

# ~ A Stranger in my Family ~

by Red Hope

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## **Disclaimer & Notices**

**Copyright:** I do not own the Xena concept and certain characters but the plot is all mine.

**Violence:** There is violence.

**Subtext:** Yes, there's two women together.

**Summary:** The sequel to [Stranger in a Strange Time](#). The Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle take their trip to Egypt to meet the powerful Queen Cleopatra. Along the trip across the Mediterranean, Gabrielle learns from the Conqueror that her long lost sister, Lila, is still alive and well but a slave. Quickly Gabrielle becomes less concerned about her vacation in Egypt and more about rescuing her sister from Gurkhan. And the Conqueror for the first time realizes she cannot simply take what she wants because so much is at stake. Can the Conqueror and Gabrielle safely rescue Lila, who may not even want to be freed?

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One-Shot Fanfictions

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## **Chapter 1 - Sea Legs**

"By the gods, I can't believe this," Gabrielle whispered to nobody. Her features showed her awe, and she'd been on the bow of the transport ship for some time. Her sunshine hair was blown back, the smell of salt encircled her, and the sunset was just off to her left. She then turned her head sidelong when heavy boot steps approached her from behind.

"Do you plan to stay here all day?"

The Amazon Queen smirked and turned her head away after taking in her lover's words. "I think it helps."

"I don't think you have anything left in your stomach," the Conqueror smugly remarked. She stood behind her partner's back, her arms crossed, and her body swayed to the motions of the ship.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Gabrielle murmured. She blinked to rid of slight sting from the salty air.

The Conqueror, a past pirate, scanned the watery horizon then a distant smile touched her lips. "It never changes."

"Hmmm." Gabrielle considered the ruler's words for a moment. Then the ship suddenly pitched deeper from a larger wave, and Gabrielle clung to the railing for support. She sensed quick and strong hands at her hips that steadied her. She groaned

when her stomach grew upset from the movements. "Isn't there something for this?" She shook her head and muttered, "You outta order the captain to hang me off the side of the ship so I don't mess up his deck anymore."

Xena quietly laughed at her partner's joke. She stepped closer then slipped her arms around the bard, but she pulled Gabrielle's left hand into her hands. She turned the bard's palm up then with her right two fingers; she pressed a certain spot on Gabrielle's wrist.

Gabrielle stiffened then relaxed when her stomach settled down instantly. "What was that?"

The Conqueror kept her left arm around the bard's waist. She signaled to the pressure point just under the bard's wrists. "If you press there, it'll control your queasiness."

The bard tested it and grew bright at realizing it did indeed work. Then she suddenly glowered. "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"Well," Xena explained, "I was hoping you'd just adjust."

"Xena, it's been three damn days." Gabrielle's tone was laced with annoyance. "This deck has been washed more in these three days than they do in two moons." She heard the ruler's snicker so she quickly turned around with an angry look.

The Conqueror went very serious and lost her smirk. "Well, you should be fine now."

"Oh no," Gabrielle ranted, "you're not getting out of this that easily."

The Conqueror's right eyebrow gradually arched up at the challenge.

The bard opened her mouth, but her lecture was halted before it was even started.

"My liege," Iolaus greeted.

The Conqueror let out a relieved breath then separated from the irate bard. She turned to Iolaus and gave him a faint smile because she was so grateful. "Yes?"

"The captain wishes a word with you," Iolaus informed.

The ruler glanced at her partner then shrugged. "Duty calls." She didn't wait a beat for any reply and took off like Hades was on her heels.

Gabrielle snarled then turned her angry sights onto the defenseless Iolaus. "Iolaus?"

The tetrarchès had wide eyes upon seeing the wrath, and he stepped back once with his hands up in defense. "Please excuse me, Queen Gabrielle," he drew out carefully, "the Conqueror will need my assistance." He turned and tore off at an incredible speed.

"Gods damn it," the bard hissed then she stumbled when the ship porpoised deep then rocketed back up into the air. Gabrielle clutched the railing nearby then moaned at her upset stomach. Once her body was steady, she calmed her stomach by way of the pressure point. "If they ever find a way to fly, I swear I'm never touching a damn boat again."

The Conqueror finished her discussion with the captain of the transport ship. She was quite pleased with the ship's speed across the sea to their destination. She imagined it would be another nine days or so before they reached the shores of Alexandria. After they left port, she secretly admitted she was excited to go on the vacation simply because Gabrielle was so excited.

Yet the Conqueror had quickly sobered once she realized she needed to discuss with Gabrielle about her sister. She never found the right time to do it in Corinth since they were so busy preparing for the journey but now there was plenty of time. The Conqueror just kept delaying it, and she'd already snapped off Iolaus's head once when he'd inquired about it. At that thought, she bid goodbye to the captain and ordered Iolaus to follow her.

The tetrarchès had his hands behind his steel covered back. He was formal but yet calm. His curly blond hair moved in the wind, and his face was rather weathered, which made him seem years older.

The Conqueror took a spot next to the railing. She leaned against it and gazed over the beautiful sea that was darkening from the slowly sinking sun. "Iolaus," she started in a quiet voice, "I should have not reacted the way I did the other day."

The soldier shifted uneasy on his feet because he'd never once been in this position with the ruler. He brushed back his hair as he tried to think of something appropriate to say, yet he failed.

"I have not been looking forward to disclosing to Queen Gabrielle that her sister is alive." The Conqueror leaned against the rail, and she wouldn't look at the tetrarchès. "She will be happy for only a brief instant before she realizes what this means." She turned her head to the soldier. "I don't like that and I don't look forward to seeing that from her." She turned her head away then murmured, "I should have not taken out my frustrations on you. You have served me well and faithfully since I conscripted you."

"And you have always been fair, my liege," Iolaus declared in a serious voice.

"Not so fair in your conscription," the ruler sadly argued.

"Fairer than many warlords would have been at the time." The tetrarchès offered a faint smile, yet it did not help the ruler. "At first, I loathed you for conscripting me but I realized I was lucky." Upon seeing the ruler's confusion, he explained, "I was a thief, my liege so I had no luxuries in my life. There was only danger and the possibility of ending up dead any heartbeat." He softly smiled, which made his murky blue eyes glow for once. "Now I have a roof over my head, a purpose, and drachmas in my pocket but most importantly you've given me honor that I never had as a thief."

The Conqueror could no longer hide her smile at the soldier's words.

"I do not patronize the gods," Iolaus revealed, "because they did not save me. I honor you, my liege."

The Conqueror straightened up after hearing the tetrarchès's strict dedication to her. She nodded then honestly declared, "You're a good soldier, Iolaus and an even better man." She grabbed the small man's shoulder and squeezed it. "I could not ask for more. Thank you." She released him then quietly took her leave before the

conversation deepened anymore.

Iolaus had a distant smile and watched his leader join the Amazon Queen at the bow. He then sensed another presence coming up to his side.

Najara rested her hands on her hips then glanced down at her superior. "When do we arrive in Egypt?"

The tetrarchès peered up then answered, "The captain believes in nine days."

Najara faintly smiled at the news. "Queen Gabrielle will find Egypt splendid."

Iolaus's eyes slightly slotted, and he prickled. "You talk as if you've been there."

"I have not," Najara clarified.

The tetrarchès made no further remarks, but he still didn't feel comfortable with the dekarcho's words. He didn't like the fact that Najara had been selected to come but he could barely argue against the Conqueror's word. He only wondered why the ruler had selected Najara and her file when he knew the Conqueror didn't much like Najara either. He figured all would be revealed in time. Instead his focus returned to the Conqueror, who now held the Amazon Queen at the bow of the ship.

The Conqueror lowered her head down and softly asked, "Are you hungry?"

Gabrielle had her head resting against the ruler's shoulder. "A little but not much." She could almost picture the grin that was coming over her lover. "Just don't start with me."

Xena swallowed her laughter and instead brushed her lips over Gabrielle's ear. She then whispered, "Let's go below and eat."

"If I do that then I'll have to entertain my Amazons tonight."

The Conqueror smirked but more at her thoughts. "Perhaps you may want to entertain your ruler tonight instead."

Gabrielle chuckled, and she faintly shook her head at Xena's subtle context. "Only if you wish it, my liege." She already knew the answer, but she busied herself by trailing her fingertips up the muscular arm around her waist. "I can think of a few stories," she thoroughly teased.

"Mmmm." Xena bit the small ear under her lips. She withdrew when nails dug into her arm in a pleasing sensation. "I love those stories."

Gabrielle deeply laughed then soothingly ran her hand over Xena's skin where she'd clawed her accidentally. "Come on then." When Xena let go, she turned and followed along side the ruler. She ducked her head when she entered through the open door. She carefully descended the ladder to the first level of the lower deck. "What is for dinner?"

"I don't know," Xena confessed, and she guided her lover through the ship to the galley. When she ducked through the open doorway and straightened up, she was none too surprised to find a handful of leather clad women all at a table together.

"Queen Gabrielle," an Amazon politely greeted.

Gabrielle observed her Amazons must have been chatting for some time because their plates were quite clear of any food. "Has everybody eaten?"

The Conqueror decided not to listen in and instead went in search of the cook.

"Yes, my queen," Vara replied. "We were hoping to catch you for a story tonight."

The bard instantly noticed the Amazons' eyes lit up at the prospect of getting a story to entertain the long candlemarks away. "Indeed," she murmured.

"My queen, the time on this ship is long," Amarice complained, "your stories make the candlemarks go by faster."

Gabrielle blew up air, which lifted her bangs then she spied her partner returning with two plates of food. She sent a silent plead to her lover.

The Conqueror simply smirked and turned to the table of Amazons. "The queen was just mentioning to me about the story she was going to tell everybody." She then innocently smiled at the bard. "It was about your new hero, wasn't it?"

The Amazon Queen's features went very dark, and her upper lip curled into a faint snarl.

"Sit here, my queen," Vara pleasantly offered, and she pushed the seat out.

The Conqueror held out a plate of food to her partner.

Gabrielle stepped closer to the ruler and unclenched her right hand. She took the offered plate then lowly warned, "You remember this later tonight."

The Conqueror didn't lose her innocent smile then escaped by taking seat beside Amarice, who was overly fond of her. To her left was an older Amazon by the name of Taren, who wasn't as fond of her and only knew her as the Destroyer of Nations. Recently, the Conqueror had been required to come more accustomed to this odd bunch of Amazons that Queen Gabrielle had selected for the trip. At first heartbeat, Xena had been greatly insulted that these Amazons had been sent for protection for Queen Gabrielle then her logic finally played over her emotions. Gabrielle explained that Ephiny had required her to do such, and Xena knew it couldn't hurt to have extra protection.

"So you have a new story about this Alcides?" Vara prompted. She watched the queen slowly eat her food, as if delaying something.

Gabrielle swallowed her mouthful of fish then answered, "Yes, I've been working on it."

"Then you can practice on them, Queen Gabrielle," the Conqueror suggested. She bit back her smirk when the queen shot her a warning look.

Gabrielle then scanned the six Amazon faces and saw they were certainly inclined to hear her story. She briefly grounded her teeth together but told herself she'd get retribution on her partner later. She instead tried to enjoy her meal because it was the

first time she was able to get anything down after so many days.

"You're eating better, my queen," Taren observed.

"Yes," Gabrielle agreed, "it seems there's a... trick to settling one's stomach."

Amarice glanced at the Conqueror knowingly then brightened at the queen. "You mean you found out that trick too?" She held up her left wrist and demonstrated it. "The Conqueror showed me that the first day."

The Conqueror dipped her head and seemed to be carefully studying her food.

"She did, did she?" The Amazon Queen took a steady breath then released it, and she went back to eating.

Taren eyed the silent ruler and wondered what was transcending between her queen and this dark ruler. She huffed then focused back on the queen. "When are we due to be in Egypt?"

"It can't be much longer," Grete whined who was another Amazon that believed feathers and water did not mix.

"I believe another nine days..." Gabrielle gazed across the table to her lover.

The Conqueror merely nodded her consent.

"Thank Artemis," Jarine breathed out in relief.

The last, quiet Amazon finally spoke up and asked, "The Egyptians don't believe in Artemis, do they?"

The Amazon Queen took the question quickly since she'd done some research before leaving Corinth. "Actually no, Lacy they have a similar religion where there are many gods."

Lacy seemed to consider this then questioned, "Is there a goddess similar to Artemis?"

Gabrielle filed through the information she'd recently learned then replied, "The goddess Neith is the closest."

"Who is she?"

Gabrielle glanced at Vara then noticed that all the Amazons were clearly interested in the history of Neith. So her bard side couldn't resist a good story, and she rolled into it.

The Conqueror quietly listened to the bard's tales tonight despite she considered leaving earlier so that she could check on the captain. She decided though that it was safer to stay and listen or else she'd suffer the bard's wrath more so tonight. She slyly grinned to herself at the thought of the bard's hot temper. Although her excited thoughts about tonight started to wear thin when her earlier concerns about Gabrielle's sister surfaced. Halfway through Gabrielle's story about the demi-god hero, she ended up displaying her distractions clearly to the bard.

Gabrielle sensed that the ruler was far away from her story. It was rare she caught

Xena in such a way unless something was happening. It was something only she could catch about the ruler as most couldn't read the ruler's subtle shifts in mood. Gabrielle didn't let it distract her from the story or else her listeners would know something was up. It would just have to wait until later.

At the end of the story, the Amazons all at once began to speak and thank their queen. Gabrielle graciously took her Amazons' praises then it took her another half of a candlemark to escape the galley. She reminded them to sleep then she and the Conqueror said goodnight. The couple silently walked through the ship to the stern where the various quarters were located. They held hands, and the only sound heard were their boot steps.

The Conqueror sternly nodded at the two guards for their quarters. She then opened the door for Gabrielle and let her enter first.

Gabrielle separated from her lover once she was in the room, and she went to her bag of things. She rooted around for her sleeping shift even though she may not need it tonight.

The Conqueror first removed her chakram then unhooked her sheathed sword from her back. She placed her weapons by the double bed then she came up behind her partner.

Gabrielle straightened up into the warm body. She twisted her head up and smiled at the ruler.

Xena returned the smile then lowered her head for a slow kiss. She grinned at the bard's soft whimper of protest when they parted. "You won't need this tonight," she huskily informed and removed the shift from her lover's hand.

"I was just... checking," Gabrielle joked.

"Hmmm." The Conqueror lowered in for another kiss but a small hand at her chest halted her.

Gabrielle knew if she didn't get into the conversation that she wanted, she wouldn't have a chance all night.

"What's wrong?" Xena questioned after she straightened up some.

"I was going to ask you the same thing."

The Conqueror's eyebrows slightly drew together, and her lips thinned. She racked her mind at what the bard could be referring to right now.

Gabrielle sighed, set her shift down on her pack, and faced the ruler. "You've been acting odd for awhile now."

Now Xena's right eyebrow slowly inclined into a perfect arc. "How have I been acting... odd?"

Gabrielle smirked at how her lover drew out the last word as if it was an impossible feat. She moved her hands and rested them on Xena's forearms. "I don't have an exact example." At the ruler's doubtful features, she sighed and explained, "I can just... feel

it."

"Feel it?" Xena's nodded once then asked, "There are other things we could be feeling right now."

"You're trying to detour the topic," Gabrielle challenged.

The Conqueror's teeth grounded for an instant because she didn't want this topic to go in the direction she felt it was going. She inwardly grunted at realizing she too was having feelings about Gabrielle's intentions. Things just were never simple when it involved the bard, which she wouldn't admit to anybody that she enjoyed.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on?"

The Conqueror kept her silence and her face passive not to reveal anything.

Gabrielle knew for a fact now something was indeed going on behind her back, and she didn't like that at all. She took a steady breath then slipped out of her lover's arms. She crossed to the other side of the quarters and stopped. She kept her back to the ruler and stared out the small, circular window where all she could see were dark waters. Just the thought of the sea made her push on her wrist pressure point.

"I know something is going on, Xena." Gabrielle lowered her right hand from her left wrist. "It's not just you, its Iolaus too." She turned and noted the ruler hadn't moved at all. "If you don't tell me, I have no problem corning Iolaus until his spills it. And you know I can get him to do it."

The Conqueror slowly breathed to calm her frustrations. She could never plan anything out the way she wanted it to work when it came to the bard. She brushed back her bangs once then crossed over to the bard.

"Xena, we have to be honest with each other." Gabrielle shook her head then pointed at the ruler. "We promised that to each other."

The ruler dropped her head as she recalled that very promise not so long ago. She every intention to keep it, yet it would undoubtedly be broken at some point. She knew the longer she could stay away from breaking that promise the better off her relationship with Gabrielle would be. Ultimately she knew there were too many things in her life and rulership that wouldn't one day sneak up on them. And gods, Xena could only hope it would turn out okay when it happened.

"You're right," Xena agreed.

Gabrielle lowered her hand and slightly relaxed. "Please tell me what's going on."

The Conqueror didn't like how the bard was already concerned about the topic. She knew it'd certainly worsen once she told Gabrielle everything. "Let's sit down."

The Amazon Queen mutely agreed and sat down on the foot of the bed with her partner to her right. She slightly turned her body so that she faced Xena.

The Conqueror mentally prepared her pending words, and she steeled herself for the results. She rested her hands on her knees then she turned her head to the left. She was captivated by Gabrielle's inquisitive eyes. "About a moon after you took position as

the state advisor, I had a discussion with Iolaus so I put him on a mission."

"Okay," Gabrielle murmured, "What was this mission?" She reached over and took the ruler's left hand into hers. She detected how nervous Xena was because Xena's palm was slightly moist.

The ruler took a beat to inhale a calming breath. She then continued her story. "His mission was to track down your sister and find out what's become of her."

The bard's eyes widened at this news because she'd heard nothing of this mission. She was struck blindly that the ruler had done this secretly and when she considered the time frame, she realized it was some time ago. "What did he find out? Has he found out anything?"

"He has," Xena softly answered. She ran her thumb soothingly across Gabrielle's thumb. She met the bard's confused and nervous features so she gave the most important detail. "Your sister is alive."

Gabrielle covered her mouth with her left hand and muffled a whimper of relief. She closed her eyes but not soon enough to stop the tears. She felt them slip down her cheeks and burned a wet trail. She wiped her tears away then rasped, "Where is she?" Her rapid thoughts quickly pieced together that Lila must not be in an easy location or else Lila would have been returned to her by now. "She's a slave, isn't she? Who has her?"

The Conqueror placed her freehand overtop of their collapsed hands. She squeezed and softly answered, "There is a powerful man that owns her now. His name is Gurkhan." She watched the Amazon Queen shake her head because she didn't recognize the man's name. "He was a warlord in Greece back in my warlord days. He fled when I ascended the throne."

"Where is he? Why haven't you stopped him?" Gabrielle pleaded after her irrational thoughts. She very rarely heard her lover describe another person as powerful, and it didn't set well in her upset stomach.

Xena held tightly the bard's hand in hers. "I can't touch him, Gabrielle." She read the fear and distraught in the bard's eyes, which made her new protective instincts come to life. She wanted more than anything to level Mogador and return Lila to Gabrielle, but it wasn't that simple. "He's in a city called Mogador, which is located in north-west Africa."

"Outside of the realm," Gabrielle murmured.

The Conqueror nodded her agreement then continued to explain the difficult situation. "Gurkhan and I are old enemies from the past because he wanted Greece as much as I wanted it. I defeated him a handful of times, which he was rather bitter about and still is, I imagine."

"Why can't you just..." Gabrielle stopped her dark thoughts because she tried to never use violence as an answer.

The ruler though understood the unfinished question and answered it anyway. "The city of Mogador is inhabited by two groups of people. The natives are the Numidians then in recent times the Phoenicians have settled there too. Mogador rests just on the

coastline of Africa so it's a very large sea port, especially for the Phoenicians."

The Amazon Queen, who'd been in the Conqueror's court long enough to think politically, understood where this was headed. "You're worried about endangering your relations with the Phoenicians."

"As well as with the Egyptians," Xena sadly added. "I'm afraid Gurkhan is a wealthy merchant in Mogador. He owns many merchant ships, which he leases out and reaps a certain profit from the trading."

Gabrielle turned her head away and tried to process everything she'd heard so far. She couldn't believe it, and her emotions were a mix of happiness, anger, and fear. She just didn't know what to think. She finally whispered, "I won't leave Africa without my sister, Xena."

The ruler studied her partner's profile that told her so much of what stormed inside of the bard. "We're not leaving Africa without her."

The Amazon Queen slightly relaxed when she heard the declaration from the ruler. She freed her hand and walked away from bed, from Xena. She dipped her head then slowly turned around. "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" She met the ruler's concerned gaze.

Xena clenched her hands in her lap. "I didn't want you to know until I had certain confirmations." She then stood up and neared her partner. "I also didn't want you to worry during the entire trip to Egypt."

Gabrielle inhaled sharply then her face darkened considerably. "We should go straight to Mogador."

"We can't yet, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle stepped closer to the ruler and hotly asked, "We can't or you won't?"

The Conqueror tensed at the bard's temper, and she certainly didn't want it flaring up now. "If we go directly to Mogador we will draw attention to ourselves. If Gurkhan catches wind of me within a hundred leagues of him, he will disappear better than a ghost. I won't risk it."

"I can't just sit in Egypt and wait around for... whatever!" Gabrielle fisted her hands at her sides.

"Gabrielle, listen to me carefully," the ruler instructed. "We will go to Egypt first where I can confirm things with my spies. I have them working on finer details about Gurkhan and your sister's situation. Then I plan to get Queen Cleopatra's blessing to go to Mogador."

"How in Hades does that matter?" Gabrielle barked.

Xena grabbed the bard's shoulders and lowered her head. "If I endanger the realm's relations with Egypt I could lose the Egyptian navy. I worked too hard to lose it now."

"You mean to lose it to my sister," Gabrielle bit off snidely, "I'm sure you can recourt Cleopatra for her navy."

The Conqueror's back straightened up, and her hands fell from the bard's shoulders. She was suddenly armored by her darker emotions that could easily separate her from those she cared for.

Gabrielle's anger instantly died when she not only saw but felt the shift in the ruler. "Xena-

"Save it," the Conqueror snapped. She then turned away, went to the bed, and collected her weapons from the wall. Then without a glance back or a word, she left the quarters.

Gabrielle dropped her head back and closed her eyes when she realized what she'd done. "That was real fuckin' smart, Gabrielle." Her stomach agreed by lurching from the strong pitch of the vessel. The bard made a sprint for the head where her dinner just made it into the pot.

The Amazon Queen stumbled back out of the head with pale features. She debated whether she'd gotten sick because of how she acted earlier or because of the boat. She figured it had to be a combination. She only made it out of the head before she sunk down against the doorframe. She drew her legs against her body, dropped her head down, and started to cry.

Gabrielle remained that way until her tears dried then she climbed to her weak legs. Her partner hadn't returned at all, and she feared to seek out the angry ruler. She decided it was best to leave the ruler alone because if anything, she figured Xena would become angrier if she couldn't have her space. So the bard changed into her nightshift and curled up in the lonely bed.

The candlemarks were slow as Gabrielle swore she could count every heartbeat. She prayed that Xena would return soon, but it seemed more doubtful as time passed. Gabrielle remained a tight ball on one side of the bed, and she tried to go to sleep. It wasn't until she was emotionally exhausted from her thinking that she drifted into a restless sleep.

The sunshine from the porthole slowly crept over the bard's face and moved up and down her face as the boat rocked. Gabrielle awoke with a startle then murmured, "Xena?" She scanned the room and saw nothing of the ruler or anything showing that she'd been in the room. Gabrielle dropped her head onto the pillow and moaned at the situation she'd created. "Just great." She pushed back her bangs then decided how to approach her day. Her stomach decided to help her get up because Gabrielle stumbled over to the head and repeated the same process from last night.

Gabrielle slowly exited the small head after trying to somewhat get clean. She then slowly changed into her Amazon leathers then after a sideward glance at her staff, which somehow remained upright against the wall, she decided she didn't need it again. She climbed to her feet then made it to the door.

Vara peered up when she saw the queen enter the galley.

Amarice twisted in her seat and smiled then lost it when she saw the queen's mood.

Vara noticed it too and cautiously asked, "Is everything alright, my queen?"

"Everything is great," Gabrielle lied and took a slumped seat beside the two Amazons.

"Are you hungry?" Amarice questioned. "Vara and I just had breakfast."

Gabrielle's stomach spoke its mind about food, and Gabrielle covered her bare stomach with her arms. "I'm fine, actually... I may have lunch." She then considered her sea sickness and knew it was best to at least drink water. "I better get some water though." She started to get up but Amarice stopped her.

"I can get it."

Vara leaned against the table and quietly asked, "Are you sure everything is okay, my queen?"

The Amazon Queen waved off the worried Amazon and answered, "It was just a long night."

Amarice joined the small group and handed the queen her mug of water. "You sound like the Conqueror."

Vara narrowed her eyes at the young Amazon's interests in the dark ruler. She, like Taren, wasn't too fond of the ruler because she remembered the darker days. She didn't trust the Conqueror.

Gabrielle tried not to show her over interest in the Conqueror, but she asked, "Why you say that, Amarice?"

The young Amazon shrugged and leaned back in her chair. "I just saw her earlier, up on deck, and she looked like she just came back from Tartarus."

The bard choked on her water because that Amazon's joke reminded her of a scary point in her life. She cleared her throat then lowered her mug to the table. "I'm sure she's fine."

Amarice considered it then shook her head. "The Conqueror looks like she's been up all night." She then smirked and joked, "And by the gods, her mood is worse than Tartarus."

Vara snorted and jabbed, "It sounds like the good ole days." She then smirked at the queen. "I hope you can work your magic on her, my queen."

Gabrielle peered into her mug and wondered if she still had any magic to do that trick. She prayed to any god that would listen to her and hoped she could settle the ruler. "I hope so too, Vara."

Vara didn't quite understand what the queen meant, yet she didn't question it either.

The Amazon Queen drank another swallow of water then decided she really couldn't finish it off. Her knotted stomach wouldn't allow her. She pushed the half empty mug aside then mentioned, "I'm going above deck. I'll see you both later."

"I'll come too." Amarice hopped up then followed her queen.

Vara stayed behind and stretched out her legs under the table. She knew something

was up in the salty air, but she figured if it was serious the queen would warn her.

"I notice you're fond of the Conqueror," Gabrielle casually mentioned.

Amarice shrugged then replied, "I just thought she'd be taller."

The bard laughed, finally, and she sadly smiled. "She's pretty tall, Amarice."

"To be honest, my queen that's because you're so short."

Queen Gabrielle shot a glare at the Amazon. "Did the Conqueror teach you to say that?"

Amarice was glad to see the queen took it in good humor. She smirked and teased, "Ephiny, my queen."

The bard groaned when it clicked into place. "That figures." She then climbed the ladder in front of her and emerged onto the top decks of the ship. For a brief instant, it took her eyes time to adjust to the bright sunlight but they did then she scanned the deck for tall, dark, and hot tempered.

"She's at the helm, my queen," Amarice quietly mentioned.

"So it would seem," Gabrielle muttered then her short strides carried her to the upper deck.

Amarice debated whether to follow then decided it was best not to when she saw how the Conqueror still had that icy look. She shivered at seeing it then decided to go visit with Lacy and Grete, who were sparring at the bow.

The Amazon Queen cautiously approached her stone cold lover at the ship's wheel.

The Conqueror didn't acknowledge the bard, but she clearly knew the moment Gabrielle came above deck. She turned her head to the right to the sailor that hung over the larboard side of the ship. She called, "Soundings?"

The sailor straightened up with a marked rope in his hands. "By the mark, ten!"

The Conqueror knew it was plenty of depth not only for the transport ship but also her triremes that were a few Roman miles behind them. She then lifted her dark gaze to the sailor in the crow's nest. "Where are the triremes?"

The sailor turned around in the crow's nest so that he now faced the stern of the vessel. He shielded his eyes from the sun then sighted the two large triremes that followed them. "The ships are about a league away!"

The Conqueror decided that was almost too far so her focus went to the deck sailors. "Pull up the mizzenmast and haul the foremast to topgallant!"

"Aye, my liege!" the sailors hollered out, who quickly went to work.

Gabrielle had carefully listened and was quite impressed with her lover's sailing knowledge. She knew of Xena's history as a pirate in the Mediterranean and that's where her fame only began. She was always impressed by the amount of knowledge stored away in the Conqueror's mind because it seemed so endless. She placed her

hands behind her back and peered up at the ruler briefly then turned away.

"You haven't slept," Gabrielle noted.

The Conqueror was silent for a several beats as she turned the ship to the west slightly. "I did not want to invade the bed."

Gabrielle swallowed at the cutting words that ran through her. She bowed her head as she tried to control her emotions. "You can't when it is yours too."

"It was not my bed last night," the Conqueror coldly concluded. She wouldn't reveal that last night, she'd returned to the quarters, and stood in the shadows. She remained there for candlemarks and watched her lover's restless sleep before she returned to the upper deck.

The bard's eyes closed. She desperately gained control of herself because she didn't want to repeat last night. Slowly her eyes opened, which showed her more calmness. "I was wrong last night... very wrong. I shouldn't have thrown that in your face."

"You only said what you felt was true," the ruler remarked.

Gabrielle combed her bangs back, but they fell back on her forehead. She sighed and softly argued, "I don't believe it though."

The ruler roughly turned the wheel so that the ship went due east. "Yet still you felt the need to say it so obviously you don't fully trust me."

"Xena, I trust you."

The Conqueror finally glanced down at the bard, and she hotly reminded, "We promised not to lie to each other." She turned her head away when the bard's features went distraught. She wondered if she had her truth now.

"That's not fair," Gabrielle shot back quickly when she realized what could be going through the ruler's head. She stepped closer and reminded, "We're not being fair to each other. I was angry because you hid this from me, and I'm just... I'm..." She sighed and dropped her head when the pending headache touched her brow. "I'm scared about what's going to happen now. I was stupid and took it out on you."

The Conqueror was silent. She let the cool, sea breeze calm her hot temper because she knew she didn't need to throw any oil on the fire. She took a few steps away from the helm and ordered, "Come here."

Gabrielle was hesitant at first then cautiously moved until she was position behind the helm and Xena at her back.

"Take the wheel," the ruler instructed.

The bard felt the more soother tone laced in the ruler's voice. She hoped that was an omen to some kind of resolution between them. She took the wheel then Xena's larger hands grasped the top of the pegs from the wheel that Gabrielle clutched.

"Now steer the ship to the starboard... towards the west."

Gabrielle now understood, but she was still trying to learn the nautical terminology.

She carefully spun the wheel to the right then stopped when Xena halted her action.

"Do you know why ships sail in this zigzag motion?"

The bard just shook her head.

"It's a sailing maneuver called tacking," the knowledgeable ruler explained, "and it helps a sailing vessel gain the most benefits from the wind." She directed at the sails ahead of them. "The sails can be maximized to catch the wind better at an angle instead of straight on."

"The triremes can't keep up though," Gabrielle mentioned.

"No," the ruler agreed, "as they only have one main sail."

Gabrielle did a quick count of the sails. "This ship has three."

"A trireme is quite speedy in short distances but in long distance it cannot keep up." The ruler then signaled to turn the ship to the larboard. She helped Gabrielle with it because it wasn't a simple task against the strong winds when one wasn't use to steering a ship. To turn a ship's wheel in high winds was purely a brute's labor.

"That makes a trireme effective in close battles," Gabrielle concluded. "They can swoop in and out to fight their enemies."

The Conqueror slightly smiled at the bard's thoughtful observations. "Yes, and it is why the Romans originally copied our Greek triremes."

"That figures," Gabrielle joked.

"Mmmm, the Greeks are not so innocent." Xena stepped closer so that her front almost brushed against the bard's body. "The trireme originated from the Phoenicians... we stole the idea and modified it by adding the decks of oarsman."

"Huh," Gabrielle muttered. "I never knew that."

The Conqueror could tell the bard's interests were highly peaked. She always enjoyed how Gabrielle seemed to have an interest in everything and craved to learn. That was one of the linking aspects between her and Gabrielle and what most likely helped draw them together.

The Conqueror lowered her head down then softly promised, "If the realm's relations have to suffer to save your sister then it'll be done."

Gabrielle briefly closed her eyes then they fluttered open again. "Thank you." She twisted her head up, and her emotions showed in her face. "That means a lot." She turned back and moved her right hand to rest overtop of the Conqueror's. "I don't want to risk the relations. I want this to work out as best as we can do it."

The Conqueror had finally justified her decision when she considered herself in Gabrielle's position and Lyceus in Lila's. She knew she'd risk everything to save her brother. Then she realized that Lila was essentially her family too despite it seemed extended. Gabrielle was the Conqueror's family then so was Lila. If it was one, deep value Xena's mother instilled in her it was that family was first. She was jarred from

her thoughts when the small hand over hers squeezed.

"So we'll go to Egypt first then, right?"

The ruler slowly released a deep breath then replied, "Yes. We'll take care of our business there and prepare to handle Gurkhan."

Gabrielle laced her fingers through her lovers then turned her head up and around to study the ruler's calm features. "What are we going to do?"

The ruler lowered her blue eyes that matched the clear skies behind her. "I won't be sure until I get more details."

The bard accepted the response because it was logical. Her irrational thoughts were still with her, yet she kept a lock on them. She freed her right hand from Xena's then lifted her hand up until her fingertips could caress the ruler's cheek.

The Conqueror's gaze had been distant, but the light touch brought her back. She centered on her young lover and wondered when they'd become so open about their relationship. She didn't consider it any longer and instead was drawn into a tender kiss from Gabrielle.

Gabrielle smiled at the end of the kiss. She brushed back some of Xena's hair then sincerely whispered, "I'm sorry about last night."

Xena took Gabrielle's hand from her cheek and locked hands together. "I know." She then noted that the captain was joining them so she withdrew from her partner. She touched the small of Gabrielle's back and gave a commanding nod to the captain. She and Gabrielle silently left the helm to the captain, and they went down to the waist deck.

"Have you eaten?" the Conqueror inquired.

The Amazon Queen was observing her sparring Amazons; she simply shook her head. She decided it was best not to mention her rather up heaving experience last night and first thing this morning.

Xena detected something out of place, however she kept her silence. She rested her hands on her lover's shoulders and gently suggested, "We should eat then get some rest." She paused then unexpectedly added, "I know you didn't sleep well." Then without another word, she turned and went towards the doorway to go below.

Gabrielle pulled away from her view of the Amazons when she considered Xena's last words. She turned and caught up to her lover. She decided to not face the ladder as she descended; her hands grazed down the wood rail on either side of the ladder.

The Conqueror made it to the bottom and slightly turned when she heard Gabrielle hurrying down.

The transport ship dove deep from a surprising wave then it launched up, which also launched the bard.

Gabrielle screamed as she sailed through the air. Her head just skimmed the ceiling then she was on a rapid descent until very strong arms swept her up. She instantly

clung to the ruler's body then started to tremble.

"I gotcha," Xena soothed and put the bard on her shaky legs. She drew Gabrielle into her body and held her tightly in her arms. "You okay?" She felt the bard trembling against her.

"Yeah... yeah." Gabrielle gulped some air to calm her nerves. She nervously brushed back her bangs then peered up at her partner. "Thank you."

Xena arched an eyebrow then coolly remarked, "I know you're an Amazon but that doesn't mean you can fly."

"Funny, funny," Gabrielle muttered, "Who thought the Conqueror was a comedian?"

The ruler slightly smirked then her smirk faded away when Gabrielle's body wouldn't calm. Now that she considered how Gabrielle so easily lost her grip, it made her wonder. "You were sick this morning?"

The bard peered up at her lover then lowered her gaze. "And last night."

The Conqueror did a quick calculation and realized Gabrielle's stomach hadn't kept a real meal since they left Corinth. That wasn't good at all plus the dehydration effects. "You need to eat and keep it down."

"I would love to do that," Gabrielle agreed. She released the ruler and worked her right fingertips to her pressure point on her left wrist.

"Come on." The Conqueror kept her left arm around the bard's waist then she guided them back into the ship and towards the berth deck. She opened the quarter's door then let the bard enter but she stood in the doorway. "Get comfortable while I get us some food."

Gabrielle turned back and quickly kissed her lover. "Thank you." She brushed her hand across the ruler's soft cheek then strolled off.

The Conqueror closed the door, and a silly grin touched her lips because her cheek, where Gabrielle had touched her, still burned warmly. She shook off her grin and tried to become her usual self, yet the glow around her was deceiving.

Gabrielle changed into her nightshift again then just sat on the foot of the bed. Her shoulders drooped, and she wondered why she felt so wiped out from doing nothing. She shook her head when her quiet headache from earlier gave a bang of reminder. "Great," she muttered. She crawled into bed and warm up the covers even though she wished her partner was here to help.

The Conqueror soon returned and seemed to magically balance a tray of food as the vessel rocked. Her well adapted sea legs let her cross over to the bed where she placed the tray close to the worn bard. "Come on, eat so you can sleep." She moved away and went to her things so that she could prepare for bed too.

"Was that an order?" Gabrielle joked.

The Conqueror peered across her shoulder and smirked. She knew this game too well. "It was a request." She disappeared into the head to get cleaned up from her long night

on the main deck.

The Amazon Queen started with the grapes in the bowl. She popped one in at a time and savored the juicy flavor. "You know," she rambled, "I'm still trying to understand how we ended up in these meager quarters." She heard no response from Xena, yet she knew Xena was listening to her. "I mean, you do have the largest empire in the known-world but here we are in a..." Gabrielle stopped and mentally scrolled through her vast bardic vocabulary. "...tawdry vessel. The quarters are half the size of your washroom back in the fortress."

Xena appeared from the head, but she leaned against the doorframe. "You must be feeling better." She grinned and folded her arms over her chest.

Gabrielle appreciated the view of the ruler in a very simple, white nightshift. Gabrielle loved the view of Xena's long, muscular legs that seemed to last for some time when she traced them with her eyes. She finally met Xena's amused stare, and Gabrielle blushed. "After a long nap I'll feel right as land."

The Conqueror shook her head then padded across the short distance. She crawled up onto the bed then stretched out along side her lover. She plucked a grape from the bard's fingers, and she received a glare for it. She smirked then popped the grape into her mouth.

"It appears I'm not the only one feeling better," Gabrielle chided.

Xena chuckled then stole another grape from the bard's small vine. "The salt air burns off my temper."

"I'll have to remember that." Gabrielle chuckled at the ruler's mock glower. She then slightly sobered then mentioned, "I've noticed Amarice is..." She hesitated then her lover's lifted eyebrow made her grumble. "She's a little taken with you."

The Conqueror bent forward some then collected some cubes of feta off the tray. She considered the bard's words, Amarice, and made a decision. "Its okay to be jealous, Gabrielle."

The bard snorted. "You wish."

The ruler's eyes lit up at the game clearly placed before her. She peered up with hooded eyes and silkily purred, "Amarice is only one of many, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle knew what the ruler was trying to do. She wouldn't fall into the ruler's little trap. She instead grew smug then proudly stated, "I know, and it's really a compliment to me." She displayed her arrogance through a smile then when she saw Xena's confusion, she simply explained, "I have great taste and everybody knows it."

The Conqueror just refrained from rolling her eyes. She instead took some flatbread and stirred it in the olive oil. She considered the bard's reaction to Amarice. Xena knew, for a fact, that the bard had a green-eyed monster that was just waiting to take over under the right circumstances. Xena just hadn't found the right button that would pop the monster out... yet.

"I don't get jealous," Gabrielle stated as if she read Xena's mind.

The Conqueror grew excited at the bard's challenge so she bent closer to the bard, let the flatbread sit above the bowl of oil, and she huskily whispered, "We'll see."

Gabrielle bit the inside of her mouth. She suddenly pulled the last grape free then shoved it into Xena's mouth. "I'm sure, my liege."

Xena almost choked on the unexpected fruit in her mouth. She growled but ate the fruit.

"You deserve that after last night," Gabrielle reminded.

The Conqueror smirked at the memory of getting the bard's goat with the Amazons. She loved using the Amazons as part of her ploy especially because the Amazons were so clueless, except for their queen of course. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Rrrright." The bard took the piece of flatbread from Xena's fingers then brought it to her. "You showed Amarice the pressure point before showing me?" She fed the bread to her lover while she spoke. "But you see? That didn't make me jealous either."

The Conqueror steadily listened as the information helped her map out her next plans to tempt the bard's green monster. She quickly focused on the flatbread. Once she ate it, her lips slid over the bard's fingertips and her warm tongue teased the smooth fingers.

"Mmmm," Gabrielle muttered, and her eyes closed.

Xena grazed her teeth under Gabrielle's fingertips as she pulled back. She then reached for another piece of bread. "Eat, Gabrielle."

"Uh huh." The exhilarated bard tried to refocus on her task at hand rather than her body's new desires for other things that weren't food.

The Conqueror chuckled and quietly ate more of the meal. She then shared the large piece of halibut fish that'd been prepared for them.

Gabrielle ate it much slower and almost forced herself to do it. "Promise me we'll eat something else other than fish when we get to Egypt...?"

"I thought you liked fish?"

"I... do." The Amazon Queen eyed the white meat but took another piece. "It's just I don't usually eat it... everyday for every meal."

Xena smirked and couldn't resist a small snicker. "Well, when we get to Alexandria you'll try the cultural food there." She tilted her head in consideration to the foods in Egypt. "A rare delicacy in Egypt is fried scarab."

Gabrielle had a piece of fish by her lips, speared on her Roman fork, and she stopped then peered down at her lover. "Fried what?"

"Scarab." The Conqueror lifted up her right hand and held her index finger a certain distance from her thumb. "Those beetle like bugs about this size."

"I've seen drawings," the bard whispered then her face blanched. "They... eat those?"

When her partner nodded, she lowered the fork to the fish plate. "Scarabs are..."

The Conqueror remained very serious as she informed, "They're quite nice... have a little crunch to them when you eat them."

"You've... ate one?" Gabrielle stared wide-eye at her lover.

"Mmmhmmm." Xena pierced a bit of the fish then further mentioned, "They're quite good." She then hastily shoved the fish into her mouth to conceal anything when she saw Gabrielle's expression.

Gabrielle touched her covered stomach then distraughtly whispered, "What... what they taste like?"

The Conqueror thoughtfully chewed on the fish and considered the fried scarab. She swallowed then answered, "Like chicken."

The Amazon Queen moved her hand up to cover her mouth.

"Gabrielle, come on and finish the halibut." Xena pushed the fish around with her fork.

Gabrielle's stomach flipped so she quickly shook her head. "I'm full... yuf go afead," she muffled between her hand. A shiver clearly rolled down her back then she forced her thoughts of a fried scarab that tasted like chicken out of her head.

The Conqueror saw the look but made no comment since she knew the cause. She decided it was best not to tell Gabrielle about the grasshoppers and ants that people in Chin eat. She finished off the fish then decided to take the tray back to the galley. She jumped out of the bed, pulled on just her leathers over her thin shift, and took the tray.

"I'll be quick."

Gabrielle only nodded as her flustered features watched the ruler leave.

Xena just was able to close the quarter doors and get several paces away before she broke into quiet laughter. All she could picture was Gabrielle's face the entire time during the discussion about the fried scarabs. She shook off her mirth just as she entered the busier decks.

The Amazon Queen removed her fingertips from her pressure point after using it to calm her belly. She then slid under the warmer blankets and closed her eyes. She tried to relax and not mull over the fried scarabs that rested ahead in her future.

The Conqueror quietly slipped back into the small quarters. She removed her leathers, tossed them on their packs, and crawled under the covers.

Gabrielle sleepily smiled at her partner's return. She then wiggled closer to the ruler, and she found herself drawn into the secure place she'd come to love. She never imagined finding safety in this woman's arms who was once her enemy.

"Aristotle was right," Xena muttered.

Gabrielle was halfway to her dreamscape but she pulled away and murmured, "About?"

The Conqueror kissed her lover's bare shoulder then whispered, "The antidote for fifty enemies is one friend."

