori hitting up the spine with the end of her staff.

"Ooowwww!" snarled Satori, "You'll pay for that" and charged at Gabrielle. Attacking Gabrielle with hit after unrelenting hit.

She caught Gabrielle across the knuckles on one hit and when Gabrielle reflexively let go of her staff with one hand to shake it off, Satori hit her on her exposed collar bone when her hand was down.

It was a resounding crack and everyone flinched as Gabrielle went down on one knee in pain.

Satori took this chance to swing at her head and knock her out but Gabrielle saw it coming and rooled down and away from the hit.

She rolled up on to her feet behind Satori but was visibly in great pain.

"I told you to get out before I hurt you, now there's no turning back" Satori gloated.

She attacked Gabrielle again with a fierce determination to end this, "I am better suited to be her champion, face it. And I am more...shall we say...evenly matched to be her consort" she said

with great pleasure.

Gabrielle's eyes darkened in anger at what Satori had just alluded to.

Satori kept attacking Gabrielle's weakened side, again and again she hit towards her arm causing Gabrielle to back up.

Sensing her weakened opponent, Satori went in for the kill.

When she had Gabrielle in a locked staff position only a few inches from her face, she whispered "I will be the one to share her bed Gabrielle, and I will eventually be her Queen".

Gabrielle pushed back against her with a great shove causing her to stagger back in shock that she had such strength.

Embarrassed at having been pushed by a smaller and less experienced opponent, Satori lunged at her "Heeeyaaah".

Gabrielle saw her move and did something that even took the Conqueror by surprise; she launched herself up and over Satori.

In mid rotation over the top of her, Gabrielle struck out and hit Satori in the back of the head.

Gabrielle landed in a defensive stance just as Satori hit the floor face first.

"Uuunnghhh!" Satori groaned as she tried to get up.

Gabrielle was on her before she had completely turned over. The end of her staff to her throat pressing down hard.

"Yield Satori" Gabrielle panted the first words she had said throughout the ordeal.

"Never!" Satori said through gritted teeth.

Gabrielle pressed down harder as she kicked Satori's staff away with her right foot. "Yield Satori, I've disarmed you and from what I can see of your eyes, given you a concussion. Even if you stood up right now, you'd fall over. Yield Satori, you are a good warrior fighter, but I'd rather have you as one of my tribe warriors than an enemy. Don't make me hurt you Satori, please".

Satori knew Gabrielle was right as she was seeing two of her at the moment, then there was what she had said, no regular Queen being in the winning position she was in, would plead with the loser".

Tapping the ground Satori said, "I yield My Queen".

Then startling Satori even more Gabrielle said, "Thank you Satori" as she removed the staff from her throat.

Gabrielle stepped back and offered her good arm to Satori who looked up confused at her, "You are not who you seem, My Queen".

"Everyone keeps telling me that" Gabrielle said sheepishly, "I don't know why".

Satori just shook her head in amusement which caused her to stumble.

Ephiny and Eponin were immediately at their sides to help support Satori before she fell over.

The Conqueror who had gripped her chair so hard at the events she'd actually ripped one of the armrests off and had to hide it by resting it on the posts of the chair, stood and stepped down to the floor.

The priestess walked over to Gabrielle and with a bow, "The winner is Queen Gabrielle" making it official and thus ending the challenge.

Just then two shimmering figures appeared. Goddess Artemis and Aphrodite stood in front of both Xena and Gabrielle.

"Goddesses" the priestess said and all in the hall bowed.

The Conqueror gave a small bow of her head as usual.

Artemis walked over to Gabrielle, "Very well done. You once again have proven my choice to be correct in your actions".

"Thank you Goddess Artemis".

"For your actions and compassion, I wish to grant you this" Artemis placed a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. Immediately it glowed and she then took her hand away. At her touch, Gabrielle's injuries had all healed.

"Thank you Goddess Artemis, there was not need to do that though as I had gotten hit fairly".

"Once again, it is my gift to you little one".

"You do me a great honor Goddess Artemis".

"As do you little one, as do you".

"That was totally cool!" Aphrodite said.

"What is that you are holding Goddess Aphrodite?" the Conqueror asked leaning over to look into a very small bucket the Goddess held.

"Oh popcorn, want some?" she extended it to the Conqueror.

"Uh, no thanks" she held up her hand in a negative manner.

"So now sweet pea. You gonna make an honest woman out of her?" Aphrodite pointed with her thumb over to Gabrielle.

"I want to ...so much Goddess Aphrodite. So, so much but I'm afraid" she whispered back.

"Of what sweet pea?"

"Of her possible rejection of my feelings, of the implications".

"Whoa there Xena. She just fought one of their best warriors to be with you. What do you mean by rejection?"

"Well, what if I'm not everything she wants or needs in a bondmate?"

"Xena, you can only be who you are. She will have you entirely and that's everything she needs to fulfill her heart".

"But what of the implications of being my bondmate?"

"I think she's proven she can handle herself and whatever implications. I'm sure she is intelligent and strong enough to weather them" the Goddess tried to assure her.

"Besides sweet pea" the Goddess looked around and then sneakily pushed the Conqueror to a corner to whisper something to her, "Xena, it's a path chosen for the both of you by the Fates. You are to make Gabrielle you Queen as well, so get to it!"

Aphrodite gently tapped Xena's cheek to rouse her out of her shocked look.

"Come on tall, dark and brooding. I hear there's a celebration tonight with an announcement to be made". The Goddess winked and took Xena by the hand, walking her back to the center of the hall.

"Okay everyone, we'll see ya tonight. Bye" Aphrodite bid them a goodbye and they both disappeared.

"Wow, they sure make an entrance" Eponin said.

"Yeah, come on. Let's get Satori to Tidimous" Ephiny replied as they turned and practically carried her away.

"By your leave Lord Conqueror, My Queen" the priestess asked for her and the elder.

"Yes, thank you for...um everything" the Conqueror granted.

The rest of the hall took the reply as permission and request to leave the two alone.

The hall was completely vacated.

"I, um...would you like to...um....walk with me?" the Conqueror asked hesitantly.

"Yes, thank you My Lord".

Xena extended her arm and gracious for a bit of support herself, Gabrielle took it.

They walked through the corridor in silence, enjoying the silence and the moment to sort through the events and emotions of the past day.

"My Lord?" Gabrielle asked suddenly.

"Yes?"

"May I be excused for a while? I would like to freshen up".

"Oh, yes, of course, of course. Um, maybe we can um...."

"If I may be so bold My Lord, but when I am finished, might I see you again? In your private chambers?"

The Conqueror smiled at the suggestion, "Yes, you may".

Chapter 58

The Conqueror had finalized the festival preparations and given them to Abraxus to pass on to the counsel.

They would begin immediately to set up so that they would be ready for the Solstice in the next few days.

"Enter" the Conqueror said in reply to the soft knock on her door.

"My Lord?" the soft voice said in reply.

In walked Gabrielle; clean refreshed and dressed in a long tan skirt, matching blouse and carrying her cloak.

Once the doors closed, she walked slowly over to the Conqueror.

They stood looking into each other's eyes for a candle drop and then the Conqueror opened her arms for Gabrielle.

With a smile, Gabrielle walked into her embrace. A small satisfied sigh escaped them both at they held each other.

"I've so missed this" the Conqueror whispered into Gabrielle's hair as she breathed in her sweet scent.

"As have I, My Conqueror" Gabrielle agreed.

"How are you feeling? Anything hurt?" the Conqueror asked with concern in her voice as she laid a gentle hand on Gabrielle's shoulder where Satori had hit her on the collarbone.

"No, I feel fine. The Goddess Artemis granted me a special blessing of healing" she replied looking up to the Conqueror's concerned face.

At her response, the Conqueror relaxed in her arms "I was worried about you, you know? You got hit pretty hard by her and some of those hits would have knocked anyone else down and out".

"Some of them almost did, but I was determined not to let her beat me" Gabrielle replied, "Would you like to continue our walk? I just feel...like walking" she asked.

"Sure" the Conqueror gave a loving caress to her face and then released her to grab her own cloak.

They walked down the corridors at a leisure pace, not really heading anywhere but taking great pleasure in going there hand in hand.

At one point they came upon the rose garden.

"Might we sit My Lord?" Gabrielle asked.

"As you wish" the Conqueror replied, assisting Gabrielle to the bench but not sitting herself.

"Is there something wrong, My Lord?" Gabrielle had noticed the quiet demeanor the Conqueror had about her.

"No, no. Just a lot on my mind. But nothing could be wrong" she answered.

The Conqueror began to pace, ever so slowing in front of Gabrielle, "Gabrielle...you...I am very proud of what you did today, you know?"

"Thank you My Lord. That is very kind of you to say".

"You know that now that you've won the challenge, you are entitled to be granted the title of Royal Consort and Champion?" she kept pacing slowly.

"Yes, My Lord. I do not know who that becomes official though" Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, that has to be announced at another formal meeting like the one that was done for your freedom".

"Oh, all that?"

The Conqueror nodded, "That's if you want to make it official that is" she hesitantly replied.

"Do...do you want me to?" Gabrielle asked in a small insecure voice while looking down at her hands.

"No, I don't".

At this answer Gabrielle looked up and felt her heart rip apart. She took in a ragged breath and blinked her eyes which suddenly had tears in them, "I...I think I am going to go to my room...My...Lord" she struggled with her words as her breaths had turned into sobs.

"Wait Gabrielle....please....let me explain" the Conqueror said in a panic, "Please..." she pleaded as she grabbed Gabrielle by shoulders as she had risen and began to walk away.

Gabrielle could not look into her eyes and could only nod; the Conqueror eased her back down onto the bench.

She began pacing again, "Let me start at the beginning so you might understand all of this better. Approximately six moons ago, I began having these dreams. In them there was a young woman with red blond hair. Because of me, the woman was killed. It was not until recently that I became aware that all the things occurring now were all tied in with these dreams; Wotan or Odin, the Amazons and Queen Melosa, even you. Then one day I saw the young woman here in my palace. When I ran to find her, she had simply vanished, but instead I was greeted by Goddess Aphrodite. She gave me cryptic messages that I had to decipher to make heads or tails of this all".

The Conqueror was pacing again as she spoke.

"In our meetings, the Goddess alluded to you being the woman of my dreams".

"Me? How can that be?" Gabrielle asked while sniffing back her tears.

"That I know not, but I only recently was given a hint about. You see Gabrielle..." the Conqueror had stopped pacing and sat next to Gabrielle, "...the woman in my dreams...was my wife".

Gabrielle was stunned silent.

"So do you understand now why I said no? No to you being my consort and champion?" the Conqueror rose and stood directly in front of Gabrielle, then went down on one knee before her.

"Gabrielle, I ask you to be my bondmate. I may not be everything you want or need but I will spend the rest of my life trying to be. Will you be my wife?"

Gabrielle threw herself at the Conqueror, bowling her over onto her back and hugging her fiercely with new tears running down her cheeks.

"So..." a breath, "I take that as a possible yes?" the Conqueror teased.

"Oh yes, yes, yes!" Gabrielle said with childlike glee.

To this the Conqueror laughed heartily, "I love you Gabrielle".

"As I love you Xena" Gabrielle leaned down and shared a tender yet passionate kiss with her.

They separated and looked lovingly into each other's eyes before breaking out into wide, face splitting grins.

"Let's get you up off the floor, it would not look well for me to have you pinned to the floor like that" Gabrielle joked.

Once standing, the Conqueror startled Gabrielle by suddenly embracing and spinning her around, "You have made me the happiest woman in the world!"

"No my love, the second happiest, for I am the happiest" Gabrielle smiled back at her laughing.

"Come on, we've got a celebration to get to!" the Conqueror said cheerfully, reaching for Gabrielle's hand and turning to the halls.

Chapter 59

"Welcome Everyone! We celebrate tonight for many reasons. Not just for the sake of a party like some of you might believe" a few laughs throughout the hall could be heard.

The hall was full of people, the entire Amazon troupe with the priestess and elder, all the generals, commanders and troop leaders and Abraxus, Ophelia, Sephina, Nika and Tidimous.

"We celebrate tonight to honor those who fought valiantly and gave their lives that we might be her tonight. We celebrate to honor the ones who survived and are here to join us" the Conqueror's voice carried easily over the crowd.

"To them, we offer our first toast" the entire hall was on their feet, "To all the brave souls; you have your lives and your heart. We thank you" The Conqueror lifted up her goblet as did all and

drank.

Once everyone was seated again, she continued "There are a few, um, interesting announcements to be made this evening. Quite a few of you will be shocked at these revelations, some of you not. For the first, I will ask Regent Ephiny of the Amazon tribe forward".

The Regent stood up and walked to the dais the Conqueror was now seated upon.

Bowing and saluting to the Conqueror, she stepped up one step and turned to face the hall.

"Most of you are not aware of the circumstance that brought us here. I am now able to reveal to you why. We came here under our beloved Queen Melosa's behest to advise the Lord Conqueror of a petition for her hand as bondmate to one of our Amazons".

The hall broke out into murmurs and whisperings.

Speaking over them to get their attention again Ephiny continued "It just so happened that this battle broke out while we were here. As you know, our Queen fell in battle but a sister tried to save her by a valiant deed.

Just this morning the petition was declined and then a Challenge was issued. Under the rules of Challenge, only the Queen of the Amazons may deny its progress or give her consent for it to continue.

Now, what only a handful knows is that as the Queen lay dying, she asked our weapons master to bear witness. Our Queen passed on her Right of Caste to someone. This person has also been verified by our priestess and elder to possess the prophesized sacred marking of Artemis. The marking would designate our future Queen of the Amazon Nation that would unite our tribes and bring forth the glory of a truly proud nation".

Ephiny walked over to where Gabrielle sat and offered her hand. Gabrielle blushed, took her hand and was led to the front of the hall where Ephiny stood only a moment before, "Ladies and Gentlemen, It is my honor to present to you, our new Queen Gabrielle" Ephiny went down on bended knee and lowered her head.

The entire hall broke out into noise as chairs were pushed back to have people rise to their feet. The Amazons copied Ephiny in saluting their new Queen and the rest of the hall bowed in acknowledgement.

Gabrielle was moved to tears at this unexpected reaction and did not know how to respond, but typical of her nature she began "Please, please everyone. Thank you. Please rise and be seated".

Slowly everyone did as requested.

Ephiny still stood by Gabrielle and continued, "So, as Queen, Queen Gabrielle consented to the Challenge. But the uniqueness of this consent was that Queen Gabrielle was the Challenger!"

A lot of gasps and murmurs again arose.

"As one of the witnesses, I am truly looking forward to have the opportunity to serve for our Queen as she is a very talented, capable and honorable fighter" Ephiny looked to Gabrielle and then about the hall, "After a lengthy combat, our Queen was the Victor!"

The Amazons whooped it up at this announcement followed on by the rest of the hall thumping their mugs on the tables or clapping causing Gabrielle to blush in embarrassment.

"Our Queen is now entitled to be granted the title of Royal Consort and Champion to the Lord Conqueror!"

Another round of whooping with now a contingent of wolf whistles at the implications of the title.

Gabrielle felt she could turn no deeper shade of scarlet or have her face burn so hot. She tried to cover her face with her hands in attempts to hide it but that action only caused more wolf whistles.

The noise went on for a few candelights before it began to settle down.

"My Queen" Ephiny bowed to Gabrielle and returned to her seat.

"Thank you Ephiny for that truly embarrassing introduction" Gabrielle joked which caused laughter throughout the hall.

"Firstly, I want to thank the Goddesses Artemis and Aphrodite who helped me throughout out all of this" Gabrielle looked about the room and as she did, the Goddesses materialized on either side of her, causing her to jump a bit.

"You're welcome pumpkin" Aphrodite said and Artemis finished with "You are most welcome, my chosen". Each gave her a knowing wink and smile and then just as quickly disappeared.

The entire hall was still and silent, surprised at their sudden appearance and disappearance.

"I still can't get used to them doing that" Gabrielle shook her head causing another round of laughter.

"To the Amazons, I am truly sorry for your loss of your beloved Queen Melosa. She was, in the short time I knew her, an extraordinary woman. And I will try to uphold her example of dignity and grace as your new Queen".

The Amazons stood and bowed to her.

"Thank you" she said and they reseated themselves.

"Regarding the Challenge, well...let's just say that was a true learning experience for me and I am honestly relieved that I never have to do that again" she said with a small laugh.

"Once again, thank you everyone" Gabrielle gave a small nod of her head and sat back down while everyone applauded her.

The Conqueror rose and took a step down from the dais, "Quiet interesting announcements don't you think?"

Laughter and table thumping was her response.

"Well, if I could indulge in the presence of the newly crowned Amazon Queen?" she looked to Gabrielle and extended her hand in invitation.

Gabrielle stood once again, walked over and bowed.

"As the Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire, it is my pleasurable honor to acknowledge you as Queen Gabrielle of the Amazon Nation. Welcome" the Conqueror then gave a low bow to Gabrielle as the hall looked on.

"Thank you My Lord" Gabrielle stuttered as she was shocked at the formal acknowledgment.

The Conqueror rose and turned again to the hall, "As Regent Ephiny stated earlier, Queen Gabrielle is now entitled to be granted the title of Royal Consort and Champion" she paused and waited a breath, "But, I have rescinded that".

The Amazons rose up in a clamor of shouts "How dare you! This is an affront to our Queen and us!"

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow and smirked, turning her head to look over to Gabrielle who took the opportunity for her first act as Queen. She stepped forward one step, "ENOUGH!" she said forcefully.

The Amazons stopped the shouts but grumbled under their breaths.

"Whilst I appreciate your defense of my honor and that of our Nation, your actions disrespect the Lord Conqueror, the generosity of these celebrations and shame us" she said sternly.

"My Lord" Gabrielle turned to the Conqueror, "My apologies on behalf of the Amazons" she bowed.

"No need Queen Gabrielle, it was merely a misunderstanding" the Conqueror replied "As I was saying, that title will not be granted, for on the full moon of this month Queen Gabrielle will become Queen of the Empire as well".

Several heads tilted in quizzical wonder at what the Conqueror had just said.

"For you see, Queen Gabrielle has agreed to my request to be my bondmate..." she paused "Queen Gabrielle has agreed to become my wife!" as she took Gabrielle's hand in hers and brought it up to her lips for a kiss the hall erupted into absolute chaotic celebrations.

People were shouting kudos and thumping tables. The Amazons were a first struck dumb but then began whistling and yelling shouts of joy, others about the hall clapping.

This went on for a full half candle mark and ebbed in waves of intensity.

Finally the hall began to settle down and the Conqueror and Gabrielle stood at the front of the hall still holding hands and smiling.

"So, we take it that you all are happy with this news?" the Conqueror joked causing again a round of laughter and shouts.

"Okay, okay settle down, settle down. You'd think they heard some great news or something" she joked again.

"So everyone is invited as the ceremony will be on the Solstice Eve. Now, I know Ophelia has slaved over a great meal for us tonight. Please, everyone enjoy" the Conqueror swung and arm in the direction of the servers who began bringing in the food.

Chapter 60

Gabrielle and the Conqueror were swamped by those wishing them congratulations.

Sephina and Nika pulled Gabrielle to one side, "Okay, spill it! We want to know all the details" Sephina insisted.

"There's just too much so I'll give you the short version" she huddled with the two of them and began telling them.

"So, Lord Conqueror; finally decided to commit to it eh?" Abraxus asked the Conqueror as he handed her another goblet of wine.

"Yes, someone has finally conquered over me" she sighed back happily looking over at Gabrielle still huddled with her friends.

"It does you good Lord Conqueror" he slapped her on the back in congratulations.

"Thank you Abraxus" a small blush tinted her cheeks at the compliment, "Would you send word to all the dignitaries and heads of tribes?"

"Aye Lord Conqueror it would be my pleasure to announce" he responded.

A clearing of a throat stopped Gabrielle in mid sentence. She turned to see Ophelia standing behind her.

"Might I have a candledrop of ya time Queenie?" she said with a bit of hurt and anger in her voice.

Gabrielle nodded and Sephina and Nika left them alone as they headed off to a corner under the watchful eyes of the now protective Amazon Royal Guard, Weapons Master and Lord Conqueror.

"Ophi, before you get mad..."

"Before? Hmph!" Ophelia crossed her arms over her chest.

"Oh Ophi!" Gabrielle put a gentle hand on Ophelia's forearm, "please don't be mad at me. This has happened all too quickly for me and I have barely had a chance to touch ground. Please sit with me and let me explain" she pleaded with sorrowful eyes.

Gabrielle grabbed two chairs and dragged them over and then took two goblets of wine. She handed one to Ophelia and began to explain everything to her.

It was a half a candlmark of non-stop talking on Gabrielle's part as she finished and waited on Ophelia's reaction.

"Ya know, she loves ya as do we all" Ophelia said with a bit of hurt still evident on her face.

"Yes, I know Ophi. All of you mean the world to me also" Gabrielle looked truly concerned over whatever Ophelia was going to say.

"I just don't want to see ya hurt....ya two minions are the closest things I's got to children of me own".

"Oh Ophi!" Gabrielle broke down into tears and Ophelia took her into her arms as a mother would her hurting child, "Oh sweetie, I could never be mad at ya. I loves ya too much child" she caressed her head that was nestled to her chest.

"Oh Ophi..." Gabrielle said through the tears, "I consider you my mother. You mean so much to me".

"Sshhh...it's alright child, it's alright" Ophelia reassured her.

The Amazons were about to interrupt when the Conqueror stepped forward, "No, leave them be. This is a family matter" she said in a hushed tone.

They nodded their heads and stepped back to leave them in private conversation.

The Conqueror waited a few more candle drops then walked up quietly. "Everything okay?"

Gabrielle sniffled back tears and wiped at her eyes as she sat back out of Ophelia's embrace, the Lord Conqueror immediately embracing her into her arms.

"Yes, I've just apologized to Ophi for not telling her about everything" Gabrielle explained.

"Then I owe you one as well Ophi" said the Conqueror, "...for not advising you of what was happening to the little one here" she hugged Gabrielle tighter "and myself".

"Tsh, I know about ya me child, but ya to stubborn for ya own good to gets hurts badly like this little imp can" she smiled at Gabrielle.

"Well, only a few days for me to arrange a wedding banquet, so I best be on me way" Ophelia said giving them both a loving look before leaving.

"You okay?" asked the Conqueror as she looked down to wipe away a tear on Gabrielle's face.

"Yes My Lord" she took in a deep breath and released a sigh, "Glad that's over with though".

"Come on, you haven't eaten and I'm actually quite hungry" the Conqueror admitted.

"Well that's a first" teased Gabrielle.

"Don't you start too!" bantered back the Conqueror as they made their way to a table.

The revelry went on well into the night when the Conqueror said her goodnights to all and made her way back to her room accompanied by Gabrielle and a few of the Royal Guard in tow.

"Would you like something more to drink?" she offered Gabrielle.

"No thank you Xena. If I put anything else in this stomach, I think I'll burst" she said placing both hands on her belly.

"Okay, come sit with me" she offered her hand and they sat down on a bench in front of the fireplace in her private chambers.

Gabrielle was nestled in the crook of the Conqueror's left shoulder with the Conqueror's arms wrapped about her enjoying the moment of silence and listening to the gentle consistent thump of the Conqueror's heart.

Looking up, she etched into memory the profile of the Conqueror's face. The strong jaw line, the high cheekbones, the aristocratic nose and the long eyelashes.

Gabrielle released a contented sigh and the Conqueror looked down into her eyes, the fire

reflected in the clear blue.

Slowly the Conqueror leaned down and with her right hand she gently cupped Gabrielle's chin up, placing a tender kiss upon her lips.

Pulling back, the Conqueror looked into her eyes again "I love you Gabrielle" she whispered to her lips.

Gabrielle reached up with her left hand and ran it up the back of the Conqueror's right shoulder to the base of her neck, pulling her down for another kiss as she declared "and I love you Xena".

This kiss was not so chaste, as Gabrielle parted her lips slightly and snuck the tip of her tongue out to caress the Conqueror's lips in silent request for entry.