The bard smiled at the ruler's sentiment. "He was right," she agreed then started to slip away again. She snuggled her back deeper into the ruler's warm body behind her, and she finally met her dreams.

The Conqueror remained awake for awhile bit longer. She considered last night's fight and how it'd been mostly resolved today. She admitted it wasn't the most complete resolution or the best tactic to their fights, however it was an improvement compared to their last major fight. There were no threats and nobody disappeared off the boat so it was progress for them.

Xena then mulled over her recently surfaced emotion, which was making her so protective over the bard. Xena was only ever protective over her family, especially Lyceus, and then when she lost her family all she protected were her emotions. She never guessed that she'd grow so protective over Gabrielle.

The Conqueror recalled that she and Gabrielle first slept in their arms after the first time they had sex. And typically that was always the case after they were together. They never slept in each others' arms when they just simply went to bed. That habit had been a recent development, and it seemed to be transcending into their daily life on many levels.

At first, Xena had been trying to delay it and keep the bard at arms length in public. It'd worked at first before her own plan just cracked apart, and she discovered she was the one intuiting the touches in public. Then Xena realized she would have troubles falling to sleep at night if Gabrielle didn't stay. She ended up tossing and turning for a solid candlemark, in which she berated herself, and eventually forced her body to sleep.

And now this business with Gurkhan and Lila was not settling the ruler's protective instincts over the bard. Xena was not looking forward to seeing to what extent her defenses would be drawn out of her. She was even secretly nervous that it could pull so deep to bring out her darkness. She never guessed that she could become so protective over her former and most challenging adversary.

The deeper thoughts brought the Conqueror to a sleepy conclusion that time would only tell her more. Her weariness from last night finally took her away to her dreamscape. Her steady breathing matched that of the Amazons Queen's.

The Conqueror was slowly and sensually awoken candlemarks later by soft kisses to her chest. She slyly grinned and her eyes remained hooded as she took in her lover's face.

Gabrielle was on her hands and knees but over top of the ruler. She kept her head ducked down, and she brushed her lips against Xena's pulse point on her neck.

"Mmmm." The Conqueror brought her arms around the small waist above hers. "Somebody is awake." She then hissed when she received a sharp nip to her throat. "Very awake."

Gabrielle chuckled then lifted her head for a light kiss that would rouse her lover

more. She pulled away from the kiss then grinned. "I was hoping you could join me."

Xena smirked at the tease. "I'm sure I can manage."

"I'm sure you can too." Gabrielle lowered her head for another kiss, which was much more conveying to her needs. She pulled back from the kiss with heavy breathing then she raised her head up. Just then she lost control of her body when the boat lurched forward and sent her head towards the headboard.

Xena reacted faster and placed her hand over Gabrielle's head then her hand took the impact against the headboard. She clenched her jaw at the sharp, brief pain but saw Gabrielle's shock.

The bard grabbed Xena's hand from her head then worriedly asked, "You okay?"

"Fine compared to what you would have felt."

The ship decided to pitch again, but Gabrielle was better prepared because she clung to her lover. Gabrielle then rested down on Xena's body when her earlier fire was suddenly washed away by what'd happened. "Is it me or is the ride getting a bit bumpier?"

The Conqueror already sensed the ship's increased rolling than normal. She slightly frowned then declared, "I better go up on deck and check on things."

"Xena, I'm sure the captain and his sailor boys can handle it."

The ruler's eyebrows crawled up at hearing the 'sailor boys' remark.

Gabrielle sighed then reminded, "He's probably been captain longer than you were a-" She ended her own words with a yelp when the boat rocked from larboard to starboard unexpectedly. She went off her lover's body and landed flat on her back. "Okay... go check," she gruffly consented.

Xena rolled to her left side and lifted up. She flashed a grin at her partner. "Thanks... my queen." And before Gabrielle could swat her, she popped out of bed. She hastily put on her leathers after getting her night shift off this time. She then rammed her feet into her boots then quickly tied them.

Gabrielle watched in astonishment as the pitching and rolling didn't send the ruler all over. She then recalled her stomach, which she promptly calmed with her pressure point. "Be careful," she ordered.

The Conqueror was by the door. She glanced over her shoulder and gave her own order. "Stay in the bed unless the ship sinks." She then left without another word.

"That was really comforting," the Amazon Queen muttered to nobody but herself. She then cried out again when the ship rocked hard to the larboard, and her small hands locked on the bed for safety. "This is not good for my stomach."

The Conqueror used her hands on either side of the walls to hold herself up right. Once the ship righted itself, she quickly moved to the bow of the ship then made it to the ladder. She carefully ascended the ladder and saw the door was indeed closed, which wasn't a good sign. She grasped the wood handle, rolled the door to the left,

and sea water spilled over her. She ignored it and disappeared out into the loud deck. She slammed the door behind her.

The Conqueror worked her wind blown hair out of her face then scanned the murky skies above her. "Damn," she growled then she carefully moved further out onto the waist deck. She gazed up at the bridge deck and saw the captain and first mate were handling the wheel together in the strong winds. She turned back to the sailors that raced about the decks to subdue the sails before they were torn to shreds.

The Conqueror pushed through the wind and hastily took charge of the frantic sailors on the waist deck. She barked out orders to get control of the various mast lines. The lines were whipping about in the strong winds but she and the sailors managed to subdue them in groups.

Xena and two sailors managed the line for the mainmast and hastily tried to pull up the sail. She shook her head to get the stinging rain and sea water from her face. Her head snapped to the right when loud lightening snapped just off the starboard and entered the water. She cursed at how close it'd been then she yelled out, "Let's move!"

"Rocks!! Rocks off the bow!" the sailor cried out from the crow's nest. He hastily grabbed the ropes in his crow's nest and lashed down his wrists.

The first mate froze when the lightening struck again and brightly lit the jagged rocks dead ahead. "Hard to larboard!!" He called out to the men, "Hard to larboard!!"

The captain and first mate grabbed the wheel and furiously fought to turn the ship away from the rocks that jutted out from the sea and waited to tear into the ship.

Several sailors yelled when their feet went under them from the hard shift of the ship.

Xena lost her footing from the hard turn and the soaked deck. She slammed hard onto her back and the air was knocked from her chest. She groaned but quickly moved to get back up on her feet.

"Lash down, men!" the captain yelled out.

The Conqueror knew what that meant and when she was on her feet; her hands rapidly caught a tied line from a cleat. Just as her fingers tightly curled over the rope, her feet were taken from under her again then her body was lifted into the air.

The ship roared out when its starboard hull scraped across the side of the rocks. The serrated rocks chewed away at the starboard side of the hull when the ship passed it. Loud snaps of wood growled then the thunder echoed overhead. The ship then made it past the rocks and the starboard side slammed back into the water with a hard boom.

"Get the sails up!" the Conqueror yelled when she found her feet on the deck again. She and the sailors scrambled and finished their earlier work. Xena finally had the mainmast's sail rolled up. She pressed forward in the strong winds and cleated off the heavy rope on the wood cleat.

"Breaker wave!" came the warning from the crow's nest, "Off the starboard bow!"

Xena stared in horror when she spotted the gigantic, white-capped wave that rose above the ship's bow. "By the gods..." She raced for the mainmast and to the ropes

around it.

The captain, like his first mate, wrapped his arms in the steering wheel and he screamed, "Lash down, men!"

The Conqueror hastily finished the tight knot across her left wrist then tangled her right hand into the line. Her wide eyes met the top of the gigantic wave that loomed just at the bow of the ship. She sent a prayer for hope and when she heard that loud growl, she inhaled a deep breath.

The immense wave loudly howled over the tiny ship then broke over it with a harsh explosion of water. The water poured down over the ship's deck and made the mizzenmast bend under the great pressure but it didn't break. The cold, heavy water flooded over the deck and quickly swept away several humans then took them out to sea.

Then the ship sharply veered to the larboard which sent everybody flying to the starboard side. The ship's wheel erratically spun now that it was free from the first mate and captain.

"Captain!" the first mate cried then his voice went eerily dead.

The captain stumbled across the bridge deck after his unconscious first mate. He saw the roll of the ship about to send the first mate off the side, and he launched himself. His hand clamped over the first mate's right wrist, and the captain quickly grabbed a rope from the railing nearby. After he lashed down the first mate, he scrambled across the wet deck back to the twirling wheel.

The Conqueror gasped for air when the wave finished breaking over the deck. She shoved her soaked hair out of the way then scanned the waist deck. She quickly counted that half a dozen men were at least washed away. She still clung to the rope that'd saved her life. She blinked out the sting from her eyes and focused on the bridge deck. She spotted the captain's intense struggle with the wheel.

The captain fought against the powerful wheel and tried to twist it to the larboard. His efforts were to no avail, yet he gritted his teeth and desperately fought so that his ship wouldn't flip. "By the gods, give me strength," he hissed then he lost his grip because of the water.

The wheel flew clockwise at an alarming rate, and the ship sharply veered to the starboard because of the wind. The sailors on deck screamed out in fear.

The captain's hands shot out to grab the spinning pegs, which almost took out his hand.

The wheel's speed increase then it suddenly stopped cold when a larger, stronger hand grasped a peg handle.

The captain peered up in surprise at the dark ruler, who stopped the wheel.  
"Conqueror, you should-"

"Just shut up and steer with me!" the Conqueror commanded.

The captain didn't argue anymore and took the helm with the ruler. He helped turn the

wheel back to the larboard side.

The Conqueror stood behind the captain, her arms around him, and her hands anchored to the wheel. She dug her spread feet into the deck and used her entire body strength to move the wheel back.

The vessel wailed and the larboard side began to lower back into the sea again. The brave sailors worked back onto their feet and tried to continue their work and finish up with the last sail on the mizzenmast.

"Breaker wave off the larboard bow!!"

The Conqueror gritted her teeth when she saw the immense wave surge up before the ship's bow.

"Poseidon, please have mercy," the captain prayed.

"Not today," the Conqueror hollered, "anchor down!" She pressed the captain into the steering wheel and slid her arms through the openings of the wheel.

The captain wrapped his arms into the wheel and hollered, "Lash down, men!" He then felt the Conqueror's body press him into the wheel, and he knew he wouldn't be lost at sea.

The Conqueror ducked her head when the howling wave came down upon the ship. She held tight when the ship's bow rose up to the heavens. For a brief instant, the Conqueror lifted her head and swore she saw a face in the black clouds then her vision was gone when the wave slammed down on her.

Screams from the sailors echoed all around and several more sailors were taken out to Poseidon. The ship's bow boomed when it smacked into the sea again, which caused everybody to lose their footing.

The Conqueror struggled to get to her feet but she held tightly to the wheel so it wouldn't spin.

The captain growled yet made it to his feet again.

The Conqueror rose up to her full height and her arm muscles protruded as she forced the wheel counterclockwise. She then glanced down at the men on the waist deck. She saw only a handful was left, and she hoped they would survive the rest of the battle against the seas. She then noticed several of the sailors were staring back at the stern then one sailor started yelling and waving but not at her or the captain.

The Conqueror tried to understand what the sailor was yelling but it was hard to make out against the wind. Then two words filtered through and rang in her ears, 'back inside'. Her body surged with the most foreign feeling ever: fear.

Gabrielle slid across the deck, and she became visible to the Conqueror. She just caught her balance before she went down.

"Get back inside the ship!" the sailor loudly repeated.

"Where's the Conqueror?" The Amazon Queen struggled to get closer to the sailor and

further from the closed deck door.

The sailor shook his head and ordered, "Get back inside, Queen Gabrielle!"

"Not until I know the Conqueror is safe!"

"Breaker wave off the larboard bow!" came the cry from high above.

Gabrielle's eyes widened when she heard the warning and despite she didn't know what it exactly meant, she knew it wasn't at all good.

The earlier sailor stretched out his hand to the Amazon Queen. "Take my hand! Hurry!" He stretched out as far as he could go while his right arm remained tied to a line.

The ship started to rise up to meet the gigantic wave.

Gabrielle's eyes widened with horror when she saw the wave. She desperately fought against the increased incline of the deck and tried for the sailor's hand. She sensed her boots slipping under the wet deck and her fingertips brushed over the sailor's. "Nooooo!"

The sailor frantically fought his line in hopes it'd stretch him to the Amazon Queen.

"Gaaabrielleee!" the Conqueror hollered in fear.

Gabrielle's fingers laced through the sailor's callused hand then his hand vanished when waterfall washed over her. Gabrielle screamed but her cry was immediately silence by the powerful wall of water that slammed into her body.

The Conqueror shook her head to rid of the slam of water. She frantically yelled, "Gabrielle!" She hastily scanned the deck for signs of her lover then the sharp scream on the starboard side caught her ear.

Gabrielle glided across the deck like soap, and her head slammed into a large wood cleat. She gasped in pain and inadvertently swallowed a mouthful of salt water. She madly clawed for something to grab and her right hand curled around the cleat she'd hit. She pulled up and got her left arm around the cleat for a better hold.

The ship slammed back down into the sea after it passed the wave. The wind then grew stronger and howled at the ship. The tied sails argued with the wind and barely resist from being yanked free.

Gabrielle wiped the salty water from her face. She then felt the very deep sting to her right temple but she ignored the pain. She instead worked to get back on her feet, her muscles strained in her legs and arms.

"Look out!" a sailor cried out, "The foresail is free!"

"Get the sail, get the sail!" another sailor ordered who helped to chase after the loose line.

The foresail quickly rolled down and its main line whipped around in the air over the deck. It dropped to the deck then snaked off to the larboard side.

"Watch out!" a sailor called to Queen Gabrielle.

Gabrielle held onto the rail then she held her breath when the line for the foresail came snapping at her.

The line swooped down to the deck, snaked across the deck, and the wind lifted it up near the Amazon Queen.

The bard screamed when the line tightly wrapped around her right leg. "By the gods!" She let go of the rail and hastily tried get the line from her lower leg.

The wind growled incredibly loud and it rose into a vicious gale.

"Xena!" the bard cried then her feet were yanked from under her, and her body rose up into the air.

The foresail caught the wind and lifted the small body at the end of its main line.

Gabrielle yelled in pure fear as she sailed higher into the air. Then the most beautiful sound rang in her ears; it was the Conqueror's battle cry and it was growing closer.

The Conqueror removed the dagger from her mouth then stretched out her right hand at the line. Her sharp dagger easily sliced the taut line then her left arm wrapped around the midair bard. She dropped her dagger and quickly wrapped her arms tightly around Gabrielle's waist.

Gabrielle closed her eyes as her world spun in every direction then it finally stopped. The Conqueror's secure body was all around her.

The Conqueror slid across the wet deck with her partner in her arms. She put out her right hand and stopped them when they hit the mainmast. She quickly laced her right arm through the tied lines and locked them down. She pulled Gabrielle in closer to her body.

The bard stayed hunkered down like her lover. She buried into Xena's strong body, and she sent a prayer out to whatever god would take her thank you.

"Don't you ever do this again!" the Conqueror yelled over the roar of the storm.

The Amazon Queen didn't respond but kept her faced in Xena's neck.

"Breaker wave off the bow!"

The Conqueror's heart pounded at the warning. "Gabrielle, wrap your arms and legs around me! Hurry!"

Gabrielle complied just as the ship started to repeat its high lift. She wrapped her legs around her lover's waist and her arms around Xena's upper body. She dug her face into Xena's chest.

"Hold on to me," Xena loudly instructed as she weaved her left arm through the ropes that lined the mainmast. She pushed forward which pressed the bard's back into the mast. She quickly glanced up and saw the wave bearing down on them. "Here it comes!" She dropped her head down and shut her eyes. Her arm muscles tensed and

held them in place.

Gabrielle swallowed her cry when the wave crushed them. She clung to her lover for her life. She held her breath as best as she could, yet her lungs burned. Gabrielle took a mixed swallow of air and sea water. She coughed deeply and started to lose her grip on Xena.

The ruler sensed it so she freed her left arm and held the small woman tightly. She then inhaled deeply when the wave passed them. She hastily patted the bard's back to help her.

Gabrielle finally had it under control, and she wiped her face free from the salty water. She then inhaled clean air and gasped, "When does this stop?"

The Conqueror lifted her head and dropped it back. Her eyes focused on the grey sky, which was a good sign and she spied a ray of sunlight fighting through the clouds. "Just hold on a bit longer."

The sailor in the crow's nest brushed back his sodden hair. He stared at the huge wave off to the right side of the ship. "Breaker wave off the starboard side!"

"Oh no," the bard gasped, and she instantly adhered to her partner's body.

The Conqueror quickly locked her arms down in the lines of the mast. She lowered her head when the wave roared down upon them.

The impact was intense as the ship rolled to the larboard side and the wave spilled over the deck with rage. Everybody on deck screamed and then Gabrielle's cry broke louder.

"Xeeenaaa!" Gabrielle flew across the deck on her back towards the edge of the ship. She rolled a couple of times and landed on her stomach.

The Conqueror hastily tried to free her arms and it took her a solid two beats. She then turned and spotted Gabrielle nearing the ledge of the ship. "Gabrielle!" Her legs lifted her, and she raced across the deck but kept slipping.

"Xena!" Gabrielle felt her legs dangling off the edge of the ship. She scrambled to grab something, and her nails clawed the wood. Her eyes met Xena's for a heartbeat then Xena's face was gone. Gabrielle screamed as she went over the edge of the ship.

Gabrielle's head jerked harshly and her body hovered in midair until her front side hit the side of the ship. She felt the tight grip on her right wrist so she gazed up to see Xena's face again.

"Don't let go!" the Conqueror yelled. She briefly checked her right hand's grip on the cleat then focused back on Gabrielle.

"Xena!" the fearful bard pleaded. She desperately attempted to climb the side of the ship but it was impossible. "Xena, help!"

"Calm down," Xena loudly ordered. "I need you to be calmer!" She tightened her grip on the bard's wrist. "You'll be okay, just trust me!"

Gabrielle wrapped her left hand around the ruler's muscular arm.

"I'm going to pull you up," Xena explained, "I want you to stay focused on me. Okay?"

The bard nodded as she knew her words would fail her. She didn't dare look below her feet despite she heard everything far below. Then her body started to rise up the ship.

Xena gritted her teeth then urged her sore muscles to haul the bard up from the side of the ship. She closed her eyes for a brief instant, and her mind flashed with Lyceus's fall in Tartarus.

The ship porpoised then surged back up out of the water.

Gabrielle screamed when her body fell lower towards the sea. She then peered up and saw the Conqueror had come over the ledge with her. "No," she gasped in fear.

The Conqueror's right hand no longer held to the cleat but just managed to grab a wood leg from the rail. She peered down at the bard.

Gabrielle knew the situation was even direr than earlier. She swallowed then called up, "Let go of me, Xena!"

"I'm not letting you go!" the Conqueror hotly yelled then focused back on the problem.

"You can't save us both," Gabrielle yelled back. "Just let go, Xena!"

Xena's mind swam then the loud boom from the thunder shook her thoughts. She rapidly blinked her eyes to work out of the haze.

"It'll be okay, Xena just let go!" Gabrielle demanded.

"No!" Xena screamed so loud that her voice thundered. "I will not!" Her anger surged her adrenaline rush, and she growled as she lifted her right hand.

Gabrielle rose up in the air and her body started to meet Xena's.

"Grab onto my body, now!"

The stunned bard did as she was told. She wrapped her left arm around Xena's shoulder then she managed her legs around the ruler's waist. Then her right hand was free so she wrapped that around too.

The Conqueror threw up her right arm and grabbed the other wood leg to her right. She then used all of her arm strength and stomach muscles to lift them up. Just as her head made it over the side of the ship, several hands grabbed her shoulders and arms then pulled her onto the deck.

Xena soon found herself on the calmer ship with Gabrielle wrapped around her. She closed her eyes and sighed in pure relief while she rested on the deck.

"Are you okay, my liege?" a sailor inquired.

"Never better," the Conqueror answered. She opened her eyes and amusingly stared

up at the several faces of the sailors.

"Queen Gabrielle?" another sailor asked.

Gabrielle just waved them off and decided to keep herself buried into Xena's back.

The Conqueror's gaze moved past the sailors' faces, and she studied the breaking clouds. Absolute relief now washed over her, and her head thunked against the deck. "We're okay now, you better return to your stations to help the captain."

"Aye, my liege," a sailor barked, and he ordered the other men to get back to work.

"Xena?" Gabrielle whispered.

"Mmmm?"

"If we ever go to Egypt again we are doing it by land."

The Conqueror was now seriously considering this option. "Did you bring up your lunch already?"

"I brought up my last two moon's worth of meals."

The Conqueror couldn't do anything but laugh at this point. It was either that or get really emotional at what just happened, and she opted for the first choice.

## **Chapter 2 - The Land of the Pharaohs**

The Amazon Queen gritted her teeth then held up her staff horizontally to her body. She parried the blow and tried desperately to hold her position, yet her right foot scrapped back. She shifted her staff to the right and blocked another attack. Her right heel met the board then she detected the rope that marked the edge of the sparring square.

The Conqueror smirked then doubled her efforts against the bard. Her blade moved quickly.

Gabrielle met each of the blows, but she knew her chances to win were slim. She didn't care though and instead broke into offense.

The Conqueror was remotely surprised as she back stepped twice from the onslaught of attacks. She bent back when the bard's staff just missed her face. She arched an eyebrow then warned, "Don't get cocky, Gabrielle."

The bard couldn't help a smug face when her lover warned her. She gained her space back and pushed forward against her opponent.

"She's amazing," Amarice murmured.

Najara folded her arms over her chest, and she continued to watch the Conqueror and Amazon Queen spar at the bow of the ship. She tilted her head then murmured, "Yes, she is." Her head lifted again. "It won't be long before she masters the staff."

Amarice blinked and turned her head to the dekarchos. "I was talking about the

Conqueror."

Najara chuckled and shrugged. "And I was talking about your queen."

Amarice frowned then gazed at the rulers practicing together.

"Your queen has only been practicing with a staff for about six moons. She's learned quite a bit."

Amarice rolled her eyes then replied, "And the queen has never been in a real battle... not like the Conqueror."

The dekarchos softly laughed then smirked at the Amazon. "Yet Queen Gabrielle can hold on her own against the Conqueror?"

"Probably because the Conqueror is taking it easy on her," Amarice jabbed.

Najara was taken over by amusement. "The Conqueror does not hold back."

The Amazon had nothing else to say so she just watched the sparring match instead.

Gabrielle bent her knees, her staff over her head, and her body vibrated from the hard blow to her staff. She hastily brought her staff down and swiped at the Conqueror's legs.

The Conqueror gave a low warcry then sprung up. She then watched as her opponent jumped to her feet and spun away. The Conqueror grinned and gave her sword a twirl.

Gabrielle's chest rose and fell quickly while her skin glistened from sweat. She was rather pleased by her efforts so far to stay in the match. This was the best she'd done thus far against her lover.

The Conqueror crept a half step closer then taunted, "You only have a few beats left before I push you pass the edge."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes at the ruler's mind game. She smirked. "Maybe not this time." She spun her staff once for good measure then stepped to the right once.

"You're not that good, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen knew half the battle was about show. If it was one thing she'd learn by watching the Conqueror, it was that she could put on the best show of all. She stepped to her right again and raised her staff higher. "I'll take my chances."

The Conqueror laughed evilly in response, and she decided it was time to teach the bard a lesson. She lunged forward with her sword doing a vertical slash.

Gabrielle stopped the blade then hastily moved her staff for the next attack and it was followed by a rapid third. She quickly found her arms moving up, down, left, and right to stop the Conqueror's endless assault. Her breathing grew more ragged and her arms quite sore.

The Conqueror gave an unpredicted battle cry and leapt up then over Gabrielle's head. She twisted in midair then landed with a large boom with her sword coming at the bard's back.

Gabrielle knew the move, and she dropped to the ship's deck then rolled away. She popped back up on her feet then raised her staff when the blade came at her again. She realized her partner's original intent was to get her closer to the rope edge. It worked.

The Conqueror amusingly laughed when Gabrielle realized her plan. She charged her next blows, which forced Gabrielle to step backwards to the rope edge.

The worn bard stepped back once, twice, a third, and she met each of the ruler's blows. She lifted her right leg prepared to step back, which would put her over the rope, and she'd lose. She grew angry suddenly at her lack of strength and that caused a surge of adrenaline to pump her body.

The Conqueror slightly stumbled back once when Gabrielle surprisingly went on offense. She adjusted quickly then brought her blade at a horizontal swipe towards Gabrielle's stomach.

The Amazon Queen yelped and jumped back. Her boots landed behind the rope, yet she lifted her staff to stop the attack. Her features darkened at her loss, but she wouldn't back down.

"You're done," the Conqueror declared.

"Not until I say so," the bard retaliated. She swiped her staff at the Conqueror.

The ruler easily obliged and suddenly increased her efforts to further teach the imprudent bard. Her earlier speeds seemed slow in comparison to her lightning attacks.

Gabrielle realized her mistake when she couldn't keep up. She hastily kept back stepping to get space. When she checked her partner's face, she saw there was no way to talk Xena out of it now. She had to finish what she started.

The Conqueror suddenly halted and stood still; her face was very dark. She held her handle with both hands now, and her blade seemed to divide her face.

Gabrielle raised her staff and glanced over her shoulder to see the railing wasn't that far behind her. She focused back on her opponent and raised her staff. She shifted her grip on the staff then gave a cry and charged her opponent.

The Conqueror gave her famous battle cry as she lunged for the bard.

Gabrielle's staff met Xena's sword just between their bodies. She held Xena's blade back, and she bared her teeth up at the ruler.

"Yield, Gabrielle," the ruler ordered.

For an answer, Gabrielle pressed her staff against Xena's blade.

The Conqueror felt her blade coming back so she easily corrected it and pushed her blade towards the bard. It wasn't hard for her to overpower Gabrielle between her height and strength.

Gabrielle's teeth clenched even harder as her muscles strained against her arms. Her stomach grew taut. Then her rear muscle legs tried to push, but they burned badly. She

sensed her knees giving way so she stepped back once.

The Conqueror stepped forward and pushed even harder.

The Amazon Queen stepped back again then after a beat she was forced into a third step. This time, her back touched the railing of the ship, but she wouldn't yield to the ruler. She inhaled a ragged breath then mustered the last of her strength against the ruler.

The Conqueror's own muscles showed through her arms and shoulder as she found a decent fight from the bard. She put her leg muscles into it now.

Gabrielle gave a faint cry when her knees started to give out on her. She knew she didn't have the strength to surpass the Conqueror, yet she would not yield until she gave it her all. She then heard a faint crack of wood from her staff then finally her knees lost the battle. Gabrielle fell to her knees but kept her staff raised and against the ruler's sword.

The Conqueror lowered her head down but would not remove her sword or the pressure. "Do not pick a battle that you'll ultimately lose."

The bard understood what her partner meant. She knew there was no way she could outmatch Xena's strength and that she'd simply have to find something she could outmatch Xena with, if that was possible. Her sore arm muscles gave in and her staff grew closer to her chest.

"Do you yield now?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes against the sting in her eyes. She bowed her head respectfully then suddenly the wall of pressure was gone from her. She next heard the Conqueror's blade being sheathed.

The Conqueror breathed hard but what she truly won after this match was more pride in Gabrielle. She hadn't expected the bard to so adamantly resist the yield. She knew it was a mixture of foolishness and bravery.

Gabrielle lifted her head, which displayed her displeasure in losing.

The Conqueror held out her right hand in silent offer.

The bard didn't even consider as she placed her staff into her left hand and collapsed Xena's offer. She rose back up to her feet then once she felt settled, she remarked, "Don't even say it."

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow as if she didn't know what the bard meant.

Gabrielle stepped closer to her lover. "I already know it was stupid." Then she stomped off with her dark mood.

Xena turned on her feet and decided it was best to let the bard cool off. She knew how it felt and sometimes a little space after a defeat was appreciated. She instead took it upon herself and coiled up the ropes that they'd use to mark the sparring square.

After she finished returning the lines, Xena climbed up to the bridge deck and joined the captain. She spoke with him for awhile and in the middle of the conversation, she

noted Gabrielle's presence at the bow. The bard must have gone below deck and returned her staff to the quarters as she now was empty handed. The Conqueror excused herself when the first mate joined the captain's side.

The Conqueror quietly neared her partner's back. She inwardly admired the bard's developed back muscles that showed in the sunlight and the exposing leather top. She had to admit that Gabrielle was starting to fill out her Amazon leathers quite well. There was plenty about Gabrielle to be desired and the leather's highlighted Gabrielle's beauty and strength.

Xena took a silent position beside her partner. She put her hands behind her back, stood quiet, and enjoyed the beauty of the sea along with the cool breeze.

Gabrielle had her arms over her chest. She knew some time ago that her partner had intent to join her. She closed her eyes for a moment and just let the breeze flow over her skin. She slowly filled her chest then released her breath as her eyes drifted open again. "I don't know what I was thinking." She huffed then muttered, "I guess that was the problem."

The ruler understood her partner was referring back to the earlier practice. She remained silent as she considered each aspect. She hadn't expected Gabrielle too be overly hard on herself about it. She knew a remedy was required, and she hoped she could deliver on it despite words were not her forte. "Your attempt was foolishly admirable," she honestly remarked.

Gabrielle didn't respond but gnawed on the side of her mouth.

"It was admirable that you would not give up."

"You mean it was stupid," the bard sadly argued.

The Conqueror rocked on her boots for a beat. Her hands, behind her back, locked tightly from being nervous. "If even a quarter of my legions and phalanxes were half that admirable, Gabrielle then I would have the finest army in the known-world." The Conqueror tilted her head upon further consideration. "To have such dedication is not something you can train in a fighter, it is either there or it is not."

"It can be inspired though," Gabrielle tried.

"Perhaps," the ruler murmured, "but regardless it cannot be taught. It simply is." She finally gazed upon her partner. "You have the right values, but you have not yet discovered where your strength lies."

"When it comes to being a... fighter I don't think I have a strength." Gabrielle dipped her head then peered up with hooded eyes at her partner. "I don't know if I'm really meant for this."

The Conqueror's eyes slightly narrowed, and she turned her head away. "I was wrong then."

Gabrielle frowned at the remark, and she grew curious to understand.

The Conqueror saw the bard's look from the corner of her eye. She prepared to say her pending words because she wasn't sure how Gabrielle would react, but she

endeavored to be honest and even brutally honest. "Maybe you're not as dedicated as I said."

Gabrielle shut her eyes against the sting. She felt the words cut through her, and her emotions surged to the top.

The Conqueror sensed the shift in her partner and decided it was best to take leave. She felt safer to put space between them so she stepped back once, turned, and started off.

Gabrielle swallowed, but she turned her head and called, "Xena?"

The ruler paused at hearing the unexpected request. She pivoted and gazed at her lover. The expression on the bard's face made her stomach drop, and the feeling was an odd sensation for her.

"Thank you," Gabrielle sincerely whispered then she returned her attention to the sea.

Xena was puzzled, yet it didn't show externally. She just continued her walk away, and her thoughts were heavy about why the bard had thanked her when she felt she worsened it. When she was just near the mainmast, she stopped and glanced back at her partner's back. She internally struggled with her feelings and her logic. The battle was settled so she turned around and silently approached the bard.

Gabrielle sighed yet continued watching the calm seas around her. It made her wonder how the seas could be so dark, turbulent and dangerous one beat then in the next calm, blue and beautiful such as this. Then surprisingly she felt the warm presence behind her and strong arms circled around her waist. She released a very faint moan from the relief she felt at having Xena's return.

The Conqueror had a thin smile when she realized her presence was quite welcomed. Her feelings had correctly assessed the situation and helped her handle it. She lowered her head down close to Gabrielle's, and she said nothing that wasn't already being conveyed.

Gabrielle unfolded her arms then lowered her hands so that they rested on top of the Conqueror's. She was still shocked that Xena had returned to her after the previous discussions. She knew that it wasn't that Xena didn't support her or didn't understand, but simply that at times Xena didn't know how to handle the situations. It'd taken some time for Gabrielle to understand that aspect about the ruler, but it'd become quite clear when Cyrene explained it one day.

Nearly half a moon ago, Gabrielle had a long day at the fortress and was preparing to go to Artemisia. She'd gone to Cyrene's house and gathered her things for the trip back then returned to the fortress. When she arrived in the Conqueror's bedchambers, she found herself quite exhausted, and she teetered on a slightly emotional state. Gabrielle knew she tended to get that way when she was overly tired.

It also so happened to be the night that the Conqueror wanted to argue why Gabrielle should take a different dekarchos than Najara. They'd hotly debated, but Gabrielle refused to take any other dekarchos because she was solely comfortable with Najara and that Iolaus was the only other option. The Conqueror wouldn't allow Iolaus to leave his post. The argument didn't find an end until Gabrielle was on the verge of

being upset and almost walked out of the bedchambers for the night. The Conqueror didn't know how to handle Gabrielle's more emotional state that night because in typical fashion Gabrielle would argue against her. Instead that night, Gabrielle gave a half fight and almost broke down, and the ruler hadn't expected such a reaction.

The Conqueror's temper burned out quickly upon seeing Gabrielle's upset. She didn't apologize verbally, but she immediately gave in and agreed that Najara could escort Gabrielle. Afterwards, Gabrielle had gathered her leftover dignity and prepared for bed then received some much needed sleep. The Conqueror, however, didn't go to bed that night until much later, and she kept to her side of the bed. By the following morning, the bard woke up to an empty bed and only received a brief goodbye from the ruler.

It was a strange occurrence and at first Gabrielle truly took it personal. She considered it heavily while she was away in Artemisia. What made it stranger still was Xena's normal regard when she returned because it was as if it didn't happen. So Gabrielle went to the only person she knew that could help her understand it, understand Xena.

Cyrene sat down at the table in her house, and a hot mug was locked in her hands.

Gabrielle had a mug of tea too. She'd just finished sipping on it when she explained the argument and Xena's reactions.

Cyrene remained silent for a heartbeat or two then finally spoke in a very somber voice. "I suppose some things about Xena will never change."

The bard curiously peered over at her adopted mother.

Cyrene studied the younger woman, who'd recently become her daughter's anchor in the world. It amazed her how Gabrielle had become not only Xena's anchor but also hers so many moons back. She focused on the topic at hand then finally revealed, "Xena was never very good at expressing her emotions or dealing with them."

The bard grunted then took a sip of her tea. She considered Cyrene's words and applied the theory to the ruler. "She's excellent at expressing her anger."

"She is," Cyrene granted, "And always has been. She use to be very good at expressing her love for somebody."

Gabrielle's shocked clearly showed.

Cyrene faintly smiled at Gabrielle's surprise, but she explained it carefully. "Xena couldn't express many of her emotions except for her anger or love. The two extremes, I suppose." She peered into her mug and considered her murky tea. "After Toris and I turned our backs on her, she had no reason to express her love anymore."

"She lost Lyceus too." Gabrielle tilted her head as she tried to imagine what the ruler went through at such a young, traumatic stage of her life. "I guess all she had left to express was her anger."

Cyrene dipped her head in agreement.

"Now she has you again," Gabrielle murmured in open thought. "Melpomene."

"And you," Cyrene softly added.

The bard shook her head at her adopted mother. "Cyrene, I'm just..." Gabrielle fell short on her words that she couldn't compose.

Cyrene slightly grinned and waited to see if Gabrielle could explain it.

Gabrielle was slightly annoyed but not at Cyrene. "I'm just her... well you know. It could change, at anytime." She lifted her mug for a sip of tea.

"I wouldn't fool yourself, Gabrielle." The mother's earlier grin grew, and it made her look young. "You know Xena's history better than anybody. You name one person who she's been with this long."

The Amazon Queen mulled it over then named, "Borias."

"And did she change her life, for him?"

Gabrielle frowned at the question. "She's not doing it for me, Cyrene. She's doing this for herself."

"Is she really?" The mother argued. "Xena knows if she doesn't at least try then she could lose all of us, again."

The bard's shoulders slumped at this knowledge that wouldn't settle well in her stomach. "She's still doing it for herself though... She made the final choice to do this."

Cyrene thoroughly agreed with the bard. "I believe she recognizes what's at risk though." She took another drink of her tea while she thought out the rest of her explanation. She quietly set her half empty mug down then mentioned, "Give Xena some time to relearn what she's forgotten."

"You mean with how she handles the relationship?" Gabrielle saw Cyrene's nod so she let out a long sigh. "I worry that sometimes it might be too much for her." At Cyrene's raised eyebrow that mimicked Xena's technique, Gabrielle quickly explained, "Xena has a lot on her plate. Besides just ruling the realm, she does have to relearn to have family in her life again. She's trying to make the changes in her life as much as the realm. Then on top of that is our relationship, which I don't think she's quite use to."

Cyrene leaned across the table some then challenged, "And are you?"

The bard stared at Cyrene then she leaned back in her chair when her thoughts grew heavy. "I..."

"When was your last relationship, Gabrielle?" The mother pointed at her adopted daughter. "I've known you since you were nine Helical Risings and since then I've never seen you in a serious relationship. You've dedicated your life to stopping the Conqueror and helping the realm. You and she are in the same place." Cyrene lowered her hand to the table. "Now you tell me, between being the Amazon Queen, being the state advisor, a bard, and your family... do you find your first relationship that difficult, with her?"

The bard worked her right hand through her bangs. She stared at the wood grain of the table between her and Cyrene. She opened her mouth to reply, yet she faltered. She then sadly smiled at her adopted mother. "I see your point."

Cyrene reached across the table and took Gabrielle's hand into hers. She squeezed tightly. "Just give her the time to relearn just as you need time to learn." She ran her thumb across the bard knuckles. "You're both happy and the occasional fight is good. You learn each other's faults just like your strengths."

Gabrielle chuckled but not at Cyrene, just simply because it was true. She then went serious when she mentioned, "I just don't understand why when I got back she tried to act like we didn't fight. It's still unsettled somewhat."

Cyrene gave a brief squeeze then released Gabrielle's hand. "My suggestion is to talk to her." She took a sip of her tea. "Xena may not be the most talkative person, but she is an excellent listener." She then shrugged. "And knowing my daughter, she's just trying to keep things good natured because she doesn't want to see you upset again. She's protective that way."

The Amazon Queen huffed then sarcastically joked, "The Conqueror is protective over me?"

Cyrene smirked then lightly teased, "Stranger things have happened, Gabrielle."

The bard softly grinned at the truth behind her mother's words. Her head bobbed a few times as her recent memories floated to the top. She imagined stranger things had yet to happen for them.

"Land off the bow!" the sailor called from up in the crow's nest.

Gabrielle was shaken out of her memories, and she focused back on the present.

The Conqueror sensed the change in her partner, but she didn't comment. She instead gazed over the bow of the ship and focused on a forming lighthouse. She smiled at the familiar landmark that was so famous in Egypt.

"That's the Great Lighthouse?" Gabrielle whispered. Her eyes grew wide, and she became quite excited.

"It is," Xena agreed, "It stands on the Pharos of Alexandria... a small island."

"It was built several hundred Helical Risings ago," the informed bard mentioned.

"Yes, it was built by Ptolemy I after he became pharaoh."

Gabrielle tilted her head in thought. She knew if it wasn't for Ptolemy I being chosen as pharaoh of Egypt by Alexander the Great that Greece may have never grown so close to Egypt. "It's funny how things work out... its amazing the Ptolemy Dynasty has lasted so long in Egypt. You would think the Egyptians would have refused him as their pharaoh since he was Greek."

"Sometimes the people do not have a choice," the ruler reminded in a heavy voice.

The bard understood what her lover meant. She peered up at Xena then softly

questioned, "Do you think there'll be your dynasty in Greece?"

"That requires an heir."

"An heir doesn't have to be blood," Gabrielle prompted, "Just simply named."

The Conqueror studied the bard's face and tried to gauge her thoughts. She broke her stare and gazed upon the coast of Egypt. "It is too early to tell yet."

The bard knew it was best not to pursue the topic with her partner. The topic would have to wait until much later and in more private surroundings, she decided.

"I need to speak to the captain. Did you want to join me?"

The Amazon Queen smiled at the invite. "Yes." She stepped out of the ruler's arms then turned around.

The Conqueror led the way across the deck and up the steps to the bridge deck. She beelined for the captain then commanded, "I want one trireme ahead of us."

"Aye, my liege." The captain then called to his men to pull up the sails so that the triremes would catch up to them. "The Egyptian navy should be out here soon, I would imagine."

"I believe so," the ruler agreed. She then turned to Gabrielle. "You see the harbor just ahead?"

The bard squinted and focused on the distant harbor that was sufficiently protected by a mole that snaked out into the open seas. "That's the Great Harbor?"

The Conqueror faintly smiled at Gabrielle's knowledge. She'd only briefly mentioned to her partner that she may want to do some research on Alexandria and Egypt so that nothing surprised her upon arrival. Gabrielle had headed her advice all too well and now seemed to be quite prepared. "When we enter the Great Harbor we go slightly west and there's the private port."

Gabrielle peered up inquisitively at her lover.

"The private port has a large dock that's directly connected to the palaces." The Conqueror slipped her hands behind her armored back then further informed, "After we disembark, the ships will go to the Port of Alexandria to stay docked until we're prepared to leave."

"I read that the emporium isn't far from the palaces," the bard softly mentioned.

The Conqueror held back her grin once she heard Gabrielle's peaked interests in the Egyptian market. "It's only a few blocks."

Gabrielle smirked and teased, "You'll have to come with me."

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at the clear demand spoken aloud and in front of subordinates. "I suppose so since you only have drachmas."

"That's right," the bard realized aloud, "they have no currency in Egypt."

"Not yet," the Conqueror muttered. She didn't further her comment since the captain

and first mate were beside her.

The Amazon Queen understood her partner's silence about the topic so she changed it. "Tell me about the queen. I didn't get a chance to do much history on her."

The Conqueror nodded at the request. She figured they had time until the triremes would join them. "Do you know Cleopatra's full name?"

The bard's eyebrows knitted together. "You mean it isn't just Cleopatra VII?"

The ruler slightly grinned when she realized Gabrielle really didn't have much information on the Egyptian Queen. "Her full name is Cleopatra Thea Philopator. Her name means 'the Goddess Cleopatra, the beloved of her father.'"

"So, she has three names?" The bard smirked at her partner.

The Conqueror saw the look and decided to ignore it. "She ascended the throne after her father died... she was about eighteen Helical Risings."

"Wow," the bard muttered. "How long has she been the ruler?"

The Conqueror turned her head to the bard. "She has been the queen for two Helical Risings now."

Gabrielle blinked then it blindly struck her. "She and I are closer in age. I thought she was closer to your age?"

The ruler chuckled and softly replied, "Not at all. I met her when she was twenty-two Helical Risings."

The Amazon Queen tried not to fathom her lover being with the young Cleopatra so many Helical Risings ago. She'd heard plenty of far and wide stories about the Conqueror's courtship for Cleopatra's navy. It'd also been the Conqueror who returned Queen Cleopatra to her throne against her brother, Ptolemy XIII.

The Conqueror felt the uneasiness in her lover, and she had her suspicions on why. "An interesting fact about Cleopatra..." She paused and saw her partner coming back to the present. "She's the only Ptolemaic pharaoh to read, write, and speak Egyptian."

"Really?" Gabrielle wondered why none of the previous Ptolemaic rulers knew Egyptian. The concept seemed slightly absurd to her because all rulers should know the native tongue of their lands.

"Cleopatra actually knows nine languages all together," the Conqueror revealed.

"I hope Greek is in there," Gabrielle joked.

"Of course it is." The Conqueror grinned at the bard.

"The triremes are a quarter of a league off the stern!" the sailor in the crow's nest hollered down.

The Conqueror stepped forward then directed her command to the sailor high above. "Signal the Aegeon to take the lead!"

"Aye, my liege," the sailor called back. He then produced a thin, metal sheet from

under his feet on the crow's nest. He carefully sent the sun reflections to the trireme named the Aegeon then he noted something else to his right. "My liege, two Byblos ships off the larboard side!"