The Conqueror granted her request with a soft moan swallowed up by Gabrielle's mouth.

Excruciatingly slow and tentative, Gabrielle entered the Conqueror's mouth with her tongue and then retreated causing a small whimper of loss from the Conqueror.

This exchange lasted a quarter of a candle mark and the Conqueror's resolve was quickly deteriorating. The kisses had begun to deepen and exploring by both sides caused the two to have to come up for air.

The Conqueror leaned her forehead to Gabrielle's while breathing heavy and ragged, "Ungh" came the anguished sigh from the Conqueror's chest.

"G...Gabrielle....we....must...stop" she said trying to catch her breath and calm her racing heart as she untangled her hands from Gabrielle's golden lock of hair, "I swore not to take your virtue in a dishonorable way" taking a very deep breath, "I will not let my libido control my actions with you".

Gabrielle, whose lips were swollen and slightly bruised from their passionate kisses, looked up into the intense azure eyes of her love, "I ...I understand" as her hand continued to stroke the back of the Conqueror's neck; "I should go....its late and has been a long day" taking a deep breath she closed her eyes and stood.

The Conqueror leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and put her face into her hands.

Gabrielle could see the Conqueror's tension as it radiated off her body in waves. She stood before the Conqueror and with a lover's caress ran her fingers through her ebony locks, "Soon my love" she whispered.

The Conqueror wrapped her arms around Gabrielle's waist and laid her forehead on Gabrielle's stomach, "I've fought nations and all manners of creatures but this wait will kill me!" she said in a self deprecating manner.

Gabrielle just smiled and ran her nails over the Conqueror's skull in a last tease which earned her a startling growl from the body in front of her.

"Time for you to go!" growled the Conqueror as she stood up revealing steely blue eyes burning in intensity.

This look caused Gabrielle to gulp and smile timidly, "Yes My Conqueror" she reached for Xena's hand and they walked to the chamber door.

"Goodnight my love, until tomorrow, sleep well" she said teasingly while she played with the laces on the Conqueror's blouse.

"Gaaabrrrieellee" the Conqueror growled again.

Gabrielle knew she had to stop before she pushed her any further, so she stood up on her toes and gave her a tender lingering kiss.

She then turned and opened the door, with one last glance back; she winked seductively to the Conqueror and left her room.

The Conqueror closed the door and began beating her head against it, "She will be the death of me. Either she kills me or I will self-combust...I'm sure of it!" she said to herself, "Cold tub! Cold tub!" she kept repeating as she headed towards her private bathing chambers.

Gabrielle stepped into the corridor where four Royal Amazons stood and snapped to attention startling her, "My Queen" said the lead guard Varia.

"Oh! I didn't expect you to be here" Gabrielle said, then hearing a thumping she leaned back to the door, pressing her ear against it.

The Amazons watched with curiosity as she did this.

A big grin at what she heard and then a blush came to Gabrielle's face as she realized the Amazons were watching her.

"Err, um" she stuttered.

"Are you ready to go My Queen?" Varia asked.

"Um, yes. I'm just going back to my room" Gabrielle replied.

"Yes My Queen, we will escort you there" Varia acknowledged.

Gabrielle's things had been moved into Queen Melosa's room after the announcement had been made.

"Well..." Gabrielle said once they had reached her new room, "Thank you; you can go rest now".

"Oh no My Queen, It is our duty and honor to guard you" Varia said, "As Amazon Queen, you will have a guard escort at all times".

"At all times?" Gabrielle asked squeakily.

"Yes My Queen" Varia answered proudly, "We will always be posted outside your chambers or tent to escort you where you go" she continued.

"Oh...um, okay. Thank you for that...I...um...goodnight then" Gabrielle said a bit flustered entered her new room.

"Goodnight Queen Gabrielle" Varia saluted and posted next to the door, on first watch.

Once inside, Gabrielle leaned back against the door and looked about the room. It was fairly large as compared to the room she shared with Nika. Actually it was almost three times the size. In it there was a meeting room with a desk with four chairs, a separate room for private bathing and then her bed chamber.

"Wow" Gabrielle said to herself as she had not been inside there before.

She looked around a bit before a yawn escaped her, "Ugh, tomorrow. Bed now" she told herself and sat on her bed, removed her boots, skirt and blouse. She threw on a sleep shift and curled up under the thick blanket. As she lay relaxing, a small smile began to form on her lips as she thought of the Conqueror and the kisses they shared. Then it turned into a naughty grin as she thought of the state she had left her in, *'Oh Gabrielle, you naughty girl. That will come back to bite you'* she thought to herself. Then with a slight shudder, "I can't wait!"

Chapter 61

The next day was chaotic to say the least as the preparations began in earnest for not only the customary Solstice celebrations but for the once in a lifetime bonding ceremony of the Conqueror and the Queen.

Ophelia was in her kitchen with Sephina making a list of all the foods they would need, then the ingredients, tools and they also had to plan how to cook all of it in time causing Ophelia no end of despair but quiet glee at the notion it was all for her two favorite girls.

The Conqueror was busy issuing directives and invitations, meeting with counsel and releasing funds for the preparations.

Gabrielle had to meet with her priestess, elder and Regent to discuss her role now amongst the Amazons.

"But constantly?" asked Gabrielle in a small bit of exasperation about her Royal guards.

"Yes Queen Gabrielle. They are the Royal Guards for that reason alone" the elder replied, "that has been custom and law since the creation of the Amazons by the Goddess Artemis".

"Oh" she replied.

"I know it must be a bit overwhelming and disconcerting at first My Queen, but rest assured that you will become accustomed to them being there to the point that you will not realize they are there and they have the upmost discretion in your matters". Ephiny interjected.

Gabrielle nodded to her in response.

"So My Queen, we must help you to understand your role now in the Amazon Nation. You will lead the Amazons as Queen, as such you will help negotiate treaties and trade relations, and you will sit at counsel and decide verdicts. You will pass laws or amend them. If punishment is warranted for a crime, you will render it. Only counsel, of whom you will head, can find someone guilty or innocent of a crime during trial. As Queen, you have inherited Queen Melosa's possessions, of which are her home, status and valuables".

"So this is what she meant" Gabrielle said outloud but to herself, thinking of the conversation with Queen Melosa when she said she envied her freedom.

"My Queen?" the elder asked in confusion, "Who meant what?"

"Oh nothing, sorry to interrupt" Gabrielle replied, "Please continue".

The next few days were like this for everyone.

The Conqueror and Gabrielle only had time to share their evening meals with one another as they were on different schedules.

The evenings became more of a challenge for the Conqueror as she had discovered that her betrothed was enjoying torturing her with her newfound wiles causing her to end her nights dousing herself with a bucket of cold water right after she had gone for the night.

"Ophi, I need your help...please!" Gabrielle came into the kitchen, followed by her ever present guards.

"What's the matter child?" Ophelia said as she put the final ingredients on a shelf for use tomorrow when she began to cook.

"Opho, they ...they want me to wear ...this!" Gabrielle practically cried and cringed at the same time while holding up an assortment of items which included feathers, beads and what Ophelia could only make out to be strips and pieces of leather.

Biting her lips together to keep from laughing, Ophelia covered her mouth and tried to put on her

most contrite face, but failed miserably.

"Don't laugh Ophi or I swear I'll have one of these guards put an arrow in your butt right now!" Gabrielle said in near tears.

At this Ophelia had to turn away and walk into her storage room. The bellows of laughter could be heard down the corridor for several candelights.

When she re-emerged, wiping her tears from her eyes Ophelia took Gabrielle by the hand and led her out of the kitchen down the corridor and past several doors.

There she knocked and entered with the troupe in tow.

"Lania, we need your help" Ophelia said as she walked into a huge room. It was littered with rolls and rolls of cloths and silks the likes of which none who had entered had ever seen.

In the middle of the room sat a woman of similar age and build to Ophelia. She had two young assistants scurrying about with scissors and needles while she worked on what seemed to be the hem of some trousers.

"Lania, this is Gabrielle...sorry this is Queen Gabrielle of the Amazons. And by now I'm sure you've heard, the Conqueror's betrothed" Ophelia introduced the two of them to each other, "this is the Conqueror's seamstress Lania".

Gabrielle walked up to the seated lady and extended her hand in friendship, "Hello".

Lania stood up and bowed, "Welcome your majesty. I have heard of your great beauty and deeds and was wondering when and if I were to see you".

Gabrielle blushed at the words of compliment, "Thank you Lania".

"Now Lania this..."she held up what Gabrielle had shown her earlier, "...is what the Amazons expect her to wear for her bonding".

"Oh my!" Lania covered her mouth with her hand in shock.

"Uh, yep. Anyways, I was thinking that this is the one and only bonding ceremony for both of them and that you could design a gown royal enough for her majesty that would include some of the....um....traditional aspects of the Amazons?" Ophelia finished with a small smirk and raised eyebrow to which Lania nodded.

"Fine, I apologize for the short notice" Ophelia offered.

"Not to worry Ophelia, I was somewhat expecting it. I only just got the Conqueror down here today myself. Took a good threat but she listened" Lania smile mischievously.

"Oh ya gots to tell me later" Ophelia replied with a wink like they were old friends discussing the mischief's of their children.

"I will dear, I will" Lania nodded.

"Okay child, I'll be leaving ya in safe hands" Ophelia gave a one armed hug to Gabrielle, "Now ya take good care of this one Lania, she might get stroppy with ya cause she's Queen but she's still my little girl and gets nuthin but the best" her eyes twinkled with unshed tears and before Gabrielle could say anything, she left.

Lania led Gabrielle gently by the arm, "Come Queen Gabrielle, we have much to do" and began to lead her further into the room but as she did, the Amazon guard followed, "Oh no you don't. Out ya get!"

"But we don't leave the Queen" Varia said.

"Now listen here young lady..." Lania began getting blinking in shock look from Varia, "We have a lot to do and don't need ya underfoot. There is no one else in here 'cept my two girls. No other way in or out 'cept that door there" she pointed to the door they had come in through.

"So out you get and do your job whilst I does mine".

Varia opened her mouth to respond in protest but was stopped by Gabrielle, "Varia, I will be fine. Why don't you please wait outside?" she said in a gently appeasing tone.

"Yes, my Queen" Varia saluted and bowed her head and then left with the other Amazons.

"Let us begin" Lania stated.

Chapter 62

Later that night, "So, I heard you finally got to meet my seamstress?" the Conqueror said as she relaxed in front of the fireplace.

"Yes, she's a lovely lady" Gabrielle replied.

"Oh don't let her demeanor fool you. She can be quite vicious if she needs to be".

"Yes,, I gather that from a comment she made to Ophi about how she got you down there with some sort of threat. What was it?"

"Trust me, you don't want to know!" the Conqueror said cringing and unconsciously crossing her legs.

"So how are the Solstice preparations going?" Gabrielle asked.

"Great, almost all done. Most of the dignitaries and leaders arrive tomorrow with a few the next morning. They are putting the finishing touches on the altar platform for our ceremony. Besides that they're all done".

"Wow, that's was quick but close" Gabrielle said with appreciation in her voice for all the work having been done.

"Yes, they really have done an outstanding job. But I guess the fact that this is also our bonding ceremony added to their excitement to finish".

A yawn escaped Gabrielle's covering of her mouth and the Conqueror smiled as she had noticed Gabrielle's eyelids very slowly blink in attempts to stay awake, "Well my love, as much as I would love to have you torture me some more tonight..." the Conqueror teasingly let Gabrielle know she knew what she'd been doing to her, "I am going to get the Amazons to escort you back to your room early tonight".

Gabrielle began to protest but was stopped, "Shhhh....my little one. It has been a long few days and yet another one and a half more to go. We must present you to the arriving dignitaries and leaders. Then there is our final fitting and pre-bonding meal".

"What is that?" Gabrielle asked.

"We have a special meal made for us the night before our ceremony. It consists of various foods supposedly to give us health and strength for the next day as it usually wreaks havoc on our body and nerves..."

"Oh" Gabrielle was eager to learn of these traditions.

"....and then we say our goodnights".

"Don't we always?" Gabrielle drawled seductively while she began playing with the Conqueror's throat with her fingertips.

The Conqueror chuckled as she grabbed Gabrielle's hands and kissed her fingertips, "Not like that my little minx. You see I must escort you to your bedchamber door and bid you good night with witnesses whereupon the priestess seals your door and your Amazons stand guard for the night. Then I must go and make a sacrifice to the Goddess Aphrodite for the gift of our bonding blessing. I am then escorted to my chambers, but as the Conqueror I can not be sealed in due to the nature of my being in charge of the realm. Nevertheless, a symbolic sealing is done and Abraxus and my guards stand watch".

"Oh, okay".

"We do not see each other again until the ceremony that night. As I have to continue running the empire, it will be you mostly who is kept hidden from my eyes in the rooms. You'll have your bridal bath before dressing and then be escorted to the ceremony. Even when you do emerge

from your rooms, no one is to see your face until it is unveiled by my hand".

"How do you know of all this?"

"A recent lecture by Ophi, your priestess and elder" smiled the Conqueror, "So come on, bed time for you my love".

The Conqueror rose and escorted her to the door, "I shall see you in the morning my love".

"I look forward to it my conqueror" Gabrielle gave her their nightly ritual kiss which curled the Conqueror's toes and exited the room.

"Ugh, just one more night. I can make it...just one more night" she said as she headed to the bathing chambers and her bucket of water.

True to the Conqueror's words, she greeted her the next morning and escorted her to the greeting hall to meet the arriving dignitaries.

"Kaliepus, you remember Queen Gabrielle?" the Conqueror greeted the centaur.

"Aye, Lord Conqueror, but I do not recall the Queen part" the Centaur bowed to both of them.

"Ah yes, I have no doubt that by tomorrow's ceremony you will have been told all about it" smiled the Conqueror.

"That I look forward to with much enthusiasm" he bowed once again and trotted to the side.

"Princess Nefertiti, may I present my betrothed Queen Gabrielle of the Northern Amazon Nation" the Conqueror used her full title proudly.

"Queen Gabrielle, the princess curtsied deeply in deference to her status.

"Princess Nefertiti, it is a pleasure to meet you" Gabrielle said formally with a bow of her head.

"News of your bonding has spread quickly Lord Conqueror, but the stories of your beauty are lacking indeed Queen Gabrielle" the princess said graciously.

"I thank you Princess, I am sure those stories are equally lacking by those of your beauty" Gabrielle complimented the princess honestly as she had not met an Egyptian before lest a princess of such dark beauty.

"Well, it seems Lord Conqueror that you have finally met the true one of your heart" the princess said with sad eyes and a wistful tone that made Gabrielle quirk her head in wonder at its meaning.

"Yes Princess, as by decree of the Fates, my heart and soul" the Conqueror gave slightly imperceptible nod to the princess which she acknowledged by turning away from her look.

"I then wish you both all the blessings of the Gods and should you ever have need of our chariots, we will answer your call". The princess bowed and then mingled with the rest of the crowd assembled.

They watched her leave and Gabrielle then asked, "So, My Lord, how long have you two known each other?"

"Oh several seasons" she replied nonchalantly.

"And for how many of those has she been in love with you?" Gabrielle whispered.

The Conqueror nearly choked on her tea, "What?!" she asked in a hushed yet outraged voice.

"My Lord, I know there are many who have shared and desired to share your talents and virtues; both men and women alike. I could see the yearning in her eyes and hear the sadness in her voice of a love lost".

"I...I..." the Conqueror was dumbfounded.

Gabrielle turned to look at her, surprised at what she saw "You did not know" she more stated than asked.

"No....I didn't" she answered solemnly and sincerely.

"Do you regret that?"

"Yes, but not for what you may believe. I regret it for not knowing sooner so that I could stop it from happening and causing any hurt. She is a good friend and ally, which is how we came to know one another" the Conqueror said with sadness, "we shared information to the benefit of our realms and comfort and companionship when afforded".

"Though I know you have shared yourself with others, and I have no right to be jealous of your past, it does not stop me doing so" Gabrielle whispered and turned away from the Conqueror but as they were in a formal setting with several in attendance she did not make a scene.

"Gabrielle, that was I the past...I..." the Conqueror tried to explain.

"I know My Lord. I wish I could stop this feeling, truly I do. But I can not. I take comfort in your honesty to me and in knowing that as of tomorrow no one will share you but I" Gabrielle tried to sound stoic and assured.

"No my love..." the Conqueror turned Gabrielle around to face her caring less who watched.

Gabrielle looked up with confused eyes at her words until the Conqueror continued, "...you will not share me for you will have me entirely". With that, the Conqueror did something she'd never

done out in public, she cupped Gabrielle's chin up with the tips of her fingers and gently kissed her.

Conversation grew quiet as eyes turned to watch the two who were obviously in love and then respecting their private moment, those in attendance turned their backs and resumed their conversations.

Standing back up, the Conqueror looked down at the beautiful face of her beloved whose cheeks had just flushed with color.

When she felt the Conqueror pull back, Gabrielle blinked open her eyes, "My Lord" Gabrielle then blushed and laid her forehead on the Conqueror's chest, embarrassed at the heat of her blush on her face.

The Conqueror laughed, "Its okay, they have all turned away to give us a moments privacy".

Gabrielle snuck a peek and groaned, "How embarrassing" to which the Conqueror laughed out loud, "Come on, let's introduce you to the rest. We have to go get fitted soon".

"So, do I get to peek at what you'll be wearing tomorrow night?" the Conqueror asked as they walked towards the seamstress's room.

"No, Lania is still putting the finishing touches on it. She has apparently had everyone work all night and day on this. Besides, it's a surprise. A mix of Amazon tradition and romantic fairytale" Gabrielle said to her.

"Lania, we're here!" the Conqueror announced.

"Lord Conqueror, Queen Gabrielle" Lania and her assistants bowed, "Well, this will not do. You each can not see what the other is to wear. Um, since you Lord Conqueror are an easier fitting, please come with me" Lania motioned her into another partitioned room where she took in the final adjustments.

"Thank you Lania that was quick and graciously painless" the Conqueror said to the private threat Lania had given her earlier the day before.

"My apologies Lord Conqueror, but you have me no choice. Otherwise, I would not have been able to finish on time for both of you" a nervous Lania explained.

"It's alright Lania, I know I can be difficult when it comes down to this. You know it as well otherwise you wouldn't have done it" the Conqueror patted her shoulder gently and exited the room.

"Your turn my love" the Conqueror whispered to Gabrielle, "And since I can't sneak any looks at you in various stages of undress or at your dress..." the Conqueror teased, "...then I'm going to finish up a few things and I'll pick you up for our pre-bonding dinner" she finished in a normal

tone.

"As you wish My Lord" Gabrielle replied cordially as always when they were in the company of others.

Kissing her on top of her head, the Conqueror left Gabrielle in Lania care under the watchful eyes of the Amazon guards.

Chapter 63

It had been at least four candle marks since the Conqueror had left Gabrielle with the seamstress. Pushing away from her desk, she surveyed the work she'd gotten accomplished today to her surprise as her mind kept drifting to her bride to be.

"Hmmm, actually got a few things done" she mentally gave herself a pat on the back. She had arranged for a few competitions to entertain the special guest, a ceremonial offering for a peaceful Solstice and the normal festival music, food and wine. She had wanted to organize all of this so that she could spend her bondmoon with her wife in peace and quiet.

She rose and made her way leisurely toward Gabrielle's room. When she came around the corner, Gabrielle's ever present guards were there so she knew Gabrielle would be inside.

The guards saluted as the Conqueror came up to the door and knocked.

Gabrielle opened it with a smile.

"Good evening Queen Gabrielle, I would like the honor of escorting your majesty to our pre-bond meal" the Conqueror asked with a small bow.

"Good evening Lord Conqueror. I would be honored to be escorted by you" Gabrielle replied with a small curtsy.

The Conqueror extended her arm and Gabrielle eased her hands into the crook of her elbow, making their way down to the hall.

Once everyone was seated, the Conqueror rose to address them "I want to thank you for making time and this journey to be here for this Solstice Celebration and most importantly for Queen Gabrielle's and my bonding" she smiled at Gabrielle and then the audience.

"Ophelia has now been cooking for a full day in preparation for this pre-bonding meal as well as what I am sure will be a sumptuous bond feast. I want to thank her for all her efforts in this traditional meal ceremony".

Ophelia, who was waiting in the doorway to begin ordering the food brought in, bowed in acknowledgement of the compliment.

"Please enjoy" and with the Conqueror's nod, Ophelia motioned for the servants to bring in the food.

After a while into their meal Gabrielle leaned over to the Conqueror, "My Lord?"

"Yes Queen Gabrielle?"

"I am unfamiliar with all of the traditions; might I ask you some questions regarding them?"

"Of course, what would you like to know?" the Conqueror replied taking a sip of wine.

"Well to start, why this meal?" Gabrielle fanned her hand over the table.

"Well as I mentioned earlier, some of the foods are to ensure we are healthy for the ceremony. Others to...um...give the couple strenght..."

"Strength? For what?" Gabrielle asked curiously.

Looking about to ensure no one was listening to their conversation, the Conqueror leaned closer to Gabrielle and whispered, "For strength of endurance and vitality to consummate our bonding".

"Oh..." Gabrielle said not fully understanding what she meant, then when the realization of what the Conqueror alluded to became apparent she blushed, "OH!"

"That's another reason for the bouquet you see before us" the Conqueror pointed.

"I was wondering what that smelly thing was" Gabrielle scrunched up her nose at saying this.

"Yes, it does leave something to be desired but it is made of garlic and herbs. It is believed to ward off evil spirits and ensure fertility and union".

Another scrunch of her nose and a small smile is what she replied to the Conqueror with.

"Okay, so what about the sealing of the doors?"

"Well that is done after I escort you back with witnesses, to ensure you arrive safely and that I have left you alone for the night and not ravish you and sully your virtue before the ceremony" the Conqueror wiggled her eyebrows suggestively which caused Gabrielle to laugh, "really though, it is meant to ensure you are still untouched because no one has broken the seal to your door until the priestess opens the door the next day".

"Okay, I understand the sacrifice part but what about not seeing you and this bride bath?" Gabrielle continued to ask.

"I am not allowed to see you before our bonding as a way of making our hearts grow fonder to

be with each other and suspense at what we have chosen to wear to entice each other".

"Okay, what about this bath? Do you have to do it too?"

"It is a ritual bath usually taken the day of the bonding. A procession led by a child draws water from a spring or river using a loutrophros which is a double handled, pointed vase. The water cleanses away all dirt or evil clinging to us, the child drawing it, pure of heart, grants it a blessing by proxy. Usually it is only for the bride but some husbands do participate in the ritual to symbolize they are cleansing themselves for their brides".

"Will you be doing this?" Gabrielle asked bashfully and hoping the Conqueror would do this for her.

"Yes, I intend to" the Conqueror reassured her and Gabrielle smiled at this.

"Then when the time is right, you will be led by a torchlight procession to the altar platform. This is for you to be guided by the light of your love in security".

"Oh that sounds so romantic" Gabrielle said dreamily causing the Conqueror to chuckle at her teasingly.

"Stop that!" she whispered blushing.

"I can't help it; you're so cute when you blush like that. Besides, I think it is very special too" the Conqueror said under her breath.

Gabrielle looked at the Conqueror and smiled realizing that the Conqueror too was excited and had a romantic side also, recalling their time up in the castle tower.

"So, am I going to do this walk under a veil? Why?"

"That is so that no one by your bondmate sees your beauty and steals you away, thus protecting you from evil. It also symbolizes that you are only going to reveal your body to your bondmate".

Gabrielle thought of that and what it meant, nodding to herself in understanding.

"Part of the ceremony ritual is also is that we have crowns placed on our heads and they are linked together by silk ribbon, this ensures we share the glory of being treated as a special couple because it is our bond ceremony and then the final part of the ceremony is the part that seals our bond. When we exchange our first kiss after our vows, we supposedly exchange part of our souls thus making us soulmates".

"Wow, that is so spiritual" Gabrielle said in awe.

The Conqueror nodded in agreement.

Looking about the hall and seeing most of the meal was over, the Conqueror rose "As you know, tomorrow at this time I take the beautiful Queen Gabrielle as my bondmate..."