The Conqueror signaled for her partner to follow her so she and Gabrielle walked over to the larboard side. She indeed spotted the two enormous galleys that were rowing from the east towards them.

Gabrielle was quite impressed by the galleys' sizes, and she imagined they were almost double that of a Greek trireme. "By the gods... I see why you like the Egyptian Navy."

The Conqueror smirked and muttered, "Size isn't everything." She heard the quiet snicker from the Amazon Queen and figured it was best not to encourage it further. "As soon as the Aegeon is ahead of us, we'll enter the Great Harbor." She rested her hands on the rail and simply admired the beautiful Egyptian galleys that approached them.

Soon, the three Greek ships were escorted by the Egyptian galleys into the Great Harbor then directed west to the private port. Gabrielle grew anxious and excited because she couldn't wait to meet Queen Cleopatra, and she really couldn't wait to put her feet on land. She then was thoroughly distracted when the transport ship passed the Great Lighthouse on Pharos Island. She had to drop her head so far back that it caused an ache in her lower neck.

The Conqueror was calm and cool as ever as if this was her daily routine. She remained poised beside the captain and her bronze armor reflected the western sun. She'd considered changing out of her warrior attire but decided against it as she'd preferred to bathe before getting into something more regal. It would just have to wait until this evening.

Gabrielle was quiet because she was too busy absorbing everything she could take in with her eyes. She was mesmerized, and she hastily recorded every detail for her scrolls later. She then lit up when she swore she recognized something far off in the city. "Is that a theatre?"

The ruler thinly smiled because she knew it was only a matter of time before the bard would pinpoint the large theatre in Alexandria. "It is the Great Theatre," she agreed. "It is a Roman theatre actually."

Gabrielle's eyes were bright with excitement.

The Conqueror sensed the unasked question in the bard. "Perhaps we'll find time to see a play."

The bard suddenly had a smile when she heard the promise, which she knew it was without failure. She also couldn't wait to see the Library of Alexandria as she'd heard so much about it. She'd always wanted to see it and never thought she would have the chance. There were many literary jewels in Egypt that Gabrielle couldn't wait to immerse in during her trip.

Finally, the sailors on the transport ship were hastily throwing lines to the dockhands on the private dock. They quickly worked to get the ship secured then pulled up the

sails. The captain barked out orders and finished off by ordering the gangplank down.

The Conqueror glimpsed off the stern and saw the two triremes were anchoring in the Great Harbor for now. She turned back to her partner and quietly ordered, "Let's go down on deck." She gazed over the bard's head when she heard the gangplank hit the dock below. "Queen Cleopatra will be waiting."

Gabrielle nodded then descended the steps. She felt somewhat underdressed for the meeting since she wore only her Amazon leathers without her mask or feather necklace. She figured it could wait until later.

Iolaus waited at the head of the gangplank. He stood with his hands behind his back, a faint smile, and his armor shined in the sunlight. "My liege," he greeted with a bow. He straightened up and smiled at the bard. "Queen Gabrielle." His focus returned to the ruler. "Queen Cleopatra has arrived, my liege."

"Let's not make her wait," the Conqueror decided aloud, and she stepped onto the plank.

Iolaus bowed his head and held out his right hand to the gangplank in respect. "Queen Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen rolled her eyes then lightly slapped Iolaus's armored side. "Come on, Iolaus." She stepped onto the gangplank, grabbed the right rail, and took large steps to catch up with Xena.

The tetrarchès hopped up onto the gangplank then followed the rulers to the dock below. He hadn't met Queen Cleopatra yet, but he was looking forward to it.

Gabrielle finally made it to the dock with complete relief. She remained a pace behind the Conqueror in respect of Xena's position as the ruler of the Greek Realm. She quickly shifted her mindset into a more leadership role as she knew it was expected of her. A role that was far from foreign to her.

Just ahead, several dark Egyptian guards that were finely dressed in gold plated armor marched down the dock. There were two rows of three lined guards that marched in unison and quickly came to a stop and stepped to either side, one by one. When the six guards were at their posts, all that was left was a young woman that was just between the Conqueror's and Gabrielle's height.

The young woman wore a pure white dress that reached her ankles, a v-cut in the dress's top, and it was sleeveless. Her soft arms though bore golden arm bracelets then she wore a thick necklace made of gold and turquoise. Then around her waist was a golden sash that loosely dangled. Her midnight hair was neatly braided and pulled back to reveal her sculpted features. A gold headband wrapped around her head and stopped at the center of her forehead where there was an almost glowing scarab jewel.

The Conqueror dipped her head respectfully when the young woman paused before her. She then slowly lifted her head, and she couldn't help but return the smile on the young Egyptian Queen's face.

Queen Cleopatra stepped up to her Greek counterpart, and her smile broadened. "Egypt welcomes you back, my liege." She then stepped into the Conqueror's space,

placed her hands on the Conqueror's hips, and lifted onto her tiptoes.

The Conqueror closed her eyes as she warmly received a kiss to each of her cheeks. She then waited until Queen Cleopatra took a step back. "It is an honor to be warmly received again, Queen Cleopatra." She then held out her right hand, palm up.

Queen Cleopatra's left hand immediately filled the Greek ruler's.

The Conqueror raised the petite hand up then placed a butterfly kiss to the top of the queen's hand. Then as she lowered the queen's hand, she politely stated, "Thank you for your invitation to Alexandria." She released Queen Cleopatra's hand.

"You are always welcomed, my liege," the Egyptian Queen promised.

The Conqueror dipped her head then she slightly pivoted to her right. She instantly noted the odd look on Gabrielle's face, but she wouldn't comment on it now. She instead invitingly held out her right hand to Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen suddenly smiled when she saw her cue. She focused on her role and pushed aside her thoughts about how strange it was to see how the Conqueror kissed Queen Cleopatra's hand. Gabrielle considered it a rather masculine gesture, and she'd never observed Xena doing such until now. She collapsed her lover's callused hand then was drawn forward.

"Queen Cleopatra, I would like you to meet the Amazon Queen, Gabrielle." The Conqueror released the bard's hand because she knew Gabrielle would need it free. "Queen Gabrielle will also be taking over the position of state advisor in my polis."

Queen Cleopatra slyly smiled at the Amazon Queen. "I am a bit of a politician myself, Queen Gabrielle." She carefully studied the Amazon Queen's beautiful and striking features.

Gabrielle was doing the exact same thing with Queen Cleopatra. She realized one fast fact and that was that Queen Cleopatra was not as beautiful as many of the legends made her out to be. Indeed, Queen Cleopatra had the traditional Macedonian facial structures like the Conqueror. Cleopatra even had the classic long hooked nose of many Greeks and surprisingly, her features were more masculine than expected. The only seeming Egyptian aspect to her was her richly tanned skin.

"The politics are a bit new to me," Gabrielle admitted.

The Conqueror placed her hands behind her back then mentioned, "However you've learned quickly, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard was shocked by her partner's open appraisal but she gratefully took it. "Thank you, my liege."

Queen Cleopatra found an interest in the Amazon Queen's respect for the Conqueror since she went by title. She stepped up to the Amazon Queen and inquired, "This is your first time to Egypt?"

Gabrielle smiled then her excitement clearly showed. "It is."

Queen Cleopatra softly laughed then she stretched out her right hand. She lightly

caressed the bard's cheek and softly proclaimed, "Then you shall be appropriately welcomed for your first time." Then without warning, she leaned in for a soft kiss.

Iolaus's eyes widened and his jaw went slightly slack. He peered up at the Conqueror, who acted passive to the entire scene. He shook his head then observed how Gabrielle was stiffer than the boards of the dock.

When Queen Cleopatra leaned back into her original position, she grinned at the Amazon Queen's red features. "Welcome to Egypt, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard cleared her throat and hoarsely replied, "Thank you." She didn't dare to assess her lover's reaction.

The Conqueror signaled for her tetrarchès to take her left side. "Queen Cleopatra, this is my tetrarchès, Iolaus, and he's my acting guard captain." She didn't mention that Iolaus main position was to command the Corinthian squads because it wasn't relevant.

Queen Cleopatra smiled at the short, blond man that seemed well natured. She warmly received the soldier by kissing his left cheek and offered, "Welcome to Egypt, tetrarchès." She then placed her hands behind her back. "I will be sure that my head guard, Cheops, speaks with you."

"Thank you, Queen Cleopatra." Iolaus dipped his head then fell silent despite the blush to his cheeks.

Queen Cleopatra collapsed her hands in front of her body now then warmly spoke again. "I'm sure you're both exhausted from your journey." She glanced between the foreign rulers and asked, "How was the trip?"

Gabrielle smirked but peered up at her lover for the answer.

The Conqueror felt all eyes on her so she simply replied, "Manageable."

Queen Cleopatra smirked at the response then focused on the Amazon Queen. "I've come to learn that the Conqueror tends to... understate many things in life."

The Conqueror peered down at her partner and arched a dangerous eyebrow at her.

Gabrielle was not at all frightened or would be subdued into silence. "Yes, the Conqueror does have a... knack for that."

The Conqueror narrowed her eyes at the bard then she warned, "Perhaps you'd enjoy another night on the ship, Queen Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen ticked off a back molar and ignored the ruler's mock threat. She could just taste the Conqueror's taunt in her mouth. She instead politely asked, "What time is dinner here?"

Queen Cleopatra quietly laughed then replied, "At sunset, Queen Gabrielle and I am sure you'll enjoy a bath prior."

"That would be wonderful," Gabrielle agreed.

"Then I shall escort you to the palace." Queen Cleopatra turned and signaled her

guards to prepare.

The Conqueror gave brief orders to Iolaus and instructed him to get the ship disembarked, which included the Najara, her file, and the Amazons. She then took her position to the right of the Egyptian Queen.

Queen Cleopatra walked between the two foreign rulers as they went down the long dock. "I did observe some hull damage to your ship." She peered up at the Conqueror.

The Conqueror sighed then nodded her head. "The ship will need to be repaired before we leave."

"That will not be a problem." Queen Cleopatra smiled and promised, "Our resources are at your disposal, Conqueror."

"Thank you," the Conqueror replied.

Queen Cleopatra then turned her focus to the Amazon Queen. "I have heard you are also bard, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard in question smiled instantly when her lifelong aspiration came to light. "I was a bard before I was an Amazon Queen."

"Indeed." Queen Cleopatra was remotely surprised by the open statement since she knew the arts were outlawed in the Greek Realm. She wondered what'd changed to allow this bard to be so public. "Perhaps you will honor me with some stories." She tilted her head to the bard. "In return, I can promise a night or two at our Great Theatre."

The Amazon Queen chuckled at the deal already struck between them. "I would love that, Queen Cleopatra." She then lost her amused smile when she thoughtfully peered up at her silent lover. "If you will join me, my liege?"

The Conqueror felt her lover's affections in her title. She then sensed Queen Cleopatra's inquisitive features set on her but she kept focused on Gabrielle. "I will join you."

Gabrielle tried to hide her smile, but it was too hard.

Queen Cleopatra bit her lower lip as she was stunned by the Conqueror's agreement. In past times, Cleopatra had repeatedly invited the Conqueror to join her at the Great Theatre. The Conqueror politely refused her every time so she wondered what hold this Amazon Queen had on the Conqueror to perform such a miracle. This would certainly require more investigation.

The three rulers climbed the flights of the marble steps to the top of the palace's entrance. Gabrielle paused at the top and turned around so that she could see the entire Great Harbor.

The Conqueror had gone a step then stopped and faintly smiled at her partner's interest.

Gabrielle softly smiled at the beauty and culture of Alexandria in the low western sunlight. She then turned and saw that everybody had been waiting for her so she

became bashful. She took her spot beside the Conqueror and silently followed Queen Cleopatra past the granite columns that lined the entrance. The bard's attention was grabbed by the statues of seated pharaohs beside the doorway into the palace. She stared at the right one as she passed it the closest.

The Conqueror had seen this in her past, yet she wouldn't admit aloud how much she enjoyed it. She felt the Egyptian had their unique take in the world, but it was similar to the Greeks. It was only the Chin culture that fascinated her most of all.

The Egyptian guards slimmed down just to two as the group went deeper into the palace. Queen Cleopatra guided them down a long hallway then stopped by a double door. "This is the south wing where the quarters rest." She stepped forward and opened the door. "And my liege, this is yours as always."

The Conqueror entered behind the Egyptian ruler then her partner followed her. She scanned the familiar bedchambers that were almost as large as hers in Corinth. "I am grateful."

Queen Cleopatra spun around and smiled at the Greek ruler. She approached her again. "Your maidens will be in soon to draw you a bath." She then centered on the Amazon Queen. "Queen Gabrielle, your quarters are across from the..." She faltered when the Conqueror held up her hand to silence her.

Gabrielle had grown anxious when she realized that she and Xena would have separate rooms, but she wasn't going to argue it either. She knew it was her lover's choice.

The Conqueror lowered her hand then stated, "This bed..." She signaled it with her right hand. "...is large enough for Queen Gabrielle and me together." She lowered her hand to her side. "Thank you though, Queen Cleopatra."

If Queen Cleopatra had been surprised by the switch, she certainly didn't show it. She smiled instead and politely offered, "I'll leave you to relax before dinner." She then brushed past the rulers and closed the doors behind her.

Gabrielle's tense shoulders slightly loosened and fell.

The Conqueror caught the change in her lover, but she turned her head sidelong and softly ordered, "Follow me." She walked straight ahead where there were white, drawn curtains, which ruffled in the breeze.

The bard silently followed and waited until her lover pulled the curtains open for them. She then was guided out of the bedchambers and out onto a balcony that was only some fifty pouses high from the ground. She soaked in her view and held her breath at the beauty of Alexandria basked in the sunset. "By the gods," she rasped.

The Conqueror slightly smiled at the bard's appreciation for the view. "It is almost as beautiful as Corinth." She stepped up to the granite rail and leaned against it, her arms folded overtop.

Gabrielle stood beside her lover, and her hands rested on top of the banister. "It is." She then caught Xena's raised eyebrow at her so a soft laugh escaped her. "Almost as beautiful as Corinth."

The Conqueror grinned then focused back on the city that was a romantic blend of Egyptian and Greek. She then heard the maidens coming into their room to prepare the bath. She ignored it though and focused on her time with Gabrielle.

"Thank you, by the way." Gabrielle saw the confusion in Xena's eyes. "For letting me stay with you."

The Conqueror moved her left hand and rested it on top of Gabrielle's. "My pleasure."

The bard smiled then she suddenly grew smug and huskily teased, "It will be... later."

Xena's head snapped to the left when she heard the promise for tonight. Her right eyebrow made the perfect arc and remained still for a beat. She grinned as her eyebrow lowered then she turned to the bard. She found Gabrielle's hips and carefully pulled the bard into her body.

Gabrielle tilted her head back and smiled at the Conqueror.

Xena lowered her head then met Gabrielle for a sweet kiss. She withdrew from the kiss but kept her head down, and she whispered, "How about that bath?"

"Is it big enough for two?"

The Conqueror chuckled. "It's big enough for at least six."

The bard ran her fingertips down her lover's muscular arms. "That sounds sufficient for us." She grinned at the ruler's low laughter at her joke. She trailed her right hand over to Xena's chest then her fingertips traced the ruler's defined jawline. She truly admired Xena's stunning beauty, and she had yet to break the habit of holding her breath when she completely took in Xena's beauty. She would have thought the effects would have worn off by now, but they wouldn't.

"Come on," Xena murmured and took Gabrielle's hand from her face. She held onto the bard's hand and guided them back into the bedchambers. "Our things should be here by the time we're finished."

"Mmmm." The Amazon Queen was led into the large, well lit bathing chambers off to the left. She bit back a yawn but mentioned, "I could go for a nap before dinner."

The ruler shot a grin back at the bard. "The fun has only begun." She entered the steaming chambers where the handmaidens waited for them. She noted Gabrielle's hesitation, however she silently showed Gabrielle how to handle the unusual situation.

The bard took a seat with Xena on a long bench. Just when she sat, two maidens approached them and each of them helped with the undressing process. Gabrielle clearly broke out into a blush as she wasn't use to such royalty. The times she'd bathed in the fortress, she never went to the bathing room, but instead privately used Xena's tub in her bedchambers.

The Conqueror was quite use to this situation. She merely leaned casually back against the wall, her eyes closed, and she let the maiden untie her boots. When her feet were free, she straightened up and helped the maiden work the hooks of her armor.

Gabrielle also tried to help her maiden with the straps of her Amazon leathers. She was slightly shaky in doing so, which slowed the process considerably.

The Conqueror stood and slipped one strap off her shoulder while the maiden removed the other. She then let the brown leathers be pulled off her body, and she stepped out of them.

Gabrielle briefly froze in her help. She stared at her lover's sexy and completely nude form, which glided across the stone floor and slowly descended the steps into the large bathing pool. Gabrielle's maiden grabbed for her rear strap of her leather halter top. That broke Gabrielle's stare on her lover so she grew shy again at her predicament.

The Conqueror's eyebrow rose up when she saw how her lover was so bashful. She moved through the water and leaned against the side opposite of where Gabrielle sat on the bench. She openly observed the bard dealing with her pending nudity before the handmaidens.

The Amazon Queen sucked her breath when her breasts met the cool air. She then tried to ignore the fact there were four unknown women here. They were all women here became a mantra in the bard's head. She then had her leather skirt off.

Xena tilted her head and grinned at the quickly moving bard to the steps.

Gabrielle felt her lover's eyes on her the entire time, which didn't help rid her blush. She moved fast down the steps and felt slightly better when her body was submerged under the fragrant water. She neared her lover then muttered under her breath, "Some of us don't look as good as you in the nude."

The Conqueror smirked but whispered back, "Yes, some are more exquisite than me."

Gabrielle did a double take at the ruler's suggestive words.

The Conqueror though had turned her head away and signaled the handmaidens to proceed.

The bard tried to control her apprehension when the handmaidens came over to the ledge and began to wash her and Xena. She glanced at the ruler and observed how she was so calm. She wondered how Xena became so accustomed to the lifestyle despite the peasantry.

The Conqueror knew the bard was uneasy so she decided a conversation would help. "What do you think of Cleopatra?"

Gabrielle glimpsed at her partner to her left then turned her head straight again. "I'm not sure yet." She shrugged then honestly stated, "She looks completely different than I thought she would."

The ruler slowly grinned and closed her eyes. She rested her head back some when the warm water flowed over the back of her head. "How did you expect her to look?"

"Well... just... you know the stories about her being a seductress," the bard rambled. "I guess my imagination took her to the clouds when I heard that label. I thought she'd

be more Egyptian than Greek."

"Her heritage is Greek," the ruler reminded.

"Yes, but you would think the Greek lineage would have been... diluted after so many generations." Gabrielle glanced at her lover's sedate features. "She is darkly skinned though by comparison."

"Her mother and father are Macedon," the Conqueror explained.

Gabrielle considered this quietly. She then closed her eyes when warm water washed over her head then small hands lathered her hair. "The colors in her eyes were so unusual," she mentioned nonchalantly. "They were like a turquoise that matched her necklace but when I looked closer I saw..." Gabrielle bit her lower lip then finished her description. "There were chips of amber in them... kinda sprinkled."

The Conqueror's body shook with a silent laugh, yet she agreed with the description. "Cleopatra is attractive in her mysterious way," she casually commented, "A lot of her allure lies in her intelligence. She's a powerful leader for Egypt."

The bard knew her lover was being truly honest. She mulled it over then something perked her interest. She tilted her head and asked, "Do you think she's as powerful as you?" When intense blue eyes leveled on her, Gabrielle quickly added, "If you stripped away your warrior side, I mean."

The Conqueror surprisingly grinned then turned her head away. She tilted her head forward when the maiden started washing out the soap in her hair. "She would be close to it, yes."

Gabrielle grew even more curious. "What makes you a step ahead of her?"

"I have a bigger drive than she."

The bard chuckled and recalled an earlier joke that she quickly brought up. "I suppose size matters in this case."

The Conqueror smirked then her ice blue eyes met the bard's. "Yes, it does." She then leaned back against the wall of the pool when the maiden finished with her. She dropped her head back and closed her eyes. She simply enjoyed the warmth of the bath.

Gabrielle let the maiden finish her hair then she too tried to relax. She slightly jumped when she felt a hand on her left leg.

"Relax," the ruler murmured.

"Sorry." Gabrielle sighed in annoyance at her jumpiness because of the bath. Then Xena's soothing motions on her leg made her calm down. She rolled her shoulders then leaned back heavily on the wall. She closed her eyes then thought about the fact that she was here of all places, Egypt.

The Conqueror trailed her fingertips up and down the bard's leg. She was glad when the bard became calmer and enjoyed the warm bath finally. "What you thinking about?" she softly inquired.

"Mmmm." Gabrielle kept her eyes shut, but her head fell to the left some, closer to Xena. "That I can't believe I'm in Egypt... with you."

The Conqueror paused in her soothing motions but continued again. "Why?"

"Well... it's just that sometimes when I stop and think about all of this it just seems so strange." Gabrielle sighed at her thought pattern.

Xena tossed the bard's words around in her head for a few quiet moments. She then gently asked, "Are you happy?"

The bard's eyes sprung open, and she lifted her head again. "Xena, I'm really happy."

The Conqueror opened her eyes and met the bard's gaze. She carefully read the honesty there.

Gabrielle could tell that Xena was truly concerned about her wellbeing, and it touched Gabrielle deeply. As she sat there, she realized she was seated besides a completely different woman than she once thought she knew. When she was sure she had the Destroyer of Nations figure out, she unexpectedly met the hidden woman behind the ruler, Xena of Amphipolis.

The bard smile then murmured, "I really am. Thank you." She then leaned in closer and carefully questioned, "Are you?"

The Conqueror's instant reply was merely silence then her eyes softened into a rare shade of blue. Xena leaned in closer then simply but profoundly answered, "Yes." Then she abruptly stood up and moved away from her partner to the center of the bath. She stopped and glanced over her shoulder at the stunned bard. "Coming?"

Gabrielle faintly shook her head to rid of her shock. She hadn't expected her lover to withdraw so quickly, yet she understood it after she caught the curious handmaidens watching them. She assumed they couldn't understand what she and Xena were saying in Greek but still the body language was interpretation enough. She figured Xena didn't want them knowing they were together.

The bard stood up and quickly neared her waiting partner.

When Gabrielle was close enough, the Conqueror took the bard's hand into hers. She then faced the smaller woman and lowered her head closer.

Gabrielle curiously peered up but smiled at Xena's passionate features. "Tonight," she softly reminded.

The Conqueror smirked then she lowered her head for a long kiss.

Gabrielle's earlier assumption that the ruler didn't want the handmaidens knowing they were together was now completely shot dead. After the kiss, she then instantly realized Xena's earlier withdraw had been because it was an emotional conversation. She wondered how long it'd take for the Conqueror and Xena to meet halfway and find a balance.

Gabrielle softly groaned when her lover ended the kiss. She remained in Xena's arms, and her eyes darkened with passion.

The Conqueror's body pressed against the bard's. Her right hand rested on Gabrielle's hip while her left arm snaked around Gabrielle's back. She lifted her right hand and traced the bard's right cheek. She dipped her head for another long kiss.

Gabrielle's pleasure rumbled from her throat, and she slid her arms around Xena's waist. She no longer cared about the four handmaidens, who openly observed the two females passionately kissing in the middle of the steaming pool.

The Conqueror smirked at Gabrielle's bite on her lower lip at the end of the kiss. She then smugly repeated, "Tonight, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen released a deep growl that shocked the Conqueror. Gabrielle smirked at Xena's arched eyebrow so she took Xena's right hand and turned. "Come on, tiger." She waded through the water to the steps with the ruler in tow.

The Conqueror had never once been called tiger by anybody else. She still wondered where Gabrielle had picked up that nickname. Had Lao Ma told Gabrielle that Xena's zodiac was the tiger? She reminded herself to ask the bard later tonight.

The rulers though decided it was best to hurry, as Xena suggested. When they were dried, they wandered back into the main bedchambers and discovered their belongings had arrived. Gabrielle decided to put on her entire Amazon Queen outfit, which took her some time. She just put on her mask over her head and was left with her feather necklace. She picked it up, turned to the mirror in front of her and lifted the feather necklace to her chest. She then hesitated when her lover's reflection formed in the mirror.

The Conqueror had dressed in her more royal attire instead of her leathers. She wore a silky, red dress that had only one strap over her left shoulder. The dress was very form fitting as it hugged the ruler's curves and hips. Then on her right arm she wore a gold bracelet that matched her gold waist belt.

The Conqueror's gold sandals quietly sounded on the marble floor as she neared her lover's back. She reached around the bard's neck and took the necklace then brought it around Gabrielle's neck. She worked the leather band between Gabrielle's hair and mask's stray strands. She carefully tied the necklace so that the feathers rested perfectly on the Amazon Queen's chest.

Gabrielle tilted her head when she thought how odd that it was the Conqueror, the Amazon's former enemy, who tied her Amazon necklace.

"What's that look about?" the ruler inquired.

The bard shrugged then wondered how she could be so transparent to the Conqueror. "You're tying an Amazon necklace."

The Conqueror smirked then whispered, "Stranger things have yet to happen, bard." She lowered her hands when she finished with the necklace.

Gabrielle turned around and observed how Xena had her bangs pulled and pinned back. She smiled at how amazing and beautiful Xena was in the dress. "You make me look like chopped liver."

The Conqueror shook her head then leaned in for a soft kiss. She pulled back then

murmured, "Never."

The bard smiled at the indirect compliment as they seemed to be becoming plentiful more recently. She couldn't guess what prompted them from Xena. She often wanted to tell Xena how beautiful she was, yet her words always died behind her lips because she wasn't sure how Xena would take it.

"Are you ready?" the ruler questioned.

"I think so." Gabrielle's nose crinkled though. "You think they'll have those... scarab things tonight?"

The Conqueror ran her tongue along the back of her molars. She remained quite serious as she replied, "Most likely." Her jaw locked when Gabrielle's features paled. She walked off to her left when she felt her smirk wouldn't remain hidden any longer.

Gabrielle let out a throaty whine. "Do I have to eat a fried scarab?"

The Conqueror stopped a few paces away then she wiped her smirk away. She turned to her right some then stretched out her right arm. "When in Egypt, do as the Egyptians do."

The Amazon Queen groaned but took her lover's hand. She joined the ruler's side then walked to the door. "I really don't think I can handle eating one of those."

"I promise," the ruler offered, "it'll taste just like chicken."

Gabrielle stepped through the door first then waited for Xena to join her again. "Why don't I believe they taste like chicken?" She shook her head but followed her partner down the long hallway. "How does a bug taste like a bird?"

The Conqueror shrugged casually. "They both fly."

The Amazon Queen frowned. "A scarab flies?"

"Mmmm." The Conqueror's lips thinned as she considered another aspect about the scarabs here in Egypt. "Do you know what the scarab eats?"

Gabrielle adjusted her Amazon mask with her free hand as she considered the question. "No, what they eat?" She then saw her lover's smirk. "I really don't want to know now."

"Oooh no," Xena argued, "It's important that you know." She leaned closer then she proceeded to explain the beetles in Egypt. "The scarab is also called the dung beetle. They eat-"

"Wait, no." Gabrielle abruptly stopped and held up both her hands. "I am done now." She turned then quickly proceeded back towards their room. "I rather be sea sick than eat a dung beetle right now."

The Conqueror quickly hurried down the hallway and caught her lover's hand. When Gabrielle stopped and turned back to her, she raised an eyebrow. "You wouldn't want to insult the queen... or dishonor me, do you?"

The bard narrowed her eyes at the Conqueror. "You're really something, Xena."

The Conqueror's lips curled into a grin.

"I swear to every Greek and Egyptian god and goddess, you better hope there are no fried dung beetles at this dinner." Gabrielle pointed her finger at the ruler. "Or I am going straight back to Greece... without you."

The Conqueror chuckled then teased, "Then shall I have your bags packed for after dinner?"

The bard glared at her partner, and she really debated whether to skip dinner or not.

"Conqueror, Queen Gabrielle," a man greeted from the end of the hall that went into the main part of the palace.

The Conqueror squeezed Gabrielle's hand then released. She smiled when she recognized the darkly tanned man that was traditionally dressed to Egypt. "Cheops, it's great to see you again."

Cheops smiled at the Conqueror as he bowed to the rulers from Greece. He straightened up then turned his smile to the Amazon Queen. "Welcome to Egypt, Queen Gabrielle." He then focused on the Conqueror again. "It is wonderful to see you here again, my liege." Again, he bowed to the Grecian ruler.

The Conqueror held out her right hand.

Cheops understood the ruler, who was a warrior at heart like him. He collapsed the woman's forearm and briskly held. "Queen Cleopatra has been anxiously awaiting your return. Tonight's dinner promises to be large."

The Conqueror release the Egyptian's muscular arm. "I pray she only invited half the royals of Alexandria."

Cheops laughed and stepped closer. "The queen recalls your distain in overpopulated dinners."

The Conqueror softly laughed then she smiled at the quiet bard. "Queen Gabrielle and I were just discussing dinner." She grinned at Cheops. "She's looking forward to it as she's complained earlier to me about eating too much fish."

The Egyptian chuckled and smiled at the Amazon Queen. "I promise, Queen Gabrielle tonight's dinner is planned to be less than... fishy."

Gabrielle's attention flickered to the Conqueror then back to Cheops. "The Conqueror and I were conversing about that."

"Well," the Greek ruler piped in, "shall we go?"

Cheops nodded and turned so he could guide the rulers to the dinner. "I believe your..." He stopped and tried to think of the Greek word.

"Tetrarchès," Gabrielle supplied.

Cheops smiled at the bard then nodded as he focused back on the Conqueror. "Yes, your tetrarchès is already there and so are the Amazons."

"What of Najara?" Gabrielle questioned the Egyptian, but she glanced at the Conqueror.

"Oh yes." Cheops nodded once. "She is there as well." He then softly laughed and mentioned, "I thought you were the only female warrior in Greece, Conqueror besides the Amazons."

The Conqueror smirked then replied, "I am... for now."

"Najara is Phoenician," Gabrielle explained, "She's originally from Phoenicia."

The Egyptian warrior considered his mental map then questioned, "Just near Canaan, is it not?"

Gabrielle smiled at Cheops correct assessment. "It is near Canaan."

The Conqueror carefully listened despite she knew Najara's public history. She more or less was reading her lover's obvious interests in the Phoenician warrior. She then was lost to the noise ahead of them to the entrance of a large room. She knew it was the dining room.

Queen Gabrielle's eyes grew wider and wider still when she entered the busy and active dining room. She stepped closer to her partner and muttered, "This isn't overpopulated?"

The Conqueror sighed and leaned closer to her lover. "Yes, I'm afraid many in the upper class in Alexandria favor me greatly."

The bard peered up curiously at this news.

Xena shrugged then simply clarified it by saying, "Many of them are Greek."

"Oh gods," the bard moaned then she was quickly absorbed into the crowd when people spotted her lover. "Here it goes."

The Greek ruler and the Amazon Queen were soaked into the middle of the crowd. The Conqueror introduced her lover to many of the guests, and she tried to hold up conversations. Occasionally Gabrielle's bard side saved the moment. Gabrielle was dazzled by Xena's incredible memory because somehow Xena knew everybody's name and general life. If Gabrielle had to guess, she'd say it'd been about two Helical Risings since Xena had seen these people. How in the known-world Xena ever did it, she would never understand.

Then Gabrielle's good nature was dampened when Queen Cleopatra appeared and seemed to adhere to the Conqueror. She tried to keep up in the conversation between Queen Cleopatra and the Conqueror, but it became somewhat overly political for her taste. She surprisingly excused herself then wiggled through the people to find a certain somebody.

The Conqueror's skin prickled when her partner left her side. She didn't like it. She broke from her conversation with Queen Cleopatra for a heartbeat and spotted her lover beside Najara. She sighed in annoyance then focused back on her conversation with the Egyptian Queen.

"So how do you enjoy Egypt so far, Queen Gabrielle?"

The bard smiled up at Najara and discreetly touched the dekarchos's nearby arm, which was bare. "Come on, Najara you know I hate that title crap."

The dekarchos softly laughed and bowed her head closer to Gabrielle's. "I do know, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle smiled appreciatively when she heard her name finally. "And I can't wait to explore more of Egypt tomorrow."

"I hear they have a theatre here," Najara prompted.

The bard chuckled and broadly smiled at the dekarchos. "I know. I saw it when we came into port. The Conqueror and the queen promised I would go."

Najara smiled at the news because she knew how much Gabrielle loved the theatre. "It would seem Alexandria has many things you like."

The bard's nose crinkled up, and she grinned at the dekarchos. "I guess it does." She then thought about the somebody that she liked so her gaze wandered in that direction.

The Conqueror tilted her head to the left, which meant she was getting weary of the present conversation. Her eyes briefly flickered off to her left and captured Iolaus's attention.

Iolaus stopped his conversation with Cheops. He watched in curiosity when the Conqueror's head dropped to the right side, and her eyebrow arched up high in hidden signal.

The tetrarchès followed the signal then he spotted what was on the Conqueror's mind. He peered up at Cheops and stated, "I've got to check on something."

Cheops held out his arm for a brisk shake. "I'll see you at the meal."

"Yes," Iolaus agreed. He then broke away from the Egyptian, who he found out was the head guard for Queen Cleopatra. He weaved through the mass of people, passed the Conqueror, and finally surfaced before the Amazon Queen and Najara.

Najara became more formal when her superior was upon her. She dipped her head respectfully to him.

"Najara," he greeted then smiled at the Amazon Queen. "How are you, Queen Gabrielle?"

The bard groaned at hearing her title. "I'm fine, tetrarchès."

Iolaus took the hint, and he grinned. "The Conqueror has requested your help, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle's eyebrows drew together then she glanced at the ruler, who was in a deep conversation with her Egyptian counterpart. She focused back on Iolaus. "Iolaus, she didn't even talk to you."

The tetrarchès felt slightly caught, yet he easily recovered. "The Conqueror and I have

known each other for many seasons so I understand her unspoken... wishes." He rocked on his feet then glanced at Najara.

The dekarchos understood his unspoken orders. She turned to the Amazon Queen and smiled. "I'll see you at the dinner."

Gabrielle touched the other woman's elbow and mirrored the smile. "Thanks for the company, Najara."

"Anytime, Queen Gabrielle." Najara then disappeared into the crowd of people.

"So, what's this request?" the bard challenged.

Iolaus shifted until he stood beside the Amazon Queen. "The Conqueror is very bored right now." He licked his lips then his voice quieted low enough for only Gabrielle to hear. "You see how she has her head tilted?" At Gabrielle's nod, he continued speaking while he observed his leader. "Then her jaw is set and her eyes slightly narrowed. Even her shoulders are faintly lifted and tense." He nodded and turned his head to the bard. "She is bored."

Gabrielle laughed and shook her head at Iolaus honest assessment of the Conqueror. "And your point is?"

"You must rescue her from Queen Cleopatra. The Conqueror cannot out talk her, but you can." Iolaus touched the Amazon's forearm and leaned closer to her. "Please, Gabrielle because if you do not then she may prove to be grumpy tonight."

The bard couldn't ignore the tetrarchès's plea. She patted his back then whispered, "Just for you."

"You make my job as the tetrarchès so much more pleasant," Iolaus joked and winked.

Gabrielle smirked then said goodbye to him. She shifted through the people and made her way to Xena's side. "Hey," she softly greeted to her lover, who warmly acknowledged her.

"Hey yourself," Xena murmured back then touched Gabrielle's mid back in reception of her returned presence.

Queen Cleopatra smiled at the Amazon Queen. "Queen Gabrielle, perhaps you could offer your perspective on our debate since you're a new ruler."

The bard shifted closer to her partner but she was centered on the Egyptian Queen. "What is it about?"

"The Conqueror has been pushing for Egypt to take on a currency ever since I took the throne." Queen Cleopatra saw the Amazon Queen's clear interest in the debate so she continued. "It has been Egyptian tradition for many dynasties back that there is no currency. Now the Conqueror wishes for me to take on the drachma as our currency."

Gabrielle tilted her head to the right and considered her lover's profile then she focused back on Queen Cleopatra. "The Conqueror gave the Amazon Nation the option to produce our own currency, adopt the drachma, or continue without one."

Queen Cleopatra stepped closer as she was quite curious to hear the results. "Have

you decided?"

"Queen Terreis and I have taken it to our council and decided that what was best for the nation was to adopt the drachma." Gabrielle quickly formulated her reasons that she knew Xena would appreciate later. "I understand the appeal of not having a currency but it can truly be a hindrance to a growing nation. If your currency comes in the forms of grain, merchandise, and labor then those are things that may be easily lost." Gabrielle paused then questioned, "How do you measure the value of one man's labor to another? Or is one farmer's grain better than another but the lesser farmer worked two times as hard?" She then shrugged and finally added, "The drachma holds a true value and it cannot be questioned. Plus it is highly transportable unlike grain or merchandise."

Queen Cleopatra's head bobbed a few times as she appreciated the bard's line of thinking. "Many Egyptian will refuse the use of the drachma... any currency as it's not traditional."

The bard mulled it over and was reminded of her partner's past conversation so many moons back about change. "Tradition is important," she softly agreed. "Maybe you can slowly phase out the old tradition and slowly introduce the drachma." Gabrielle tilted her head then suggested, "Perhaps offer to the people a way to use both the drachma and grain as currency but promote the drachma more so. When taxes are due, proclaim that people who pay in drachmas may take a small tax reduction compared to anything else."

Queen Cleopatra slowly smiled at the bard's ideas. She then grinned up at the pleased Conqueror. "I see why Queen Gabrielle is your advisor of state." She lowered her grin to the bard and teased, "Perhaps I'll have to hire you away from the Conqueror."

Queen Gabrielle played right along with the other queen. "I only accept drachmas for payment."

Queen Cleopatra laughed at the quick wit of the Amazon Queen. Then in her deep voice, she warmly instructed, "Perhaps we should begin dinner."

Gabrielle didn't know whether to be happy or worried at that announcement. She was starving but not for fried dung beetles.

The mass of people began to converge on the two large and long tables that were properly setup for the large feast. Queen Cleopatra required the Conqueror to sit at the head of one table while Queen Cleopatra took the opposite end. Gabrielle almost made it to the right chair beside her partner but Queen Cleopatra called the bard down to her end. Gabrielle almost refused but recalled her position not only to her rulership but also Xena's. So she obliged the Egyptian Queen.

The Egyptian slaves suddenly swarmed the room when everybody was seated. The food came out in rapid succession and the guests passed the food about while they spoke. Each time Gabrielle received a plate, she carefully inspected for any black bugs that may be hiding. She'd gone through five dishes and had yet to find anything.

Queen Cleopatra idly chitchatted with the Amazon Queen. She said something of humor, which made Queen Gabrielle laughed well naturedly.

The Conqueror listened to the table conversation as she filled her plate. She occasionally glanced down at the two queens and especially watched Queen Cleopatra.

Gabrielle waved her hands about in the air for a second. She was obviously telling a story to the Egyptian Queen. "I slid completely across the deck." She then reached for the platter that Queen Cleopatra handed to her.

"By the gods," Queen Cleopatra murmured. "Did you go overboard?"

The bard briefly studied the plate of food, which was a Greek dish. She decided to take some despite she'd been mostly taking Egyptian food. "I actually did. The last thing I saw before I went over was the Conqueror's face."

Queen Cleopatra was shocked, and she leaned closer to the bard. "You're obviously survived. How?"

"Well just as I went overboard, something grabbed my wrist, and I was dangling about fifty pouses above the dark water." Gabrielle accepted the next dish from the queen. "The Conqueror had somehow made it across the deck and grabbed me."

Queen Cleopatra shook her head then grinned at the Amazon Queen. "The Conqueror has many skills."

Gabrielle softly laughed and nodded her head. "I was grateful for that skill at that particular moment."

Queen Cleopatra chuckled, and she picked up her Roman fork but didn't touch her meal yet. "I assume she pulled you back onboard?"

"Actually no," the bard answered, "the ship dived into a large wave and sent the Conqueror overboard with me. Somehow she managed to grab one of the railing legs and held on tight." Gabrielle picked up her Roman fork too but hesitated from eating. "She then lifted us both from the side and back onto the ship."

Queen Cleopatra shook her head again, yet she smiled and briefly glanced down at the subject of their conversation. "The Conqueror has many, many skills." She grinned at the Amazon Queen. "I presume you've discovered her more... intimate skills, Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle almost choked on her meat, but she managed to eat it. She wasn't sure how to respond the queen's bold statement so she kept her silence. She was saved too as a slave servant came to her side. She twisted her head up and saw the long, cylindrical jar that the slave held in her hands.

Queen Cleopatra saw the Amazon Queen's confused features. "Would you like some beer, Queen Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle blinked and turned her head to the Egyptian Queen. "Beer?"

Queen Cleopatra softly smiled at the bard's ignorance about beer. "It is a fermented drink, which is native to Egypt. It's made from barley, hops, yeast, and water."

It dawned on the bard what the beverage was so she mentioned, "I usually don't drink

but..."

Queen Cleopatra spoke to the slave in the Egyptian tongue and ordered the slave to fill the guest's cup.

The slave bent over the guest, picked up the glass cup, which had a straw, and she filled it with the very dark brew. She then placed it back down in front of the guest and quietly left.

Gabrielle slotted her eyes at the drink in her cup. She then turned her head to Queen Cleopatra. "Is it as thick as soup?"

"Yes, actually," the queen replied. "You must drink it with the straw." She then held out her hand to the cup of beer. "Please try it."

The bard set her fork down then picked up the cup. She was struck odd again by the feel of the clear mug. She'd never seen a mug that was clear like this, and she hadn't expected it to be so hard. She lifted her left hand and tilted the straw to her lips then her lips met the straw. She sucked in the small amount of air then her mouth suddenly exploded with the sharp, rich taste of the beer.

Queen Cleopatra chuckled at the bard's disgusted features so she mentioned, "At first taste, it is quite unpleasant and it's an acquired taste after a few sips."

Gabrielle chuckled and set the mug back down. She swallowed the last of the bitter taste down her throat. "It's pretty strong."

"It is but you grow accustomed to it." Queen Cleopatra then pointed her fork at the bard's filled plate. "How is the goose and duck?"

"Wonderful," the bard replied, "I've never had either before." Gabrielle ate more of the meat and enjoyed the flavor of the fowls. "I'm curious, what is this mug made from?"

Queen Cleopatra gazed down at the signaled mug that held the beer. She chuckled and asked, "You have not seen glass?"

Queen Gabrielle brightened at the mention of glass. "I've heard of it." Her eyes lowered to the clear mug. "I've just never seen it before now."

The Egyptian Queen pierced a piece of her duck but she paused. "Then you will require a tour of our glass factory before leaving Alexandria."

The bard's smile grew larger to the point that it almost hurt. "I would love that, Queen Cleopatra."

Queen Cleopatra freed her right hand, reached across, and collapsed her hand over Gabrielle's. "Please call me Cleopatra."

"Only if you'll call me Gabrielle," the bard challenged.

"Of course." Queen Cleopatra squeezed the bard's hand then released.

The Conqueror, from the corner of her eye, caught Queen Cleopatra's intimate touch with her partner. She tried to ignore it while she went back to her conversation between the two Greek aristocrats on her left side. She listened to them more than

anything else. They were hotly debating the region of land known as Libya, which was west of Egypt. There were rumors in circulation that Queen Cleopatra was looking west at Libya but had made no moves because the Egyptian army fell shy of being conquest material.

The Conqueror's interest were perked at this news since Queen Cleopatra hadn't mentioned this to her. She began to wonder if the queen had ulterior motives to inviting her here to Egypt. She knew it would come to light soon if it were the case.

The servants started to collect the empty dishes from the full guests. They then started to set down large plates of dessert, which was passed around the tables like the dinner.

Gabrielle received the plate, and she inspected the foreign food on the plate. It was red, seemed juicy, and had a green bottom.