The hall quieted down and everyone turned to listen.

"...I want to say here in front of all of you that I thank the Goddess Aphrodite for all she has done and as a tribute, this Solstice's Celebrations are held in her honor!" the Conqueror toasted and the hall followed suit with applause.

"Now tomorrow is a big day for us and I must get as much rest as I can tonight..."

"Doubt you'll get any tomorrow night!" someone jeered which caused the hall to erupt into laughter and Gabrielle and the Conqueror both to blush.

"...be that as it may; and whoever you are that said that, bless the Gods I am going to let that slide due to my celebrations! We now take our leave".

The Conqueror rose and extended her hand to Gabrielle.

The hall rose and bowed as they exited and left the hall.

Chapter 64

The made their way in companionable silence, each enjoying having the other there. Once they reached Gabrielle's room, the guards posted onto four corners; two in front of her door and two on the opposite wall down a length.

The priestess and elder had accompanied the group to perform the ritual sealing.

"Well my beloved" the Conqueror turned to look at Gabrielle while taking her hands in her own and bringing them up to her chest, "this is were we must part for the night".

Blushing and smiling Gabrielle whispered "I won't be able to give you a proper kiss good night".

"No, but my body could use the night's rest" the Conqueror teased back.

Gabrielle pouted a bit causing the Conqueror to chuckle, "Go on inside before I break tradition and take you tonight!" she winked, leaning down and placing a chaste kiss on to Gabrielle's soft lips; "Until tomorrow my beloved".

"Until then my Conqueror" Gabrielle gave her jaw a soft caress and then entered her room as the Conqueror watched every move with love and adoration.

With a great sigh, the Conqueror stood straight and stepped to the side waving forward the priestess and elder.

After a few spoken words, the priestess poured hot wax over the latch of the door and the elder pressed a seal into the cooling wax to show the Amazon emblem of a feather and arrow.

They turned to the Conqueror and bowed.

The Conqueror then went out to Aphrodite's temple altar in the forest.

Placing a bouquet of winter flowers on the altar, the Conqueror bowed her head, "Goddess Aphrodite, I give this bouquet as a gesture of appreciation for your help and to honor you I have offered this Solstice's Celebrations in your name". She stepped down away from the altar.

"I know I have no right in asking the Gods for any blessings, but I ask not for me but for my betrothed's."

At this admission and sincerity, a soft shimmering light began to materialize above the bouquet and then settled next to it, eventually becoming the full apparition of the Goddess Aphrodite seated on top of her altar.

"Hello Xena, thank you for the flowers..." she waved a hand over them, "...and for the honor of the celebrations".

"Had it not been for your assistance, there would not be any celebrations Goddess. For that I thank you".

"That's okay Xena, it is small recompense for what my brother has done" the Goddess looked away truly sorry.

"Of that Goddess, would you answer a question for me?" the Conqueror tilted her head sideways a little in curiosity to her answer.

"If I am able to, of course".

"Was Ares the force behind Satori's actions? The whole bond seeking and challenge?"

"Yes" she replied sadly, "he had tried to corner you with war of the land on one side and a battle of a suitor on the other. In this he hoped you would turn to him in need so he could 'rescue' you. What he didn't count on was that the Fates had predicted your soulmate coming to your aid at the time of great need for you as well as being the prophesized Queen to the Amazons".

The Conqueror was pensive as the Goddess explained to her his sordid plan.

"So my tasty little morsel" the Goddess winked causing the normally reserved Conqueror to blush again, "You wanted a blessing?"

"Um yes Goddess. As you know tomorrow evening is our ceremony. We would ask of you, the Goddess of Love, for a Bonding Blessing".

"Hmmm....let me ask you this Xena; if I did not grant you one...would you still bond with her tomorrow night?"

"YES!" the Conqueror quickly and emphatically replied, "I am in love with her Goddess and want no other but her!"

"That's what I wanted to hear Xena, that's what I wanted to hear" the Goddess smiled and disappeared leaving a bewildered Conqueror standing there.

The Conqueror looked about, "Goddess?" she held out both her arms in supplication.

When no one answered, she shook her head in confusion and went back to the palace, dejected and more confused then she had been in days.

She was escorted by her guards, the priestess, elder and Abraxus to her chambers. There she bid them all a good night and entered leaving them out in the corridor to perform their blessing ritual.

In the morning, the Conqueror took the liberty of sleeping in late. According to her that meant rising with Apollo's chariot and not before.

The priestess had arrived and nodded to Abraxus thus ending her period of seclusion and breaking of the so called seal.

Ophelia had sent up Sephina with a tray of food so that the Conqueror would begin her day on a full stomach.

"Good Morning Lord Conqueror" Abraxus said as she entered her private study chambers.

"Yes it is Abraxus, yes it is" she smiled and happily replied as she drank her tea.

The Conqueror spent most of her day doing very little; she read a few scrolls, signed a few petitions and relaxed by the fireplace.

When the afternoon had arrived, the palace began to bustle with activity.

The ritual baths were arranged for both of them; each of them in their own bathing chambers.

A light meal was sent to each to their room with a small note from Ophelia, *'This is for the two of ya, I know ya would be nothin but nerves 'bout now, but ya needs to eat a bit so ya don't pass out at the altar. And I'll say this now in private to ya both, I loves ya like me own flesh and blood and am proud of ya. Now eat! Love Ophi'* This caused both of them to laugh in the privacy of their own room.

The sun had finally set, signaling the start of the evening's event.

The Conqueror had taken her time to dress not wanting or needing to rush. She wore deep dark purple trousers laced in the front. They were tucked into mid-calf high black leather boots. Around her waist she wore a belt from which hung her ceremonial sword with black tassels. She had an ivory cream silk blouse with sleeves that billowed down to ruffled cuffs at the wrists. It had a stiff high collar with a lace up front.

She reached over and took the knee length coat that had been hung for her in waiting. It was also a deep dark royal purple with gold embroidered swirls at the bottom with a gold trim that ran along the hem and cuffs. It also had a stiff high collar with gold tips and buttoned down mid way to the waist. The Conqueror however choose to leave it open so as to accommodate her sword.

She gave one final look into the mirror and adjusting the jacket once more, flicked her ebony locks back and exited her chambers.

Outside guests had started to gather in the night. The bitter cold wind had all but died noticeably during the last few candle marks leaving only a slight winter coldness in the air.

Roaring fire pits drums were stationed throughout the courtyard taking the damp chill out of the air and enlightening the area with a soft ambience.

The altar platform was arranged with the two ceremonial crown and silk ribbon, the sets of rings were being held by the priestess until the ceremony and the torches were being lit about the platform.

As there had been a slight snow flurry earlier, they had not rolled out the red carpet to the altar just yet to ensure it remained clean and not slippery.

Gabrielle also had a similar day with the priestess breaking the seal the next morning and allowing the breakfast meal of the day. No one was to disturb her but she was allowed to chat with only a few friends such as Sephina, Nika, Ophelia and Ephiny.

The priestess was there constantly as she was not allowed to be left alone with one anyone other that the priestess at anytime.

When the time came for her bath, everyone was escorted out.

She then ate her light meal alone for her last few moments of reflection before preparing to dress.

Lania had personally delivered the dress and was the only one allowed to assist Gabrielle in dressing aside from the priestess.

Gabrielle was amazed at the dress and thanked Lania endlessly for the beautiful work.

It was an ivory white dress that fitted the winter scheme in the heaviness and thickness of the material but was light enough to exude the femininity of Gabrielle's beauty.

The neckline was square across Gabrielle's bosom leaving a hint of cleavage showing. It caressed over the slopes of her shoulders before a latticework crisscrossed down her back until waist level. The sleeves snug her arms until the elbows before billowing out to open in a flare.

It tapered to her waist in two sections and then opened down the center to reveal another plait of dark royal purple to match the Conqueror's colors. The front hem barely covered the front of her feet but angled further lower towards the back. Where the latticework ended at her waist it was gathered in a soft ruffle made to look like a blossoming rose and then extended down to the ground in a five foot long train.

The trim around her chest, arms and hem were done in the same gold as the Conqueror's.

On her feet was the finest and latest fashion of a heeled shoe that stopped before the ankle. It too was an ivory color but a few shades darker than her dress.

Once all had been assembled and put in place, Lania set the veil on the dressing table and explained how to put it on as that was for her to do alone before leaving.

It had been interwoven with two small feathers on the sides that would sit next to her temples and a few simple beads placed strategically at the base thus fulfilling some of the Amazon needs.

As they were unsure of the weather, a light coat shawl had been prepared for her to accommodate her dress fitting.

At last she was left alone.

Gabrielle sat in front of the dressing table mirror and applied a bit of lip balm and perfume behind her ears.

She then placed on her veil, adjusted it and taking a deep breath stood to admire herself.

She was finally ready.

With a smile, Gabrielle walked to her door and opened it.

Chapter 65

In the hall, the Royal Amazon Guard were dressed in their finest.

Ephiny, the elder and all snapped to attention when they heard Gabrielle open the door.

As no one was to look directly at the Queen, Ephiny and the elder bowed and turned to form into the guard escorting her.

Once everyone was situated, they made their way to the courtyard.

At the archway into the courtyard, the guards with Ephiny and the elder were each given torches.

Ephiny and the elder were situated at the front of the procession with Gabrielle surrounded by four other guards; two on either side of her and two behind her.

The carpet was finally rolled out and light music was being played.

The guests had filled the seats and with a change in music, the Conqueror made her way to the altar, nodding and smiling as she walked along the nave.

At the bottom of the steps to the altar, she turned and waited.

With another change of music, the crowd all turned to the archway to see the procession of Amazons walking towards them.

At the start of the carpet, the two side guards stopped and stepped away leaving Ephiny and the elder at the front and the two in the back to escort her up.

At the base of the altar where the Conqueror stood, Ephiny and the elder bowed to the Conqueror and stepped apart, allowing Gabrielle to step forward.

The Conqueror's breath caught at the vision before her.

Gabrielle had the shawl draped across her shoulders with the hood pulled back revealing her almost bare shoulders. She had her hair pinned up with only a few curled strands hanging sensuously from the sides.

Gabrielle looked up and what she saw caused her to go weak in the knees.

Before her stood an exotically alluring woman who exuded strength, commanded respect and warranted worship.

The Conqueror's eyes shone brilliant bright blue in the light of the torches even though Gabrielle was looking through a veil.

After looking at each other in a lover's moment of awe, the Conqueror stepped forward and with a slight bow, offered her hand to help Gabrielle up the three steps of the altar platform.

At the top they stepped onto the platform and turned to face one another holding each other's hands.

The priestess began, "Xena, Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire. Before you stands Queen Gabrielle of the Northern Amazon Nation. Here and now state your intentions and vow".

The Conqueror's eyes twinkled from the reflected light of the torches as she looked lovingly into

Gabrielle's eyes, "I ask you to accept me as your bondmate. I give all that I have, except my heart, for that you already own. I will have no other, in this life or the next, before you. You are everything I never knew I always wanted and so much more. You have been my salvation and my light and I will respect you, nurture you and adore you with every breath that I take into this warrior's heart for I am in love with you".

Gabrielle gazed teary eyed through her veil at the Conqueror as she spoke; etching into memory every word and every look.

The priestess asked, "Queen Gabrielle of the Northern Amazon Tribe, what do you say in response?"

"I..." Gabrielle cleared her throat quietly, "I accept you as my bondmate" she smiled at the huge grin now on the Conqueror's face.

"Queen Gabrielle of the Northern Amazon Tribe, what intention and vow do you offer in return?"

"I ask you to accept me as your bondmate. I want nothing of your realm but your heart, love and respect. I will not share with any other what is now yours. You have rescued me from harm and set me free. I will respect, adore and cherish you for I also am in love with you".

"Xena of Amphipolis and Lord Conqueror of the Greek Empire, what do you say in response?" the priestess asked.

"I humbly accept" she replied not taking her eyes off of Gabrielle's.

The priestess then turned to get the rings she had placed on the altar just as the couple had ascended the steps when three shimmering lights cascaded down in front of her.

The priestess stepped back and as the lights turned into three Goddesses, she bowed.