Queen Cleopatra observed the bard's inspection so she simply stated, "Watermelon."

"A fruit?" the bard questioned. At the queen's nod, Gabrielle smiled and took a triangular slice of the juicy fruit then passed the tray. She bit off the fleshy tip and was surprised by the wonderful taste. "This is amazing."

"It is one of my favorite fruits," the queen agreed.

Gabrielle finished a second bite but she excitedly asked, "Have you ever tried bananas?"

Queen Cleopatra's features twisted tightly. "No, I don't believe so."

The Amazon Queen chuckled at the thought of that yellow fruit. "Its not exactly one of my favorites but the Conqueror loves them. They're from Chin."

"The land to the rising sun," Cleopatra murmured. "I have yet to see Chin. Have you been there, Gabrielle?"

The bard sadly shook her head but she slightly brightened again. "I have met the ruler of Chin, Lady Lao Ma."

Queen Cleopatra was surprised by this news that the Amazon Queen personally knew the Chin ruler. "I believe she and the Conqueror are close...?"

"They have a history," Gabrielle simply offered because she wasn't sure how much she could tell the Egyptian Queen. She then hastily switched topics. "I was curious about something."

Queen Cleopatra grinned as she leaned towards the bard.

The bard leaned closer to the queen too as she didn't want any of the other guests to hear her. "I thought there would be... uh fried scarabs for dinner?"

Queen Cleopatra shot up straight when she heard the question. She stared horrified at the Amazon Queen. "That goes against our faith. It is a sin to harm scarabs because they are so sacred." She then took a deep breath to calm down because she knew Gabrielle may not understand the culture. "Where did you hear such a thing?"

Gabrielle had been surprised by the queen's instant reaction. She inhaled sharply then

when the queen's words soaked in deeper, her face darkened. "A certain somebody has been... goading me the entire trip across the Mediterranean."

Queen Cleopatra's eyes flickered to that particular somebody, who was poised at the other end of the table. She bit back her laughter so it wouldn't bother the Amazon Queen. Her tone was laced with amusement however. "Unfortunately, Gabrielle the Conqueror has a strange sense of humor at times." She gave the bard a sympathetic look.

Gabrielle drummed her fingers on the table and glared down in the Conqueror's general direction. "She has a strange sense of humor alright."

The Conqueror felt a cold stare on her so she glanced down at the queens. She raised an eyebrow at Queen Gabrielle's threatening features then she saw Queen Cleopatra's face full of mirth. She cringed when she realized her practical joke had come to a sharp end tonight. She grabbed her mug of beer and sipped on it while she returned her focus to the conversation at hand.

Queen Cleopatra leaned over the table towards Gabrielle again. Her hand moved under the table and met the bard's exposed knee. "Don't worry, Gabrielle I'm sure if the Conqueror can dish it out then she can take it."

Gabrielle laughed and took a long drink of her beer. Her imagination was instantly charged with the idea of getting even with the Conqueror. She then pushed her empty mug aside then focused on the queen. She reeled into a long conversation with the Egyptian Queen. Gabrielle thoroughly enjoyed the conversation with the queen. And while they talked, Gabrielle drank another mug of beer plus ate a couple of pieces of watermelon.

What Gabrielle didn't realize what was going on was that Queen Cleopatra was focusing her charms on her. The earlier touches became more constant and almost intimate between the pair. Gabrielle leaned against the table so that she could hear the queen, who was purposely talking in hushed tones. As the night wore on, the bard realized just how alluring Queen Cleopatra truly was, and she was positive that Queen Cleopatra kept the nearby beer servant on call for her mug.

Near the end, the bard was so pulled into the deep voice of the queen. Then what blindly struck Gabrielle was the fact that Queen Cleopatra reminded Gabrielle very much of the Conqueror. Queen Cleopatra had similar facial features to the Conqueror, but only a more masculine take. Through Gabrielle's fuzzy state, she realized her draw to the Egyptian Queen was based on what she saw of the Conqueror in the Egyptian Queen.

The Conqueror excused herself from the conversation with the guests. She'd counted too many passed touches between the Amazon Queen and the Egyptian Queen. She rose up until her dress fell to her ankles then she glided through the thin crowd that'd decided to stand after dinner.

Gabrielle laughed then grabbed Queen Cleopatra's wrist and replied, "Xena has never done that since..." She fell short on her words when Queen Cleopatra's attention was drawn above her head.

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow when she realized her first name was being traded

between the queens. She glanced at the half empty mug of beer and wondered how many Gabrielle had sucked down. She sighed then grabbed the Amazon Queen's shoulders and lowered her head down.

Queen Cleopatra leaned back in her chair and removed herself from the bard's space. She openly observed the foreign rulers' interactions.

Gabrielle had her head back some and her glossy eyes met the Conqueror's. "Hey," she warmly greeted.

The Conqueror's lips thinned when she thought she could count the consumed beers in the bard's eyes. She lowered more and whispered, "Are you ready to go back to our quarters?"

The bard grinned then lifted her right hand. She lightly caressed the Greek ruler's defined cheek. "Yeah, I think so."

The Conqueror hadn't expected Gabrielle's open display of affection, and she wasn't completely comfortable with it. She squeezed the small shoulders then straightened up so that Gabrielle's touch left her. She turned to Queen Cleopatra and politely stated, "Thank you for dinner."

Queen Cleopatra bowed her head briefly then smiled at the Conqueror. "I hope you enjoyed it, Conqueror."

"It was wonderful," the Grecian ruler agreed.

Queen Gabrielle chimed in next. "It really was. Thank you, Cleopatra."

Queen Cleopatra chuckled and nodded once. "I will see you tomorrow, Gabrielle."

The bard stood up and luckily the Conqueror's remaining hand on her shoulder balanced her until she felt stable. "Goodnight, Cleopatra."

The Conqueror bowed her head at the Egyptian Queen. "Goodnight." She then directed her partner away from the table and towards the exit. She kept her left hand on the small of Gabrielle's back. When they were in the hall, she quietly asked, "You enjoyed the dinner?"

Gabrielle walked closely to her lover. "Yes, I had a nice conversation with Cleopatra."

The Conqueror noted how the bard referred the queen without her title. She knew Gabrielle and the Egyptian Queen were becoming quite comfortable with each other, which gave her mixed emotions.

"She's very intelligent like you said," Gabrielle mentioned, "I really like her." She then peered up at her lover. "I also see that allure you're talking about, but I think mine's a little different than yours."

"Oh?" the Conqueror prompted. She couldn't guess where this conversation would go with the tipsy bard.

"Mmmm." Gabrielle took her partner's left hand into hers. "Her facial features remind me of you."

The Conqueror displayed an arched eyebrow at her partner's words.

Gabrielle giggled at the look but quickly explained, "She has those high cheek bones like you. Her lips are even like yours."

"Her lips?" The Conqueror's eyes narrowed. "You must have had a good look, Gabrielle."

The bard snorted then shot back, "How couldn't I? She should have just sat in my lap." She waved her free left hand in the available space around her. "Cleopatra is like a halfway version of you becoming a male."

The Conqueror shook her head then her eyebrows almost touched. "I do not know whether to be insulted for Queen Cleopatra's sake."

Gabrielle abruptly stopped and faced her lover. "I didn't mean it like that. Cleopatra has her own attractive appeal and besides that, you'd probably make a handsome man." She shrugged then mentioned, "Your brother, Toris, is pretty handsome."

"Gabrielle, this conversation is going downhill and quickly," the Conqueror warned.

The bard's tipsy state made her laugh instead of being worried. "I know and I can't explain what I mean." She took Xena's hand back into hers and continued the walk through the torch lit palace. "Xena, what did Lyceus look like?"

"Gabrielle," the Conqueror hotly warned.

The bard sighed then peered up at her lover. "Come on, Xena. I'm not asking like that. I just notice the fact that everybody in your family is beautiful. Cyrene is absolutely gorgeous."

"Mmmm." The Conqueror considered her mother and murmured, "Mother does age quite well."

"See? I'm right," the bard teased, and she bumped her shoulder against her lover's arm.

The Conqueror slightly grinned then she went somber. "Lyceus had dirty blond hair, and it was curly. He and I were about the same height as kids."

The bard glanced up in surprise. "And he was younger? I'd probably been taller than you."

"Maybe," the ruler granted. She then peered down at her lover. "He had green eyes, much like yours."

Gabrielle softly smiled when her imagination developed the young man in her mind. She then asked, "What did his face look like?"

The Conqueror chuckled and quipped, "He always had a baby face, which made him look younger. It took him awhile to grow out of the baby fat but when he did, he started to grow into a handsome young man."

The bard's grin appeared. "Were the girls in Amphipolis chasing after him?"

"Oh yeah." Xena considered those few and fond memories before Cortese struck their

town.

Gabrielle reached over and rubbed the ruler's bare arm. She smiled when the ruler sadly smiled down at her. She then noticed they entered the south wing, which meant their room was just ahead of them. "By the way, I found out something quite interesting about scarabs."

The Conqueror sobered when she heard the pending topic. She knew where this conversation would go, and quickly. "Oh?"

"Uh huh." Gabrielle stopped in front of their door and turned to her lover. "The scarab is sacred to the Egyptians." She stepped closer and her dark eyes held the ruler in place. "They don't eat them." She then lifted up onto her tiptoes so that her face was closer to Xena's. "Next you'll tell me they eat alligators, which by the way is sacred too." She then pointed at the ruler and poked the ruler's chest for each of her next words. "Don't even try that again." She spun her heels then marched into the room, but she left the doors wide open.

The Conqueror held back her grin as she entered the bedchambers. She closed the doors behind her but stiffened when the angry bard turned to her.

"I can't believe you did that to me," the bard hotly snapped. She gritted her teeth and pointed her finger again at the Greek ruler.

"It was all in good fun, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen's earlier tipsy mood was washed away by her temper. "Do you realize the entire time we were journeying across the Mediterranean..." She pointed at the sea in the northern direction. "I was getting more paranoid about eating a fried scarab! I don't know whether that made me sick or the ship's rocking."

The Conqueror swallowed down her amusement and went very serious. "You didn't know gullible wasn't a word?"

Gabrielle, the bard extraordinaire, hotly growled then marched up to her lover. "You're really pushing it, Xena." Then Xena's revealed smug features sent her into a ranting fit. "Not only was I half out of my mind about eating one of those shit rolling, crunchy bugs but I was embarrassed in front of Queen Cleopatra." She tossed her hands in the air. "She probably thinks I'm a complete idiot."

"I wouldn't say that," the ruler argued.

The Amazon Queen snarled when a key fact came to light about the Conqueror. She suddenly brushed past the ruler and went to the doors.

The Conqueror grew surprised so she turned and hastily asked, "Where are you going?"

The bard stopped by a door and glanced back at her lover. "I'll be in the bedchambers across the hall... if you need me for another damn joke of yours." She shoved the door open, walked out, and slammed the door behind her. Gabrielle kept her head high as she silently slipped into the empty, quiet bedchambers that'd originally been saved for her.

Gabrielle didn't care about her current stage of dress. She just went to the made bed that was washed white by the moonlight from the balcony. She dragged her body into the bed and rested on top of the covers in the lonely middle.

Gabrielle's earlier fire was completely dead, and her upset emotions surfaced instead. She brushed back her bangs and considered how that fight had happened. She knew it was her fault that it'd started, but she needed to voice her opinion.

It wasn't so much the Conqueror's practical joke that bothered her as she could take it and give it. What'd bothered her was more so the humiliation in front of Queen Cleopatra, despite the queen had promise it didn't bother her. When Gabrielle realized that the Conqueror wouldn't apologize for that part, she became instantly hurt and angry. She just didn't understand why it was so hard for the Conqueror to utter those two simple yet meaningful words.

Gabrielle adjusted her head on the pillow and just watched the sheer curtain in front of the balcony ruffle in the breeze. She closed her eyes and tried to relax even though she knew it'd be hard to get to sleep. Then her body felt as though she was still on the ship, and she was rocking. She'd noticed the sensation earlier at dinner but thought maybe it was just the beer, but now she knew it was otherwise.

Gabrielle grumbled but tried to ignore the feeling. She didn't feel like bringing up her dinner. She balled up tighter when the chill from the evening caught up to her. She closed her eyes again then pushed away her emotions for the night.

The bard tightened into a neater ball so that the chill wouldn't bother her. Then Gabrielle's body loosened when warmth surrounded her back and a strong arm came over her goose bumped stomach. Gabrielle released a soft moan of pleasure for the needed warmth.

The Conqueror drew the bard closer to her body and rested her head down on the pillow beside the bard's. She then whispered, "Come back to our room."

Gabrielle kept her eyes closed as she tucked her hands under the pillow and her head. "I'm fine."

The Conqueror's jaw flexed a few times then in her husky, deep voice she urged, "Please."

Gabrielle rarely heard the ruler's plea on her lips. She typically gave in right away too but this time she wouldn't do it. She just stayed still and silent for her response.

The ruler knew this was quite serious so she closed her eyes and steeled herself. "Tell me why you're so upset?"

The bard removed her right hand from under the pillow and collapsed the ruler's over her stomach. She was pleased at how the ruler was trying to work this out. "It wasn't so much your joke," she softly revealed, "because we do that to each other all the time." She ran her thumb overtop of Xena's hand. "I just felt really stupid in front of Queen Cleopatra when I asked her about the fried scarabs."

The Conqueror understood what the bard felt at that instant. She frowned then murmured, "I know."

Gabrielle sighed because she didn't hear the words she needed to hear. She chewed on her lower lip then carefully asked, "Why won't you say it?"

"You know that I rather show it than say it."

Gabrielle recalled the Conqueror's belief that actions spoke louder than words. She couldn't argue that theory, but she also believed that words were very meaningful. "Sometimes you don't need to show it, Xena and all that's required are the words." She finally turned around so that she faced the ruler. "In my case, the words happen to mean a lot to me... and that does show a lot when somebody can say them."

The Conqueror continued to silently stare into the bard's eyes that were dark. Her tongue would not move for her though.

Gabrielle sadly sighed then moved her head so that her face was buried in the Conqueror's neck. Gabrielle's frustration surged to the top then her tears damped the ruler's neck.

The Conqueror felt it so she ran her fingertips up and down the bard's back. She wouldn't move away as she wouldn't destroy her conveyed message that she was here for the bard. Then when Gabrielle's grip tightened on her body, she closed her eyes. She considered why it was so hard for her.

The bard's old memories from a few moons ago when she first and last heard the ruler apologize for something floated back to her. The Conqueror had apologized for their awful argument about Gabrielle accepting the rulership of the Amazons. She wondered why the Conqueror apologized then but had since refused to do such a thing again.

The Conqueror reached up with her right hand and touched the bard's chin. She drew the bard's head out then up to hers. She guided the bard's lips to hers, and she tasted the salty tears in the kiss. She expressed her apology in the kiss.

Gabrielle withdrew from the kiss and breathed deeply but more from her crying than the kiss. She stared at the turmoil in the Conqueror. She never felt such a mix of emotions against and for the Conqueror persona that her lover wore.

The Conqueror sadly observed the bard's distraught features. She hated the tears, and she hated that she tasted their sharp, stinging taste. Yet she leaned forward, and kissed them so that they would be driven away from the bard. She pulled back and found the bard's eyes closed tightly in hopes to stop the tears. Then something in the Conqueror made her feel the dark emotions that attacked the bard, and it broke the Conqueror.

"Gabrielle," the ruler softly called.

The opened her eyes, which were a bright turquoise due to her crying. She was met by silver blue eyes that held her next heartbeat.

Xena caressed the bard's cheek then she sincerely and emotionally whispered, "I'm sorry that you felt embarrassed in front of Cleopatra... that wasn't my intention."

Gabrielle closed her eyes again, and the words filled her completely. She took Xena's hand from her cheek and tightly held it. "I know it wasn't." She then kissed the ruler's

hand and choked out, "Thank you... thank you so much."

The Conqueror hadn't expected the words to be so impacting on the bard. Yet she knew, without any required facts, that it didn't just help the bard but also their relationship. She focused back on their current situation and asked, "Please come back to our bed."

Gabrielle sadly smiled then opened her eyes. "Yes." Then before she could move, the Conqueror was faster and moved about.

The Conqueror was sitting up and maneuvering the bard into her arms better. She stood up from the bed and secured the bard in her arms.

Gabrielle's astonishment clearly showed in the moonlight. She peered up at the faintly grinning ruler. She snaked her right arm around the back of Xena's neck. "I'll have to get upset more often."

"I don't prefer it," the ruler argued. She glided across the room and asked, "Get the door."

Gabrielle obliged and pulled on the gold ring. She then grabbed the ring on the other side and closed it for them. "Xena, I don't know if it's me or the beer I drank but I feel like I'm rocking still."

"It's not the beer," the ruler explained, "it's from the ship. It'll take a few days for it to pass."

"Oh great."

The Conqueror shoved the right door open to their quarters. She then kicked it shut then went directly to the large bed that was lined with more pillows than any human required. She neatly deposited the bard on the left side then crawled up. Her sandals resounded on the floor when she dropped them.

Gabrielle smiled at her lover that hovered over her. She then tilted her head back far when she felt like she wasn't on the bed quite right. She realized the pillows were truly taking up a lot of room. "Xena-

"I know," the ruler grumbled who stretched out a hand.

Gabrielle followed suit and stretched her arms up and grabbed the pillows. She and her partner efficiently knocked several of them off the bed onto the floor. "Who in the known-world sleeps with that many pillows? What a waste of good bed space." The bard heard her lover's chuckles, but she wiggled up the bed more when she had the room.

The Conqueror stayed put and decided to deal with the bard's boots. When she had them off and tossed to the floor, she ran her hands up the bard's smooth legs. She then crawled over her lover's body and met Gabrielle for a kiss.

Gabrielle smiled at the end of the kiss when Xena's face remained above hers. She thought about what the ruler wore tonight and how Xena so easily mingled with the people despite she disdained it.

"What is it, bard?" The ruler could tell it was the bard instilled in her lover at that moment.

The bard blushed as if completely caught with several loafs of nutbread. She cleared her throat then quietly whispered, "I was just thinking about..." She lost her words because she never said anything like this to her partner.

Xena arched an eyebrow to encourage the bard.

Gabrielle dropped her gaze for an instant then met Xena's again. She touched the ruler's soft cheek then she finally spoke her mind. "I was thinking about how beautiful you looked tonight."

The Conqueror's face was broken by a bright smile that was rare. She lowered her lips close to Gabrielle's right ear and sensually murmured, "Thank you." She now understood what Gabrielle meant earlier that words could mean a lot. Plenty of times she'd been given compliments about her body or dress but never had the bard given her one. The bard's words drove deeper than anybody else's.

Gabrielle smiled when she saw the ruler's happy features. She rarely witnessed such an open expression. She knew tonight that it would be Xena that slept with her. It was often Xena anymore and the Conqueror rarely showed in their bed unless it was prompted by such physical activities like sparring or Gabrielle coaxed it.

Just maybe Cyrene was right that her daughter, Xena, had to learn to be again. Gabrielle prayed she would be there every step of the way; through the dark and the light of it. And tonight, Gabrielle shared her pleasures with the beautiful woman hidden behind the Conqueror, Xena of Amphipolis.

### **Chapter 3 - The Conqueror, the Conquered**

"Alright, I'll meet her there," the Conqueror called to Cheops, who just stepped out of the bedchambers.

"Ow," Gabrielle complained from her slumped spot on the foot of the made bed. She lowered her hands from her ears. "Do you think you could talk any louder? I don't think they heard you back on Mount Olympus."

The Conqueror smirked at her partner's obviously hurting state. She came right to the bard then knocked on the bard's temple. "How's the head?"

"Hey!" Gabrielle swatted her lover's covered stomach.

Xena lifted her hands and teased, "Wooo."

"Look," Gabrielle ranted in an irritated voice, "do me a favor okay? If you ever see me drink another Egyptian beer again, just kill me."

"You got a deal." The Conqueror walked away with a highly amused face. She went over to their things and dug around in the bags. "Still, for someone hung over on beer, you do a pretty fair job of keeping your food in your stomach."

Gabrielle groaned and flopped back in the bed, her hands over her face. "You're enjoying this far too much." She then caught her lover's low, deep laugh. "You really are enjoying this."

The Conqueror had a small wood cup in her left hand, and she disappeared into the washroom.

The bard made herself get up and finish the process of getting ready for the day. She picked up her boots off the floor then she slid off the bed. She padded over to the table near the balcony entrance. She flopped into the chair and dragged out the process to get her boots on and tied.

The Conqueror strolled back out and went to her lover. She held out the cup to her partner. "Here, take this."

Gabrielle could already smell the contents and her stomach wasn't happy about it. She wearily peered up at her lover. "Are you trying to make me sick?"

The Conqueror sighed then ordered, "Go on."

The bard gave in and took the cup from her lover. She sniffed the contents again to double check that awful smell.

"Just hold your breath and drink it." The ruler chuckled at the bard's screwed up features. She grinned when the bard dropped her head back and took the thick liquid.

Gabrielle's face paled after the oozy liquid slipped down her throat. "I think I am going to be sick now." She touched her chest and glowered up at her partner.

The Conqueror took the cup back and went to the washroom again as she spoke. "You'll feel fine soon. The rest of your remedy waits in the market."

The Amazon Queen slightly brightened at the prospect of going shopping today. She leaned forward and distracted herself with her right boot. She opted to wear her Amazon leathers again even though she was tiring of them somewhat.

The Conqueror, who was coming out of the bathroom, wore attire that was more fitting to Egypt. Her dress was white and hugged her sleek, muscular form similar to the red dress last night. This dress wasn't silky though but smooth and had a gold swirl design that went diagonal down her chest. Then the only two pieces of jewelry she wore was a thick choker necklace made of gold and turquoise then the gold arm bracelet from last night.

Gabrielle sat up in the chair now that she finished her arduous task. She then reached for a small pouch on the table and placed it in her lap. She opened it up and pulled out a shining, silver coin. "You're sure you can't come?" She already knew the answer to her question.

The Conqueror was bent over her bag and finished tucking the clean cup away. "I need to meet with Cleopatra."

"I know." The bard sighed then turned the drachma over in her palm. She stared at the resembling profile of her lover on it. She grinned. She held up the coin just to the right of Xena. She carefully tried to measure the coin's profile against her lover's real profile. "I think your nose is bigger on the drachma."

The Conqueror had been staring in the mirror but she stopped and turned her head to the right. Her eyes narrowed at seeing her lover comparing her profile to the drachma's profile. "Is that so?"

"Mmmm." Gabrielle tilted her head; her eyes flickered between the coin and her lover. "You definitely look better in real life." She dropped her drachma into her palm and tucked it back away in her coin pouch.

The Conqueror rolled her eyes then turned back to the mirror. "I almost killed the artist that did the rendering."

The Amazon Queen blinked when she realized her partner was serious. "Why?"

"Because he did make my nose too damn big." The Conqueror straightened out her dress then walked closer to the mirror to inspect her face better. "He told me it was traditional for any Greek whose profile is placed on a drachma."

The bard snickered and teased, "Maybe that's why I think you and Cleopatra seem alike."

The Conqueror shot a glare at her partner for the joke. "Be careful, Gabrielle or else I put your face on the new drachmas."

"Funny." Gabrielle tied the pouch to her belt side while she mentioned, "If you do, I would prefer my profile on the gold pieces." She lifted her head and smirked at her lover's annoyed look. "Just incase you do."

The ruler shook her head then moved away from the mirror. She came over to the bard, who was standing up. "I take it you're feeling better then?"

Gabrielle adjusted her leather gauntlets some then nodded. "I think that stuff is working."

The Conqueror remained serious as she stated, "Glad to hear the scarab juice helped." She then smirked and walked away to her things again.

The bard slightly blanched at the concept of dung beetle juice. "Maybe it's a good thing you're spending the day with Cleopatra."

The Conqueror chuckled and went to the mirror with a small jar of thick red paste. She carefully applied it to her lips then closed up the jar and tossed it back in her bag. "Are you ready?"

Gabrielle came over and rummaged in her bag until she had her empty satchel from home. "I can't go shopping without this."

The ruler sighed at the thought of her partner filling that satchel. "Don't forget your staff." She and Gabrielle walked to the doors together, and she paused by the closed doors.

Gabrielle adjusted the satchel's strap across her chest then she grabbed her staff. "Is there anything you want from the market?"

The Conqueror slightly smiled at the gesture but politely declined. She then led the way out of the room and went down the hallway with Gabrielle at her side. She then inquired, "Are you taking all the Amazons?"

"No, just three... I asked Najara to come too so I figured that's plenty."

"Cheops is joining you too," the ruler informed. She cut off the bard's protest ahead of time. "Can you speak Egyptian?"

Gabrielle sighed then grumbled, "If you came then I could."

The Conqueror softly laughed, and she took Gabrielle's hand into hers. "You'll enjoy yourself."

"I enjoy myself even more when I can drag you through the market," the bard complained. She knew how her lover hated to go shopping, which just thrilled Gabrielle more so. "Come on, you know you love to go through the Corinth market when Salmoneus is there." She chuckled when her lover evilly laughed. "There's bound to be at least one Salmoneus in the market."

"Well you find him for me, and I'll go back with you next time," the Conqueror promised.

"Deal." Gabrielle then considered something about Salmoneus and her decedent from another world. She quietly asked, "Why did Janice get annoyed with him? She didn't get a chance to tell me."

The ruler shot a grin at her partner before she explained the situation. "Salmoneus kept calling her little."

The bard cringed, and her head bobbed. "That would get to me too." She then noticed they entered the main atrium of the palace where her escort waited for her.

The Conqueror turned to her partner and softly smiled at her. "Don't spend too much."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes then reminded, "Not all merchants take drachmas, my liege."

"Not yet," Xena quietly whispered, "but they might. Thanks to you."

"Yeah, I know," the bard proudly stated.

Xena couldn't shake her smile at the bard's upbeat attitude. She was glad for it because she knew Gabrielle hadn't slept well last night or the past several nights. She knew

why, but she had yet to discuss it with the bard. She focused on the present and took a step closer to her partner. "Be careful." She then ignored the curious stares of the Amazons, Najara, and Cheops.

Gabrielle enjoyed the long kiss from her lover, and she tangled her freehand in midnight hair. She withdrew but moved her hand to the back of Xena's neck. "I'll see you at the lighthouse."

The Conqueror nodded then untangled from the bard. She flashed a last smile then disappeared into another hallway, and her sandals could be heard echoing.

Gabrielle joined her entourage and smiled. "So which way to the market, Cheops?"

The Egyptian warrior softly laughed then he held out his right arm. "This way, Queen Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen linked her arm through his and was escorted out of the palace. She and her company were taken through a few blocks until they entered the very busy emporium. Gabrielle was surrounded by her three Amazons and Najara. She was grateful for their steadfast protection and support. From the Amazon bunch, she'd selected Lacy, Amarice, and Vara to join her.

Amarice glanced off her right when another Egyptian gave her an odd look. She sighed then blurted out, "That's the seventh look I've gotten like that." She stopped and slowed down to Najara, who was next to the Amazon Queen. "It's like they've never seen women with any other hair color besides black or brunette!"

"Or curly for that matter," Najara pointed out.

"And short." Gabrielle smirked when Najara rolled her eyes.

The dekarchos played with her short hair as if subconscious about it.

The bard chuckled and softly mentioned, "I like it." She straightened up from leaning in the dekarchos's space. "If I was bold, I'd cut mine that short."

Najara mentally pictured the bard with such a hair style, and she grinned. "I believe you'd out do me, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen laughed then shyly smiled at the compliment. "I don't know, Najara."

Najara brought her hand to the bard's back and whispered, "I do." She offered a warm smile then asked, "So, what shops are we looking for?"

Cheops glanced back and listened for the answer.

Gabrielle's eyes went fuzzy as her lips thinned from her thoughts. She then decided, "I wouldn't mind a new outfit."

Amarice brightened at this prospect. "Where's the nearest one, Cheops?"

Cheops laughed at all the women he had to escort today. He waved them to make a left onto the next street. "This way." He then brought them to a large clothing stand, and he made sure to inform the Egyptian merchant that the women were shopping.

The merchant beamed at all the women in his shop and called, in Egyptian tongue, for the women to look all they wanted.

"Here we go, my queen," Vara called. She turned from the table and held up a matching two piece set.

Gabrielle dropped the yellow top she'd been inspecting and absorbed what the Amazon held up. She tilted her head when she realized it was deep orange leather top and a matching skirt that had three leather flaps in the front that matched the top's design.

Najara side stepped and studied the outfit then turned her head to the Amazon Queen. "You should try it, Gabrielle."

The bard blushed and mentioned, "That's too revealing."

Vara lowered her arms with the outfit but before she could argue, Amarice got the jump on her.

"How is that anymore revealing than what you're wearing?" Amarice put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "Besides, I hear the Conqueror has a thing for leather."

"Amarice," Gabrielle snapped.

Amarice held up her hands in defense but snickered and walked away.

Lacy then appeared and in her hands were two silver, long cuff bracelets. She matched them against the outfit Vara held and nodded. "This definitely looks good together." She then flashed a devilish grin at her queen.

The bard's shoulders slumped. "This is what I get for bringing you three?"

Vara neared her queen then pressed the clothes into the queen's body. "Yes, my queen."

Gabrielle groaned yet wrapped her arms around the outfit pushed into her. She gave a pleading glance to Najara.

The dekarchos's lips curled into a cat grin. "The changing tent is right over there, Queen Gabrielle."

"Thanks a lot, Najara," the bard deadpanned and went to the changing tent.

The bard slowly worked her Amazon attire off then put on the test outfit. She had a hard time tying the back leather straps that would tie in the center of her back. She managed her skirt on with no problem. "Lacy," she called, "I need your help and bring

those bracelets." She smiled when the Amazon entered. "Can you tie these two straps in the back?"

"Of course." Lacy let the queen hold the bracelets while she dealt with the straps.

Gabrielle tucked one bracelet under her arm then neatly untied the other. She then was able to slip her right hand into the bracelet, and she repeated the process with the other cuff bracelet. "An arm bracelet would be good with this outfit."

Lacy considered this then smiled at an idea. "I'm sure we could get you one made that's in a feather design."

The Amazon Queen instantly brightened at the great idea. "I like that."

"So does that mean you're going to get the outfit?" the Amazon teased.

Gabrielle sighed but she turned around, stepped back twice, and held out her arms. "How does it look?"

Lacy crossed her arms over her chest, her head bobbed, and she declared, "It does look good, my queen." She then neared the queen, grabbed the queen's small shoulders, and whispered, "Let's see what the others think too."

"Oh no!" But before Gabrielle could stop Lacy, she was pushed out of the tent and into the light of day.

Lacy chuckled then spun the Amazon Queen around for a display. "How does the queen look?"

Amarice tilted her head then she whistled.

Vara slapped the young Amazon in the stomach then honestly stated, "You look great, my queen."

Najara rested her hands on her hips, and she grinned at the complete change. "You look amazing, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle grumbled then her attention darted to the silent Egyptian warrior. "What you think, Cheops?"

Cheops tensed when all the women centered on him. He cleared his throat and tried to ignore the dangerous looks of the Amazons. He smiled and replied, "I like it very much, Queen Gabrielle." He then tilted his head and suggested, "Although you could do with a short hairstyle. The outfit is slightly Egyptian in nature and most women in Egypt keep their hair at shoulder length."

Najara bit her lower lip when she spotted the Amazon Queen's gaping features.

"Oh no... n-n-no." Gabrielle held up her hands.

Amarice came back from the clothes table and held up a white outfit. "I think it's a

great idea." She then stretched out her arms. "I think a short hairstyle would even go with this outfit too."

Gabrielle gaped at the long white skirt that Amarice held and mostly because the skirt had slits that ran up to the belt of the skirt. "Sweet Artemis."

Lacy leaned over then murmured, "She's not in Egypt to save you, my queen."

Queen Gabrielle soon had her satchel stuffed by two outfits that the Amazons made her purchase. She then was being dragged across the marketplace to a more residential area. Cheops was taking them straight to a well-known hairstylist. Gabrielle tried to stop her Amazons from this, but nobody seemed to listen to her. She wondered if her caste meant nothing in Egypt?

Gabrielle stumbled over the three steps of the entrance because her Amazons were shoving her up. She growled at Lacy behind her and threatened, "When we get back to Greece you three will have a moon's patrol duty."

Amarice laughed and called up, "You need a better threat than that, my queen. This is well worth a moon's patrol."

Lacy snickered and pushed the queen into the building.

"Alright," Gabrielle challenged, "wait until the Conqueror sees this." She turned and remained poised at the top of the last step.

Najara stood by the building with Cheops to her side. She grinned and informed, "Most likely the Conqueror will like it, Queen Gabrielle."

"Najara, I really..." The bard was pointing at the dekarchos, but she growled and spun around.

Lacy guided the queen into the building, and she was followed by Amarice and Vara.

Najara later on checked the sun when she felt like it was close to half a candlemark. She glanced over at Cheops, who also leaned against the building.

Cheops grinned and asked, "How long have you served the Conqueror?"

"This is my third moon."

Cheops chuckled and folded his muscular arms over his gold plated chest. "She is a ruler worth serving."

Najara made no remark to the comment but instead asked, "And how is it serving the queen?"

"Very challenging," Cheops replied, yet he smiled. "I served her father previously. It is surprising the kind of ruler she is compared to him."

"A better ruler?" Najara prompted.

"Yes, the queen has her own way. She is bold yet traditional, which is a usual combination for Egypt."

The dekarchos silently considered the head guard's words and compared it to the Conqueror. She didn't have a chance to say anything as Gabrielle and her Amazons loudly exited the building. Najara straightened up from the building and openly observed the Amazon Queen's new hairstyle, which greatly reflected the Egyptian style.

Gabrielle's hair reached just to her shoulders where as before it'd been to her midback. Her bangs were braided back onto her head so that her forehead now showed. She hopped off the last step then faced the dekarchos and Egyptian guard. She held out her hands and in her right hand was her staff. "It isn't that bad, is it?" She crinkled up her nose at the pair.

Cheops quietly laughed while he let Najara take the question.

Najara's brightly smiled, which almost made her glow. "I love it." She stepped up to the bard and softly mentioned, "Soon you will cut it shorter."

The bard subconsciously fooled with her hair. "I don't know if I could go any shorter."

The dekarchos collapsed the bard's shoulder and only winked.

"So where to next?" Amarice questioned who remained on the last step.

Cheops stepped up to the group but directed his words to the Amazon Queen. "Parchment and scrolls are quite inexpensive here."

Gabrielle hadn't thought about that, but it made sense because parchment paper was often made from papyrus. And papyrus reeds were plentiful along the Nile River.

Cheops knew his answer already so he passed the women and ordered, "Follow me." He guided them back to the emporium. Eventually, he stopped at a popular stand that seemed to have a little bit of everything, which included the papyrus scrolls.

The Amazon Queen spotted the scrolls but didn't beeline to them. She first checked over other things then something caught her ear. She lifted her head and glanced to the left when she heard the same music. Now there were people that gathered around one spot just to the left of the stand.

The Amazons had also heard it and wandered over with full interest.

Cheops chuckled at the curious foreigners, and he stepped up to Gabrielle's side. "You've never seen a snake charmer?"

The bard peered up at the Egyptian then glimpsed back at the sitting man in front of a basket. "No, actually."

"Then you shall see," Cheops decided. He took the queen's arm and led her closer to

the group.

Gabrielle was somewhat on her tiptoes so that she had a better view. Her lips curled into a smile while she watched the snake charmer coax the cobra out of a basket. "Isn't he afraid it'll strike him?"

"Not at all," Cheops replied, "Music soothes the beast."

Gabrielle repeated the phrase in her head, and she shook her head at an odd thought. She then decided she really couldn't see that well and wanted a better view. She quietly moved away from Cheops and went to the far left side of the u-shaped audience. She found a neat crack between the people's heads and smiled at having a great view.

Then the person in front of Gabrielle decided to move around so Gabrielle grumbled under her breath then shifted to the left again. She became comfortable just as the snake charmer finished his first act. He spoke to everybody in his Egyptian tongue.

Gabrielle sighed and muttered, "What in Hades is he saying? Where are you, Xena?" She chuckled at her complaint then suddenly her right side was hit by something or somebody. Gabrielle stumbled a step, almost fell, but she caught sight of the boy that'd hit her and was taking off with a small pouch in his left hand. It struck the bard as she stared down at her right hip and saw her coin pouch gone. "Hey!" she yelled at the retreating boy.

Gabrielle didn't wait another beat, and she took off at a mad run for the pickpocket. She hefted her staff in her right hand then disappeared down a small street. She targeted the boy in her vision. Despite her strides were small they were fast so she started to catch up to him. "Hey stop!" she called out to the boy.

The boy glanced back over his shoulder and was stunned to see his victim coming for him. He cursed under his breath then tried to speed up.

"Damn it," the bard growled, yet she wouldn't give up the pursuit. She took a sharp turn around a line of merchants just as the boy did the same.

The boy glimpsed back and couldn't believe the strangely dressed foreigner was still after him. He thought she'd be easy pickings. He then ducked into an alley and scanned his surroundings. He made a hasty decision and squeezed between two homes that had a thin space. He hugged the wall.

Gabrielle darted around the corner then ran several more paces and stopped. She scanned the long, narrow alley but in the mix of people she didn't see her suspect. Then her attention was drawn to the left by a low clink, and she smirked.

The boy closed up the pouch after he checked out all the drachmas. He had a sly grin at his reward. Then carefully, he poked his head around the corner just as a hand came at his arm. He yelped when he was yanked out of the small space and spun around.

The Amazon Queen threw the boy against the side of the neighboring house and lifted her staff to keep him locked against it.

The boy showed fear and held up his hands with the pouch in his right.

Gabrielle sighed and lowered her staff but kept it horizontal to her body. "Give me back my pouch." She held out her right hand in demonstration.

The boy hesitated, but the fire in the foreigner's eyes made him hand over the pouch.

The bard decided to drop her pouch into her satchel for now then she focused back on the boy. "You shouldn't steal."

The boy swallowed but kept his silence.

Gabrielle frowned as she realized he may not understand Greek at all. She observed he was very dark skinned, brown eyes, and short midnight hair. She also noticed he wasn't very well dressed, which certainly could explain why he was stealing. Gabrielle now debated what to do with the boy.

The boy kept his hands up, and he could tell the foreigner was at a dilemma. He decided to help so he said, "Just let me go. I returned your purse."

The Amazon Queen blinked as she was amazed the boy knew Greek. "You speak Greek?"

The boy slightly grinned at the foreigner's astonishment. "I speak it pretty good." He then took a step to his left. "I go now. You have your purse so no harm done."

"Oh no." Gabrielle stepped forward and lifted her staff to block the boy. "You don't get off that easy."

The boy glanced over the bard's shoulder where the alleyway met the street ahead. "Please, just let me go." He then noticed that several people were becoming onlookers.

Gabrielle glowered at the boy and stated, "You know, I would have given you some of my drachmas if you'd asked."

The boy's features screwed up when he heard this news. "You must be a foreigner."

Gabrielle smirked and prepared a remark, but she fell short when the boy suddenly grew fearful about something behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and spotted two Egyptian soldiers that most likely caught his attention.

The boy took his opening and made a break for it.

Gabrielle half expected it so she jumped forward and grabbed the boy's wrist. "I don't think so."

"Let me go!" the boy hollered. He snapped his mouth shut as if he realized some mistake.

The two soldiers turned to the commotion, one pointed at the foreigner and boy, and he yelled in Egyptian, "You, boy stay there!" He and his partner hurried towards the pair.

"Let go, let go!" The boy struggled against his captor's vise grip.

Gabrielle didn't understand what was happening, yet she hotly ordered, "Stop struggling."

"You don't understand," the boy hastily demanded, "they will take me back!"

"Back where?" Gabrielle grew confused and even worried.

The boy grew even more fearful when the soldiers were almost upon them. He wiggled his wrist free and broke off running again down the alley.

"Hey, stop!" The Amazon Queen glanced at the soldiers, who also repeated her demand but in Egyptian. She then chased after the boy because her worries were high.

The Egyptian soldiers yelled for the boy to halt, but he didn't, and they ran after him too.

The boy sprinted as if Anubis, the God of Death, was after him.

Gabrielle sucked in a deep breath then pressed her body to go faster. She glanced back and saw that the heavily armored soldiers were falling behind, but they were least of her concerns.

The boy jumped over a stand, darted around people, and went around sharp corners to get away. He almost ran into cart but just spun away from it in time. He caught sight of the foreigner still after him. He then dodged into another street that was quite crowded and smelled of food. He took a hiding place between two food stands.

The Amazon Queen came around the corner and stopped, as she recalled this game.

A food merchant peered up and smiled at the obvious foreigner. He rubbed his hands together and called out in Egyptian for her to come closer. She ignored him so he frowned then tried another tactic. "Hello, my little blond!"

Gabrielle's attention snapped to the Egyptian merchant that spoke gurgled Greek. She then narrowed her eyes at the man when she realized exactly what he'd said.

"Come here, I have watermelons that are your exact size." The merchant held up two very tiny melons.

The bard ticked off a back molar and decided to ignore the merchant. She carefully walked forward, yet she heard the merchant calling out to her. Then she chuckled when she spied her target. She walked over to him and lifted her staff.

The boy's head snapped up, and he jumped to his feet. "You again?" He backed stepped once and held up his hands. "Just leave me alone. You have your money."

Gabrielle grabbed the boy's wrist and asked, "Why are you running from those soldiers?"

The boy struggled but stopped and replied, "They'll take me back to them. I can't go back!" He tried to fight the foreigner again.

The bard kept up as she had superior strength over him. "Will you stop? I'm trying to help you."

"You can't help," the boy snapped, but he suddenly stopped when he spotted the two soldiers coming towards them. "Oh gods."

Gabrielle glanced back and saw them coming. As she turned back to the boy, he ripped free of her grasp and this time she didn't pursue him. She instead smirked.

The boy only took a few running steps then stopped when he realized his problem. He'd run into a dead end so he turned around and stared at the nearing soldiers in horror.

The bard frowned when she realized just how petrified the boy was of these soldiers. She turned around and faced the nearing soldiers.

The soldiers unsheathed their swords from their sides and determinedly closed in on the boy. The left soldier barked out an Egyptian order to the boy.

The boy stepped back once then held up his hands and shook his head. He spewed something in Egyptian.

Gabrielle saw one soldier lift his sword, and her heart jumped into her stomach. She suddenly ran forward and stepped between the boy and the soldiers.

The soldiers stopped and stared in brief awe at the blond foreigner. The left soldier waved his sword at the woman and commanded something in Egyptian.

Gabrielle had no clue what he said so she raised her staff for her only answer. Her muscles tensed.

"Oh, little blond," the merchant called from his spot, "he told you to move! You might want to move!"

The bard huffed and made eye contact with the soldiers, she conveyed her message the best way she knew any soldier or warrior would understand no matter the language barrier. She spun her staff and mentally prepared for the second fight in her life.

The left soldier pointed his blade at the foreign woman and hotly stated something in Egyptian. He then raised his sword and charged her.

Gabrielle gave a brief cry then raised her staff and blocked the blow. She quickly brought her staff around and slammed the soldier across his face. She then swung her staff to the right and caught the other soldier's knee.

The food merchant sucked in a breath when his little blond friend knee capped the right soldier. He then stood on his tiptoes and laughed when the blond hit the left soldier in the stomach. But he tensed when the left soldier reacted fast and slashed his sword at the blonde's stomach.

Gabrielle jumped back in time then she tried a new tactic. She gave a high kick to the left soldier's chest and sent him stumbling backwards. As her boot made contact with the ground again, she swung her staff back at the right soldier. She roughly struck him in his side.

The soldier hissed then his sword threw a thrust. He caught the foreigner just on her right arm.

The bard backed off a step when the open wound let blood ooze out. She glanced at it in remote surprise because she'd never been wounded like this in a fight. She steeled her fears then raised her staff. She encouraged her determination by remembering the fearful boy, who stood behind her.

The Egyptian soldiers were then shocked when the small, foreign woman consumed them with rapid attacks. They tried to parry her attacks and mostly stopped her until she broke the right soldier's defense first. She took him down then came after the left one with a vengeance.

Gabrielle's sharp cry pierced the remaining soldier's bravery, and his sword was knocked out of his hands. Gabrielle flashed the soldier a smirk just before she brought her staff hard across his head.

The soldier fell to the ground and went unconscious.

The bard spun around, neared the boy, and knelt down in front of him some. "Tell me I just attacked the Egyptian soldiers for a really good reason?" With her freehand, she grabbed the boy's arm. "What's wrong?"

The boy stared at the unconscious soldiers then the shake to his arm brought him to the foreigner. He realized he had a question to answer.

"Why are you running from them?" Gabrielle demanded.

The boy started to hyperventilate, but he emotionally answered, "I'm a slave... they're going to take me back to my master. I ran away! I won't go back!"

The Amazon Queen inwardly groaned at her minor mistake; it had to be a minor mistake. "You're not going back," she promised despite she wasn't sure she could deliver on it.

"How do you know?" The boy shook his head frantically. "They'll kill you for this!"

Gabrielle ruefully smiled because she wasn't too worried about her future. "I can help you."

"No you can't, nobody can help me." The boy stepped back once, but he was stopped by the woman again. He then heard the soldiers' groans then they slightly moved.

Gabrielle heard it too so she stood up and suggested, "We need to go." She released his arm but held out her left hand. She softly smiled when the boy actually took her hand. "Stay close and hold my hand." She then hastily moved around the soldiers and got them out of the alley.

"Little blond, the soldiers are coming!" the merchant hollered around the corner to the foreigner.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and hotly yelled back, "Thanks for the tip, Plato!" She then urged the boy to hurry.

The Egyptian soldiers climbed to their feet. They knew which way the pair went so they started off in a slow run then sped up as the aches from the fight worked out of their legs.

The boy glanced back when he heard the soldiers yelling for him and his new friend.

Gabrielle heard it too, but she kept up their run. She hefted her staff better at her side then glimpsed at the scared boy. "What's your... name?" She hoped the broken conversation would relax him.

The boy helped the foreigner around some people then he replied, "Its Xavier."

The bard smiled at the name as it reminded her of somebody else in her life. She then introduced herself. "I'm Gabrielle."

Xavier had confused features and asked, "You are... Greek?"

"Yes," the bard breathlessly replied.

"But... that is... Hebrew name." The boy glanced behind because he didn't hear the soldiers as much.

The bard then slowed her run down to a jog and tried to find her bearings.

"Where are we going?"

Gabrielle decided to stop because it was a very good question. She gulped some air then replied, "Well I was hoping the market." She then quietly mentioned, "I need to find my friends."

Xavier couldn't imagine who these friends were but he pointed straight ahead. "That goes to the market. Come on." He tugged on her hand and led the way, but he stopped.

Gabrielle stopped too when she saw the problem. "Oh Hades."

Three soldiers were filtering through the crowd and coming towards them.

"Okay," Gabrielle murmured, "they don't know what's happened." She tried to look calm despite she definitely wasn't. "Let's just go past them."

Xavier agreed but only after he was behind the bard, as if he was in a slave role.

Gabrielle didn't question it and instead walked towards the soldiers, who weren't paying her much mind. She was just a fifty paces ahead of them then the loud yells from behind caught her ear.

Xavier understood the Egyptian cries, and he looked to the three soldiers.

The soldiers responded in perfect form. They withdrew swords and scanned the crowd, which was spreading out very quickly for them.

Gabrielle tried to back Xavier away into the spreading crowd in hopes they wouldn't be spotted. She came to a stop because the boy was so scared.

The middle soldier pointed his sword at who he suspected were the culprits. Then in Egyptian, he ordered, "Stop there!"

The two soldiers from earlier came from the opposite side and broke through the crowd. One soldier pointed his sword at the foreigner with the boy and spewed out several things in Egyptian.

Gabrielle didn't like it so she lifted her staff. Her stomach dropped when she realized five trained soldiers against her was three too many. She felt her heart pound against her chest.

The five soldiers fanned out and surrounded the suspects. The soldier in the middle commanded in Egyptian, "Put down your weapon, and you will not be harmed."

The bard clenched her jaw and gripped her staff harder.

Xavier hid behind the bard's back and whispered, "There are too many." His voice quaked as he added, "He said to put your weapon down, and we won't be hurt."

Gabrielle bit her lower lip as she debated what to do. The soldiers stepped closer to her, and her heart went even wilder. Her partner's past words about knowing what battles to fight came to mind so she made her choice. She twisted her head and murmured, "Please trust me, Xavier." She lowered her staff then threw it a few paces away from her.

The soldiers exchanged looks then four of them quickly came at the foreigner and boy. The easily subdued the woman and the boy then confiscated the staff and satchel. Gabrielle tried not to struggle against the soldier that had a hold of her. She gritted her teeth when his grip became more than necessary.

Xavier cried out then tried to break free.

The Amazon Queen then glanced at the boy. "Don't fight him."

"I don't want to go back," Xavier cried out.

"You won't, Xavier. I made a promise."

The boy shook his head frantically because he couldn't understand how the foreigner would do this when they were taken. "You can't stop them."

The Amazon Queen walked along side the soldier that held her, but she explained, "Just trust me on this." She smiled reassuringly and mentioned, "I know some people in high places." She added a mental prayer that those people in high places would forgive her for this act.

"I hope it's the queen," Xavier joked, and he knew he couldn't fight the soldiers, who surrounded him.

The bard chuckled and didn't make any other comment. She kept searching for her Amazons, Najara, or Cheops, yet she had no luck. She cursed under her breath then it wasn't long before she and Xavier were escorted into a prison house. "Oh great," she muttered under her breath.

"In here," the soldier ordered in his native tongue. He shoved the foreigner and boy into the open jail. His partner then grabbed a bar and quickly closed the door.

Gabrielle glanced to her left when the obvious jail guard revealed a ring of keys and locked them up tight. She glared at the soldiers, who merely smirked back at her. Then one made some snide comment at her that she couldn't understand.

Xavier stared wide eye at the soldier that'd said the remark. "He said-"

"I don't want to know," Gabrielle cut off, and she dropped her hand. She dramatically sighed, crossed the distance, and sat down on the bench that was attached to the wall.

Xavier turned and thoughtfully studied the small blond woman that was dressed in very unusual leathers. "You dress very strange... even for a foreigner."

Gabrielle amusingly peered up at the boy. She patted the open bench space beside her.

Xavier took the spot then quietly mentioned, "You fight well... for a woman."

The bard half glared and half smirked at the naïve boy. She leaned against the cool stone wall then casually mentioned, "I'm an Amazon."

"Amazon?" The boy shook his head then asked, "All these Amazons fight, like you?"

"Mmmhmmm." Gabrielle tilted her head and asked, "How'd you become a slave?"

Xavier peered down at his hands and grew rather solemnly. "I was a born slave." He fidgeted with his hands. "My parents are from Libya... from a tribe known as the Libu." He frowned and shook his head.

"Where are your parents now?"

Xavier closed his eyes then his voice grew hoarse. "They are in the afterlife... with my little brother." He lifted his head and his moist eyes fixed on the foreigner. "After my mother died, I escaped and have been hiding since."

The bard was moved by the boy's story, and it made her think of her sister. She lowered her head at the thought of her enslaved sister some hundreds of leagues away from here. She blinked away her tears because she reminded herself that soon she'd see Lila again.

Xavier scooted closer to the Amazon and asked, "Where are you from in Greece?"

Gabrielle lifted her head and revealed a sad smile. "I was born in a small sheep town called Potidaea. Right now though I live in Corinth."

The slave grew interested and leaned closer. "Isn't that the capitol of the Greek Realm?"

The bard chuckled and nodded her head.

"Have you ever met the Conqueror?" Xavier was slightly awed and mentioned, "I've heard she's taller than any man. And he's stronger than twenty. I've even heard she can fly as far as one can sprint."

Gabrielle groaned as she recalled exactly why she'd written those true scrolls about her past adversary. It was wild tales like this that made her partner sound like some goddess. "I've actually seen her breathe fire, Xavier."

Xavier straightened up and stared at the bard in shock. Then as he really considered it, he laughed and shook his head. "She cannot do that."

The bard quietly giggled and argued, "Sure she can... everybody knows that about the Conqueror."

The slave's features twisted tightly, and he debated whether or not the foreigner was serious. "How do you know? Have you met the Conqueror?"

Gabrielle shrugged then asked, "Does seeing her from a distance count?"

Xavier laughed and realized just how much he enjoyed this stranger foreigner. "I've seen her face on a drachma but you've seen her closer than I."

"Have you heard any stories about the Conqueror?" The bard inquired, and her green eyes grew brighter than emeralds.

Xavier became excited. "I heard the story about how she met Queen Cleopatra. The queen wrapped herself in a rug and was delivered to the Conqueror one night." He leaned even closer and murmured, "They say Queen Cleopatra was only dressed in gold chains just to impress the Conqueror."

The bard snorted because she could really imagine that about the Egyptian Queen.

"Have you heard the story about the Conqueror and the Amazons?"

Xavier ran through his memory then shook his head. "You must know the story... you're an Amazon."

The Amazon Queen wildly grinned. "Boy do I know that story." She then turned on the bench, brought her left leg up, and became comfortable. She lifted her hands as she went into bard mode.

Xavier mimicked the stranger's seated position so that he faced her. He smiled when the Amazon opened the story about the Conqueror's earlier days when she was solely known as the Warrior Princess. Xavier realized he'd keep holding his breath at some points when Gabrielle painted images of the Amazon tribes taking arms and riding into battle against the mighty Warrior Princess. He started to cry when he heard the death of one Amazon Queen, Melosa.

Then Gabrielle brought to light an unnamed woman, who was a famous rebel in Greece. She jumped to her feet when she described the horrifying scene when the rebel leader spoke out against the Conqueror, and she was sentenced the cross. Xavier cringed when Gabrielle described the powerful hammer's blow to the rebel leader's knees. But he didn't give up hope as the Amazon continued her story and spoke about some mysterious stranger that came to Greece.

Xavier felt as if he was living the story that the foreigner told him. He normally felt no faith in life, but suddenly he felt it so clearly when the rebel leader and this stranger stood against the Conqueror. He then felt his hopes dashed when the rebel and her adopted mother had to escape to the Amazon Nation. Xavier kept his faith that the good would win over the evil in this story.

Gabrielle stood tall and proud in the middle of the cell, and she demonstrated the rebel leader's persistence to represent the evil Conqueror before the Amazon Nation. She then jumped at the boy when the assassin tried to kill the rebel leader but was saved thanks to the Conqueror.

Xavier fell back some, his eyes wide, and his breath held. He leaned forward when Gabrielle knelt down and told him how the rebel leader begged the Conqueror to join the Amazon Nation. He dropped his head when the Conqueror only refused to join her enemies.

Gabrielle rose to her feet and back stepped once then twice while she spoke. She rose up her hand to demonstrate an imaginary dagger held out. Then abruptly she threw her right arm out, and the imaginary dagger drove into the wall behind Xavier.

The slave leaned forward, grabbed his knees, and his lips went into a broad smile. The Conqueror finally agreed to join the Amazons to stop the warlord Darphus! Xavier couldn't believe it, but he could see it all playing out before him.

The bard then unsheathed her imaginary sword and showed some of the well-known tactics the Conqueror would use in battle. She then came closer to Xavier whispered about how the rebel leader discovered Darphus's plans to kill the Conqueror by hemlock.

Xavier gasped, but he clenched his hands when Gabrielle told how the rebel, despite her handicap, rode a horse out into the battle field. He shook his head frantically, yet he felt himself gallop through the bloody battle in search of the ruthless ruler.

Gabrielle fell to the floor of the jail and held up her hands in fear. She glanced at Xavier and quickly detailed how the rebel leader was betrayed by the evil Amazon, Velasca. She then was on her feet again just as her right hand stretched out. Her imaginary sword skewed the evil Amazon just before Darphus attacked her.

Then Xavier covered his mouth and tears slowly trickled down his cheeks. The Conqueror had defeated Darphus, yet it cost her life. His eyes locked on Gabrielle, who stood in the middle of the cell with her eyes closed and uttered the Conqueror's slow death in the clearing.

Gabrielle stopped her words once the Conqueror felt her last heartbeat. The bard stepped closer to the boy, knelt down, and took his hands into hers. She softly spoke about how the healer, Eilis, came a heartbeat too late, but the rebel demanded the healer to try. Then the drained rebel rested her head upon the dead ruler, and all she heard was the Conqueror's steady heartbeat.

Xavier smiled and wiped his tears when the Conqueror returned to the land of the breathing. His smile broadened when Gabrielle popped up and declared that the Conqueror was free from her past debt with the Amazons. The bard smiled at Xavier when she came to her last words of the story, which she'd trimmed down immensely compared to the whole story.

Gabrielle knelt back down in front of Xavier and softly finished, "The Conqueror, her mother, Melpomene, and the rebel leader returned to Corinth. To the city that they called home, but never knew what that felt like until they rebuilt their family."

Xavier had a bitter smile as he wiped his tears away. He cleared his throat then murmured, "I wish that was a true story."

The bard gathered the slave's hand into hers. "It is a true story."

The slave shook his head and argued, "The Conqueror is said to have no family."

"Then how was she born?" Gabrielle gently debated.

Xavier frowned then tried, "She was born like the gods."

Gabrielle chuckled because she'd heard this one before. "The Conqueror is very mortal... how else would have hemlock kill her?"

Xavier shook his head a few times. "That was just a story you told."

The bard squeezed the small boy's hands then honestly whispered, "This story is more fact than fiction."

Xavier was confused about why the Amazon was so adamant that it was true. He then

tilted his head. "What was the rebel's name?"

Gabrielle shrugged and challenged, "Does her name matter?" She saw Xavier was about to argue so she tilted the scale by adding, "Since it is just a story."

Xavier's mouth hung open but no words came forth.

Gabrielle chuckled, fussed with Xavier's hair, and stood up. She then reclaimed her seat beside the young boy. She was quiet because the story made her think back on her earlier days when she only knew the Conqueror and not Xena. For once in her life, she was very happy she was proved wrong. At the thought of her partner, she wondered what Xena was doing right now, and she dazed off.

The Conqueror slowly walked along side Queen Cleopatra towards the atrium. She'd spent her morning in the office with the queen and tried to work out details for the resources Greece required. Queen Cleopatra agreed to them quite easily and instructed that tomorrow she, the Conqueror, and the Amazon Queen should inspect the resources. The Conqueror had agreed finally.

Queen Cleopatra stopped in the empty atrium and smiled at her ally when she turned to her. "You plan to tour the Great Lighthouse this afternoon?"

The Conqueror dipped her head and answered, "Gabrielle is curious to see the workings of the lighthouse."

The queen softly laughed, but it made sense to her since the Amazon Queen was a bard. "She'll most likely find it interesting."

The Conqueror slightly smiled at this because she thoroughly agreed.

Cleopatra then stepped closer to the Greek ruler and lightly touched her muscular forearm. "Perhaps we'll find time tonight... to be alone."

The Conqueror pricked when Cleopatra suggested the plans.

Cleopatra lifted her right hand from the strong arm and traced the Conqueror's jaw line. "I haven't forgotten those nights, Xena." She tilted her head and tried to gauge the Greek ruler's response. "You are hard to forget."

The Conqueror also recalled those nights too that were filled with mystery and pleasure, for Cleopatra. She lifted her hand and captured the Egyptian Queen's hand into hers. "I have engagements with Gabrielle," she drew out.

The queen laced her fingers through the ruler's much longer ones. "She could always join us," she further suggested, and she sensually whispered, "I know you can handle us both... together." She lifted her freehand and trailed her fingertips over the Conqueror's muscular arm. "I have tried to forget those nights with you, but no man can match what you do." Cleopatra tilted her head, and desire burned in her eyes. "For memory's sake, Xena."

The Conqueror's jaw went set at the proposition from the queen. She knew she was

playing a game with Gabrielle to see if the bard would get jealous. This certainly would bring out the green-eyed monster in the bard, and it was fire the Conqueror did not want to witness or receive.

Cleopatra's leer broke apart when the ruler separated from her. Her right hand became chilled and filled with air.

The Conqueror had ice blue eyes and her tone grew deep. "I cannot and I will not."

Cleopatra searched the Conqueror's face and eyes for any form of deception to the statement. She saw none. "This Gabrielle must mean something to you, Xena."

The Conqueror knew it wasn't a question so she gave no response. She was slightly relieved when the jogging footsteps drew their attention to the palace's entrance.

Cheops didn't know whether to be happy or fearful when he saw the rulers before him. He came to a quick stop before them and only half bowed. He breathed heavily.

The Conqueror first focused on the item in the Egyptian warrior's right hand. "What has happened?"

Cheops swallowed and briefly glimpsed at the staff in his right hand. It was Queen Gabrielle's staff. "There was a problem."

The Conqueror's instant reaction was anger, which cloaked her fears for the bard's safety. "Where is she?"

Cheops steeled himself and wondered what punishment he would receive, not only from his queen, but also the Conqueror. "She's safe, Conqueror." He then rolled into the story from his side and tried to explain it as much detail as he knew. Afterwards, the Conqueror ordered him to take him to the Amazon Queen, and he obliged.

Back in the prison house, the Amazon Queen was standing off the bench because she needed to move around. She'd been casually chatting with Xavier to find out more about him. The more she knew, the more heartbroken she became. She wasn't at all pleased to hear how volatile and loathsome the slave's master was to him. The entire master's family even treated him poorly. It almost made Gabrielle sick and especially when she imagined her younger sister in such a lifestyle.

The prison's main door slammed loudly then light footfall hastily came down the long aisle of jail cells. The prison guard heard the newcomer so he met the newcomer halfway, and he happened to stop next to Gabrielle's cell.

The bard walked closer to the jail door, and she swallowed when she saw tall, dark, and furious.

"I would ask you if this is your idea of a practical joke, but I already know it isn't." The Conqueror slammed the staff's end onto the rock floor and coldly stared through the bars to her partner.

Gabrielle sighed at the trouble she got into and needed to get out of now. "There's

really good reason for this."

The Conqueror's upper lip slightly lifted, and she growled, "I can't wait to hear it." She then turned her head to the guard and in perfect Egyptian, she ordered him to open the cell.

The guard didn't argue and jumped in front of the gate. He fumbled with his keys.

The Conqueror's cold stare flickered to the boy that was huddled on the bench.

Xavier stared in awe at the tall and beautifully dressed woman outside the cell. He was almost positive the woman's face matched the Conqueror's face on the drachma, but he knew it wasn't true.

The guard swung the door open and pulled it back with him. He stepped aside and waited.

The ruler noticed her partner wasn't leaving the cell so she coldly ordered, "Let's go."

Gabrielle glanced back at Xavier and held out her hand to him in hidden signal.

Xavier hesitated then slid his legs off the bench.

The Conqueror's back straightened when she realized what the assumption was, and she instantly corrected it. "The boy stays."

Xavier froze in his spot. His heart beat wildly against his chest.

The bard lowered her hand and turned her sights back to her lover. "If he stays then I'm staying."

The slave's mouth hung open at the declaration from the Amazon. His eyes lifted to the dark woman that seemed to be another shade angrier. He trembled some and wondered what would happen to his new friend. This imposing woman was surely more superior to the small Amazon.

The Conqueror's chest rose and fell several times. She desperately tried to clamp her temper to a minimum. "The boy is a slave, Gabrielle and he will be returned to his master."

"That's the problem," the bard started, "Xavier's master brutalizes him."

The Conqueror quickly noted that her lover knew both the slave's name and his history. There was already an attachment. "It is not your place, Gabrielle. He is a runaway slave and must be returned."

Gabrielle shook her head then loudly declared, "I will not leave without him."

"It is not your place!" the Conqueror yelled who lost her control.

Gabrielle knew her temper was matching the ruler's but she kept her tone calm and

even. "Then I'm making it my place."

The Conqueror's right hand was clenched while her left hand dug into the staff. She realized the rock and hard place her partner had placed her in as the ruler and ally before Egypt. She also remembered her promise when they were crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

The guard tensed when the Conqueror's fiery eyes locked on him.

Gabrielle listened to the Conqueror's quick Egyptian words to the guard and despite she didn't know what was said, she knew what it meant. She turned back to the slave and held out her hand again. "It's alright." She coaxed him with a trustful smile.

Xavier slid off the bench then carefully edged closer to the Amazon. He took her hand but he looked anywhere but at the dark woman outside the cell.

Gabrielle led the way out of the cell then paused before her lover. She saw nothing of the woman she'd been with last night.

The Conqueror held out the staff to her partner and when it was mutely accepted, she turned and started down the aisle.

The bard lifted her staff then quickly followed the ruler. She couldn't imagine what would happen later when they had time alone. Once she was outside, her eyes had to adjust to the bright sunlight then she spotted Cheops just ahead. She inwardly groaned at what she guessed probably happened.

The Conqueror blew past Cheops without a word or a look.

Cheops took pace beside the Amazon Queen and quietly asked, "Are you okay?" He noted her arm wound.

"I'm fine," Gabrielle replied, "Thanks for asking though." She sighed then quietly asked, "How mad was she when you first told her?"

Cheops walked closer and murmured, "I believe her yell was heard through all the palaces."

"Great," the bard muttered.

"Gabrielle?" the slave called from behind.

The Amazon Queen offered a smile to him and urged him to walk closer to her open side.

Xavier frowned when he realized something. "I got you in trouble."

Gabrielle warmly smiled and played with his hair. "Nothing that can't be fixed." She lifted her head and stared at her lover's tense back. "At some point," she sadly added.

The Egyptian warrior oddly stared at the boy, who he knew was a slave. "You speak

Greek, boy?"

The slave slightly smiled at the muscular man that was handsomely armored. "Yes, sir... Egyptian too."

Cheops was impressed, but he tried not to show it. He knew few slaves that spoke more than one language. He knew the boy was the central reason behind Gabrielle's motives, yet he couldn't guess why the Conqueror had him released. It must have been magic, on Gabrielle's part, to work that miracle.

Soon the small group ascended the steps of the palace, but the Conqueror stopped at the top and waited.

Cheops said nothing but gave Gabrielle a hopeful look then he entered to palace to find his queen. The Conqueror stood silent for heartbeat with the pair at her right side. She didn't acknowledge her partner beyond her next words. "Go to our room. I'll be there shortly."

Gabrielle felt it safer not to reply. She tugged on the slave's hand and silently left her partner alone. She entered the south wing and decided it was best to have Xavier somewhere else until things were settled between her and Xena. So the bard went to the room she knew Amarice and Lacy shared, and she prayed they were there.

Lacy opened the door and was dumbstruck to see the queen. "Sweet Artemis! Are you okay, my queen?" She stepped out of the room and touched the queen's arm. "I'm so sorr-

"It's okay," the queen brushed off. "Everything is fine now... for the most part." She then signaled the boy beside her and mentioned, "This is my friend Xavier."

The Amazon smiled at him. "Hi, Xavier. I'm Lacy."

The slave smiled and glanced between the two women. "You're an Amazon too?"

"I sure am," Lacy agreed then returned her attention to the queen.

"I need a favor. Can you take care of him for me, Lacy?"

"Of course, my queen."

Gabrielle nodded then turned to the slave. "You're going to stay with Lacy and her roommate, Amarice, for a bit, alright?"

Xavier shook his head then asked, "What of you, Gabrielle?"

The bard smiled at the boy's jumbled Greek, but she squeezed his hand. "I need to have a talk with that tall woman that got us out of jail."

Lacy's features twisted then it clicked into place. She felt deeply for her queen.

"She won't hurt you, will she?" Xavier's concern was quite apparent on his face.

Gabrielle sighed because she didn't want the boy thinking like that about her partner. She knelt some so that she was more eye level with him. "She won't," she promised, "She's not that kind of person, Xavier."

The boy oddly studied the Amazon Queen and stated, "She's not like my master, you mean."

"Exactly," the bard agreed. "Underneath that temper of hers, she's a very caring woman."

Xavier smiled at this information then he suddenly stepped forward.

Gabrielle was surprised by the hug, yet she warmly returned it. She then rose up. "I'll see you later, alright?" After Xavier's smile, she exchanged looks with Lacy and said, "Thank you."

Lacy nodded then held out her hand to the boy. "How about some lunch, Xavier?"

Xavier took the older Amazon's hand and chuckled. "I am hungry."

Gabrielle moved away but glanced back when the slave entered the bedchambers with Lacy. She felt somewhat better despite she had a huge challenge ahead of her. She padded down the hallway and entered her shared bedchambers. She first set her staff aside by the door then she spotted her satchel on the table. The bard came over to the table then touched her satchel, which had all its contents.

"Made it back before I did, huh?" she quipped. Gabrielle shook her head and let out a deep sigh. Then the door's opening caught her attention.

The Conqueror quietly came into the room, closed the door behind, and stood motionless. She only waited a few beats then she approached her partner. "Sit down," she told the bard.

Gabrielle compiled, and a nervous shot went through her stomach. She glanced off to the right and watched the ruler rummage through a pack.

The Conqueror pulled out a smaller pouch from the leather bag, and she came over to the table. She dropped the pouch on the table then opened it up. She pulled out a rag, a jar, and a small skin. She first soaked the rag with the liquid from the skin.

Gabrielle dipped her head a little and closed her eyes.

The ruler kept quiet as she knelt in front of her lover. She took the bard's right wrist and stretched out the bard's arm. She then placed the soaked rag against the wound on the bard's upper arm.

Gabrielle squeezed her eyes tighter when the sharp sting cut under her skin. She swallowed then lifted her head. "I know you probably think what I did was pretty stupid."

The Conqueror didn't meet the bard's eyes then after a long silence, she whispered, "I hate when you say that."

The bard's feature wrinkled from confusion.

The Conqueror pulled the rag away then carefully dabbed the dried blood away. "Somebody that's gone through what you did as a child, later became a rebel leader, and changed a ruthless tyrant for the better is not stupid."

Gabrielle lowered her head and closed her eyes again as a deep sigh left her. She wanted badly to touch Xena, but she wasn't sure. "I guess it's just a self confidence issue."

The Conqueror stood up and dropped the bloody rag onto the table. She then took the jar and when she opened it, the air filled with the smell of balm. She knelt back down then carefully worked the balm over the wound. "You do have a tendency to leap into situations before you assess them completely."

The bard knew a lecture was at hand, but she didn't always take it. "Those two soldiers that wanted to take Xavier..." She paused until crystal blue eyes met her then she continued. "They pulled out swords, Xena. Just to stop a defenseless boy?" She shook her head and reminded, "You've told me that nobody pulls out a sword unless they intend to use it. I wasn't just going to stand there and watch them do whatever they'd planned to do."

The Conqueror dropped her eye contact when she stood up and put the jar away. She then took out another white rag and leaned over the bard. She proceeded to carefully wrap it over the wound. "You could have been seriously hurt... or worse." She neatly tied the two ends of the wrap when she finished.

Gabrielle watched her partner pack up the medical supplies carefully. "But I wasn't, and you've taught me how to defend myself."

"That should be your last resort," the ruler hotly reminded. She roughly closed up the bag and walked back to the packs.

Gabrielle shook her head at her partner's attitude towards the fight; it just didn't make sense. "It's not like I could have ran, and I can't speak Egyptian. It was my only option."

The Conqueror had finished putting away the medical kit. She quickly crossed over the bard, grabbed the chair arms on either side of the bard, and leaned over her. "Do you understand what the consequences will be if something happens to you?" When the bard didn't answer her, she deepened her voice and coldly informed, "I will bring Tartarus down upon whoever harms you." She then leaned closer. "And if they do more than harm you then they'll be begging for Tartarus." She suddenly straightened up and put space between her and the bard.

Gabrielle was shaken, visibly, by the Conqueror's promise. She wasn't sure what upset her more; the violence that would be brought on or that the Conqueror was that protective over her. She snapped out of it and slowly stood while she asked, "What

about your promise to me?" She approached the ruler's tense back. "That you wouldn't let that monster control you again?"

The Conqueror turned around quickly, and anger showed over her face. She loudly demanded, "And what value does my promise have when you place yourself in harm's way?" She breathed heavily for a beat then angrily spoke again. "Do you think that some light from the heavens shined down on me one day and told me how wrong I was?" She read the bard's worried face but she wouldn't stop until she made her point. "It was not the gods... it wasn't even an epiphany, Gabrielle. It was you that showed me how wrong I was. How can I possibly become this woman you see in me if you are not here to guide me to her?"

Gabrielle's throat tightened on her then sharp tears came from her eyes. She approached the stricken ruler and softly reminded, "I'm not the only one that cares for you. You know there's Cyrene and Melpomene."

"And by the gods, I love my mother and care deeply for Melpomene," the ruler agreed. "But they are not you nor was it them that looked past the tyrant and found me. So do not ask of me what you do then turn around and endanger yourself."

Gabrielle dropped her head some when she understood Xena's point. Why hadn't she learned this so long ago? Did she still believe she was weightless within Xena's life? And did her lack of self confidence rob her of the ability to see what she meant to Xena? Just maybe she was wrong when she thought it was the Conqueror and Xena in one embodiment where there was a constant Titan struggle. Perhaps it was Xena at the core and at times Xena wore the Conqueror mask as required.

Either way, Gabrielle realized for fact that it was she that inspired Xena, but she would pray that Xena found her own internal inspiration at some point. The bard pushed her thoughts down and studied the ruler's face, and for the first time she clearly saw fear. It was fear that Xena could lose Gabrielle, and fear of the unknown afterwards.

Gabrielle dropped her head and shook it as her tears overwhelmed her. Now she truly felt stupid for not seeing this sooner, and that she scared the ruler. "Damn it," she muttered and tried to stop her crying, but she grew angry at herself.

The Conqueror quickly crossed the short distance and gathered the bard into her arms.

Gabrielle rested the side of her head on Xena's chest while she clung to her partner. She closed her stinging eyes when she heard the ruler's constant heartbeat under her ear. She tightened her arms around Xena then emotionally rasped, "I'm so sorry, Xena."

Xena lowered her head and tried to sooth the bard. She whispered, "Promise me you'll try to be more careful."

"I promise," Gabrielle quickly replied.

Finally, another small weight lifted off Xena's shoulders. And Xena felt as if she had a slightly better light now so that she could see more of her ambiguous future. She'd had

her head down so she placed a gentle kiss on the bard's head and straightened up.

Gabrielle felt the shift in her lover so she raised her head up. She tried to wipe her tears away.

The Conqueror searched the bard's face then she asked, "What do you intend to do with this slave?"

The bard sighed, yet she knew this topic would come up. "I need your help, please." She held her breath and waited to see how the ruler would respond.

Xena averted her eyes away then gazed back down at her partner. "What do you want me to do?"

Gabrielle almost felt like falling on her butt if Xena hadn't been holding her. She'd never guessed the ruler's unconditional support in this pursuit. She finally inhaled a deep breath and cautiously supplied, "I was hoping you could buy him from his current master."

"Then give him his freedom?" After the bard nodded, Xena further questioned, "And does he have anybody to care for him once he has his freedom?"

Gabrielle hadn't considered that aspect so she sighed. "No, his family is dead." She separated from Xena and walked away so that she could think. She ran her hand through her hair where the braids weren't in the way.

"This is the problem with freeing slaves, Gabrielle," the ruler informed. "They may be free but they often have nothing to survive on afterwards."

The bard turned around and argued, "You can't tell me that their freedom isn't important?"

"It is important," the ruler agreed as she neared her partner some, "however it's never simple. Many nations in this known-world have economies based on slavery. If anything, the slavery keeps people from being homeless."

Gabrielle grew angry, but she reasoned with herself that the ruler was being very logical in her assessment of the situation. She calmed her temper then spoke again. "Do you even know how many homeless there are in Corinth?"

"There are none," the Conqueror argued.

The bard laughed and stated, "Try just over two hundred." She tilted her head. "Melpomene was actually homeless when Janice found her." She stepped closer to the tense Conqueror and further informed, "Janice saved her from some of your squad soldiers running her in. We both know what would have happened to her. She would have been locked up in your dungeons for a few days, chained, and ran over to the slave market in Corinth. Then after she was sold, the drachmas would have been put in your coin purse." Gabrielle could tell she made a direct hit on the Conqueror, through all the armor.

The Conqueror clenched her hands at her side, and she tried to stop imagining the beautiful girl that she'd come to know being sold into slavery.

Gabrielle stepped up to the ruler but didn't touch her. "Xena, we have to do what's right."

"Then what when the next slave comes along, Gabrielle? And the slave after that one?" The Conqueror stared hard at her partner. "The realm does not have enough drachmas to buy and free all the slaves in the known-world."

"No, it doesn't," the bard agreed, "but we have to start somewhere and with somebody." She pointed towards the door and declared, "Maybe that's now and with Xavier." She lowered her hand to her side. "The other nations, other rulers look to you, Xena. They watch your every move and hear your every word. If you set a precedent and free the realm's slaves then the other nations will most likely follow suit."

"I can't abolish slavery overnight," the ruler coldly reminded.

Gabrielle sighed and took Xena's hands into hers. "And Corinth wasn't built in a day. It will take time and steps to get to the goal." She squeezed the Conqueror's hands and her next words were calm but true. "Growth is optional but change is inevitable."

The Conqueror knew it was something that had to be done to the realm. She couldn't continue her rulership knowing thousands of people in her realm suffered under slavery. She couldn't live with it or herself if she continued the charade. She also understood the challenges and dangers that not only she would face but Gabrielle too.

Xena dipped her head closer and whispered, "Do you understand what you ask of me, as your ruler?"

"Yes... I do."

"And do you understand what you and I will face if we do this?"

Gabrielle sadly smiled before she answered. "I do, but we'll do this... together."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," the Conqueror quipped.

The bard's smile went brighter, and she laughed. She drew Xena down for a slow kiss that went through her body.

The Conqueror lifted her head some then muttered, "I am getting soft if I'm giving into you now."

Gabrielle crinkled up her nose then teased, "I promise not to tell anybody that I rule you."

Xena grunted and separated from her lover. She started to slip away but Gabrielle's nimble hand wrapped around her wrist and hauled her back. Before she could say anything, the bard had her arms around Xena, and Xena's words died on the bard's

lips.

Gabrielle slid her hands up the ruler's strong arms then linked behind Xena's neck. She broke the kiss and as she inhaled sharply, she whispered, "Thank you."

Xena had a lopsided grin, which seemed so unusual yet so wonderful to the bard. Xena tilted her head and mentioned, "We're late for our tour."

Gabrielle's eyes widened with realization. "Oh Hades that's right. We need to go." She grabbed Xena's hand and began to haul ass to the door. She paused and snatched her staff then opened the door.

The amused ruler simply followed without somehow tripping on her sandals. She closed the door since she was last out then she took step beside her partner. She kept her quick pace along side her partner, but she casually inquired, "New hairstyle?"

The bard flashed a grin that was sheepish. "Do you like it?"

The ruler grinned and replied, "It's different."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes at her lover's game. "A good different or a bad different?"

Xena's grin widened, but her reply was honest. "A very good different."

"Wait." The bard stopped and halted the ruler. "Then are you saying the way I had my hair wasn't nice?"

The Conqueror rolled her eyes then proceeded to walk again but yanked Gabrielle along. "Come on, bard."

Gabrielle smirked because she loved turning the table back on Xena when she could do it. She and Xena along with Cheops soon met up with their tour guide for the Great Lighthouse. They started at the bottom and the guide explained the architecture and history behind the magnificent lighthouse. Xena found this aspect most intriguing as she loved the unique engineering feat. She made plenty of mental notes.

Before they entered the lighthouse, they stopped and inspected the legendary inscription done by the designer of the lighthouse, Sostratus. He'd left his name engraved along with a dedication, which had originally been forbidden by the Pharaoh Ptolemy. Finally, when the guide directed them into the lighthouse, he explained how many enemies feared the lighthouse. There were legends that the Great Lighthouse could be used as a weapon and that its light could be focused on an enemy ship and set it ablaze. The Conqueror muttered something about the over imaginative bards, and she immediately received a dangerous glare for it.

Gabrielle found her interest with the internal workings of the lighthouse. The Great Lighthouse was divided into three areas and each area had a certain function. The light source at night was fire but during the day it was the sun. And what directed the source of light were enormous mirrors in the apex, which thoroughly impressed the bard.

Through the entire tour, Gabrielle kept asking questions so that she could better understand the lighthouse's composition. And the tour guide absolutely adored the bard's questions and enthusiasm. The Conqueror pretended to grow agitated by the endless questions by either tapping her foot, dramatically sighing, rolling her eyes, or a combination. Gabrielle pretended to ignore her partner, but she fully knew and decided to drag out the process even worse. Eventually Gabrielle read the real frustration lines in Xena's brow then the annoyance laced the ruler's tone. After the bard shot her lover a look now that she'd taught a lesson, she stopped her questions and the tour rapidly ended.

The Conqueror slowly strolled down the narrow bridge between Pharos Island and the main land and to her right was the bard. "Are you hungry?"

Gabrielle smiled and replied, "I think so." She then frowned and asked, "Aren't we going to be late?" She now realized the sun had sunk behind the western horizon.

"If somebody hadn't asked so many questions," the ruler jabbed.

Cheops made his presence known by laughing. He then instantly stopped when the Amazon Queen glared at him.

"Don't encourage her, Cheops."

The Conqueror stopped them when they came to the front of the palace. She turned to her partner and instructed, "Give Cheops your staff."

The bard blinked and then processed the order. "Aren't we..."

"We need to hurry, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle snapped her jaw shut then handed the head guard her staff.

"I will place it in your room," Cheops offered. He bowed then turned and ascended the palace steps.

The Conqueror started for the streets with her partner at her side. Her strides were longer than normal.

"Do you have a hot date?" Gabrielle joked who was trying to keep up.

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow then in her sensual tone, she replied, "I already have that."

The bard displayed a lopsided smile at the indirect compliment from her partner. She found herself guided through the city down a few blocks, around a few, and finally she followed her partner into a building that was clearly a nice tavern. She was quite excited when she realized her partner's possible plans.

The couple took a quiet spot in the corner and was served quickly. Gabrielle thoroughly enjoyed her meal, and she could tell Xena did too. The conversation at the table was light and steered away from anything political. Gabrielle could tell it was

her partner's intent to have a night without anything related to the realm between them. It was an evening meant for them solely.

After dinner, the Conqueror escorted the bard out into the torch lit streets and took her hand. She then murmured that they had to go another direction that wasn't towards the palaces. Gabrielle didn't question it because she'd soon find out what Xena had in mind. Gabrielle instead continued the light conversation but then she noticed Xena's replies slimmed down to one word sentences.

The Conqueror tilted her head after the bard asked her something. Then she narrowed her eyes when her senses prickled.

The Amazon Queen walked closer and softly asked, "What's wrong?"

The ruler didn't reply but instead stopped and glanced over her shoulder. She saw nothing out of order among the people along the street. She turned her head to the left and studied the opposite side of the street.

Gabrielle edged even closer and worry twisted in her stomach. "What is it?"

Suddenly the sensation left the Conqueror, and she shook her head. "Come on." She squeezed the bard's hand then continued the walk to her destination in mind.

Gabrielle may have not gotten an answer, yet it was obvious something bothered her partner. She didn't like it at all. "Maybe we should have brought the squad with us."

Xena peered down at her lover then gave a wicked grin. "I'm not enough of a squad for you, Queen Gabrielle?"

The bard chuckled and teased, "Typically you're a walking army, but not tonight." She indicted her lover's lack of armor, sword, and chakram.

"Those are only accessories." The Conqueror's eyes twinkled because she knew, just like Gabrielle, that she could make a weapon of anything and that her body was just as lethal.

Gabrielle was about to retort to that, but she faltered when her view filled with an amphitheater, the Great Theater on the hill that overlooked the harbor.

The Conqueror peered down, and slowly a smile crept over her as she saw the bard's excitement reached higher than Mount Olympus. She realized how worth wild this would be tonight. "Have you ever been to an amphitheater?"

The overwhelmed bard just processed the question, and a blush took over her features. She shyly answered, "Actually no. They were all..." Her words were lost when she realized where she was going with it.

Xena squeezed her partner's hand. "I know." She now carried a heavy sense of regret that she'd destroyed many theaters or others remained forbidden and had fallen to disrepair in the realm. It would take some time to mend the damage, yet she vowed to do it with the bard's help. "We need to hurry before the play starts."

"What play is it?" the bard tried. The anticipation and happiness weaved through her words while her walk took on a bounce. She was a kid with nutbread that had henbane.

The ruler brought them around to the front of the theater then descended the steps to where they'd be seated. She casually replied, "I believe it's *The Frogs*."

Gabrielle lit up when she realized what play this was tonight. She followed Xena down a row in the center of the seats. She then started a ramble. "Aristophanes wrote this play back..." She racked her mind to think how long ago it was written.

"Over four hundred Helical Risings ago," the Conqueror offered who took a seat in the middle of the second row from the floor. "It's a comedy about Dionysus. It was first performed at the Lenaea festival in Athens."

The bard sat and shook her head at the Conqueror's knowledge. "For somebody that acted like the arts were Hades, you know a lot."

Xena noted the flow of patrons were entering the theater and took seats. She leaned closer to the bard and murmured, "And don't tell anybody."

The bard smirked and glanced over the stage that was so close to her. She wiggled around on the stone seat and muttered, "Can I make a recommendation for the Theater of Dionysus when we build it?"

"Mmmm?"

"We should have cushions."

The Conqueror's eyes glowed as she peered down at her partner. "We could charge extra for that."

Gabrielle laughed at the ruler's constant ability to find revenue in anything. "You would really do that."

"Sure, it's a luxury, right?" The Conqueror shrugged. "No luxury is free." Then the circulating whispers around her caught her ear.

Gabrielle scanned the audience and noticed people were pointing at her lover then her. She dramatically sighed, however she wasn't too concerned about it. If it was one thing she could count on it was Xena's ability to chase off any annoyance with one of her threatening looks.

So Gabrielle became very comfortable since the play would be soon. She had a silly smile on her face when she thought about the Conqueror's plans for tonight. If Gabrielle didn't know any better, she was positive that her partner had an undercurrent of romance in her. For this bard, this was a romantic night in her scrolls, and Xena was right about actions speaking louder than words on this night.

## Chapter 4 - The Cult

Queen Gabrielle was briskly walking through the palace and headed to the south wing, to her room. She was pleased that her meeting with Cleopatra had gone well. The relations between the Amazon Nation and Egypt would most likely benefit one another. It was still slightly early to tell since Artemisia had no port to utilize, however it was only a matter of time.

What did send Gabrielle off in a bewildered mode was Queen Cleopatra's parting questions or rather statements. Cleopatra had a way of rattling her with offhand questions or comments, and Gabrielle wasn't sure how to handle it. Also it didn't help that Gabrielle hadn't slept well the past couple of nights and yesterday had been wearing. Yesterday she, Xena, and the Egyptian Queen spent most of their time outside, under the hot sun, and went over the resources the realm required to build the Corinth City Academy of the Performing Bards. Gabrielle realized just how lavished her partner planned to make the academy compared to its predecessor, but she should have known when it came to Xena.

The bard finally entered the room and was surprised to find Xena in mid motions of donning her leathers. She faintly smiled at her partner then neared her so that she could help with the armor.

The Conqueror eyed her partner and noticed the darkness under her eyes. She knew Gabrielle's nights of sleep were growing more and more restless. Xena's nights were becoming restless as well because she awoke each time to comfort her partner.

"Need some help?" After Xena pulled on her bronze armor, Gabrielle stepped in and maneuvered the buckles of the swirling armor. She truly adored the ruler in this matching armor, gauntlets, bracers, and greaves because it made Xena glow so different than the Conqueror persona. Then Gabrielle had spotted M'Lila's necklace around the ruler's neck again; it made Gabrielle wistfully smile.