There in front of all stood the Goddesses Aphrodite, Artemis and Athena.

"We'll take it from here darlin'" Goddess Aphrodite said to the priestess who immediately bowed again and stepped down off the platform.

"We've watched over both of you and now this moment of great joy, we will sanction this bond with our actions" Aphrodite said out loud for all to hear.

Artemis and Athena took a ring each and walked around the altar to stand by the couple, Artemis next to Gabrielle and Athena next to the Conqueror.

"As Patron Goddess of the Amazons I bless this ring for you, my chosen Queen to my Amazon's, to give to your chosen bondmate. Let it guide and protect the wearer for all time" Artemis handed the ring to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle then took the Conqueror's left hand in her own and slipped the ring onto her fourth finger.

Athena then held out the ring in her hand to the Conqueror while saying, "As your Patron Goddess, I bless this ring for you to give to your chosen bondmate. Let it guide and protect the wearer for all time".

The Conqueror then placed the ring on Gabrielle's finger in the same manner.

Aphrodite then handed the two crowns to her sisters, "These crowns are to advise all those here, that you are to be treated as a special royal couple for today is your day of bonding. The silk ribbon tying you together symbolizes the unity of you both beginning to share this day together", the Goddesses placed the crowns on the couple.

"Our final blessing, as it was asked of us..." Aphrodite winked to the Conqueror "...for you both is this..." just then a teardrop shaped diamond materialized in the air in front of her.

All three Goddesses came to stand together and each placed their index finger on the diamond, "We offer this blessing, a symbolic tear of joy for the two of you, as a tear of the Gods and a reflected flame of love between you".

At this, the diamond split in two perfect halves.

Once again each Goddess walked to their chosen, placed it about their necks and then returned to the altar with Aphrodite.

"With this first kiss after your vows, you exchange part of your soul and seal your bond, thus making you soulmates to each other. Our blessings protect and keep you both" and they nodded to the couple.

Gabrielle took the Conqueror's hand and guided it to the tip of her veil, thus granting her symbolic permission to be revealed to her bondmate.

The Conqueror took a deep breath and lifted the veil from her beloved's face.

There to greet her were the most intense emerald green eyes she'd ever seen with a brilliant smile.

She then leaned down to kiss her, and just before their lips met each whispered "I love you".

This kiss was one dreams and stories were made of; it was gentle and passionate and spoke volumes of the love they both shared.

It lasted only a few candle drops but to them it was momentous.

Leaning back from the kiss, the Conqueror winked to her new bride and the courtyard erupted into applause.

The Goddesses, with one final nod, disappeared.

The Conqueror offered her arm to Gabrielle and escorted her down the steps as the applause continued.

The Royal guards surrounded them with torches and the procession led them back into the palace and the reception banquet that awaited the happy couple.

Chapter 66

The banquet hall was adorned with all types of festive decorations for the Solstice celebrations. The tables were laden with breads and meats, trays of fruits and sweets.

The ale was flowing freely and the atmosphere was jovial indeed as guests mingled in the dual celebrations.

"Regent Ephiny" Daniera called out.

Turning, the Regent looked to see who was calling for her, "Oh hey Daniera.

Handing her a mug of ale, "Here, I wanted to offer you a celebratory mug" Daniera said.

"What for?" Ephiny asked as she took the proffered mug.

"Our freedom, of course!" Daniera stated happily, "We no longer have to babysit Satori" she whispered.

"Ah yes! Definitely a drink up on that" she tapped her mug with Daniera's and they each took a sip.

"So, how is she by the way?" Daniera queried.

"Well she fully recovered from the concussion the Queen gave her, but not of the embarrassment of the whole thing. Apparently Hermes..."

"Hermes? As in the messenger of the Gods Hermes?" Daniera interrupted and asked incredulously.

"Yup...trust me. I am just a little spun out at all these Gods showing up myself" Ephiny declared, "Well he delivered a message from Goddess Artemis stating that all this hubbahbaloo about her wanting to bond with the Conqueror was all a deceitful scheming plan set by the God of War. Some plot he hatched over trying to win over the Lord Conqueror".

"Oh no" Daniera exclaimed.

"Yeah, so she was a under his influence and now can't face anyone cause of the embarrassment she feels".

"But it's not her fault!" Daniera didn't realize she was actually defending her until the smile Ephiny had on her face grew larger.

"Umm...eyeah....uh.....so what is she going to do?"

"Well, I've tried talking her into coming tonight but she didn't really feel up to it yet. Maybe once all this has died down, she'll be better able to deal with it".

"Ye, give her time. I'm sure no one will fault her once the truth is made public" Daniera agreed.

"Yeah, I hope so".

"So, what did you think of the ceremony?" Daniera asked, wanting to keep the conversation going.

"Well, personally it was all a little over the top for me but for the Conqueror and our Queen, it fit perfectly" Ephiny replied honestly, "They make a perfect match".

"So, it was too ostentatious for you?"

"Yeah, I would prefer something simpler, more our traditional ceremony of the couple with the priestess and a few close friends; nothing more, nothing less. Maybe a nice little dinner with friends afterwards and then leave to spend time alone together somewhere secluded" Ephiny looked away wistfully.

"Anyways, how about you? Was it something you would want or different?"

"Me? Oh no...definitely too big for me. I prefer a more laid back and simpler approach as well. It's more intimate and has more meaning to me that way" Daniera shrugged.

"Yeah, I agree".

They were both quiet for a while, each lost to their own thoughts.

"Hey Ephiny, who's got watch detail tonight?" asked Eponin as she walked up holding two mugs of ale in her hands.

"Why?" Ephiny asked looking from the mugs to her face.

"Uh, well, I was wondering if I....uh...could have...the night off?" she asked sheepishly.

"Any particular reason?" Ephiny wanted to have a little fun at her weapon's master expense.

Looking from Ephiny to Daniera, a slow blush began to creep up her face.

"Well....um....Ium....you see...I ..." Eponin stuttered.

"Oh Pony; it's not worth the hassle. Go on, I'll get Varia to stand again. But, you will owe her and me big time!"

"Oh yeah hey, sure, no problem Eph. Thanks so much, see ya" Eponin said practically running away.

"What do you think that was all about?" Ephiny asked Daniera.

"Looks like she wanted to spend the night in someone's company if you ask me" Daniera motioned her head over towards where Eponin was standing with her back towards them. She was in the company of Nika and Sephina, "Or maybe I should say in the company of others?" she continued as they watched both Sephina and Nika put their arms in the crook of each of Eponin's elbows and walked away with her.

Ephiny and Daniera watched with mouths agape, then turned to look at each other and burst out into laughter.

"Come one, let me get you another drink" Daniera said.

"Nah, how about I get you one and we go for a little walk?"

Daniera stopped and turned in shock to look at Ephiny who timidly pressed her lips together and raised her eyebrows in question.

"Um...sure, I'd like that".

"Great! I'll be right back!" Ephiny said over her shoulder as she had turned to make her way over to Varia and advise her of her duty tonight and get the drinks.

"Congratulations ya two little imps" Ophelia said to the Conqueror and Gabrielle who were seated sipping some wine. They had eaten the gloriously sensuous food and now sat back enjoying the evening.

"Thank you Ophi, from both of us" Gabrielle said, "You outdid yourself on this food, and it is divine".

"Nuthin' but the best for ya today child. Oh, and I have a little tray already being sent to ya room for later on" she winked at them which caused Gabrielle to blush.

The Conqueror smiled and looked over lovingly to Gabrielle as she blushed, "Thank you Ophi, it is very considerate".

"Tsh" Ophelia made a noise, "Now I will have a tray sent up in the mornin' but will have them set it in the study so as not to disturb ya. Get it at ya leisure and in ya privacy".

A nod from the Conqueror acknowledged the gesture.

"Now, go on....get ya two. Everyone here is set to drink the night away. Make ya break now" Ophelia shooed at them to go.

With a nod towards Abraxus, the Conqueror put in motion the guards for their escort.

They said a few goodnights and accepted a few congratulations as they made their way out of the hall.

Chapter 67

Once they reached the corridor to the Conqueror's chambers, the guards both Amazon and Realm situated themselves discreetly away from the chamber entrance to allow the newlywed couple their privacy.

The Conqueror opened her study chamber door and allowed Gabrielle to enter first.

"Well, we can take these off now" the Conqueror lifted off her crown as Gabrielle did hers and they laid them on the desk.

"Can I take your shawl for you?" the Conqueror offered to Gabrielle.

"Yes, thank you" Gabrielle removed it and handed it to her.

The Conqueror placed it over back of one of the chairs, "I'm just going to take off my jacket and boots, I'll be right back" she pointed towards the bedroom chambers.

"Okay" Gabrielle replied as she started to remove the pins holding her veil in place, letting her hair down.

When the Conqueror had returned, Gabrielle was seated in front of the fireplace. Her feet tucked up under her as she stared off into the fireplace then back down to her ring and back up.

Xena just stood watching her, taking her in silently, "Beautiful" she whispered absentmindedly causing Gabrielle to turn in her direction.

"Did you say something?"

"Yes, I said you are beautiful. And that dress you have on makes you look stunning" the Conqueror answered while coming to sit besides her.

"Thank you Xena, and can I tell you now how dashing you looked tonight?"

"Oh, that's a bit much don't you think?" she jested.

"Well, maybe dashing isn't the best description but...well, amazingly exotic suits a bit more" she said while looking at her up and down in slow appreciation with a bit of desire and want in her eyes.

"That was a unique ceremony and quite a shock from the Goddesses, don't you think?" the Conqueror said nervously all of a sudden as Gabrielle's look at her was doing things to her insides.

"You mean that wasn't the blessing you asked for last night?"

"Yes and no. I asked Aphrodite for a blessing for us for our bonding but she didn't say anything except to ask me would I still bond with you without it".

"What did you say?"

"Yes of course! Then she said that was what she wanted to hear and disappeared until tonight".

"Have they or do they do that often...especially with the tear diamond?" Gabrielle asked as she held hers up and looked down to it.

"No, never in any account that I have heard or read of".

"Does that make ours special?" Gabrielle looked up to Xena.

"Their blessing does not make you any more special to me than what you already are, but in answer to your question...yes, it makes it unique not only to us but to those in attendance and those that will hear of it" she replied while caressing Gabrielle's cheek with the knuckles of her hand.

Xena then leaned in and kissed Gabrielle softly, she pulled away a tiny bit and looking into Gabrielle's eyes leaned in and kissed her again.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of that first kiss and when she felt Xena pull away she opened them. She felt her beloved's lips kiss her so delicately that she parted her lips slightly at the timid request of Xena's tongue.

Several more such kisses and Gabrielle was willingly sharing exchanges with her wife's tongue in her mouth.

The kisses were not ravishing but revering; a gentle exchange and exploration of the two souls on the precipice to become lovers finally.

Gabrielle leaning in to the Conqueror's pull and Xena gently coaxing Gabrielle to her.

Xena's hand had gone from Gabrielle's cheek to her shoulder and caressed down to her back while Gabrielle had raised her left hand and slid it sensuously down Xena's throat to have it rest in the open lace front of the Conqueror's shirt against her chest.

"Gabrielle, I've wanted you for so long....but if I should do something that displeases you or hurts you in any manner, regardless, I want you to stop me okay?" Xena asked in a hushed tone once they had pulled away for a breath of air and laid their foreheads against one another.

"I trust you Xena and I will, but I am sure I will not have to" Gabrielle said confidently.

"I love you Gabrielle"

"As I love you my beloved..." Gabrielle looked into the bluest eyes she had ever seen and saw only love and adoration in them, and then she glanced to the bed chambers and back to Xena.

She nodded to the Conqueror, giving her silent consent of agreement to move to the bed chambers.

The Conqueror looked deeply into the emerald green eyes she had fallen in love with and seeing the nod, stood and extended her hand to Gabrielle to help her to stand.

Once Gabrielle had taken her hand and stood, the Conqueror released it and bent down, scooping Gabrielle into her arms and striding into their bed chambers.

Once inside the doorway, the Conqueror used her heel of her right foot to shut the door and walked over to the side of the bed, gently placing Gabrielle down onto her feet.