"How'd the meeting go?" the ruler questioned. She quietly took a moment to hook her chakram into place.

"It went well."

The Conqueror picked out the note of hesitation or concern in the bard's tone. She twisted her head but couldn't get a full view of her lover, who was behind her back. "Something happened."

Gabrielle sighed because she was amazed Xena was figuring her out this well. "Can I ask you about something?" She slowly worked on the last two buckles. She took the silent response as her cue to ask. "Cleopatra asked me if..." Gabrielle stopped and tried to properly recall the exact words, which made her nervous to ask. "She asked me if I enjoy how you take me like a man does a woman. What in the gods' names is she talking about?" She finished the last buckle and waited for an answer while her stomach knotted. She slowly sensed the tension rising in the ruler.

The Conqueror stepped away and picked up her boots from their empty packs. She then silently took a chair and quietly worked to get her boots on and laced.

The bard turned and faced her seated partner. She truly wondered if she'd get any answer so she figured she'd push her luck. "Xena?"

The Conqueror kept her head bowed, and she roughly yanked on her leather laces. She finished her first boot then peered up with hooded eyes. She really didn't want to discuss the topic, yet she could tell the bard wanted an explanation. "Cleopatra is just digging up old, dead memories." She lowered her head back down and started her next boot.

Gabrielle waited a few beats while she read her lover's body language. She then interpreted the answer more carefully. "How... how'd you... how'd you do that with her?" She wasn't sure if she'd exactly phrased the question right because she felt rather lost and beating a bush.

The Conqueror finished her right boot then stood up to her full and intimidating height. She twisted to her left and picked up her bracers from the table. She slowly put them on while she spoke. "It's in the past, Gabrielle... where it should be." She took her gauntlets next. "That's where I prefer to leave it."

The bard shifted her weight around on her feet as she debated what to do. She made her choice and nodded. She walked away as her hands combed her hair back.

The Conqueror finished getting ready by clipping her sword on her back then she glimpsed at the bard. She idly watched her lover check over her scroll satchel. She inwardly sighed, but she took a moment to openly admire her partner's new outfit she'd picked up in the emporium the other day.

Gabrielle had selected the white outfit that was a matching two piece skirt and top. The long white skirt reached to her ankles and had slits that ran up the front middle until they made it to the gold belt. Then her white top just neatly hid Gabrielle's breasts but clearly emphasized her cleavage. It left her stomach bare, her shoulders mostly bare, and her back quite open. Then she wore white arm bands that had gold trim to match the gold design in the skirt and top. The Conqueror truly found the Egyptian styled outfit sexy and appealing on the bard.

The bard finished with her satchel then she turned her head around and back. "You're going to practice with Najara and her squad?"

The ruler now stood just behind her lover. "Yes." Without thought, she rested her strong hands on Gabrielle's hips. "Did you want to join?"

Gabrielle seriously considered it, but she truly wanted to go down to the Library of Alexandria. She also felt too worn for staff practice plus her focus was some place else. "I don't think so," she murmured.

The ruler could tell her partner most likely had other needs right now. The possibility of personal space and time were occasionally important to the bard, and she accepted that wholly. "You'll go to the library?" After the bard's nod, she softly requested,

"Take some Amazons?"

The Amazon Queen turned after she adjusted the scroll satchel at her side. "I've already asked Amarice and Jarine to come, and I think the others want to practice with you."

The Conqueror was somewhat surprised and her right eyebrow slowly lifted. "What of Xavier? We need to talk to him tonight."

The bard lifted the strap off her shoulder, brought it over her head, and let it rest on her opposite shoulder. "How about tomorrow? I'm not feeling up to it today." Once Xena agreed, she cautiously asked, "You don't mind the Amazons sparring with you, do you?"

"Not at all." The Conqueror then revealed a dark grin. "It should be fun."

"For you maybe," Gabrielle teased. Then an after thought came to Gabrielle so she tilted her head. "You're not punishing Najara for what happened to the other day?"

The Conqueror detected the concern in her partner's face, yet she honestly answered, "She did not fulfill her duty to protect you."

Gabrielle sighed and touched the ruler's bare forearm. "Come on, Xena it was a mistake."

"And a mistake can cost lives," the ruler rebuked.

"It was my fault... I shouldn't have taken off like I did without telling somebody."

The Conqueror knew that was a mistake on the bard's part, however she believed Gabrielle already learned her lesson in that respect. She now felt as if her dekarchos required a lesson. "It doesn't change the fact that she didn't fulfill her duty. If I let her continue to think her mistake was okay then she may repeat herself."

The bard took a patient breath then wondered about another aspect. "Why don't you like her? She's a good fighter."

"Indeed," the ruler murmured then she honestly stated, "I don't like who she pretends to be."

"Maybe she's just trying to find her path in life," Gabrielle argued, "Maybe that's why she came to Greece."

The Conqueror shook her head. "She follows whatever path she fixates on at the time."

"Then what is she fixating on?" the bard argued.

The Conqueror waited a beat as she considered how Gabrielle would react. She was always honest so she simply replied, "You."

Gabrielle dropped her head and shook it. "Xena, Najara and I are friends." She peered up into crystal blue eyes.

"You tell her that," the ruler forcefully ordered. "Then you'll see who she really is." She walked away and went closer to the door.

The bard followed, but her temper was far from the surface and mostly because she was weary. "She already knows, Xena."

The Conqueror stood by the door, and she pointed at the bard. "I'm sure she says all the right things to you." She then lowered her hand and challenged, "If you don't believe me about her then test her. Say 'no' to her, and she'll blow up in your face." She held the door's handle and when the bard was close to her, she softly confided, "She absolutely despises following my orders."

Gabrielle stood still near her partner, and her face was tight. "I've never noticed it."

"That's because you're not looking for it." The Conqueror went silent then released a soft sigh. "Enough about Najara."

The bard mutually agreed by coming closer and placed a hand on the ruler's leather hip. It was her hidden signal to show she would relent.

Xena moved away from the door and faced her lover. She slipped her arms around the bard and drew her in to her body. She lowered her head then gentleness took her. "Be careful at the library."

Gabrielle chuckled and lifted her head off the ruler's chest. "What trouble could I get into at the library?" When the ruler gave her that dubious look, Gabrielle squeezed the ruler extra hard. "Trouble comes to me, I don't go to it."

The Conqueror rolled her eyes, which earned her a light slap on her backside. "I should send the Egyptian army with you."

"Funny, funny." Gabrielle placed a light kiss on Xena's chest. "Enjoy your time with the squad. And knock 'em down for me."

The Conqueror deeply laughed then huskily promised, "With pleasure." She freed her right hand and hooked the bard's chin. She stole a warm kiss then she guided the bard out of the room. At the atrium, she separated the bard once she knew the two Amazon guards were with Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen and her two escorts went across the city to the Royal Library of Alexandria, which had recently been repaired from a fire. And during the trek through the city, Gabrielle had received some eerie sensation that she just couldn't shake. She continually checked her surroundings, yet she couldn't pinpoint what it was that bothered her. She also noticed neither Amarice nor Jarine were bothered by anything so she decided it was her weariness that played her.

When they came to grand steps of the library, it took many strides to ascend them, and instantly they were stopped by the doors. There were four Egyptian guards at the door

and in their native tongue they informed the foreigners they could not enter.

"Does anybody speak Egyptian?" Amarice challenged.

The bard tried to assess what the problem was as she tried to decipher the guards' faces.

One guard realized the foreigners couldn't speak Egyptian at all so he lowered his spear, which his comrades mimicked. He then stepped up to Jarine and pointed at her sword behind her back. He shook his head.

"Oooh," the bard murmured. "No weapons." She then faced her Amazons. "Why don't you two stay out here?"

Amarice and Jarine exchanged glances then Jarine spoke first. "Why don't I leave my sword with Amarice."

"I'll wait here," the younger Amazon agreed.

After the queen's nod, Jarine unhooked her sword and gave it to Amarice. She then removed her dagger from her right boot and handed that over too. She then stepped up to the guards with her arms held out.

The same guard stepped forward and carefully patted her hips then knelt to check her boots. He stood up, nodded, and waved them to go inside the library.

"We'll try not to be long, Amarice," the queen promised.

Amarice hoped not because she knew she'd get bored, yet she moved her head in understanding. She watched Jarine follow the queen into the gigantic library. After they were gone, she wandered back down the steps but sat on the last one, and she placed Jarine's sword across her lap. She sighed and glanced up at the noon high sun.

Queen Gabrielle and Jarine briskly walked through the gigantic library. The bard scanned all over and was impressed by the immense collection that surpassed anything she'd ever seen. She tried to imagine if the library in Corinth would be anything like this, and she hoped so.

Gabrielle walked closer to her Amazon and softly mentioned, "I really want to go to the original part. There's a temple to the Muses there."

"The Muses are in Egyptian religion too?" Jarine was somewhat astounded.

The bard chuckled and shook her head. "No, they're the Greek Muses actually. Ptolemy II had the temple first built then later the library was added."

"Oooh." Jarine thoughtfully smiled when she understood some of the history.

"You know how the library gained such a large collection?" the bard questioned. When the Amazon negatively moved her head, Gabrielle stepped closer and explained the collection's history. "Ptolemy III ordered that any visitors that came to Alexandria

were required to hand over any books or scrolls in their possession then copies were made." She paused and considered a piece of rumor she knew. "The other interesting thing was that supposedly the copies were so exact to the originals that the copies were actually returned to the owners and the originals kept here."

Jarine quietly laughed, but she admired the idea. "No wonder the library is so huge." She observed the countless scroll shelves and book shelves, which stretched down for so long and created narrow aisles. "I wonder if one can ever find the time to read all these...?"

The bard sadly smiled at the shelves as she passed them. "I don't think so." She then gazed ahead and noticed the open doors to the temple of the Muses, and she grew excited. "Let's go in."

Jarine kept following, but her head was turned to the right. She came up short when something caught her eye.

Gabrielle realized her Amazon had stopped so she turned around. She observed the very peculiar expression on the Amazon's face.

"My queen, you should see this." Jarine turned then quickly strolled down between two shelves.

The Amazon Queen hastily followed as her gate widened considerably. Then what had caught Jarine's attention now drew to hers. Gabrielle tilted her head back as she grew closer to the end of the aisle, and her eyes widened.

Just where the ceiling and the wall at the end met, there were black Greek letters carved into the wall. The first was chi then the next Greek letter was epsilon, and the third nu. Finally the fourth Greek letter filled the bard's vision and it was the alpha letter.

Jarine stood near the end of the aisle and very slowly she read from left to right. She then murmured, "By Artemis..."

Gabrielle sucked in her breath then read the entire phrase across the very long wall. She slowly released her breath and stared at her lover's name, ?e?a, just above her head.

Jarine could tell that Gabrielle had no idea, especially by the expression on the queen's face. "Did she tell you about this?"

"No," Gabrielle uttered. Again she read the dedication phrase on the wall, which clearly stated that the very long shelves set against the wall contained countless scrolls that were donated by Xena of Amphipolis, Greece. She walked forward and then gingerly withdrew a random scroll.

Jarine copied her queen's actions, and she carefully untied the ribbon. She slowly unrolled the scroll then her eyebrows drew together when the author's name jumped off the scroll. She sharply turned her head to the queen.

Gabrielle gasped then she almost dropped the scroll to the floor. She hastily caught it before it hit the stone floor, but she continued to tremble when she stared at her duplicated handwriting. She then peered up at Jarine in awe.

Jarine tilted her scroll in confirmation of what the queen may have been thinking.

"By the... gods," the bard gasped, and she looked between her and Jarine's scrolls, which both had her name and duplicated writing style. Gabrielle knew these scrolls were both reform doctrines that she'd written many moons back before she befriended the ruler. She shook her head then carefully rolled the scroll back up.

Jarine did the same and put the scroll back. She then pointed at the symbol for Gamma at the top. She suspected that the entire shelf contained mostly or all of the queen's scrolls. She then studied the ruler's name just above, and she leaned closer to Gabrielle. "What's the likely hood that your scrolls ended up just underneath her name?"

The Amazon Queen grunted. She realized she had a major discussion setup between her and the Conqueror when she returned to the palace. She could only imagine when these scrolls were brought to Egypt, why, and when she would have heard about it from the Conqueror herself. She suspected the Conqueror had left it up to her to discover it, and she had done so.

Jarine and Gabrielle continued back to the temple after they were finished being impressed by the extensive donation Xena had given Alexandria. The Amazon Queen then was astounded again by the beauty of the temple to the Muses. She'd never seen a temple so extensively lavished, and it was very well maintained. She suspected that not only did the library care for it but so did the Egyptian government. It seemed as if recent work had been done to the altar area and the statues recently redone. Gabrielle assumed that Queen Cleopatra most likely frequented to the library to study and learn.

Gabrielle then decided it was best to go and not leave Amarice alone any longer. She wanted badly to stay but since no weapons were allowed, she didn't want to jeopardize anybody and especially after the last incident. When she came outside, she scanned around for Amarice and didn't spot her at first.

Jarine tried to find the young Amazon but became concerned when she stood at the top of the steps. She turned to her queen. "Where is she?"

Queen Gabrielle narrowed her eyes and quietly murmured, "I don't know."

"She may have wandered off," Jarine offered. "She has a tendency to get bored."

Jarine's idea didn't satisfy the bard at all so she approached the four guards. She went directly to the same guard that'd been friendlier the last time. Gabrielle tried to think of a way to question the guard. "Do you know where my friend went?" She then pointed at the steps where she suspected Amarice had been waiting.

The guard shook his head at the bard, and he was clearly confused.

Gabrielle became somewhat agitated because she was worried. "The girl." She pointed

at Jarine for her example. "Where?"

Again the guard shook his head and became even more bewildered.

"What's the problem?" a woman asked who was coming out of the library. She noticed the failing discussion between the foreigner and the guard.

The bard was relieved when the strange approached her. "Hi, I'm Gabrielle."

The woman slightly eyed the foreigner when she heard the Hebrew name, but she made no comment.

"My friend and I went into the library," Gabrielle carefully explained, "and another friend of ours was waiting out here. She's not here now so I wanted to see if one of these guards knew what happened to her." She hoped her long winded explanation would pay off.

The woman slightly smiled and turned to the guard. Then in perfect Egyptian, she questioned the guard.

Gabrielle felt calmer now that she'd get an answer. She listened to the guard's response despite she couldn't understand it.

The woman grew peculiar but translated it to the foreigner. "It seems your friend disappeared down that street." She pivoted to her right then pointed at the street. "Down that way."

The bard frowned as she wondered what Amarice was thinking in leaving. She offered the stranger a smile and said, "Thank you very much." She then furrowed her eyebrows. "I... I didn't catch your name."

The darkly skinned woman chuckled and quickly apologized then held out her hand. "I am Meridian."

"Thank you again, Meridian." Gabrielle finished the handshake.

"You're welcome. Good luck finding your friend." Meridian pleasantly smiled and watched the two foreigners hurry down the steps. She tilted her head while her eyes followed the foreigners because she couldn't guess if they'd find their other friend.

The bard grumbled and mentioned to Jarine, "I swear to Artemis if Amarice just took off I'm going to tie her to the bow of the ship on the way back to Greece."

Jarine laughed, and she mentally pictured the young Amazon just in that spot. "She may have learned that habit from somebody else, my queen."

Gabrielle shot the Amazon a dark look, which didn't deter the Amazon. However she focused back on her mission to find the young Amazon.

Back north in Alexandra, the port took on a new merchant vessel and when it docked a lightly dressed soldier hopped onto the dock. Then without delay, he bounded down

the dock and his boots' echoes followed him. In his right hand, he briskly held a rolled up scroll that carried the purple seal of the Greek Realm. He easily maneuvered around the sailors and captains on the docks then he came onto land. He paused then scanned the horizon until he spotted the beautiful palaces to the east. He sighted his destination.

On the grounds of the palace, the Conqueror continued her training objectives with the squad. She could tell they'd become slightly lazy since leaving Greece, but she quickly reminded them they were always on duty. Then her major objective went to plan when she ordered the squad to rest but for Najara to stay. She then ordered the four Amazons to practice against Najara; four against one.

The Conqueror stood off to the side and merely watched the agitated dekarchos spar against the well skilled Amazons. The Conqueror kept passive yet inside she was smirking at Najara's slowly weakening state. She planned to conclude the practice by sparring alone against Najara. Then from the palace's back entrance, she spotted a Grecian dressed soldier speaking to Cheops and hastily descended the steps.

The soldier immediately spotted the Greek ruler, and he broke into a jog for her.

The Conqueror walked around the sparring women when she eyed the sealed scroll in the soldier's hand. She quickly met him halfway across the grounds.

"My liege, I was sent by Commander Meleager to deliver word to you, and this." The soldier held out the seal message.

The ruler accepted the scroll then broke the seal quickly. "Tell me."

The soldier took a deep breath and quickly explained why he was sent. "There is an uprising in Britannia." He paused when the ruler's ice eyes met him then lowered back to the open scroll. "Britannia Prima has taken arms and overthrown the archon." The soldier noticed the Conqueror was listening and reading at the same time so he continued. "Flavia Caesariensissi has threatened to join the rebellion." "Has the commander sent Classis Britannica to Londinum?"

"Yes, my liege. The fleet has seized the city and that is what holds the state at bay." The soldier put his hands behind his back.

"Excellent," the ruler murmured, "as long as we have the heart then Britannia cannot breathe." The Conqueror continued to read then she generally gazed over the map that'd been drawn below. It showed the stationed legions in Britannia, the direction Classis Britannica was planned to sail, and where the commander expected to send the legions to the fight the stationed enemies.

"There is also another concern, my liege," the soldier brought up, and he sounded nervous.

The ruler lowered the scroll then met the soldier's gaze. "Yes?"

"There are confirmed reports that the rebellion faction in Britannia has sent spies here to Egypt."

The Conqueror stiffened and something dark crept into the pit of her stomach. "When was this heard?"

"The commander discovered this news only two days after your departure to Egypt." The soldier stepped closer then softly added, "My liege, the commander instructed me to inform you that these spies were in Corinth before your departure. The commander has requested that you return to Greece on a steadfast route as he's concerned they may attempt assassination while you're on foreign soil."

The Conqueror's jaw went set, and she quickly realized if that was the spies' objective that they would have attempted it by now. There'd been too many right moments that'd past since their arrival. She stepped closer to the soldier and hotly ordered, "You keep this word to yourself."

The soldier stiffened, but he bowed his head. "Yes, my liege."

The Conqueror was about to give the soldier further instructions, but her orders went dead. That dark, gnawing sensation in her stomach suddenly overwhelmed her. She abruptly turned and barked out, "Dekarchos, gather your squad!" She then disappeared from the soldier's side and approached the Amazons at a jog. "I would advise you four to come along with us."

"What's going on?" Vara questioned as she'd never seen such a shift in the ruler. She sensed something inhuman flowing off the ruler.

"There's no time to explain." The Conqueror glanced at the approaching squad and simply said to the Amazons, "The queen will need you." She then hotly commanded the squad to follow her. She wasted no time and broke into a faster run for the palace.

The bewildered Amazons glanced between each other but became too worried to argue anymore. They sheathed their swords then chased after the Greek squad and blew past the confused messenger soldier. Cheops also joined despite he didn't know what was happening. He followed the Conqueror through the palace and out the main entrance, but he made sure to order four of the six guards by the entrance to join them. Cheops ordered the four guards to join the Greek squad then he ran faster and caught up to the Conqueror.

The Conqueror seemed calm on the exterior, yet the threatening fire in her stomach engulfed her.

Cheops edged closer and quietly asked, "Where are we going, Conqueror?"

"To the library," the ruler simply answered.

Cheops knew that's where Queen Gabrielle should be located. He could tell something was far out of place because the Greek ruler never acted this way. He dodged around a few people, but the people in the streets started to part like water. Cheops glanced at the ruler's dark features then he offered, "Go ahead of us... we're slowing you."

The Conqueror exchanged a quick look with him. She nodded. "I'll give you a cry to

locate me."

"Go," the Egyptian warrior urged.

The Conqueror waited no longer as she broke into an incredible run. She targeted a wagon straight ahead then a merchant's stall just beyond it. She smirked. Then with six wide strides, she gave a piercing warcry and launched her body.

Cheops stared in awe as the Greek ruler flew through the air, hit the wagon, laughed off of it, bounced from the merchant's stall, and finally tucked into a ball rocketed through the air.

The Conqueror's cry echoed over several blocks until she landed neatly on the roof of a house. She glanced back at Cheops, the squad, and the Amazons that tried to desperately weave through the people. The Conqueror turned and continued her powerful sprint, but when she came to the ledge, she launched herself again and landed on the next roof top.

The Conqueror continued her fast journey across the roof tops and the destination was just ahead of her. The Royal Library stood out among so many things in the city. As the Conqueror hastily jumped from roof to roof, that gnawing darkness became a carnal darkness that made her heartbeat wild. What she didn't notice was as she grew closer to the library the bright her Gaelic necklace became.

Finally the library was only a few roof top hops away, and the Conqueror paused a block away from the library. She stood on the edge of the roof, and she scanned the area. She relied on her senses, which already told her that Gabrielle wasn't in the library.

Gabrielle continued her frantic run down the barren street, but she glimpsed back over her shoulder. She didn't see anything but that didn't settle her wild fears. She never felt so much panic in her life after what she'd witnessed.

The bard rounded a corner and came into a mass of people, and several people stared wide eye at her. Gabrielle knew it was because she was blotched in blood, but it wasn't hers. She didn't care and tried to get around the people. She ended up shoving some people out of the way, and they yelled at her.

Gabrielle slowed down into a fast walk because she was almost out of breath. She came to a stop when her emotions swept over her. She broke down crying, and her head dipped forward when the onslaught of new memories controlled her. "Oh gods."

The bard desperately tried to take control as she stumbled forward. She then heard a sharp scream of voices when two swords were drawn behind her. Gabrielle slowly turned around then her red eyes focused on the two men several hundred paces away. Fear and panic drowned the bard, and she stumbled back once.

The men quickly pursued the fearful bard, and they took a few steps then broke into a run.

Gabrielle screamed for help but none of the people reacted. She willed her legs and

returned to her earlier run, but she felt the men right behind her. She was too weakened from all the running and her lack of focus made her pay. She missed sight of something on the street so she fell face down and skidded a couple of paces.

The Amazon Queen put her hands under her body and tried to get up. When her back came up a certain amount, a sharp sword point pressed into her skin. She held her breath and closed her eyes. She listened to the boot steps that went around her and came to the front of her. Then a cold blade was under her chin and lifted her head up. Gabrielle opened her eyes and met the cold face of one of her pursuers.

The man said nothing but simply lifted his chin in a faint signal to get up.

Gabrielle tried but the pointed blade in her back made her stop. She didn't like the fact it wouldn't move so she peered up with hooded eyes at the other man.

The man behind her simply smirked and started to push his blade down.

The bard cried out when the blade neatly cut through her skin just between her shoulder blades. She dug her nails into the dirt then her tears ran down her face again. She never knew such dread in her life as this didn't even compare to when she faced the Conqueror at her worst. This was new and purely evil.

The man pulled his blade back finally then grinned at how the woman stopped screaming instantly. He then glanced at his comrade, who shook his head once. He sighed then pulled his blade away from the woman.

Gabrielle clenched her hands then commanded her body to get up. She wouldn't lay here like this. She could feel the blood ooze down her back while she slowly climbed to her feet. She scanned the fearful faces of the people, who would not help or move. She closed her eyes once she stood.

"Go," one man ordered. He pointed his sword back in the direction Gabrielle had run from originally.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth then opened her stinging eyes. She placed one boot in front of the other and began the slowly walk back to that place she'd escaped.

The men followed behind and kept their swords at their sides. They were by no means natives to the Egyptian lands so they stood out much like the Amazon Queen.

Each step made Gabrielle's frantic dread return. Images flashed through her head, and she almost became sick. She couldn't go back there. Suddenly, she broke into a run again, and the men's yells followed her. She heard them chase her again, but she was still too weak.

One man caught up to her, and he jumped for her. He landed on top of her back then rolled on the street with her until he was on top of her. He smirked at the woman's bloody face, but he lifted his sword's hilt.

Gabrielle closed her eyes tightly and prepared for the blow.

The man brought the hilt down but some eerie cry made his blow go wild.

The bard took the weakened strike on her left temple, which cracked her skin open but didn't make her unconscious. Her vision briefly fuzzed over, and she watched in a daze as the man on her suddenly disappeared. The heavy weight on her hips was gone then a distant din of swords striking wavered by her.

Gabrielle rolled onto her right side and moaned. She closed her eyes and willed the pain to all stop. She tried to imagine the only place she could feel safe, in the Conqueror's arms. She believed she made it so real that she truly felt the ruler's strong arms move about her then the ruler's voice drew her further. The Conqueror's voice kept repeating her name in a frantic manner, too frantic.

"Gabrielle, Gabrielle? Hey, I'm here. Come on."

The Amazon Queen's head was lifted into a warm lap, and all she smelled was leather and that familiar spice. Gabrielle then drew her eyes open when a warm hand touched her cheek, and it felt too real. She stared up into beautiful eyes that surpassed the sky far beyond them. "Xena?" She coughed then stretched up her right hand.

The Conqueror caught the bard's hand and held tightly. "It's me." She had her head bowed over the bard's. "You're safe now."

Gabrielle closed her eyes then relieved tears broke from her eyes.

The Conqueror briefly glimpsed up and scanned the faceless people that circled her, Gabrielle, and the two dead men. She ignored them and focused on the bard in her lap. "Are you okay?" She quickly moved her hands over her partner's body, yet she didn't detect anything broken.

The bard opened her reddened eyes then rasped, "They killed Jarine." She tried to get up but felt too weak.

The ruler quickly helped her lover get up onto her knees. She held the bard closer and gently demanded, "Who?"

"I don't know," Gabrielle fearfully whispered. She shook her head then clung to the ruler. "They... they have Amarice. They were..." Gabrielle's burning tears returned, and she begged. "We have to save Amarice please, Xena."

The Conqueror never heard her partner this frantic and scared. "Do you know where she is?"

The bard heaved for some air so that it'd calm her. She nodded.

The ruler didn't say anything to it because she believed it. She instead dropped her head back, closed her eyes, and inhaled a deep breath until her chest filled.

Gabrielle listened to the sharp, long battle cry that her partner gave out, and she'd never heard such a cry from her partner. She realized it was a very specific battle cry most likely.

"Can you stand?" the ruler asked after she took a long inhale from the cry.

"I think so." Gabrielle slowly rose to her feet with Xena's help.

The Conqueror balanced her lover then she quickly did another inspection of the bard's body. She felt stricken at seeing the coated blood on the small woman's body.

Gabrielle murmured, "Its mostly Jarine's." She swallowed when the memories caused a lump in her throat. "They just... gutted her open... like some fish."

Xena pulled the bard into her arms then murmured, "It'll be alright." She then separated when she heard the fearful people quickly dispersing.

Cheops and Najara hastily approached with the squad and Amazons behind them.

"By the gods," Cheops rasped.

The dekarchos came closer to Gabrielle but stopped short upon the ruler's imposing form. "Are you okay, Gabrielle?"

The bard only nodded.

The shocked Amazons instantly encircled their queen and checked over her.

"Where's Jarine and Amarice?" Vara carefully questioned the queen.

Gabrielle shook her head then touched the ruler's arm in hidden signal for help.

The Conqueror stepped closer then asked, "Do you want to go back while I deal with this?"

"No," Gabrielle quickly but quietly replied and added, "We need to hurry before..."

Xena didn't wait for the finish of the sentence. She instead ordered, "We still have to find Amarice. Follow me and Queen Gabrielle." She then softly ordered Gabrielle to stay close to her.

Cheops ordered the Egyptian guards to stay behind and deal with the dead men. He then ordered the remaining two to join them. He then caught up to the Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle, but he didn't ask questions.

Gabrielle was walking fast but then the thoughts of Amarice's life made her run.

The Conqueror increased her strides into a run so that she stayed at the queen's side. She sensed her stomach tighten with anticipation of what may lie ahead. Whatever had transcended since Gabrielle had left her at the palace had greatly shaken the bard, who had seen and survived much in her life.

Queen Gabrielle easily recalled the journey through the familiar streets. The pounding her heart reached into her ears so she went faster. The surge of adrenaline helped her

move forward. Just ahead, she spotted the narrow alley that led to her destination. She glimpsed up at her partner.

The Conqueror understood so she signalled everybody behind them.

Najara unsheathed her sword then her squad agreed with a dim of unsheathing.

Cheops extracted his broad sword as well then gave it a spin at his side.

Gabrielle pointed at the left street. "They're down there."

The Conqueror understood so her long strides carried her ahead of her partner. She withdrew her sword from its scabbard and rounded the corner. The same anger she'd felt when she first saw Gabrielle being attacked returned to her. When she entered the dead-end alley, at the other end there were three seeming guards that all were suddenly panicked at seeing the dark warrior coming at them followed by a tidal of Greek soldiers.

The ruler gave out her fierce warcry then came at the enemy.

One of the three guards, closest to the heavy wood door, pounded on it then he joined in the fight. He, like his comrades, gave a sharp cry then prepared to meet his death against the ruler.

Gabrielle stood back, with her Amazons, as her partner, Cheops, and the soldiers dealt with the enemy. She turned her head away when death rang from the three men's lips. She lifted her head when two Greek soldiers braced against the well armored wood door.

The Conqueror could hear several voices inside of the building and plenty of frenzied movement. She quickly became a mix of worry and anger because she couldn't imagine what was happening beyond the door. She knew Amarice's life was at risk. She ordered the soldiers to back away from the door.

The Conqueror was a half a step away from the door. She inhaled deeply, gave a sharp battle cry, and then performed a scissor kick.

The heavy door exploded into pieces and went all over inside of the dark building.

The Conqueror raced into the dimly lit building.

The Greek soldiers followed and flooded into the room but took a moment to adjust to the darkness.

The Conqueror was faster to it, and she bared her teeth when she realized whoever had been inside were now gone. She then held her breath when her eyes focused on the swinging, upside down battleaxe in front of her face. The entire building glinted with steel from sharp objects.

"We need to find Amarice," Xena ordered to the group.

A sharp scream cut through the dark building then it was followed by a woman's pleas for help.

The Conqueror quickly followed the cries, and as she went deeper into the building a very familiar stench filled her. Under different circumstances, she would normally relish such a scent but not today. The soldier's heavy footsteps followed her, and the Conqueror finally closed in on the screams.

Next to a prison cell on the floor, there was a metal grate door, which was hinged on one side and padlocked on the other. Then flaying arms protruded out of the open grids of the sealed lid.

"Help! Gods help!" Amarice screamed. Then she lifted her cold body up higher in the water so that her face pressed against the bars of the lid. She gasped for air, but soon she'd run out. The Conqueror suddenly appeared in her vision. "Please get me out of here!"

The Conqueror quickly assessed that the young Amazon was in a water torture. Soon the small prison Amarice was trapped in would overflow with freezing water then Amarice would either drown or suffer hypothermia.

The Greek soldiers all encircled the Conqueror and the trapped Amazon.

"Just stay calm, Amarice," the ruler urged. "You'll be out in a beat." She quickly made a decision on how to handle it. She turned to Najara and ordered, "I need you to take Amarice's hands. Hold her up as high as you can. I'm going to get the door off then once I have it free you'll need to release her."

The dekarchos nodded her head. She moved into position on the right side of the gate door. She bent over and grabbed the Amazon's hands. "Hold tight, Amarice."

The Conqueror already had her hands on the bars of the locked door. She gritted her teeth then with her arm and leg strength she surged her strength upwards.

Amarice felt the salty, cold water under her chin. She closed her eyes when the water came to the tip of her nose then she sucked in all the air she could. She closed her eyes and prayed to Artemis.

The locked door started to give way to the powerful ruler. The hinges snapped off then the abrupt loss caused the lock to fly apart into pieces.

The Conqueror let out a low growl as she lifted the gate up higher.

Najara quickly released the Amazon's hands but with worry for the Amazon.

Amarice instantly plunged into the cold, dark water but then two strong hands grabbed her arms. She flew out of the water, and the air nipped at her chilled skin.

The Conqueror had Amarice all the way out of the water chamber then she had Amarice in her arms safely. She felt how cold the Amazon was because of the water. She knew Amarice needed to warm up and quickly so she shoved through her men

and went outside.

Gabrielle had been in the doorway when she saw what'd happened. She backed out quickly when her partner came towards her. She helped Xena get Amarice down on the ground and in the hot sunlight.

The bard sat on the ground and placed the young Amazon's head into her lap. She then carefully moved Amarice's soaked hair out of her face. She became grim at seeing Amarice's blue lips.

The Conqueror hastily inspected Amarice's body for further injuries. "Have you been hurt, Amarice?"

The shaking Amazon murmured, "N-n-no." She balled up when the ruler finished her inspection, and she wrapped her arms around her body.

The ruler peered up at her partner and softly ordered, "Keep her warm, rub her skin, and she'll feel better soon."

Gabrielle nodded then before her lover got up, she touched Xena's arm. "Thank you."

The Conqueror paused, but she briefly nodded and backed away when the other Amazons surrounded. She then reentered the dark building. She neared the group, who were scanning the contents of the building.

Finally, Xena had a chance to completely absorb what the purpose of the building was, and it wasn't good. She curtly commanded, "Stand guard outside, men. Najara, Cheops... stay with me."

The squad soldiers filed out of the building and stood guard in the alley as well as at the end of the alley.

Cheops stood silently beside the Greek ruler, just like Najara. He surveyed everything then uttered, "I've never seen anything like this."

The Conqueror's jaw flexed a few times because she'd seen this plenty in her time. She counted roughly ten prison cells that each carried out a particular torture.

Then hanging from the ceiling on ropes or hooks were certain torture accessories or weapons. There were several types of blades such as simple knives, swords, or daggers. Other items included long metal rods that had extremely sharp points, which hung next to hammers that would drive the rods into somebody's body. There were several whips of various lengths and styles. A rack of spears against the opposite wall from the cells.

The Conqueror cautiously neared a typical bar cell. She narrowed her eyes as she took in the chains that were built into the wall. She tilted her head as she stared at the visible blood splatter that washed over the wall.

Cheops came to the next cell, which contained a rack for ripping apart one's bones and ligaments slowly.

Najara stood in front of a very strange bronze statue of a bull. She spotted an open door to the stomach of the metal bull. She peered in then the insides of the bull made her jump back in shock. Najara gasped and covered her pounding chest with her freehand.

The Conqueror neared the dekarchos. She studied the charred skull that rested on top of a mix of ashes, blackened bones, and most likely melted skin. She turned her head to the soldier. "It's called a brazen bull. It was invented by King Phalaris of Sicily several hundred Helical Risings ago." She folded her arms over her chest then stared into the dark belly of the bull. "The head of the bull is designed with special tubes so that when the victim screams it sounds like the bull is bellowing." She paused, tilted her head, and casually mentioned, "King Phalaris didn't want the victim's screams to disturb his dinner."

Cheops had appeared near them. He kept shaking his head.

Najara licked her lips then peered up at the ruler.

The Conqueror said nothing else but walked past and neared something that truly caught her attention. She stopped in front of a very crude wood altar, which seemed well used.

Najara stood beside the ruler but slightly behind. She whispered, "A cult?"

"It would seem so," the ruler softly agreed. She stepped up to the simple altar when she couldn't resist anymore. At the head of the altar rested a clean dagger that was round in nature with a matching round handle.

The Conqueror picked up the sacrificial dagger from the black and red cloth. She carefully inspected the dagger's design and recognized the Gaelic knot work on the handle. By the gods it had to be impossible, the Conqueror desperately thought. She continued to turn over the dagger in her hands.

Najara studied the dagger too then a bright light caught her eye. She stared in surprise at the Conqueror's necklace.

The ruler sensed it now, and she lifted her necklace's charm with her left hand.

Cheops glanced at the bright Gaelic charm in the ruler's palm then at the used altar. He whispered, "There is something evil here." He pressed his fingertips against the wood altar then murmured, "I've never seen anything like this in Egypt."

The Conqueror lowered M'Lila's necklace to her chest again then stared at the altar. "I have seen something like this." She raised her left arm up, tilted her hand back, and then she slipped the dagger down her gaiter. "Cheops, I'm going to leave some men here to guard this building."

"I doubt the cult will be back," Cheops remarked.

Najara idly listened, but she walked away. She spotted a slumped body in one corner

so she went to it. She suck in her breath then held it. She stared at the dead, gutted Amazon.

The Conqueror stood several paces behind the dekarchos and visually inspected the dead Amazon, Jarine, completely gutted and her intestines strung across the stone floor. She could tell the kill had been recent if they hadn't even had time to clean up the mess.

Cheops swallowed his temper down. He did not wish to report this to Queen Cleopatra because of the obvious carnal habits of this cult. But he also wanted to hunt these cult members down and make them pay for their crimes.

"I'll have the Amazon taken care of," Cheops offered. He licked his lips then murmured, "She'll be properly prepared to be returned to Greece."

The Conqueror was grateful so she collapsed the Egyptian's muscular shoulder. She released him then ordered to Najara, "We need to return to the palace."

"Yes, my liege." Najara bowed her head, then after a quick glance at the dead Amazon, she left the dark building.

The Conqueror slowly walked with Cheops out of the building. "You will report to the queen?"

"Of course, Conqueror," the head guard replied. He watched the ruler's faint nod then he stepped out of the building.

The Conqueror came to Amarice and the Amazon Queen, who rested on the ground still in the warm sunlight. She knelt down then cautiously inquired, "Can you walk, Amarice?"

"I think so," the Amazon agreed. Then with her queen's help, she climbed to her feet.

The Conqueror stood up too and ordered, "I want four men to remain here until Egyptian soldiers can arrive and relieve you."

Four Greek soldiers bowed in acceptance of the duty. They clapped their fists over their leather chests then took posts by the door and alley's mouth. The Conqueror then commanded the remaining squad to leave, and she remained beside Gabrielle during the trek.

Finally, the group arrived back at the palace. Cheops took care of reporting the circumstances to Queen Cleopatra then getting guards rounded up to protect the cult building. Amarice was taken to a healer and escorted by the Amazons. The Conqueror ordered Najara and her squad to patrol the palace so they could keep a certain amount of security.

Gabrielle was guided into the bedchambers.

The Conqueror came in behind her partner, she silently closed the door, and neared the bard. She placed her strong hands on the bard's shoulders.

The bard remained silent and motionless. She didn't know what to think much less say because she'd never witness such things in her life. She knew torture existed, but never had she observed it first hand.

"We need to get you cleaned up," Xena softly offered.

Gabrielle faintly nodded.

"I'll be right back," the ruler mentioned, and she turned back to the door. She had the door open, and she was halfway out when a small hand grabbed her gauntlet wrist.

"You won't be long?" Gabrielle's fearful eyes searched the ruler's.

The Conqueror was shaken by the bard's fears, which she'd never seen before now. She closed the door then came back to her partner. "I won't... I just want to get the handmaidens to fill the bath."

The bard faintly nodded then released her lover.

Xena lowered her head and placed a light kiss to the bard's forehead. "I'll be back." She turned and quickly went in pursuit of the maidens.

Gabrielle crossed the short distance to the table and chairs. She sat in one chair then stared down at her bloody lap. She focused on her hands and turned them up. She swallowed and tried to wipe the dried blood off her palms but it wouldn't leave. She could tell the blood had been smeared when she'd assisted Amarice. When the door opened, she lifted her broken gaze to the Conqueror.

Xena hesitated a step when she absorbed the bard's distraught features. She neared the bard and knelt in front of her. "Where is your scroll satchel?"

Gabrielle shook her head then muttered, "They took it from me."

The ruler reached up and brushed the bard's bangs back. "I'll have the men search the building for it."

The Amazon Queen abruptly shook her head. "No, I don't want it back... please."

Xena clenched her right hand in her lap, but she nodded once.

"Xena, who were those men?"

The Conqueror didn't know exactly, yet she had several good guesses. She also knew she needed to tell Gabrielle about the message from the commander, but right now wasn't the best time. "I'm not sure, but they look to be a cult."

"I saw the altar," the bard muttered. She stretched out her hand and touched the ruler's Gaelic necklace. "It some cult, isn't it?"

"I think so," the ruler agreed. She then twisted her head to the left when the

handmaidens entered the room. Once they were in the bathing room, she focused back on her partner. "Where were you hurt?"

The Amazon Queen did a quick inventory then answered, "My back and up here." She gingerly touched her left temple, and she flinched.

The ruler took the bard's hand away from her head. "Alright. We'll get you cleaned and some salve on the wounds."

"Are the handmaidens going to..."

Xena understood the bard's uncomfortable state around the maidens so she answered the unfinished question. "I'll tell them to leave."

Gabrielle felt relieved and especially because Xena interpreted her well.

The Conqueror stood up and after a squeeze to Gabrielle's shoulder, she went to the bathing room. She ordered the maidens to leave then once they were gone, she waved for her partner to go into the bathing room.

Gabrielle had never felt so exhausted, and she could barely process her surroundings. She was just thankful Xena was here to care for her.

Xena had returned to the bedchambers and retrieved the medical kit. She then joined her partner in the bathing room. She helped Gabrielle get out of her bloody clothes, which truly showed because her top and skirt were white. She then removed her armor easily and stripped her leathers off. All she was left with was her Gaelic necklace.

Gabrielle sat huddled on the last step of the bath. She had her legs pulled up so that her knees slightly poked through the water. She sensed her lover coming behind her.

Xena sat on the step behind her partner so that Gabrielle was between her legs. She then slipped her arms around the bard and leaned forward. "We need to clean your wounds." After her words, she noticed the bard wasn't reacting at all.

Gabrielle just stared across the long room. The warmth of the water seemed to sooth away her last resolve, and she suddenly began to cry. Gabrielle slumped forward so that her front side rested against her propped up legs. She buried her face into her knees but her sobs echoed in the room.

The Conqueror had never dealt with Gabrielle being this upset. She'd seen Gabrielle come to the brink thanks to some of their fights, but nothing like this. She wasn't sure what to do, yet she knew Gabrielle needed her.

Gabrielle had her eyes squeezed shut tightly. She tried to will her emotions to go away, but they seemed to worsen. She cried because she'd never felt such a sense of dread in her life, it made her time against the evil Conqueror seem like a nutbread walk. She didn't understand what exactly scared her so badly, but something in that building horrified her deeply.

Gabrielle cried for Jarine, and how she'd died. If only she'd stopped the Amazon from

protecting her then she'd be alive. It was her fault for not being a better queen. Then Amarice had been taken, imprisoned, and tortured. Gabrielle knew that Amarice, being so young, would forever be scarred by the events. How could Queen Terreis ever thought she'd be fit to be a ruler?

The Conqueror leaned forward until her skin melted against the bard's. She tightened her arms protectively over her lover then rested her cheek against the bard's back. She closed her eyes and willed her strength to pass into the bard.

Gabrielle's heavy rise and fall of her body slowed when she gained some control. She relished how the ruler's powerful body seemed to completely encase her and protect her. If only the Conqueror had been there sooner she may have never felt the horrible dread that she had. Whenever had she'd grown so needy for the ruler's strength to protect her?

Gabrielle felt Xena's midnight hair cascade over her back and shoulders. She felt the ruler's steady breath on her right shoulder. Then there was a tender kiss, which further soothed her internal ache. And when did the Conqueror learn to be so passionate and comforting at the right times? Gabrielle didn't have an answer, although she was grateful to have it here and now.

The bard freed her right hand from her knee. She moved her hand up until her fingers laced into the ruler's soft hair.

Xena moved her head around and because of her height and length, she was able to bring her head down closer to Gabrielle's. She brushed her cheek against the bard's.

Gabrielle returned the tender gesture. She then took a calming breath and proceeded to sit up with her partner's help.

The Conqueror sat up straight and pulled her lover in closer to her body. She wrapped one arm across the bard's stomach while her other went over Gabrielle's bare breasts. She bowed her head when the bard gave a silent plea for a kiss.

Gabrielle only had a brief kiss as it was hard for her to breathe with her stuffy nose. She enjoyed the gentleness in the kiss. She then turned her head so that her cheek rested in the ruler's neck, and the Gaelic necklace pressed into Gabrielle's lower cheek and chin.

The Conqueror seemed incredibly calm, yet inside she was fighting her anger. She wanted badly to kill the cult members that'd caused this havoc in Gabrielle's world as well as hers. Xena struggled to subdue her hatred fed monster inside of her chest and belly.

Finally, the ruler was able to get Gabrielle to clean up. She then cared for the bard's wounds after the bath. The wounds had opened up thanks to the warm water, but they were clean and now salve was over them. The Conqueror then helped her partner get into her Amazon Queen attire. Xena though merely put her leathers on and didn't even bother with her boots.

Gabrielle neared the curtains that separated the balcony from the bedchambers. "I

need some fresh air."

The ruler glanced over, nodded, and put the medical kit away. Before she joined her partner, she grabbed the cult dagger from out of the bathing room and tucked it away in her belongings. She then came to the table and picked up a chair. She followed the bard outside and placed the chair against the wall.

Gabrielle leaned against the railing and let the light breeze dry her hair. She felt somewhat better now that she was clean. She hoped the handmaidens would take her bloody clothes and clean them. She suspected Xena had already instructed them to do so.

The Conqueror sat in the chair but softly called, "Come here."

Gabrielle pulled away from the beautiful view of the city. She took her welcomed spot in the ruler's lap so that she sat across the ruler. She leaned to her left and let her side pressed into Xena's warm body.

The Conqueror encircled the bard with her arms then leaned her head against the stone wall.

The Amazon Queen slipped her left arm behind Xena's shoulders then finally lowered her head against the ruler's chest. She closed her eyes.

The Conqueror closed her own eyes and continued to soothingly run her fingertips up and down the bard's thigh. She hoped the motions would lull the bard. She was soon rewarded by Gabrielle's lighter breathing, and she checked to find the bard indeed asleep.

Xena scanned the city and felt her senses prickled. She somewhat felt like a sitting duck on the balcony, but she knew nothing would happen. She peered down at her lover's peaceful features, and she hoped the dreams were good ones.

The Conqueror spent the silent time thinking about the secret cult that was hiding out in Alexandria. She wondered if somehow they were connected to the spies from Britannia. Also she had much to consider with the rebellion in Britannia. She expected no less from the Gaelics, Erse, and Britanni since they were such a spirited culture. She wasn't overly concerned about the rebellion though as plenty of legions were stationed in and near Britannia, and Commander Meleager was quite competent.

What'd truly jarred the ruler were the tortures the cult obviously performed. She didn't know of any religion that called for such malicious acts. But more than anything, the tortures were not very foreign to the former dark ruler. Xena hated the memories the tortures evoked in her. She hated that she too had performed such acts in her past; a past not so old.

It made Xena wonder just how right she was for the bard. She use to perform such tortures and still could easily if she wished so. Xena knew how frightened the bard was by the cult and their acts. How could Gabrielle think any better of her? And could Xena truly protect Gabrielle from such harm when she, herself, could be that same monster again?

Gabrielle slowly roused after a candlemark of hard sleep. She slept well, somehow, but most likely from her endless weariness these past days. She lifted up and sensed a few creaks in her body from the odd position she'd slept in against the ruler. She was unsurprised to find the ruler awake.

"Sorry about that," the bard muttered and wiped her face of the sleepiness.

"You needed it," the ruler argued. She gauged that the bard had slept fairly well, and she was happy for it.

Gabrielle detected something was out of place in the ruler. She saw how dark Xena's eyes were and that iciness that flowed off her skin. She brushed her dried hair back then asked, "What were you think about?"

The Conqueror shook her head then replied, "Just what needs to be done about this cult."

The bard suspect that was only half the answer. "I don't think for an entire candlemark you only thought about that." She touched the ruler's cheek. "What is it?"

Xena shook her head then dipped it foward for a beat. But nimble fingers brought her gaze back up where she found concerned, green eyes boring into her.

"Come on," Gabrielle urged. "We haven't come this far for this silence. I know you're the all mighty Conqueror, but you're still human."

The Greek ruler sighed then her gaze focused beyond the bard to the city. She flexed her jaw a few times, and her voice grew deep when she spoke finally. "I was thinking about Janice... and Rhodes."

Gabrielle at first didn't understand but then she pieced it together. She touched the ruler's cheek and drew the ruler's attention back to her. "Xena, that's over. You're not that person anymore."

"Gabrielle, you've even told me that you're scared that my dark side may return and turn on you." The Conqueror recalled that old conversation in the temporary village near Artemisia.

"I don't think you would direct it at me, Xena." Gabrielle grabbed the ruler's hands into hers. "We've been through too much for that to happen. I think I'd have to do something pretty ugly to get you to do that." She shrugged then mentioned, "I'd have to... kill Cyrene to get that reaction out of you."

"I wouldn't hold your breath on it being that extreme." The Conqueror carefully thought about herself and how her anger reacts. "All I need is the right betrayal to react that way again."

"Like leaving you," the bard offhandedly muttered in despair. She still regretted how she'd walked out of Xena's life despite Xena constantly told her it was the best thing at the time.

"No," the ruler started, "something entirely else. I was okay with you walking off. You didn't betray me, and I knew that at the time." Xena sighed and shook her head some at her dark thoughts.

"I don't plan on betraying you, Xena." Gabrielle squeezed her lover's hands tightly. "I don't want anything to come between us. I like how we are."

The ruler sadly smiled at the bard's honest words and underlying dedication. "Me too," she murmured. She then took the bard's lips in a tentative kiss.

Gabrielle smiled after the kiss. She then lost it when something else was amiss.

The Conqueror knew Gabrielle had figured it out so she whispered, "We do have another problem."

The Amazon Queen sighed then became serious. "What else?"

"I received word from the commander." The Conqueror felt the abrupt accumulation of tension in the bard. "Britannia is rebelling."

Gabrielle let out a long breath then frustration showed in her next words. "Could anything else go wrong?"

Xena bit her lower lip then quietly added, "There are spies tailing us too."

"Well that answered my question," the bard jabbed. She slid off Xena's lap and paced the short distance of the balcony. She stopped, faced the seated ruler, and leaned her back against the stone rail. "Do we have to go back to Greece then?"

The Conqueror stretched her legs out, her boot tips almost touched Gabrielle's. "I promised you that we wouldn't leave Africa until we had your sister."

"What about Britannia though?"

Xena shook her head then folded her arms against her chest. "The commander can handle it and if it's still ongoing when we return then I'll finish it."

The bard frowned at her lover's hidden meaning, but she knew it would have to be done. "What about these spies? They're obviously not trying to assassinate us... there's been too many opportunities."

The Conqueror slightly smiled at the bard's clear insight and assessment of the situation. She had to give Gabrielle credit.

"Who are these spies working for?"

Xena tilted her head then answered, "Britannia."

Gabrielle thought this out then she considered the men in the cult, who'd attacked her and her Amazons. She shook her head then quietly mentioned, "Those men from the

cult... they spoke another language. I've never heard it. There were only a few that spoke Greek." She focused on her lover and asked, "Do you think the cult and the spies are one and the same? Or they're working together?"

"It's plausible," Xena agreed, "but we can't be sure." She wouldn't mention the dagger she'd taken from the altar table. She felt that her partner was shaken enough by the events plus the dagger wasn't sound proof.

Gabrielle kept shaking her head. She lifted her head, twisted it to the left, and she stared at the distant Library of Alexandria. "Xena, I don't like this." She became distraught and worried. "I feel like we're sitting rabbits right now. There's something going on that we don't know about."

The Conqueror climbed out of the chair and stepped up to the bard. She seemed even taller compared to the bard, who remained somewhat slouched against the rail. She stared off at the library too then lowered her head to the bard. "Whatever it is," she promised, "it'll be facing something much darker than what it thinks it is." She displayed a confident, dark smile.

Gabrielle peered up into mercury blue eyes that she hadn't seen in some time. She knew her lover was solely the Conqueror now. Even though Gabrielle fought against this Conqueror, she actually felt grateful for it because sometimes to fight fire it required fire. She was just glad this dark Conqueror was here to protect them now. Maybe it was now time to pity the unknown enemy.

## **Chapter 5 - Who's Gurkhan?**

Xavier sighed but continued to swing his legs since his sandals almost touched the floor. He was surveying the office he'd been directed into by Vara, the Amazon. He hadn't seen Gabrielle in the past days, but he was told that she was rather busy. What truly fascinated and scared Xavier was that supposedly the tall, blue eyed woman was Xena, the Conqueror and ruler of Greece. Now he waited in Queen Cleopatra's office for some reason, and Vara only told him that Gabrielle and the Conqueror wished to talk to him, alone.

Xavier lifted his head when he heard voices behind the closed door, which led to the main halls. He instantly detected Gabrielle's voice then another woman's, but it wasn't the supposed Greek ruler.

Gabrielle opened the door, held onto the gold handle, and stood halfway through the doorway. She had a faint smile and kept talking to whoever was out of Xavier's vision.

"Thank you, Cleopatra." The bard nodded then entered the room. She left the door open.

Xavier caught Gabrielle's warm smile and it eased him but only for a heartbeat. He stiffened when the tall, dark woman entered next and closed the door.

The Conqueror knew her imposing self and this was a time she didn't want it. She signaled to her partner to get a chair, and she did the same.

Xavier wouldn't stop staring at the Conqueror. He was thoroughly impressed by her, and even by her selection of dress.

The Conqueror had decided not to wear her leathers, armor, and weapons specifically because she was concerned it'd intimidate the young slave. Instead, she'd selected a similar white dress with different Egyptian design on it, but it had an oval cut at the top to expose her cleavage. The slits ran up her sides and her sandals showed when she sat and crossed her legs.

Queen Gabrielle had selected her Amazon garb and sat beside her partner. She and Xena faced the young slave. "How have you been, Xavier?"

The Libyan slave nervously twisted his fingers about in his lap. "I've been good."

The bard could tell the slave was nervous and mostly due to her partner's presence. She inwardly sighed, but she knew this was her area and would sooth the boy. "I'm sorry I haven't seen you lately. I've been pretty busy."

"That's what Vara told me," the boy confirmed.

Gabrielle faintly smiled then she questioned, "Did Vara tell you why you're here?"

Xavier shook his head.

The bard nodded, but she partially turned in her chair. "Xavier, I want you to meet the Conqueror." She held out her right hand to the ruler.

Xavier's stomach twisted now that it was all true. He locked eye contact with the ruler, who remained calm and almost welcoming to him. Xavier silenced his fears then slid out of the chair. He took a step closer to the ruler's chair then held out his hand.

The Conqueror was remotely surprised and very impressed by the slave's good manners. She didn't deny him either so she stood up to her full intimidating height, which didn't retract the boy. She took the slave's small hand.

"I'm Xavier of Alexandria," the boy introduced in a mostly calm tone.

The Conqueror's lips curled into a smile so she replied, "Nice to meet you, Xavier. I'm Xena of Amphipolis." She then released his hand.

Xavier seemed calmer, and he smiled. He resumed his chair like the Conqueror. This time, he didn't nervously play with his hands but instead rested them on his bare knees.

"Xavier," Gabrielle started, "the Conqueror and I wanted to talk to you about somethings." She briefly glanced at her partner then focused back on the slave. "You remember what you told me about your master?"

The slave's features dimmed. "Yes." He feared that the Conqueror would send him back to this master or Queen Cleopatra. Although he did find it odd that he hadn't been returned yet and had been treated quite well here in the palace.

"Well, the Conqueror and I discussed it a few days ago. We made a decision about it." Gabrielle then stopped her explanation and peered up at her lover.

The ruler took her cue, and she leaned forward some so that capture the boy's attention fully. "Yesterday I purchased you from your master." She paused and watched the boy's reaction. When she felt that the information sunk into the boy, she continued to speak. "This morning I signed off on scrolls to give you your freedom."

Xavier held his breath then stared in awe at the Greek ruler. He couldn't believe what he heard so he looked to Gabrielle for confirmation. He could tell by Gabrielle's smile that it was indeed true. He let out his breath, which released his life long stress of being a slave. "Why... I don't..." He choked up and tried to figure out his good fortune.

The bard leaned forward and took the boy's hands into hers. "I promised you that I'd help you." She squeezed his small hands. "You won't ever have to worry about another master again."

Xavier started to cry, and he rasped, "Why you help me? I tried to steal from you."

Gabrielle's heart broke. She stood up and pulled the former slave into a strong hug. She lowered her head close to his and whispered, "I understand why you did, Xavier and now you won't have to." She withdrew and tilted the boy's head up so that she could meet his distraught gaze. "You have your entire life ahead of you now."

Xavier sadly smiled and faintly nodded. He gathered himself and separated from the bard and resumed his seat. He wiped his tears away.

Gabrielle became situated first. "Xavier, what the Conqueror and I are concerned about is what you want to do now. We weren't sure whether you had family to go to."

The Conqueror was none surprised when the boy shook his head.

"My family is dead," Xavier sadly confessed.

"What about your tribe in Libya?" the bard offered.

Xavier sighed and shook his head. "I do not know the tribe. I was born here."

Gabrielle sighed because Xena had already explained to her that if Xavier stayed in Alexandria it could be a hard life for him. Any freed slave would find it incredibly hard and almost impossible to have a good life in the country where they were formally enslaved. And Gabrielle sadly knew that because in Greece a freed slave's status was no better than a woman's status. The slaves had no political standing in the realm, wages were slim, and it was rare for a former slave to own land.

The Conqueror crossed her legs again but at her ankles. She filled the silence with her

deep voice. "You have a few options, Xavier. You can either remain here in Alexandria and find your way. Or you can go to Libya and find your tribe. I will be sure to see that you arrive there safely." The Conqueror didn't much like either idea. There were the rumors that Queen Cleopatra planned to invade Libya and if that was the case then Xavier would end up right back where he was. "Your other option is that you come with Gabrielle and me."

Xavier was awe struck, and he whispered, "To Greece? The realm?" He looked between the rulers.

Gabrielle slightly grinned then confirmed, "Yes... to Corinth."

The boy couldn't believe it. "What will I do in Corinth?"

The Amazon Queen considered it then threw out some ideas. "You can be tutored. I'm sure the Conqueror's mother would be happy to let you work at her taverna."

Xavier's jaw slightly loosened then he looked up at the ruler. He blurted out, "You really have a mother?" He then flushed deeply when he realized what he'd asked. He almost wanted to sink through the chair and into the floor.

The ruler clicked her tongue and peered down at her partner. "What stories have you told him?"

Gabrielle just rubbed her nose then murmured, "I haven't... really... told him any."

"She told me the story about you, the Amazons, and this rebel leader," Xavier explained.

The Conqueror eyes darkened at her partner.

Gabrielle glowered at the boy then teased, "Traitor."

Xavier softly laughed but stopped when he saw how irritated the ruler was now.

The bard caught the boy's concern so she sweetly smiled at her lover. "Okay. I told him one while we were bored in the prison cell." She patted her partner's nearest knee and teased, "Its nothing you haven't heard." She then focused back on the boy.

The Conqueror sighed quietly, but she was highly amused on the inside. She was also grateful for the banter because the last two days Gabrielle had been fairly quiet since the cult experience. She was glad this boy could bring out Gabrielle's good humor.

"Xavier," Gabrielle continued, "we want you to think about this for a day or two. It's a big decision, but whatever you choose the Conqueror and I will help you with it. Okay?"

Xavier smiled and replied, "Okay. I will think careful about it." He then grew somewhat shy but honestly stated, "Thank you for everything." He lowered his head and stared at his hands. "I am not use to anybody's help... other than my family's."

Gabrielle wistfully smiled at the boy's words. She understood completely, but she was happy she and Xena were here to help him. "We're glad we're here, Xavier and helping you."

Xavier nodded a few times and smiled more.

Gabrielle then stood up and offered, "Now let's see about finding Vara and some others. I thought we could take a trip to the emporium."

The Conqueror stood up simultaneously with the boy. She knew that Gabrielle planned to get Xavier some new clothes since his current set were fairly worn and almost revealing, but it was typical slave dress. "I have a meeting with the queen," she reminded.

Gabrielle touched her partner's arm and murmured, "I'll see you after?"

"Yes," the ruler softly promised.

Xavier moved away from the pair, he could tell something was between them, and he didn't understand what.

The bard wasn't ready to reveal to Xavier the nature of her relationship with the Conqueror. She withdrew her touch and offered a smile.

The Conqueror returned the smile, and she held back her natural tendency to kiss Gabrielle. "Be safe out there."

"I will," the bard honestly promised. "No pickpockets this time."

Xavier smirked and teased, "I'll protect her from them."

The Conqueror twisted her head so that she could see the boy. "See that you do, Xavier. I trust you."

The Amazon Queen rolled her eyes then gave a hidden pat to her lover's taut stomach. She moved away and touch Xavier's mid back. She quietly exited the office and left the office door open for the Egyptian Queen.

The Conqueror put the black chairs back into place then turned when Queen Cleopatra entered.

"It went well?" the Egyptian ruler inquired.

"Yes," the Conqueror replied, "he's a bright boy."

"Do you believe he'll leave with you?" The queen strolled past the Conqueror and took her seat behind her desk.

The Conqueror sat in a chair in front of the desk. "I believe so."

Cleopatra sat then cautiously asked, "How does Queen Gabrielle fair after the other

day?"

The Greek ruler remained stiff in her black chair but calmly answered, "She's recovering from it." She laced her hands in her lap.

"Cheops hasn't found out anything on the cult," Cleopatra confessed.

"I doubt that he will," the Greek ruler firmed.

Queen Cleopatra sighed and seemed to almost slump in her chair. She wasn't happy when she received word of the ordeal and the cult's volatile and malicious habits. She didn't need this type of cult in her capitol.

The Conqueror decided to break the queen's concentration and reminded, "I wish to speak to you about a certain situation."

The Egyptian Queen became more business like and nodded. "Go on."

"I plan to depart Egypt a little early," the ruler explained, "Gabrielle and I have somethings to take care of in Mogador."

"Mogador?" Queen Cleopatra repeated. "You do not fair well with Mogador, Xena. What is there?"

The Conqueror had long debated whether to tell the Egyptian Queen the truth because of the dangers. It wasn't until she saw the developed friendship between the Amazon Queen and Egyptian Queen that she decided it would actually help to tell the truth. She knew Cleopatra's concerns for Gabrielle would supersede the politics.

"Gabrielle's sister, Lila, is a slave there. She's been Gurkhan's wife for some time now." The Conqueror shifted in her chair and rested her hands on the arms.

"Gurkhan is a powerful man, Xena." Queen Cleopatra watched the ruler bow her head in confirmation to her assessment. "If Gurkhan discovers he has Queen Gabrielle's sister then he will surely use that to his advantage."

"Yes." The Greek ruler sighed then added, "It is a dangerous situation however this is Gabrielle's last family member. Many Helical Risings ago her parents were murdered by my men and her sister taken into slavery."

Queen Cleopatra was surprised by this news, and she carefully regarded the Conqueror. "And yet Gabrielle lays with you?" She smirked and teased, "What magic have you worked on her, Xena?"

The Conqueror's tension mounted, but she knew what the queen was trying to do. She kept calm and replied, "Gabrielle sees through any such foolishness."

Cleopatra could tell the Greek ruler truly admired the Amazon Queen. She too inwardly admitted that Queen Gabrielle was quite a force and would become powerful over time. She had the foresight to know that one day Gabrielle may lay claims to the Conqueror's throne, and Cleopatra didn't want to splinter that relationship now.

"And what will become of Gurkhan?" Queen Cleopatra cocked her head. "You rarely leave your enemies alive, Xena." She knew some of the history between the powerful merchant and the Greek ruler.

"That is my plan," the ruler subtly agreed.

Queen Cleopatra rested back in her chair. She weighted everything and carefully went over the different angles. She made a single choice then stood up. "If Gurkhan is killed then Mogador will be shaken." She walked around her desk. "Egypt holds important trade relations with Mogador." She came behind Xena and stopped. "If Egypt turns her cheek when Mogador cries for help then Egypt will lose her relations."

The Conqueror's eyes narrowed, yet she carefully listened to Cleopatra. She mapped out what the queen may try to get her to do.

"I care for Gabrielle... greatly," the Egyptian ruler affirmed, "but I am also Egypt. I cannot endanger such important relations, Xena. You understand this."

The Conqueror didn't reply but tilted her head forward. Her senses tightened when she felt Queen Cleopatra bent over her and warmth breath by her right ear.

"I am willing to look the other way," Cleopatra breathed, "if Egypt is... properly compensated." She lowered her head closer until her lips brushed over the Conqueror's exposed ear thanks to the Conqueror wearing her hair back. "What will you give Egypt, Conqueror?" She lifted her hands then carefully brought them to the ruler's muscular arms. She slowly traced her fingertips up the ruler's tense, showing muscles. "What will you give me, Xena?"

The Conqueror's hands curled around the end of the arms. She clenched her teeth.

Queen Cleopatra grinned and carefully nipped at the ruler's ear. She lowered her head so that her lips were closed to the ruler's neck. "How much is this worth to you?" She brought her lips closer but abruptly the Conqueror jerked away from her.

The Conqueror was quickly out of the chair and faced the slowly rising queen. "What will I give you?" she sneered, "I won't pull the throne out from under you." She shoved the chairs out of the way so that she could come closer to the queen. "You are Egypt because I make you Egypt."

Queen Cleopatra stiffened when her earlier position of power faltered under the furious ruler. She stared up into ice blue eyes that drilled into her.

The Conqueror closed in the distance so that her body almost touched the queen's. "If you cross me, Cleopatra then I promise you that Egypt will fall under Greek control again. And your navy will be mine." She lowered her head then hotly whispered, "Do not mistake your place."

Queen Cleopatra lost her bravado now that she saw the true Conqueror before her. She felt her hands go moist and fear tightened her stomach. She had to think of her

nation.

The Conqueror brought her face closer to the queen's. She raised her right hand and traced her fingertips over the queen's jawline. "I will tell you what Greece will give Egypt, and you will accept it." She pressed her body into Cleopatra's so that her power and presence overwhelmed the queen. "I will give you Libya under certain conditions." She had darkened features and a cat grin over her lips. "I will send my legions here to join your army. You are to adopt the realm's policies on conquering another nation."

Queen Cleopatra became somewhat horrified. "The people will not stand for it." She knew what it meant to adopt the realm's policies. The Libyans couldn't be enslaved, there would be freedom of religion, and the Libyans would retain their lands by law.

"Then you better pray your position as pharaoh is as strong as you think it," the Greek ruler whispered. The Conqueror trailed her fingertips up to the queen's soft lips. "If you do not accept my gracious offer, Queen Cleopatra then I don't mind expanding my realm." She lowered her hand from Cleopatra's face and snaked her arm around the queen's back. She pulled Cleopatra tighter against her then brought her lips down closer. She felt her lips dance across Cleopatra's when she huskily asked, "What do you want for Egypt, pharaoh?"

Queen Cleopatra's breath caught, and she had weak knees against the Conqueror's onslaught. She desperately held onto the ruler's arm then she tried to work her mind through the sexual haze. "I... I accept your offer, my liege," she murmured against the Conqueror's soft lips.

The Conqueror had glowing eyes, and her lips spread into a dark grin. "You made the right choice, Cleopatra... for your nation." She suddenly lifted her head, pulled her arm free and slipped past the Egyptian ruler. "See that you have the terms written up, and I will approve it." She then silently left the broken queen alone in her office.

Queen Cleopatra was hunched forward and clung to a black chair. She placed her hand over her chest where her heart beat wildly, and she closed her eyes. "By the gods," she rasped. She was flushed and tense with sexual frustration. She'd forgotten the Conqueror's intoxicating draw and this was an awful way to be reminded.

Iolaus marched down the halls at a fast pace. He spotted the person he wanted and greeted, "My liege." He noted the ruler's dark aura, which he rarely saw these days because of Gabrielle. "Is everything alright, my liege?"

The Conqueror stopped before her tetrarchès. "Yes," she curtly answered.

Iolaus knew something had transcended, but it wasn't his place. Instead he focused on why he was looking for the ruler. "The spies from Mogador have arrived... they wish to see you."

"Perfect," the ruler murmured. "Where are they?"

"They wait in the atrium." Iolaus turned and fell into step beside the ruler. "Were you able to get Queen Cleopatra's blessing to go to Mogador?"

The Conqueror revealed her dark grin. "She didn't falter to agree."

Iolaus could only imagine what that meant. "Then maybe everything will work out," he decided.

"They will," the ruler promised. She came into the atrium and ordered the two spies to follow her and Iolaus to the south wing. She felt the only comfortable spot to do this was in her bed chambers. When she entered, she took a seat but left the spies and Iolaus to stand up around her. It wasn't exactly her throne but it reminded everybody her position as ruler.

"Now tell me what is the situation," the Conqueror ordered.

The spies, who were natives to Mogador, exchanged glances but the darkly tanned spy spoke first. "I am Alexio and this is Gyasi." He briefly held out his hand to his partner, who was far darker in skin tone. "Lutalo could not join us."

The Conqueror recalled the spy, Lutalo, who was most important to the ruler. "I understand."

Alexio nodded then adjusted his turban. "Gurkhan does have a slave named Lila. She is roughly twenty Helical Risings old... maybe slightly older." He stopped then positioned his hands behind his back. "She is Gurkhan's number one wife, I'm afraid."

The tetrarchès quietly sighed because he knew what this could mean. He kept silent though and remained poised with his hands between his back and cape.

The Conqueror accepted the news but ordered, "Tell me about his palace."

Alexio bowed his head then broke into his report. "Gurkhan's palace is located on the southeast side of Mogador... not far from the city walls. The size of the palace is roughly eight stremmata, however if you include the surrounding land and walls it is about ten."

The Conqueror realized the palace was fairly large and most likely the largest in Mogador. That didn't surprise her in the least knowing Gurkhan.

"Currently he houses a hundred soldiers as guards, and they are on duty continually. Gurkhan is rarely seen as he does not leave his palace." Alexio stopped and glanced at his partner. "He has seventeen wives so far including Lila however he's often at the slave market."

The Conqueror thinly smiled at this news.

Alexio then signaled Gyasi to speak now.

Gyasi licked his dried, crack lips then was about to speak but stopped when the door opened.

Iolaus tensed but clearly relaxed when he spotted Gabrielle.

Queen Gabrielle eased into the room, closed the door silently, and looked to her partner. "What's..."

The Conqueror hadn't expected the bard back so soon. She stood up and approached her lover. "These are the spies from Mogador."

Gabrielle glanced at the two strangers then back at Xena. "It's about Lila?"

"Yes." The Conqueror took Gabrielle's staff and set it against the wall, near the door. "Come sit with me." She turned and approached her chair again.

Gabrielle took the seat on the opposite side of the table from the ruler.

The Conqueror pointed to the man on the right. "This is Gyasi." She then pointed at the other spy. "And Alexio." She directed to the bard and introduced, "This is the Amazon Queen, Gabrielle."

Alexio bowed his head then politely stated, "Its a pleasure, Queen Gabrielle."

Gyasi mimicked his partner's politeness. "It is mine as well, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard faintly nodded and had a distant smile, but she was more concerned about the matter at hand.

The Conqueror knew this so she ordered, "Continue Gyasi."

Gyasi reeled into his details about Gurkhan's general life, his status in Mogador, and the daily activities of the palace. He could tell the Conqueror was quite pleased with his information. Then he and his partner took questions from the Conqueror and were mostly able to answer everything. Finally, he and Alexio were escorted to the door by the Greek soldier.

The Conqueror followed Iolaus and the spies to the door. She stopped Iolaus and quietly ordered, "See that you compensate them well for their work."

"Of course, my liege." The tetrarchès dipped his head then left the bed chambers.

The Conqueror closed the door then turned back to Gabrielle, who was in deep thought. "Lila is there, Gabrielle."

The bard broke from her thoughts and lifted her gaze to the ruler. "What else did they say when I wasn't here?"

The ruler approached the bard and took her seat again. "Your sister is the first wife." She paused then curiously asked, "How old is your sister?"

The bard glanced over and softly answered, "She's about three years younger... twenty-one Helical Risings." She paused then muttered, "Her birthday is this fall."

Xena lowered her gaze and remorse swept through her. She knew she had to make this

work out or else it would truly hurt Gabrielle. "Gurkhan has a fairly large palace and it's heavily guarded. He also hardly leaves the palace."

Gabrielle slumped in her chair. "So another words we have some bad odds."

"I'm not so much concerned about that," the ruler revealed.

Gabrielle was surprised so she peered over with worried features. "Then what are you concerned about?" She could tell there was something.

"I'm more concerned about your sister's attitude and mindset right now." Xena met the bard's features. "She's been with Gurkhan for six Helical Risings. She's gone from a low wife to the most important wife."

Gabrielle shook her head. "What is a first wife?"

The Conqueror grew dim but answered the question. "The first wife is the wife that holds the most power among all of them. In Gurkhan's case he has seventeen." She watched Gabrielle's astonishment flashed over her face. "Typically the first wife will have the husband's children that take on his legacy. The eldest son will takeover most often. The wives try to claim the position as first so that they can reserve a brighter future for their children."

The bard processed the long explanation from her partner. She had unfocused eyes when she muttered, "So I could have... nieces and nephews." She reached up and brushed her hair back. "If Lila has any children she's not going to be keen on leaving them behind."

"There's more complications too, Gabrielle." Xena watched how Gabrielle's eyes met hers, and she saw the upset. She had to be honest though. "It takes a lot of strength and ruthlessness to become and maintain the position of first wife." She stopped and organized her next impacting words. "Lila won't be the same person you knew, Gabrielle."

"And I'm not the same person I was, Xena when her and I saw each other last." Gabrielle though wasn't calm because her words didn't seem to settle the ruler. "What?"

Xena glanced away but turned back to the bard. "Gabrielle, think about Lila's position right now. She's been Gurkhan's wife for six Helical Risings... that's what she's known for most her life."

"And she's going to be free from that," Gabrielle argued. She stood up then demanded, "Are you telling me you don't want to free her?"

The Conqueror was swiftly on her feet and approached her partner. "I'm not saying that at all, Gabrielle." She touched the bard's arms and held tightly. "Think about it, Lila has a choice to stay with Gurkhan where she knows what her future will be. Or she can go with us... with me, the person that put her there in the first place."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to argue, yet she faltered and became somewhat

emotional . "I just have to talk to her. She'll understand."

"What will she understand?" the ruler whispered, "That you've sided with the evil Conqueror? That you're no better?"

"You're not evil," Gabrielle hotly shot back. Then she broke from the Conqueror's contact and walked away. She lifted her right hand and rubbed her temples. "If I talk to her, Xena then she'll be fine." Gabrielle's words even held an undercurrent of doubt. "She'll understand." She faced the ruler again and murmured, "She has to."

The Conqueror neared her partner and tilted Gabrielle's head back. "I hope that she does, Gabrielle but you have to prepare for the part where she might not be."

The bard closed her eyes and want nothing more than for this problem to be over and her sister returned to her. "I can't leave my sister there... she's all I have left of my family."

Xena moved in and drew her lover into her body. She held Gabrielle close and whispered, "We'll do everything we can." She lowered her head then gently added, "I promise."

Gabrielle hated that she'd been so emotional lately, but she knew her lack of sleep wasn't helping. She also was stressed about the Britanni spies and the dark cult. Then another thought occurred to her so she lifted her head off Xena's chest. "What about Cleopatra and the relations?"

The Conqueror understood Gabrielle's concerns so she replied, "I took care of it."

Gabrielle's features drew together and her voice held notes of bewilderment. "She's okay with us going to Mogador?"

"Yes, I used my powers of persuasion to convince her."

The bard copied the ruler's arched eyebrow technique. "Do I really want to know?"

"No."

Gabrielle slightly grinned and brushed her fingertips over her lover's Gaelic necklace. "Let me guess, you have to conquer Libya for her...?"

The Conqueror now raised her eyebrow when Gabrielle pinpointed the agreement.

The bard could tell her lover was inwardly impressed by her assessment so her grin became wider. "I've already heard the rumors about Libya." She tapped the necklace then further mentioned, "Its so easy to wiggle out information from Cheops when you're as sweet as I am."

Xena groaned and rolled her eyes. "The poor fella." She earned a slap to her side for the comment. "What else do you hear?"

Gabrielle suddenly had a wicked grin, and her voice deepened. "I hear that a certain

Egyptian Queen can't keep her hands off of you." She chuckled at how Xena seemed to remain passive. "And it doesn't make me jealous by the way," she further commented.

"Oh?" the ruler prompted.

"Nope because I have..." Gabrielle lifted her right hand and pointed her index finger up. "I have you wrapped around this finger."

The Conqueror narrowed her eyes then she reached up with left hand. She took the bard's lifted hand then easily maneuvered the bard's middle finger free. She held the index and middle fingers together and leaned down. She silkily whispered, "You have me wrapped around these two fingers."

Gabrielle suddenly flashed bright red, and heat flooded her body. She hadn't quite expected that from her playful lover. "Well..." She tested her throat then tried to collect her thoughts. "It's mutual."

The ruler smirked and laced her hand through Gabrielle's. She delivered a long kiss, but she knew their talk wasn't complete. She lowered their hands down to their sides and put some space between them so they could think clearly.

Gabrielle dipped her head then asked, "So what's the plan?" She raised her head up again. "How are we going to get Lila out of there?"

"Somebody needs to go in," the ruler explained, "and talk to your sister. I'm thinking one of your Amazons can go... possibly Vara."

Gabrielle shook her head. "Go in? You mean..."

Xena squeezed the bard's hand. "Somebody needs to go undercover... as a wife."

"Then what?"

"I haven't gotten that far yet," the Conqueror replied, but she had some ideas such as Gurkhan's death.

The Amazon Queen sighed then stared past the ruler. "If Lila is convinced to leave then it won't be too hard. I'm sure we could sneak her out... somehow."

"Possibly," the ruler relented.

"What about Najara?" Gabrielle slightly brightened at the prospect of the dekarchos being able to convince her sister to leave. "I'm sure Najara could-"

"No," the Conqueror cut off. "I don't trust Najara." She had dark eyes, which said how much she wouldn't agree to the idea. "We can't be sure what she'll say to your sister."

Gabrielle frowned at her lover's clear display of mistrust in the dekarchos. She sighed then argued, "Well I don't think Lila is going to believe any of my Amazons." She lowered her head and considered another way to handle the problem.

The Conqueror was about to speak when Gabrielle lifted her head. She saw that look on the bard's face, and she didn't like it at all.

"I'll go in, Xena then I can talk to her. I mean she's not going to listen to anybody else."

"No," the ruler declared.

Gabrielle became dark at the ruler's instant rejection of her idea. "Xena, it makes sense."

The Conqueror released her partner's hand then in her most commanding voice, she stated, "It is out of the question, Gabrielle."

"It's not in question," the bard argued, "It's a plan... a good plan."

"It's a suicide mission," the ruler snapped. "I don't think so."

Gabrielle narrowed her eyes at the ruler. "A suicide mission and you want to send one of my Amazons in there?"

"I'll take their death over yours," the Conqueror rebuked.

The Amazon Queen clenched her teeth then shook her head. "I'm not going to order any of my Amazons to go in there." She stepped closer and pointed at the ruler. "Especially when this is my sister. It should be me."

"Do you even know what they'll do to you if they find out who you are?" the Conqueror growled. She pointed towards the balcony and snapped, "He will do exactly what that cult planned to do with you." She lowered her hand and whispered, "You'll wish you were dead." She clenched her hands at her sides. "I will not allow you to go in there."

"Is that a threat?" the Amazon Queen challenged.

The Conqueror felt her rapid heartbeat, and she knew this was a dangerous conversation. Yet she wouldn't allow her lover to think she had any chance to enter Gurkhan's palace. "No, it's a promise."

Gabrielle's skin burned from her anger, and she knew she was almost to her limit. She closed her eyes and took three deep breaths. She then silently told herself just to walk away right now. She did just that and quietly exited the room with the door left open.

The Conqueror dropped her head back and stared at the ceiling for a beat. She needed some time to cool off too and was glad Gabrielle knew to back off.

The bard stalked through the palace, out of the south wing, and went deeper into the main palace. She ended up going out into the courtyard and took in the fresh, salty air. She stole a quiet spot on a bench that was under a tree. She bent forward and covered her face with her hands. She hadn't felt this frustrated in some time. She didn't

understand why it was so hard to reason with her partner. Then she recalled that Xena was use to be being the sole decision maker and nobody questioned her. And if somebody did happen to question her, she typically dealt with them harshly.

"Gabrielle?" came a soft, gentle voice.

The bard lifted her head and met concerned grey eyes. "Hey." She patted the space beside her on the bench.

Najara neatly sat down beside her friend. "Is everything okay?"

Gabrielle sighed because she knew she couldn't hide the truth from the dekarchos. "No... the Conqueror and I have had a slight difference of opinion."

Najara frowned then mentioned, "That seems to be happening a lot lately."

The bard grunted at the honest remark.

"What was it about?" The dekarchos tried. "Perhaps I can help." When Gabrielle sadly peered up at her, she further explained, "I can help from a warrior's perception."

The Amazon Queen relented because she agreed that Najara was a warrior much like her partner. It was possible that Najara could offer some light on the subject or at least sooth Gabrielle's frustrations. She confessed everything that'd transcended in the past moon or so that dealt with her sister. Gabrielle's hands moved with her words and her face showed her emotions about how she felt on certain things. Najara listened carefully and only briefly interrupted to ask questions. Finally, Gabrielle ended with her recent argument about who should enter Gurkhan's palace, but she didn't mention how the Conqueror refused to send Najara.

The dekarchos sat quietly for a moment then processed all the information. "The Conqueror is concerned about your well being."

"I understand that," Gabrielle agreed, "but it doesn't change the fact that it should be me that talks to my sister."

"It is a dangerous mission," the soldier reminded. "You could be killed, Gabrielle."

The bard's shoulders dropped, yet she gathered Najara's hand into hers. "This is my sister, Najara. Tell me you understand...?" She squeezed the calloused hand in hers.

The dekarchos dipped her head for a beat then lifted it again. "I do understand." She placed her freehand on top of Gabrielle's. "I had a younger sister too. She was taken into slavery, just like yours."

Gabrielle's heart dropped and held tightly to the older woman's hand. "What happened?"

"After it happened, I spent my waking hours training to become a warrior." Najara's grey eyes grew blue in tone to her emotions. "I prayed that I would become skilled enough that I could free her. When the time came, it was too late and my sister was

murdered by the warlord that had her."

The bard closed her eyes tightly then shook her head. "I'm so sorry, Najara." She released the dekarchos's hands then pulled her in for a hug.

Najara pulled back after the hug and sadly smiled. "I do understand," she repeated. She then paused and quietly added, "Perhaps its best that you do not wait like I did."

"The Conqueror and I plan to get her out," the Amazon Queen argued.

The soldier tilted her head and questioned, "What if she sends somebody else in besides you? Will your sister be convinced to leave?"

Gabrielle peered down at her lap and stared at her hands. "That's what I'm afraid of... Lila can be strong at times, but she gets scared too."

"You know your sister better than anybody else," Najara starkly reminded. "You are the best person to speak with her."

"You should try telling the Conqueror that." Gabrielle sighed and brushed her hair behind her right ear. "I don't know what to do."

"You must do whatever it takes to free your sister," Najara urged.

Gabrielle studied the dekarchos for a beat. "We will, Najara."

The soldier leaned closer then quietly spoke. "If you wait too long, Gabrielle then something could happen to your sister. Ever heartbeat is a waste of time." She touched the bard's leg. "And you're the only one that can convince her to leave Gurkhan."

Gabrielle's eyes stung as she wished she was already in Mogador. She did hate waiting here on the other side of the continent.

Najara read the distraught in the bard so she brushed her fingertips across the bard's cheek. "You should not waste anymore time here, Gabrielle." She searched the confused green eyes and explained, "Go to Mogador now and free your sister."

"I can't go over there without the Conqueror," the Amazon Queen insisted.

"You are wasting precious time by just sitting here in Alexandria and arguing with her." Najara lowered her hand to her lap. "Take your Amazons. You do not require the Conqueror's consent, Gabrielle."

"Najara-

"Gabrielle, you are not a child," the soldier affirmed which stopped the bard's arguements. "The Conqueror protects you as such and does not respect your opinions, your choices. She wishes only to control you just as if you were apart of her realm." Najara shook her head then reminded, "But that's not who you are, is it? Even I have heard of your calling as the rebel leader."

Gabrielle stared oddly at the dekarchos. "I was," she emphasized, "the rebel leader. Those days are gone, Najara. The Conqueror has changed and is improving the realm's situation."

"Is she really?" Najara argued. "How can you be so certain when Britannia is rebelling?" She sadly sighed. "They rebel because they are not happy... you know this better than anybody."

"No," the bard refuted, "the Conqueror has changed."

"How can you be so sure it's not an act?" Najara gathered the bard's hands into hers. "Go to Mogador and free your sister before its too late... nothing else matters, let alone the Conqueror."

Gabrielle's heart pounded erratically against her chest, and she tried to decipher her spinning emotions. Najara's words were like a spider web in her mind. She then clearly recalled the promise she made to Xena, to the Conqueror when they sat out on the balcony the other day. She silenced her foolish emotions and definitively stated, "I won't do it, Najara."

"Gabrielle-

"No," the bard snapped. She stood up and faced the seated dekarchos. "I won't betray the Conqueror's trust." She saw how Najara's features dimmed, but she didn't care. "If you knew anything at all then you'd know that the Conqueror and I have worked entirely too hard to get to where we are now and just throw it out." She pointed a finger at Najara. "You know, Najara just how much my relationship with the Conqueror means." She fisted her hand and lowered to her side. "Now you ask me to jeopardize it. And for what?"

Najara sat with a stiff back and glowing eyes. The flexing of her jaw muscles showed and anger shined in her eyes. "You're jeopardizing your sister's life," she hotly reminded.

Gabrielle stepped closer, bent over and angrily drew out each word. "We are saving my sister." She leaned in closer then firmed her decision. "The answer is no, Najara." She straightened up and saw how Najara was none too happy with her response. And Gabrielle didn't care what Najara thought about it so she walked off. She didn't look back and returned to her bed chambers.

The bard didn't find her partner inside the bed chambers so she took a seat on the side of the bed. She propped the heels of her boot on the edge of the bed frame then lowered her elbows on her knees. Gabrielle dropped her face into her hands again but held her hair back. Here she thought her day was going to turn out better than the last few, but she was having no luck.

The Conqueror silently stood in the doorframe that went to the balcony. She seemed ghostly because of the sheer white curtain that floated in front of her. She observed her lover's very distraught and upset demeanour, and it broke her. She slipped past the curtain then went to the opposite side of the bed from the bard.

Gabrielle sharply inhaled at first when she felt somebody behind her. She calmed though once she realized it was her partner.

The Conqueror sat behind the bard and her legs were outside of Gabrielle's. She propped her feet up on the bed frame like Gabrielle then she snaked her arms around the bard's waist. She lowered her head and observed, "You left angry and now you're upset."

Gabrielle slumped back into her lover's protective body. "You were right... about Najara." She sensed the new tension in her ruler thanks to her words. "I told her about Lila."

"Gabrielle, you shouldn't have spoken to her," the ruler warned. She sighed because there was nothing that could change that factor.

"I realize that now." Gabrielle shook her head. "I wasn't thinking... I just needed to talk to somebody."

Xena frowned yet asked, "What did she say?"

The Amazon Queen released a deep sigh and tried to settle herself down. "She basically told me that I should tell you 'screw you' and go free my sister on my own." She grabbed her lover's bare knee that was revealed thanks to the dress's slit. "She tried to... manipulate me by saying you haven't changed and that everything you're doing is just an act."