Gabrielle turned around and reached behind her to begin untying the ruffled gathering of her dress. The Conqueror assisted when it came to the lattice crisscross to loosen the dress.

As the dress began to slip off Gabrielle's shoulders, Xena leaned forward and began placing gentle kisses at side of her neck, following the slope of her shoulders as she eased the dress down to the ground with her hands.

Gabrielle could feel the heat emanating off Xena's body against her back even though they were not touching. She demurely cast off her breeches and turned to face Xena now in the nude.

Xena stepped back and gazed lovingly up and down at what Gabrielle revealed to her.

Gabrielle's eyes had darkened in reaction to the intense look of desire she saw coming from Xena.

Stepping out and over her discarded clothes, Gabrielle pulled on the laces of the Conqueror's shirt and once completely loosened, she lifted the hem of it up, encouraging Xena to shrug it off which she did.

As Xena shook her head and freed her hair of her shirt, Gabrielle began on the laces of her trousers.

Xena looked down as Gabrielle's smaller hands undid the laces and then watched as she hooked her thumbs into her waist and around her hips, pushing them down and off of her onto the floor.

Xena then discarded her breeches as well and stepped forward to Gabrielle.

Hesitantly, she reached for Gabrielle and placed a hand on her hip; she slid it around to the small of Gabrielle's back and then pulled the two of them together.

Drinking in the sight of one another as their bodies melded into a perfect match fit, they both took in a deep sigh at the feel of skin to skin contact.

Xena leaned down as Gabrielle tilted her head up and they kissed passionately, the heat of Xena's body catching Gabrielle's on fire.

Xena broke away from the kiss for a moment and turned slightly, pulling the heavy blanket down on the bed. She then led Gabrielle to the edge of the bed by hand and Gabrielle sat down.

Gabrielle scooted back into the center of the bed allowing room for Xena to slide in and lay down on her side, pulling up the blanket to cover Gabrielle and give her a sense of modesty.

"Gabrielle, I wanted to say thank you; for being there to help me, for standing by me and not giving up and for becoming my bondmate and wife. I will cherish you for all the days of my life" Xena said as she laid on her right side close enough to feel Gabrielle's body heat while looking into her eyes and caressing her face.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and leaned into the caress, turning her face she kissed her palm and then looked into Xena's eyes, "I will never give up on you Xena. I am so lucky to have you chose me to bond with and I love you. So much so that I share this with no one but you, I give this gift of myself to you Xena, I love you".

Xena moved over and kissed Gabrielle softly and passionately. She began kissing her again with more intensity as Gabrielle entwined her hands into Xena's ebony tresses and pulling her down with her as she reclined back.

A small moan escaped Xena's mouth as she half laid on Gabrielle, her lithe body under her.

"Love me Xena, share your soul with me" Gabrielle breathed into Xena's ear.

Xena moved further over until she now completely covered Gabrielle's body with her own, resting most of her weight on her elbows until Gabrielle was used to her body on her.

Instinctively, Gabrielle spread her legs to accommodate Xena's large frame on top of her and a

moan came freely from their mouths as they felt each other intimately for the first time.

"So soft...you are so soft and warm Gabrielle" Xena murmured as she kissed along Gabrielle's jaw line to nibble on an enticing earlobe as she lowered herself more onto her.

Gabrielle slid one of her hands from Xena's hair down her shoulder and back, feeling the shifting of Xena's muscles under her fingertips.

The myriad of sensations Xena was causing her body were overwhelming. The heat of her body, the sensual strength, the soft gliding friction all causing her to want to explode in exhilaration.

Having completely lowered herself onto Gabrielle, Xena was now free to explore the body underneath her. Her hand caressed the outside of Gabrielle's breast before sliding down her rib cage, then her sensual hip and muscled thigh before resuming the path back up.

Xena kissed her neck and suckled at the pulse point before returning to capture an earlobe with a soft nip as she continued on to pepper her jaw line with soft kisses.

Gabrielle moaned and turned her head, giving Xena more access to her neck.

Xena kissed her passionately as her hands went everywhere on Gabrielle's body.

Kissing lower on her neck, to her collar bone and then the top of her chest, Xena caressed her breast as she cupped it; feeling its perfect weight and softness.

Xena moved up and kissed Gabrielle again as she gently squeezed a thumb and forefinger onto the hardening nipple, causing Gabrielle to groan from the sweet pressure.

"Oh Xena" she moaned, arching her back in encouragement.

She felt the warrior's head move down, the ebony locks gliding over her skin, kissing randomly over her chest and then it hovered for a brief candle drop before her moist warm mouth covered and suckled a nipple while the other was given attention with her hand.

Gabrielle's head moved side to side as the pleasure was indescribable and she moaned Xena's name. She pressed Xena further to her chest, not wanting to end the pleasurable assault on her breast or senses.

"Ummm" was the only sound Gabrielle could hear from Xena between her own soft groans.

Xena kissed between Gabrielle's breasts as she moved to pay homage to the other one in the same manner.

Gabrielle's body was now working instinctually as her hips had begun to rock against Xena's body making her moan at the feeling of Gabrielle pressing against her core of need.

"Unnnngghhh" the sound came from Gabrielle's throat as Xena continued to worship her breasts.

Gabrielle's nails scrapped along Xena's scalp as she pulled her further into her.

Xena caressed her way down Gabrielle's body with her hand, Gabrielle's skin feeling like magic under her fingertips.

Following the path her fingertips had made, Xena kissed Gabrielle's ribcage, touching and soothing her body up and down.

Gabrielle's stomach tightened as a combination of sensations raged through her, her heart pounding with each.

Xena had slid her body down as she kissed her way over Gabrielle's taut stomach, feeling it clench as she kissed it and her navel.

Gabrielle kneaded Xena's shoulders and upper back with both hands, opening her legs wider to allow Xena's body to fit.

Xena nuzzled into the golden curls of Gabrielle's femininity, fire coursing through her veins at the scent of Gabrielle's arousal.

The soft skin, the toned muscle and the womanly curves of Gabrielle's body urging her passion to a level never felt before.

Moving the short distance from her nuzzle, she finally tasted the essence of her desire.

Gabrielle's head flew back and a loud groan of pleasure was released, "Ohhhhh".

The languid strokes of Xena's tongue caused Gabrielle to writher under her; she explored every crevice, every fold. She tasted every drop as nectar of life giving essence, stroking upwards to the hardened nub at the center of her love.

"Oh Xena" Gabrielle murmured, "Gods" she continued as she ran her fingers through Xena's hair.

Xena's hand slid over the top of Gabrielle's body which was now covered with a light sheen of perspiration.

Gabrielle's hips began rocking more insistently as Xena delved deeper with her tongue.

"Ummmm" Xena murmured as she drank in the sweetness that was her lover.

Stroke after languid stroke, taste after sweet taste she continued as she felt Gabrielle's hands wrap into her hair.

"Oh...oh Xena.....Xena.....XENA!" Gabrielle screamed as an orgasm ripped through her for the first time in her life. She went rigid and stopped breathing...seeing stars before her closed eyes.

Xena slowed her tongues motion to a very light caress as she lapped up the ambrosia before her.

Feeling Gabrielle finally relax her hold on her head with her legs and hands, she slowly moved up her body with kisses and soft touches.

"I adore you so much Gabrielle, I desire to only give you ultimate pleasure my love. To see you peak, when you are at your most vulnerable and purest beauty is an honor you give to me".

Gabrielle's ragged breathing had started to calm down and settle to normal as Xena held her in her arms.

Blinking slowly as she regained her senses, she looked up into the eyes of pure love, "Oh Xena," she took in a deep breath, "...that was....my body tingles and hums..." she luxuriated in the feeling and wonder.

"As you deserve to feel, for you are Queen to my heart my beloved" Xena kissed her.

"Ummm" Gabrielle enjoyed the kisses which were now more sensual. When Xena pulled back a little, she ran her finger along her jaw line, "You are very gifted my love" and she initiated a deeper, more erotic kiss wondering at the sweet musky taste on her beloved's lips.

"And you are more delicious than I ever imagined you would be" Xena kissed her again and then licked her lips which Gabrielle then realized were coated in her own juices.

A small blush rose to her cheeks, "Do not be embarrassed little one. It is you I yearn to taste, you who quench my thirst and fill my need. Your taste is uncompered to any nectar in the world and one I will always desire" kissing her soundly again.

The kisses were now more intimately erotic. Tongues dancing and dueling, a small nip of Xena's lower lip caused her to moan, "Oh Gabrielle".

Seeing the reaction, Gabrielle did it again and then sucked her lower lip into her mouth before releasing it, "Ungh" she felt a small flood release from between her legs at the sound from her lover.

She had gently guided Xena onto her back and now stretched out on top of her, "Gods Gabrielle, you feel so good".

Xena's hands now easily roamed Gabrielle shoulders and back down the length to her lower back to her firm buttocks. Squeezing, kneading and pulling her into her heated core.

She opened her legs and moaned at the feel of Gabrielle's wet center upon her own.

Gabrielle's kisses were deep and teasingly erotic, fulfilling the promises of their nightly kisses where they did no more.

She felt the Conqueror's breast rub against her own and pressed up to look down at them.

Taking them in so close and actually available for her to touch now freely, she lowered her head and took a nipple into her mouth without hesitation, "Gods Gabrielle" Xena threw her head back at this sudden surge of power and authority Gabrielle was showing over her body.

After a few candle drops of sheer tortuous delight, the Conqueror put her hands on either side of Gabrielle's head and pulled her up for a deep sensual kiss, rolling them both over in the process so that Gabrielle was now under her again.

Xena's center automatically began thrusting against Gabrielle rhythmically causing Gabrielle to open her legs and wrap her ankles around the back of Xena's knees and grab her backside, pulling her more into her as they continued to kiss deeply.

Xena began kneading Gabrielle's breast with one hand and kissing her neck, nipping gently on a pulse point before sucking on it harder and making Gabrielle moan, "Oh Xena, yes".

Xena ran a hand down Gabrielle's hip to her thigh where the mark of Artemis signified her as Queen to the Amazons was nestled.

Shifting so that she now straddled one of Gabrielle's thighs, she ran her hand along the inside of the thigh causing Gabrielle to start at the feeling of someone's hand, Xena's hand where no one else had ever been.

"You alright? Do you want me to stop?" Xena immediately paused all movement in concern.

"Yes, I am more than fine, no don't you dare stop!" she replied with ragged breaths and darkened eyes to which Xena smiled seductively, "As you wish My Queen".

Xena kissed her again and they battled for dominance in the kisses as her hands resumed kneading and pinching her breast and running up and down her inner thigh.

"Xena, please....touch me!" Gabrielle pleaded between their kisses as their hips rocked against each other.

Xena gently skimmed the outside of Gabrielle's soaked entrance with her fingertips, "Oh so wet my love" she whispered in a throaty breath.

Gabrielle opened her legs wider at the touch, "Oooh Xena" as she pulled her tighter to her body.

Again she skimmed the outside, "Oh Gods Xena!"

Xena traced gentle circles around the impossible wetness that coated her fingers, gently probing

the tip of a finger into her entrance.

With the mention of her name softly spoken from her lover's lips, Xena asked Gabrielle for permission to move their lovemaking to the next level, "Gabrielle?"

"This gift I freely give to you my love, take this and bond with me" Gabrielle said as she took Xena's face with both of her hands and brought her down for a soft kiss.

A lone tear ran from Xena's eye down her cheek as she revered the gift Gabrielle bestowed to her of not only her body but her soul.

Xena gently pushed a bit of her finger into Gabrielle's core, kissing and touching her body gently to get her to relax as much as possible and enjoy the other sensations on her body, as a soft groan escaped her at the feeling of Gabrielle wrapping herself around her finger.

Pulling out and gently gliding back in, she set a slow pace until she felt a barrier of resistance.

Looking into Gabrielle's eyes with love, she murmured "I love you" and kissed her as she pressed in deeply, breaking through the resistance.

Gabrielle cried out as she gripped Xena's arms halting all movement from her. Xena patiently waited for the initial shock and pain to subside.

Gabrielle's breathing was shallow and ragged and she had a few tears escape through the corners of her eyes. Willing to calm herself, she closed her eyes and took several deep breaths.

After a few candle drops, she opened her eyes to see tears and confusion on her beloved's face. She reached up and wiped away the tears, "I am okay my love, and you did not intentionally hurt me. I am overjoyed that we share this, please do not cry".

"But..."

"Shhh.....love me" she pulled her down for another kiss.

Xena closed her eyes and whimpered at the feeling of Gabrielle pulling her down and into her.

Ever so slowly and gently, she began moving again.

At first Gabrielle's breath hitched and she hissed out at the feeling, but then as the pain subsided to pleasure they began to move in unison, the desire that had long been restrained finally was let loose.

Xena set a slow grinding pace, pleasuring each other in tandem, "You are so beautiful Gabrielle, so soft and sensual".

Gabrielle gasped and moaned with each plunge as her lover went deeper into her body.

She felt incredibly and enchantingly full as she pulled Xena closer each time she delved further inside, "Xena" she panted as she felt her body react to Xena's thrusts.

A tingling sensation began from her toes, warmly weaving its way up her body, exploding in her belly as Xena's movements began to increase in reaction to feeling Gabrielle's inner walls begin to pulsate around her fingers.

Both their bodies were covered in blissfully earned sweat as they entwined their bodies as one.

"I've got you my love, my Gabrielle. Give yourself to me" seductively and erotically the brunette whispered and instructed into her ear.

Gabrielle screamed out "XENA!" and gasped while pulling Xena into her crushing embrace, her core exploding over Xena's hands as her climax ripped through her.

Xena, who was at the precipice of orgasmic release cried out Gabrielle's name as she cascaded over the ledge of bliss, feeling her beloved's walls contracting around her finger.

Only ragged breathing could be heard from the two entwined lovers as they lay exhausted and spent in each other's arms.

When Xena was finally able to compose herself she kissed Gabrielle tenderly, "I love you" and looked lovingly into her green eyes, "Are you okay?"

Gabrielle groggily and wearily tried to open her eyes to look at her but she could only manage a small sound, "Ummmhmmm".

Xena ever so carefully and gently withdrew from inside of her, causing a small hiss and whimper from Gabrielle.

Laying an affectionate kiss to her lips, Xena tenderly lifted herself off of Gabrielle and eased out of the bed.

Gabrielle had no energy and dozed lightly when a candle drop later she felt her lover reach for her thigh, "Ungh" she said groggily.

"Shhh...my love...I only mean to clean you" Xena said sincerely and quietly as she lovingly and carefully cleaned Gabrielle with a warm wet cloth.

Once she had tended to her beloved, Xena lay down next to Gabrielle and pulled her into a warm, loving embrace in her arms, kissing the top of her head.

Xena felt Gabrielle settle, comfortably wrapping herself around her body and feeling a sense of contentment wash over her that she had never experienced before.

Gabrielle nuzzled into Xena's shoulder, sighed softly and settled off to sleep.

As they both began to drift off into Morpheus' realm they each subconsciously held tighter to one another whispering "Only you my love".

Chapter 68

"So, you ...um...planning on going back to the Southern Tribe when the exchange program finishes?" Ephiny asked as she took a sip of her mug.

"No, I was actually hoping to get a nod by the elders to stay with you...I mean with the tribe" Daniera mentally cringed and embarrassingly blushed.

They walked along the corridor, looking through the archway to where the platform from the earlier ceremony now stood empty. Some of the guests mingled about the courtyard in various degrees of intoxication while others were heard bidding each other good night.

"I'd like for you to stay with me...I mean with us. I'll give the elders my note of support when we get back" Ephiny took a very long drink in attempts to cover her remark.

"Reg...Ephiny...might I ask you something..." Daniera started to asked.

"Sure" Ephiny interrupted and immediately replied to Daniera before she could finish.

"...personal?"

"Sorry...um...since I said sure I can't very well back out now, so go ahead".

"It is none of my business and you can tell me so and I will respect that..."

"What is it Daniera?"

"Well, do you...areyouwithsomeone? And if not, wouldyou...doyoufindmesuitable?" she rushed out before she could talk herself out of it.

Shocked at the candor and unexpectedness Ephiny's head jerked back and arched an eyebrow, but also in trying to decipher what was actually said.

"Sorry, I should have..."

"No, it's okay Daniera. Just shocked me that's all. Listen, sit over here with me" Ephiny led them to a bench near one of the open firepits in the common corridor.

Setting her now empty mug to the side, Ephiny turned to face her, "Daniera, I'm not one to really open up to people about my emotions".

"Sorry, I..."

"No, listen. I recently got cross signals and got hurt..."

"Oh...and then I go and do this..."

"No, no it's okay Daniera, honestly. I'm over it well and truly. It's just unexpected that you asked me so...forwardly...that's all".

"I understand" Daniera nodded and then turned her head to look out into the night sky.

"No".

"What?" Daniera asked.

"No, in answer to your question if I was with someone".

"Oh" Daniera accepted on a happier note but a bit nervous of what Ephiny might say to her second question as she did not have a really high esteem value of herself.

"And yes".

Daniera's head snapped around to look at Ephiny, "I find you more than suitable" Ephiny continued as she took one of Daniera's hands that were tightly wrapped around the ledge of the bench seat and put it into both of her hands, "I've found you every attractive and a pleasure to be around since we've met".

Looking from their entwined hands up to Ephiny's face and back, Daniera was speechless.

"Are you...do you?" Ephiny now asked.

"No..." she squeaked out and cleared her throat, "No, I am not with anyone and ..." blushing and unable to look up to Ephiny, "I've found you to be the most beautiful woman here".

Ephiny watched Daniera blush and struggle to speak and when she heard what she said, a smile graced her face. She took one of her hands and with the tips of her fingers under Daniera's chin, raised her head up to look into her eyes.

Looking into them and seeing the sincerity of her words, Ephiny leaned over and kissed Daniera tenderly.

Moaning quietly into the kiss Daniera leaned further into the touch she had always dreamed about since first meeting the regent.

When they pulled apart, Ephiny looked into Daniera's eyes questioningly.

There was no look of apprehension, only of want.

Silently, Ephiny took Daniera by the hand and headed towards their shared quarters.

Once behind closed doors, Ephiny pulled Daniera into a confident embrace. Looking into dark eyes, she leaned forward into a gentle probing kiss that quickly became deeper and more passionate.

Placing both her hands against Ephiny's pounding chest, Daniera told her, "You do the same to me, feel" as she placed one of Ephiny's palms on her own chest and finding a racing heartbeat that equaled her own.

Daniera's fingers moved to undo the laces to Ephiny's vest, pushing it open to reveal perky breasts.

She lowered her head and pressed her lips to the soft skin of her cleavage while her hands gently began working on the ties of her skirt.

With only a hint of shyness, Daniera stepped back and began undoing her vest and skirt.

Ephiny stepped forward and helped her with her skirt and as Daniera stood back up from taking off her boots, Ephiny caressed the soft naked breasts before her, leaning down to rub a cheek across a hardening nipple.

"Beautiful" she whispered as she kissed in between her breasts, standing back up and leading Daniera to sit with her at the edge of the bed.

Daniera trembled in anticipation as Ephiny ran both hands up Daniera's arms and shoulders to the back of her head and then ran her fingers into her short hair, leaning and kissing her soundly.

Ephiny gently pushed Daniera against the pillows.

She leisurely explored Daniera's body, her mouth meticulously investigated from the crook of her neck down the slopes of her breasts, stopping to suckle on each nipple to then descend to find herself between Daniera's legs. Her mouth inches from her longing.

Looking up to a face of equally intense desire, she lowered herself to the pleasure she knew was waiting for her.

Daniera cried out at the first feel of Ephiny's tongue. The heat of her tongue searing her wetness and sending tingling sparks throughout her body.

Ephiny groaned in appreciation at the taste of Daniera, it being better than she had fantasized.

Her tongue slithered over every delicate crevice, fold and curvature to seek entrance, to sink into her depths, and to fill her as far as she could.

Daniera's moans were constant as she gripped tighter to the head of hair of her lover. She could feel her body's climb to the summit of pleasure and screamed her release into the night air as she clutched Ephiny's head, pushing her face as deep as she could.

Ephiny moaned as she felt Daniera spasm on her tongue and then she drank in the flooded release of her lover.

Sliding up Daniera's body, Ephiny looking into the glazed eyes beneath her "You alright?"

"Oh yeah!" Daniera replied as her hand came up and settled between Ephiny's legs.

Ephiny whimpered at the unexpected pleasure as Daniera entered her, "Is that too much?" she asked in concern.

"No" she panted.

Curving her arm around her strong warrior's shoulders, Daniera pulled Ephiny down to her so their bodies were touching skin to skin everywhere.

They kissed passionately and with increasing fervor matching Daniera's strokes.

Daniera pulled her lips away from the regents to nibble on her neck with kisses, sucking on her pulse point as she continued to thrust up into her lover with rising tempo set by Ephiny's rocking hips.

They were both writhing frantically when Ephiny reached her peak and climaxed in a loud cry of "Dani!"

The contractions on Daniera's finders lessened in intensity as Ephiny relaxed and calmed down.

Daniera slowly withdrew her fingers which cause a small after shock to the body that now lay on top of her.

Pulling a blanket on top of the both of them, Daniera brushed hair away form Ephiny's face as she kissed her forehead, "I wish to be yours" she whispered to her as she drifted off to sleep but not before she heard Ephiny say, "Be mine forever Dani" which brought a smile to her face.

Chapter 69

Waking up in Xena's arms, Gabrielle found herself loving the feeling and thoughts that she would want it no other way.

Stretching a bit, she felt a dull ache and strain in her lower body which was a new sensation for her but one she would gladly go through again for her night of fulfillment with her bondmate and wife.

Xena, as if reading Gabrielle's mind, had felt her body's sudden stop in mid stretch and began rubbing her lower back in gentle soothing circles, "You okay?" she whispered into her ear with a husky voice.

"Ummmhmmm" Gabrielle replied as she felt shivers all over her body from her lover's close voice. Snuggling in more to her, "...a bit sore but no other place I'd rather be".

"The soreness will ease in time, sorry about that".

"Shh...no my love, it was and is a pleasurable pain" she purred.

An arched eyebrow was given in response, "Really?" she drawled out.

"Is it true what they say that if you are sore from exertion, the best remedy for muscles is to use them again? She asked as she ran a finger over the Conqueror's chest.

"Ummm, yes"

"Well my love, what do you say? Are you sore at all anywhere?"

"Let's find out, shall we?" Xena said sensually to her wife as she leaned into Gabrielle's soft inviting lips.

A knock on Ephiny's door roused her from her sleep, "W...what?" she growled as she rolled over but not before smiling and looking down at Daniera who was snuggled into her arms, naked.

Eponin opened the door, "Um, sorry Eph...pardon" she blushed and turned her back so as to give her regent and her lover some privacy.

"What is it Pony?" she grumbled.

"I just wanted to volunteer to stay here if required"

"What? Why?"

"Cause I definitely can get used to the hospitality" she said and that's when Ephiny noticed bite and scratch marks along her neck, arms and legs.

"Sure, Pony. Sure. This had definitely been an adventure for all us Amazons. But, we'll talk more later okay?"

"Okay Eph. Sorry...um...thanks. See ya".

"Xena?" Gabrielle asked as she woke to look into her lover eyes.

"Yes my love".

"Thank you for making almost all my dreams come true".

"Almost all?"

"Well, there is one thing left that I have asked Goddess Aphrodite and was given certain assurances it will happen".

"What is that?"

"Well, I want to have your child" she said matter of factly.

Xena blinked several times, "Um...I...um...I am overwhelmed that you would want to have my child, my love but, as I am sure you are now aware, I lack the necessary accompaniment to accomplish that" she looked down their sheet covered naked bodies and then back up.

"That is something you need not worry about my Conqueror, for their will come a moment in time in our making love when we both will overcome that minor detail in passion to achieve the pinnacle of our desire and conceive a child together".

The Conqueror looked to her, "Are you sure of this my love? This is something you want?"

"Don't you?"

"To have a little version of you, a gift from the Gods again...I'd do anything required".

"Then do what comes natural my Conqueror, love me"

"As you wish My Queen, as you wish".

The End`