The Conqueror tilted her head and asked, "Do you believe her?"

"No," the bard bit off then she stopped herself. "I'm sorry. It's just she really had my temper going by the end. It's like she hasn't been paying attention or listened to anything I've told her."

The Conqueror wasn't at all annoyed by the bard's snappy response, but indeed she was happy for it. If Gabrielle had faltered then she'd wondered otherwise.

"She knows," Gabrielle continued to rant, "how important you are to me. How important our relationship is to me. But it was like none of that was suppose to matter to me and that I'm suppose to throw all that away. She was trying to make me feel guilty for not helping my sister right away and worrying about getting your approval." She stopped and dropped her head back so she could see her partner's face. "I don't understand why, Xena."

The ruler lifted her right hand and caressed her lover's cheek. "I'm not sure, Gabrielle." Although she had her ideas but couldn't be sure until she found out more. She'd been belying her orders to have Najara's past dug up simply because she didn't want to damage her relationship with Gabrielle. She knew how Gabrielle cared for the dekarchos, but obviously this could prove dangerous.

Gabrielle lowered her head then muttered, "She was pissed, Xena... I mean really pissed. She definitely doesn't like the word 'no' told to her."

"Stay away from her, Gabrielle."

The bard shook her head then argued, "Xena, I don't think she'd do anything."

"Incase she suddenly decides to, let's not give her the chance." The ruler ran her hand up the bard's stomach then back down and repeated the process in a soothing motion. "Please?"

Gabrielle knew she needed to grant this much until Xena felt it was safe. "I'll keep my distance."

"The next time you need to talk to somebody," Xena offered, "talk to Iolaus. I trust him, and I know you're comfortable with him too."

Gabrielle nodded but then chided, "How about we just don't fight anymore. You agree to everything I say. And we'll be good to go."

Xena lowered her head then teased, "That's an interesting thought."

"A fleeting thought, I imagine." The bard chuckled when she felt Xena's grin against her neck.

"Mmmm very fleeting," the ruler muttered and kissed the bard's neck. "Besides," she continued, "who else would you have to argue with?" She ran her hand all the way up Gabrielle's stomach and slipped her fingertips under the leather top. "You enjoy it too much."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and dropped her head to one side so that Xena had better access. "I personally think you like to argue so you can have the make up sex afterwards." She didn't hear any argument and only received a deep laugh. "Cyrene puts up good fights with me."

"And I hope my mother doesn't offer make up sex afterwards," the Conqueror teasingly warned.

"Oh definitely not." Gabrielle hissed when her lover bit her neck. She instinctively drew her nails into the ruler's skin. "You know though we haven't settled our argument."

"Mmmm." The Conqueror's hand slid back down the bard's stomach and stopped at the top of her belt. Her left hand found its way to Gabrielle's thigh. "I suppose we'll have to continue the argument later then have sex again."

Gabrielle couldn't help her laugh, which was quickly stopped by her moan when the ruler's hand slipped higher up and under her leather skirt. "How about next time we fight, you just take me instead of waiting for the make up part?" She received a deep growl from the ruler, and she suddenly was lifted up. Gabrielle yelped out of surprise but somehow she discovered herself on her back in the middle of the bed. She gazed up into carnal blue eyes.

The Conqueror remained over top of her partner and hotly whispered, "You would

like that, wouldn't you?"

Gabrielle brightly blushed then averted her eye contact. "I still plead that I'm innocent."

The Conqueror's chest shook from a deep, amused laugh. "Hardly." She lowered her head closer to the bard's. "Then I suppose you don't want me to..." She brought her lips close to the bard's ear and whispered her last words.

Gabrielle's earlier blush turned into a full flush that spread down over her chest. "Is that really... possible?"

"It's very possible," the Conqueror whispered. She amusingly watched the flush creep even lower and covered the bard's stomach.

Gabrielle placed her hand to the ruler's right cheek and drew her down for a passionate kiss. She came out breathless but practically begged, "Show me."

And the Conqueror did show Gabrielle just how possible it was for them. She was rewarded by Gabrielle's louder than normal pleading for her to take her. Although the Conqueror didn't quickly meet the demand because she built up her young lover's frustrations higher. Then when she was positive that Gabrielle couldn't hold out anymore then she brought the bard her final pleasure.

Gabrielle rolled onto her back, coated in sweat, and gasping for air. She hadn't felt this worn in a long time, and she wondered if she wouldn't be sore later, but it didn't matter to her. "Xena?"

"Mmmm?" The Conqueror was on her back too, next to the bard, and she was fairly breathless like her lover.

"Promise me..." The bard stopped and sucked in more air. "Promise me we'll do that again."

The Conqueror chuckled and turned her head to the left. She took in her lover's nude form, which she found so beautiful. "I don't think you need to worry about me promising that."

"Well," the bard muttered, "thank the gods then." She patted her bare chest and whispered, "Wow." She met her lover's gaze and asked, "What other tricks do you know?"

The Conqueror smirked, but she picked up the short, leather rope that rested between them. She removed the knot it in then tossed it on the floor. "I don't reveal all my secrets at once, Gabrielle." She rolled onto her left side so that she was close to her partner now.

The bard reached up and traced the ruler's face. She slightly became somber when her thoughts quickly switched to something else.

The Conqueror sensed it easily so she started to run her fingertips across the bard's

stomach in random patterns. "What is it?"

"I know you're trying to keep me busy from thinking about this stuff, but..." Gabrielle sighed then asked, "When are we going to leave for Mogador?"

Xena considered it for a beat and replied, "Tomorrow at first light."

The bard was shocked and stared oddly at her partner. "You're serious?"

"Would I kid you about this?"

"No," the bard agreed. She felt relieved too because the sooner she could get her sister, the better she would feel. She knew her world would stop being turned upside down. "It's so strange... before I didn't know Lila was alive so everything was just fine." She moved her head against her thoughts then muttered, "But now that I know she's alive... that's all I can think about and worry about. I won't find any peace until I know she's out of there."

"I know." The Conqueror moved her hands about quickly. She picked up her partner, rolled onto her back, and brought the bard with her.

Gabrielle snuggled into her lover's warm and even still sticky body. She was content though, and the arms around her never felt better. "Can we come back to Alexandria some time? When it isn't so crazy."

"Yes," the ruler promised.

The bard had her head on the ruler's chest, and she closed her eyes. "Xena, I understand why you don't want me to go into Gurkhan's palace. I know you're scared something will happen to me." She stopped and took a moment to gather her next thoughts. She ran her fingertips over the ruler's collarbone. "I'm worried something would happen to me too." She moved her hand off Xena's collarbone and grasped Xena's shoulder instead. "I think what scares me more is somebody other than me going in there and facing my sister. I know its been a long time since I've seen her, but I'm still the only person that knows her best. If it's somebody else other than me, I'm worried they'll screw it up. I'll never find any peace then."

The Conqueror listened carefully to every word the bard spoke. She didn't have an instant response so she simply asked, "Let me think about this?"

Gabrielle squeezed her partner's shoulder tightly, and whispered, "Thank you."

Xena kissed the bard's head then murmured, "Get some sleep before dinner."

The bard couldn't argue that command one bit. She closed her eyes then her body relaxed completely as her mind wandered off to her dreamscape.

The Conqueror stayed awake and considered the future plans in Mogador. She also mulled over what Gabrielle had told her about Najara. She slowly ran her hand up and down the bard's back. She didn't like much the idea of Gabrielle going into Gurkhan's palace, but Gabrielle had a point. It would take the right words to convince Lila to

leave Gurkhan and go back to Greece with the Conqueror. And if anybody was perfect at convincing it was Gabrielle. The Conqueror swore Gabrielle could talk her way in or out of anything.

The only thing Xena wanted was the danger minimized for the bard. She knew she had Lutalo as part of her upper hand but that just wasn't enough. There were still too many variables. Xena kept plotting out ideas until she had the right one.

Almost two candlemarks later, the bard awoke and felt a lot better. She didn't have any nightmares and really didn't recall her dreams. She discovered the Conqueror had slipped out of bed at some point. She rubbed the sleepiness away and called, "Xena?"

The Conqueror came out from the washroom and still dried her face. She lowered the towel. "Sleep well?"

The bard noted the ruler was fully dressed in her earlier clothes. "Yeah, actually." She brushed her messy hair back. "I didn't even feel you move."

Xena slightly grinned and balled up the towel in her hand. "You were sleeping hard." She strolled back into the washroom but offhandedly mentioned, "I informed the captains that we'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Will they be ready?" Gabrielle sat up and slipped off the bed. She slowly moved about to get her clothes that Xena had neatly set up on the table for her. She slightly smiled at the gesture.

"Yes." The Conqueror strolled back out and watched her partner dress. "Are you hungry?"

Gabrielle caught the note of concern in her lover's question. She really hadn't been eating much lately because of her nervousness. "I think so." She reached behind and fiddled with her back clip.

Xena slipped behind her partner and helped her. "I hope so." She moved closer. "You haven't been eating well."

"I never do when I'm stressed," the bard admitted. "But I'll make up for it later."

The ruler smirked and teased, "Oh I'm sure." She then moved away so that her partner could get her boots on next. Once Gabrielle was ready, she and the bard left for the dinner that Queen Cleopatra had prepared for them.

The dinner went quickly, and Gabrielle was glad she'd taken a nap. She had to keep up with Queen Cleopatra's conversation since Cleopatra was always so witty. The Conqueror then closed the dinner early and reminded the Egyptian Queen that they had to be up at dawn. Queen Cleopatra promised see them off tomorrow at first light.

Gabrielle silently walked along side her partner, but a thought occurred to her. "Xena, will Jarine's body be loaded onto the transport ship?"

"It's already onboard," the ruler confirmed.

The bard was relieved. "They put the oils on and wrapped her?"

"Yes." The Conqueror took her partner's hand into hers. "She'll be ready for the pyre when you take her to Artemisia."

Gabrielle was clearly grateful because it'd been bothering her. She'd informed her Amazons what was happening to Jarine's body. They all readily agreed that it was best Jarine be returned to the Nation so that she could be properly sent to the afterlife.

"Did Xavier talk to you?" the ruler queried. She'd noticed that Xavier and Gabrielle had been quietly talking at dinner.

"Actually I wanted to tell you about that." Gabrielle walked closer to her partner. "He wants to come with us tomorrow."

"You told him it was okay?"

The bard nodded but questioned, "It is okay, right?"

The Conqueror slightly grinned at the bard's concern. "Of course." She pushed open the bed chambers door and let Gabrielle enter first. She followed and closed the door. "You tell him what time we're leaving tomorrow?"

"Oh yeah, and he asked if we could sleep in at least one candlemark."

Xena smirked then thoroughly teased, "That sounds like somebody else I know."

"Funny, funny." The bard ignored her lover and busied with getting ready for bed. "Well, back to the puking tomorrow."

The Conqueror chuckled but reminded, "At least this time you know the pressure point trick." She disappeared into the washroom.

Gabrielle glared over at the ruler's disappeared form. She shook her head and wondered when she'd get the chance to get her partner back. She never imagined the ruler of largest empire could be such a brat. She sat down at the table and almost bent forward to untie her boots when something struck her odd. She straightened back up and stared at the scroll satchel on the table.

"By the gods," she muttered. She trembled slightly and gingerly touched the tip of a scroll. Her satchel and scrolls looked good as new, yet she knew they'd been covered in Jarine's blood. It didn't make any sense. "Xena?"

The Conqueror quickly came out when she heard the bard's fearful call. "What is it?" She came over and in the sunset lit room, she just made out the scroll satchel on the table.

"Please tell me you... tell me you did this?" Gabrielle peered up and took in the ruler's confused features. She had her answer so she stood up and backed away from the table. "Xena..."

The Conqueror grabbed the satchel and hastily checked it for anything strange. She scanned the outside of the bag, and like Gabrielle, she didn't see any blood. She removed a scroll then opened it part of the way until she saw the handwriting. She carefully studied it and knew it was Gabrielle's or else a very good duplication.

Gabrielle shook her head then uttered, "How did that get in here?" Her heartbeat was frantic.

The Conqueror clenched the scroll and growled. She calmed her emotions then asked, "Did you buy this satchel here or in Corinth?"

"I actually bought it in Amphipolis when I was just starting to scribe." Gabrielle couldn't remove her stare from the satchel. "Xena, how did they do that?" She pointed at it then stated, "It was coated in Jarine's blood."

"Where did you leave it, Gabrielle?"

The bard swallowed and dug up her memories. She met the ruler's dark features. "Inside of the building... after they killed her... I... I threw it off."

The Conqueror shoved the scroll into the satchel then asked, "Do you want to keep this?"

The Amazon Queen quickly shook her head. "No."

"I'm going to go find Iolaus," the Conqueror informed, "I want you to go next door and stay with Vara."

Gabrielle merely nodded then back stepped once. She turned and went to the door but made sure to take her staff.

The ruler followed her partner out of the room, but she paused and studied the room again. She narrowed her eyes then left. She waited until the bard was in the room with Vara then she went on a fast hunt for her tetrarchès. The Conqueror gave Iolaus the satchel and scrolls then ordered him to talk to Cheops about it. She gave Iolaus specific things to find out and where to begin. Iolaus carefully listened then promised he'd talk to Cheops tonight. Finally, she ordered Iolaus to have the squad on duty all night, and they would patrol the palace.

The Conqueror thanked the tetrarchès then headed back to the south wing. She'd get Gabrielle and try to get some rest tonight. She could only imagine though if either her or Gabrielle would sleep tonight after somebody obviously had trespassed in their bed chambers. And the Conqueror was right, Gabrielle remained restless during most of the night, and the Conqueror never slept.

Just a candlemark before dawn, the Conqueror woke her partner and prepared for their long journey. Gabrielle remained silent unless she was asked something. She moved quickly though as Xena requested. Finally, the bard was guided out of the palace by her partner, Amazons, and the squad. Cheops and Queen Cleopatra had joined.

The transport ship had moved from the port, came into the Great Harbor, and docked on the private pier. The triremes waited just outside the mouth of the Great Harbor and rocked in the sea's waves. The squad and Amazons embarked the ship but the rulers stayed on the dock to part ways.

Queen Cleopatra tightly embraced the bard and softly whispered, "I hope you find your sister, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen withdrew but sadly smiled. "Thank you. The Conqueror promised we'd come back soon." She peered up at her partner.

The Conqueror moved her head in agreement.

Cleopatra grinned then teased, "Well, hopefully it won't take as long as last time." Her eyes lifted to the Greek ruler.

The Conqueror merely folded her arms then arched an eyebrow. "Perhaps just Gabrielle will come next time."

The Egyptian Queen knew what her counterpart was trying to do, but she smirked and turned her focus to the bard. "I wouldn't mind that actually." She grinned devilishly. "We'd enjoy ourselves, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle didn't like the direction of the conversation, yet she wasn't going to damage anything. "We would but nothing is more enjoyable than having the Conqueror around." She grinned at the ruler.

The Conqueror grunted as the bard's remark. "Are you ready?"

The bard understood the cue so she went to Cheops and said farewell to him. The Conqueror exchanged some words with Queen Cleopatra then she signaled Gabrielle to climb the gangplank. Gabrielle slowed made her way up but paused and waved to Cheops and the queen. The Conqueror rolled her eyes at her partner's overly polite attributes.

Gabrielle continued up then mumbled, "Well Xena, barfs away." She touched her prequeasy stomach.

Xena couldn't help a small laugh, but she urged her partner up the gangplank. "Let's go, Gabrielle before I carry you up."

"That was a really enticing threat," the bard mentioned.

The Conqueror sighed dramatically. "I like it better when you first wake up and have nothing to say."

Gabrielle hopped off the gangplank and turned. She discovered the height of the gangplank added to her partner's already tall height. She was about to say something but Xena's additional height didn't help her.

Xena raised an eyebrow at her partner and waited. She held onto the railing on either

side of the gangplank.

The bard smiled crookedly then muttered, "Right." She walked off.

The bemused ruler stepped off the gangplank then hollered an order to the captain to set sail. She listened to the sailors frantically work to get prepared. She and Gabrielle ascended the bridge deck and joined the captain and first mate.

"It should be a beautiful day for sailing," the captain mentioned. He took a moment to call out a few orders then turned to the Conqueror. "To Mogador, my liege?"

"To Mogador," the ruler agreed.

"The course is plotted and we're prepared."

The Conqueror was pleased, and she remained on the bridge deck. Gabrielle stood at her side and idly listened to the orders given out. The Conqueror could tell that the bard was learning the various nautical terms that passed between the captain, sailors, and first mate. Then when the transport ship pulled away from the dock, the rockiness already hit the bard's stomach. Gabrielle discreetly pressed her pressure point on her wrist then inhaled deeply.

Once the Conqueror felt they were well into the Mediterranean, she turned to the bard. "I want to speak to you."

Gabrielle broke out of her thoughts then absorbed the words. She nodded and moved away from the captain and first mate.

The Conqueror informed the captain she'd return later. She escorted Gabrielle down the bridge deck and took her below deck.

The bard was faintly nervous, but she entered the quarters that'd been theirs last time. She took a seat on the bed and waited for Xena.

The Conqueror turned after she silently closed the door. She was quiet for a beat or two then mentioned, "I've thought a lot about your request to go in as the undercover wife." She remained standing in front of her partner, and her tone serious. "I will let you go if you can learn and demonstrate some things that'll be vital to your safety while you're there."

Gabrielle carefully read her partner's body language and knew this was hard for the Conqueror. "What do I need to learn?"

The Conqueror stepped closer then squatted down so she became eye level with the bard. "Do you know the dance of the three veils?" She watched the changing expression on the bard's face. "You're going to need to know a few dances. The wives often dance for their husband as a form of entertainment." She then rested her hands on her armor covered knees.

Gabrielle was speechless but listened carefully.

The ruler tilted her head and added, "You need to learn some phrases in Berber in case they speak it. Most likely they'll be speaking Greek since Gurkhan is from Greece."

The bard nodded then asked, "Anything else?"

"Yes." The Conqueror briefly watched the bard touch her pressure point on her wrist. She lifted her eyes to Gabrielle again and informed, "I'm going to teach you another pressure point."

Gabrielle lowered her hand from her wrist. She was surprised by the ruler's words. "I'm not sure if..."

The ruler moved her hands to the bard's knee. "You need to be able to defend yourself. You can't have any weapons with you so this is your best option."

The Amazon Queen nodded but still wasn't comfortable with it. "What will the pressure point do?"

"It'll paralyze the person." The Conqueror then decided they might as well begin so she said, "Let me show you."

Gabrielle was nervous, yet she nodded.

Xena lifted her hands and kept her index and middle finger out. She pressed the tips of her fingers just above the bard's collarbone. "You feel that?" After the bard nodded, she continued to speak. "If you thrust the right amount of pressure against those pulse points then you'll paralyze the person." She lowered her hands. "Now try to find them on your neck."

The bard tilted her chin back some then lifted her hands and mimicked Xena's earlier actions.

The Conqueror lifted her hands and carefully maneuvered the bard's fingertips into the right spot. "Feel it?" Again Gabrielle nodded so Xena took the bard's hands and brought them to her neck. "Find mine."

Gabrielle bit her lower lip, but she carefully sought the Conqueror's pressure point.

"Good," the ruler whispered. "It doesn't take much thrust for this to work. It's more about the accuracy." She then stood up and said, "Now I want you to practice this." She sat on the bed.

Gabrielle's hands coated in sweat, and she shook some. "Practice how?"

"On me," the ruler revealed. She moved about until she rested on the bed. "Alright, find the pressure points on my neck."

Gabrielle was distraught, but she adjusted on the bed so that she faced the headboard and Xena. She stretched out her hands and determined the spot again. "There?"

"Yes," the Conqueror murmured. "Now you have to jab at the points for it to work."

The bard shook her head then asked, "How do I..."

"You release it by jabbing the pressure points again," the ruler explained. "I want you to try."

Gabrielle clenched her teeth for a beat. "What if I can't release it?"

"If you can put it on then you can remove it," Xena explained. "Come on."

The bard lifted her hands but her hands were fisted. She shook her head. "I can't do this."

"Yes... yes you can." Xena tilted her chin back some. "I won't feel a thing." She slightly grinned at her dry joke.

"That's not funny," the bard snapped.

The Conqueror went serious and ordered, "Come on, Gabrielle."

"I can't-"

"Now," the ruler hotly ordered.

"No." Gabrielle lowered her hands to her lap.

The Conqueror snarled, "If you're too weak to do this then you can't go in." She received the response she expected and was somewhat surprised how quickly.

Gabrielle's hands blurred and went to the ruler's lower throat.

The Conqueror gasped for air as her body went completely numb. Her head sunk into the pillow, and she stared at the ceiling of the quarters.

"Xena?" Gabrielle began to tremble because of how swiftly all of this happened. She hadn't expected the fast jabs to really work. "Take this off," she urged frantically. She touched her partner's neck but the pressure points were dull or gone, she wasn't sure and became scared. "Xena?"

The Conqueror remained still other than her eyes occasionally blinking. She forgot to mention that she wouldn't be able to talk once she was paralyzed.

"Oh gods," the bard emotionally rasped. She moved her fingertips over the ruler's taut neck; it almost seemed like the ruler was being choked. The ruler's motionless position reminded her too much of when the Conqueror was paralyzed by the hemlock. "Okay, okay... I can do this." She judged where the pressure points were located, pulled her hands back, and hastily jabbed her targets.

The Conqueror's back slightly arched, and she inhaled until her lungs were completely full. She eased the tension in her body then closed her eyes.

Gabrielle cupped the ruler's cheek. "Are you okay? I'm sorry. I didn't think it'd-"

"It's okay." The ruler covered the bard's hands with hers. "You did fine." She caught her breath then mentioned, "Not bad for your first try."

Gabrielle frowned and asked, "Can we skip the rest of the practice?"

Xena's lips curled into a grin. "For now."

The Amazon Queen was somewhat relieved so she lowered her forehead to her lover's chest. "You should have told me you couldn't talk."

"It slipped my mind," the ruler muttered. "I hardly use those pressure points when I interrogate."

Gabrielle faintly shook her head and tried to calm down.

The Conqueror slipped her arms around the bard. "It wasn't that bad."

Gabrielle placed her weight on the bed and the ruler. She turned her head to the side and explained, "It wasn't that... it just reminded me of when..."

Xena only needed a moment to catch onto what'd bothered Gabrielle so much about it. She sighed and murmured, "That's over, Gabrielle."

"Yeah well... I'm a little slower on the uptake sometimes... or is it the downtake," the bard rambled. She sighed sadly and closed her eyes. "Can we take a vacation from our vacation when we go back to Corinth?"

The Conqueror trailed her fingers over the bard's back. "We'll see." She wouldn't promise anything since she would possibly have to go to Britannia but right now wasn't the time to discuss it.

The western trip around the African coast didn't seem to last very long. Gabrielle spent most of waking hours training with her partner. Gabrielle perfected the pressure point. Then Xena instructed Gabrielle the basics on the dance of the three veils. The bard didn't think she could do it because of her lack of dance grace. The Conqueror, however, was determined to show Gabrielle and by sunset of the second day she was sitting on the foot of the bed and watched the bard's performance. The Conqueror had to admit, if Gabrielle was properly dressed as a wife and performed the dance, she would be spell bound too.

The third day, Xena woke Gabrielle fairly early and had her above deck all day in the hot sun. The bard wore her Amazon leathers but not her gauntlets, armbands, or jewelry as Xena instructed her. The Conqueror merely wore her black leathers and unattached her greaves from her boots. The Conqueror and Amazon Queen spent all day practicing hand to hand combat, which resulted in a very sore bard but better prepared.

During the practices, the Conqueror occasionally spotted Najara on deck and watched them. She refused to let Najara bait her or Gabrielle. Later on, Xavier surfaced on

deck and observed them practicing. He was quite taken and often cheered the bard on to beat the Conqueror. Gabrielle often came close, but close was never enough and typically landed flat on her back.

By sunset, Gabrielle was relieved to be finished. She never felt so worn and had never drunk so much water in one day. The Conqueror was proud of the bard's persistence to learn, and it made the Conqueror more confident about the bard going into Gurkhan's palace. She quietly promised the bard that she'd earned a massage for all her hard work. Gabrielle didn't refuse and hauled her partner below deck so she could claim her prize.

On the fourth day, the transport ships and triremes passed through the strait known as the Fretum Gaditanum; it was the shortest distance from Europa to Africa. The Conqueror spent the next days teaching the bard certain Berber phrases that she may need, but she hoped that wasn't the case. Finally when they were coming close to Mogador, the Conqueror had the bard practice the pressure points one last time. Gabrielle had become much more comfortable with using them and effective. The evening of the sixth day of journey, the Conqueror ordered the triremes to stay out in the ocean and that the transport ship would rejoin them in two to three days.

Next, the Conqueror instructed Iolaus of her beginning plans then she prepared the bard for what rested ahead of her. She explained the general plan to hopefully bring Gurkhan out in the slave market, and Gabrielle was the ploy. Gabrielle readily agreed and knew that it may not work so she'd have to enter Gurkhan's palace.

The following day, the transport ship docked early in the morning at the Mogador port. Iolaus had changed into something less formal and donned more local, traditional clothes. He then ordered half of the squad to follow with him to the slave market. At the market, Iolaus discovered news that the auctioneer planned to sell slaves that afternoon. After the news, Iolaus hurried to the regular market and purchased the particular items that the Conqueror had requested.

It wasn't long before Gabrielle was seated on the foot of the bed, and her head was bowed. Her lover was almost finished with the neat, tight braids of her hair. The bard's hair was completely braided, her dark makeup around her eyes, and she wore a simple white, silk dress that had one shoulder strap. She wore plain, leather sandals. She finished off by putting the white wrap over her head.

The Conqueror stood up when the bard turned to her. "Remember, if you get in there keep your profile low. Don't attract attention to yourself. Don't forget what I've taught you. And when you get to Lila, try to speak to her alone."

Gabrielle nodded as she tried to put on a new mindset.

Xena placed her hands on the bard's shoulders. "You're going to see a lot. You'll be exposed." She arched an eyebrow for an emphasis to her words. "You can't let this defocus you from the mission." She tilted her head and murmured, "I won't be far."

"I know." The bard nodded once. "I'll be careful."

The Conqueror sighed then nodded. She leaned in for a long kiss, and she brushed the

bard's cheek. She finally took the bard's wrap and used the end part to cover the bard's face. She clipped it in the back then ordered, "Let's go."

Gabrielle followed out of the quarters and went to the stairs that led above deck. She glanced back at her lover.

Xena nodded once but whispered, "Be safe."

The bard couldn't reply so she turned and climbed the steps. She went into the bright daylight where Iolaus waited for her.

The Conqueror turned and hurried down to the quarters. She retrieved her cloak then disappeared out of the room.

Iolaus and the five squad members marched down the gangplank with Gabrielle in the middle. Iolaus casually rested his hand on his sword hilt. He scanned the busy port but guided the group to the slave market. When they arrived, he approached the auctioneer behind the stage.

The slaver lifted his eyes from his parchment. "Yeah? What do you want?"

Iolaus stepped aside and grabbed Gabrielle's right arm. "Forward, wench." He tossed the bard towards the slaver. "The name's Superlius, and I have a choice specimen." He held out his hand to Gabrielle. "I'd like to know how much I can get for her." He lowered his hand and further informed, "She's a former Amazon." Iolaus removed Gabrielle's veil.

The slaver stood up from his chair and neared the well covered slave. "An Amazon? I thought there were none left." He grinned then took the slave's face into his hands.. "Very nice." He came behind the short woman. "She's quite small." He stopped behind her then suddenly removed her dress. "Not only beautiful but strong." He stood in front of the passive slave and took in her muscular stomach features. "She'll be useful day and night. Yes, we should do very well with her."

Iolaus kept his eyes up and locked on the slaver. "I want seventy percent."

The slaver's head snapped to the small man. "I prefer sixty percent for me."

Iolaus narrowed his eyes then bartered, "Fifty-fifty."

The slaver rubbed his chin then glanced at the nude slave as to make his decision. "Alright." He then grinned at the small blond. "I can tell you who'll end up with her - Gurkhan, himself. He's got great taste in women."

Iolaus bit back his smirk as he nodded.

Gabrielle was soon redressed and shoved to the ground beside two other slaves.

"Uh oh... competition," one slave remarked.

The second slave leaned over and asked, "Competition? For what? To see who gets

sold quickest to the biggest monster to do with as he pleases?"

The first slave, Sonata, replied, "Yeah. You make it sound like a bad thing."

The bard sat near the women and inquired, "Isn't it?"

Sonata raised an eyebrow at the newcomer. "Hey, in my village, the choices were marry a sober man or marry a drunk poor man. It was a toss up really. The sober man would be less likely to beat you, but the drunk man would be less likely to keep you pregnant all the time."

The second slave, Lana, sighed then softly mentioned, "At least you were around your family."

Sonata shook her head. "My father is dead, and my mother is a whore. I have no family. Now, I have a good shot at being bought by Gurkhan the Magnificent, the wealthiest man in the continent."

Gabrielle wanted to comment, but she held them all back.

"Girl!" Iolaus called to the bard, "Girl, come here!"

The bard kept her features dark, yet she stood up and neared the tetrarchès. She stayed close and softly asked, "Tell the Conqueror she won't be far from my thoughts."

Iolaus tilted his head, but he nodded discreetly.

"Hey!" the auctioneer hollered, "Hey, come on!" He waved for the small slave to follow him. He hauled her out onto the stage.

Gabrielle was pushed into center stage. She scanned the faces in the crowd and tried to guess which ones was Gurkhan.

The auctioneer signaled the new slave beside him. "And now for premium selection - a woman of such fire and beauty that a man, well, would have to be crazy not to want to take her home. From Greece, the green-eyed Amazon, magnificent to the eye as she will no doubt be to the touch." He stopped and listened to rounds of chatter. "Now, let's start the bidding at ten gold ducats."

Gabrielle listened to the opening bids and the auctioneer. Then a brief flash from high up caught her eye, and scanned the roofs just ahead.

The Conqueror waved her two soldiers on the other roofs to move carefully. She then reached to her side, extracted a long dart, and loaded it into her small crossbow. She rested flat on her stomach on the roof closest to the slave market. Her face was well hidden by the cloak, and the cloak helped her blend in with the black roof.

The Conqueror tilted her head then heard the auctioneer cry out Gurkhan's name. She targeted the man that'd bid, but something wasn't right. The auctioneer called Gurkhan's name again and pointed to a totally different man. There was a third and fourth... even a fifth, and the Conqueror kept targeting each man.

The auctioneer's fast words spun a web then he suddenly announced, "Sold to Gurkhan the Magnificent for two hundred twenty gold ducats!" He held his hand out to the seventh 'Gurkhan' and proudly stated, "What a prize he's won for himself."

Gabrielle clenched her teeth when Xena's first plan completely failed. She briefly glanced up at the small form hidden on the roof across the small market. She bowed her head and walked off stage.

The Conqueror cursed under her breath then muttered, "Very clever... but not clever enough." She signaled her two soldiers to disengage, and she did the same by crawling backwards.

## **Chapter 6 - The Number One Wife**

Gabrielle slowly strolled across the marble floor in her sheer dress. She was making her way to the communal bath. She spotted Sonata nearing her.

Sonata had a wide grin. "How bad is this? My entire village isn't worth what Gurkhan must have paid for a barrel of that perfume." She fell into step beside the blond slave.

The bard was busy scanning the inside of the room. "Yes... it was nice." She casually removed her dress and let it fall to the floor near the pool. She then descended the steps and eyed an usual woman, who reminded her a bit like Lao Ma. "Where are you from?"

The Asian wife bowed her head then replied, "A distant land you've never heard of - beyond Chin, so far to the east, it's called 'the land of the rising sun'."

Gabrielle hadn't heard of such a land and couldn't imagine anything further beyond Chin. She smiled though. "What's your name?"

"Yui," the Asian slave supplied.

Gabrielle didn't lose her smile then introduced herself. "I'm Alessa." She then shifted closer to Yui. "Do you know what the number one wife's name is?"

Yui lowered her eyes but lifted them again. "She goes by the name Coriander."

The Amazon Queen was remotely surprised, yet she hid it well. "Is there a wife that goes by the name Lila?"

Yui shifted back some and became somewhat defensive. "It's against the rules to talk of the other wives. I've said too much."

Gabrielle recalled Xena's warning not to draw too much attention to herself. "It's okay."

"Please, Gurkhan will punish us if we break the rules." Yui clearly showed worry and even fear in her eyes.

Sonata sat on the other side of the pool. She quietly but teasingly asked, "Will he spank us?"

Yui narrowed her eyes at the newer wife. "You'll be beaten, manacled, thrown in a dark dungeon, and left to die."

Sonata's face fell, and she held up her left hand. "Okay... that's all I need to know. Thanks." She dropped her hand in the water.

Gabrielle didn't much like the response either, but she pushed it aside. She noticed Lana down by the left end of the pool, and Lana seemed rather down. Gabrielle moved past Yui and Sonata then took a spot beside Lana. "Hey."

Lana lifted her chin off her arms and sadly smiled at the fellow slave. "Hey, Alessa."

Gabrielle lightly touched Lana's shoulder and asked, "Thinking about someone in particular?"

Lana sighed and lowered her chin back to her crossed arms. "Yeah, my fiancé - Leonardo."

The Amazon Queen squeezed the wife's shoulder and murmured, "Don't stop thinking about him. His memory is what'll get you through this."

Lana felt bittersweet at memories of her beloved. "I hope so... but sometimes, I think I'd rather be dead than in this place."

"Be careful of what you ask for."

Gabrielle slowly tilted her head back until she met a stone cold face. Without even thinking, she blurted out, "Who are you?"

The well dressed woman swiftly knelt down and grabbed Gabrielle by the back of her head. She jerked her head up close to hers. "You dare to question the number one wife?" she sneered loudly.

Gabrielle held her breath and froze as her eyes locked with steel blue eyes. She rasped, "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

The first wife threw Gabrielle's head back. "Well, that's a good little dog." She slowly rose up to her full, yet short, height. "You learn from your beating."

Gabrielle's dull ache from the back of her head faded out. She remained stiff but locked by the younger woman of same height, weight, and facial structure. She couldn't tear her stare away.

"New girls, listen up," the first wife announced, "I am Gurkhan's number one wife, and you are all dirt."

Sonata huffed but refrained from rolling her eyes.

"Eventually my son will rule over Gurkhan's kingdom. Anyone who comes between me and my lord will feel my wrath." The first wife paused and scanned the wives' faces then coldly continued. "Believe me, that is when you will truly wish you were dead."

The first wife lowered her eyes to the new, blond wife. She smirked then turned and left the room.

Gabrielle let out a breath.

Lana glanced at the Amazon. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine... thanks." The bard touched Lana's elbow lightly then withdrew. She sensed Sonata nearby.

"Now she'd make a Hades of an Amazon," Sonata joked.

Gabrielle mock glared at Sonata, but she agreed.

"You were really an Amazon?" Lana softly asked.

"I was... still am," Gabrielle argued.

"How can you be?" Sonata shook her head. "You're here now."

The Amazon turned her head to Sonata, on her left side. "If you have the spirit of an Amazon then you're forever an Amazon."

"Well," Lana started, "I think we could all use some of that Amazon Spirit here."

The bard solemnly smiled and nodded. "I think so too." She then moved away and headed for the steps.

Sonata and Lana decided to follow after the bard.

Gabrielle ascended the steps and desperately tried to keep her wits together. She just needed a moment alone so she could gather her thoughts. Xena constantly drilled into her that she had to remain unemotional as possible during the mission or else it'd cloud her judgments.

Sonata was wrapped in her sheer dress again just like Lana and Gabrielle. She came closer to Gabrielle. "How did you end up becoming a slave?"

Lana listened but led the group out of the bathing room.

Gabrielle mentally dug up her story she'd worked on with her partner. It was easy for her since she was a bard. "I was young when I was taken. My village was attacked, and I was taken into slavery."

"Let me guess," Sonata chided, "the Conqueror, right?" She sighed and shook her head. "I'll never understand how the gods can let a murdering bitch like that rule most of the known-world."

Gabrielle held her tongue - it was safer that way.

Lana gazed across the bard to Sonata. "Did you hear about that rebel leader?"

Sonata brightened. "Oh yeah, I did actually." She then lost her excitement when she recalled what'd happened to the rebel. "I heard she's dead though. The Conqueror put her on a cross." She peered up at the silent wife. "Have you heard anything, Alessa?"

Gabrielle's lips thinned, and she simply replied, "I haven't."

Sonata frowned. She turned her head away and brushed back her curly locks. She followed Lana and the Amazon into the sitting room. The three new wives gathered around the others and idly chitchatted about whatever they found interesting.

It was close to sunset, when the first wife entered the sitting room and stood at the top step. She scanned the lower wives then ordered, "Wives of Gurkhan, on your faces."

The wives quickly lowered to the floor on their stomachs.

The first wife, Coriander, held out her hand to the left. "Look up at your peril."

Gabrielle raised her head and briefly stared at the first wife, who had her brown, curly hair pinned behind her head. Gabrielle's eyes flickered over to the man that was Gurkhan. He looked nothing like the monster she'd perceived in her head.

Gurkhan pointed to one of his new wives, the blond that had emerald eyes. "That one - Alessa."

Coriander lifted her chin and harshly ordered, "Tonight you will dance... for the Conqueror."

It took all of Gabrielle's resolve not to go bug eyed and make demands. She held her breath and lowered her head. She listened to Gurkhan and his first wife leave the sitting room. The Conqueror's arrival was certainly not in the original plans that Gabrielle could recall.

Sonata sat up but remained on her knees. "Now could that be anymore ironic?"

The Amazon sat in the same position as Sonata and Lana. "Yeah... who would have thought?" She narrowed her eyes and became dark.

Sonata leaned over and muttered, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a dagger while you're giving her a lap dance?"

"Sonata," Lana warned. "Alessa is not that way."

Sonata raised an eyebrow then looked between the two wives.

Gabrielle expelled a deep breath and turned her head to Sonata. "She's right... revenge is never the answer." She touched Sonata's closest knee. "There's only one way to change the cycle of hatred and that's through love and forgiveness."

Sonata tried to remain serious, however she teased, "Is that what the Amazons teach you?"

The bard smirked and remarked, "Actually no. My mother taught me that." She wouldn't even begin to mention that her adopted mother was Cyrene, the Conqueror's mother. She got up just as Yui approached her.

"We should get you ready, Alessa." Yui's eyes followed the Amazon's length. "You must wear something more appropriate for the dance."

Gabrielle studied her plain dress then consented. "Do you have any ideas?"

The Asian wife slightly grinned. "Plenty." She took the new wife's hand. "Come with me." She guided her deeper into the sitting room.

Lana and Sonata decided to follow and assist the pair. Also Sonata truly wanted to see what other attire the wives could wear. It didn't take long for Gabrielle to have her clothes hand selected by the chatty wives. Gabrielle mostly stayed quiet because she was deep in thought about why the Conqueror hadn't mentioned this aspect of the plans. What could Xena be up to?

Gabrielle discovered her new attire left very little to the imagination. She wore a strapped top that lifted her breasts into ample cleavage. The top was a soft lavender with a golden spiderweb design then there were several gold beaded strings that trickled over her shoulders. Her stomach was left bare until her lower half was covered by a sheer skirt, which was matching to her top. Across her waist, she adorned a golden belt that dangled several golden strands. Then the golden sandals mimicked the the beaded strands. The only jewelry she put on were a pair of thick, gold bracelets that easily sparkled against the light. And Gabrielle decided to keep her hair braided back since it'd make it easier during her dance.

Only a candlemark later, the wives were called into the dinning room where Gurkhan and his guests relaxed. The wives took their usual spot off to the side, and they become comfortable in the cushions. Next the servants flowed into the room and moved around the room.

There was no silence in the room as the wives softly chatted. The guests whispered amongst themselves. Gabrielle was the only silent wife as she scanned the guests' faces for her lover, but she didn't see Xena.

Two guards marched into the room and stopped beside the steps that went to the lower level where everybody lounged. They tapped their spears' ends onto the floor, then the right one spoke first.

"My lord, the Conqueror has arrived."

There was no verbal response from the group of guests.

The right guard nodded to a hidden command, and he disappeared back through the open doorway. He came back shortly and guided a tall, armor clad woman. Then behind her was a smaller man, who shined from his chest armor.

Gabrielle inhaled sharply and stared at her lover poised at the top of the steps. She hadn't seen the Conqueror in her finest armor, cape, and black leathers for some time. She was so use to the usual brown leathers and the Gaelic armor that reminded her of M'Lila.

"Hail, Gurkhan," the Conqueror spoke loudly, and she bowed.

Iolaus mimicked the Greek ruler's actions then straightened up after the Conqueror.

The Conqueror stayed at the top of the steps until she was allowed to join. She stood proud, and her powerful aura hummed around her. She seemed increasingly darker than normal except for the occasional flashes of gold from her armor.

The number one wife stood off to the side, and she briefly glanced at the clump of guests. She returned her focus to the Greek ruler. "Welcome to Mogador, Conqueror." She paused then declared, "Welcome to Gurkhan's palace. Gurkhan wishes for you to join him." She held out her hand to the guests.

The Conqueror briefly studied the first wife, who reminded her nothing of Gabrielle. She didn't bother to assess the wives off to her left, but she merely descended the steps.

Iolaus silently followed. He was unsure how this would work out.

As the Conqueror neared the male guests, there was a shuffle of movement from all the guests. She hesitated and watched as the guests parted like a sea then all that was left was one man in the center.

The man, who's head was bowed, lifted it and showed a smile. "It's been a long time, Xena."

The Conqueror recalled Gurkhan's face from so many Helical Risings ago. He had aged quite a bit since she'd briefly caught a glimpse of him last. "Perhaps too long."

Gurkhan chuckled then held out his hand to the open spot beside him on the large pillow. "Sit."

The Greek ruler easily sat beside the former warlord. She sat cross legged, back straight, and eyes on Gurkhan.

Iolaus took a standing post off to the left of the sitting powers. He linked his hands between his back and cape.

Gurkhan did a brief clap, which caused the music and chatter to continue in the room.

Gabrielle felt her heartbeat was strong. She pulled away from her stare and slightly hung her head.

Sonata moved past some of the wives and sat beside the bard. She had one foot on the floor while she propped her right leg up. She wrapped her right arm around her leg and leaned towards Gabrielle. "What you think they're talking about over there?" She signaled, with her chin, the Conqueror and Gurkhan.

Gabrielle glimpsed at the Greek ruler and her supposed husband. "I can't imagine, Sonata."

Sonata smirked and whispered, "They're probably talking about how to take over northern Africa." She rolled her eyes. "It's amazing how some of the darkest people in this world can be so beautiful outside. I think it's a joke from the Fates."

The Amazon clamped down on her initial retort and simply replied, "You can't judge a scroll by it's parchment, Sonata."

Sonata blinked and turned her focus from the Conqueror to Gabrielle. "But you can judge a scroll by it's author." She grew dim. "You can't tell me there's anything good about the Conqueror." She returned to observing the Greek ruler, who was whispering back and forth with Gurkhan. "If I could pretend she didn't slaughter so many people, I would find her fairly attractive."

Gabrielle was silent, then she decided on another topic. She quietly asked, "What would you do if you were free, Sonata?"

The wife lost her earlier smirk and became somewhat serious. "I would say that I'd go back to Greece." She turned her head away and brushed her dark hair back. "But with the way the Conqueror rules things... I don't know."

"I've heard she's changing," the bard murmured.

Sonata softly laughed and teased, "Where do you get your optimistic gossip?"

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow much like Xena would have done. She lowered it then seriously questioned, "What would you do back in Greece?"

The wife really considered it, and she wasn't quite sure. "I don't know. I suppose settle down."

"You don't sound too excited about that idea."

Sonata shrugged but commented, "When I was a young girl I use to think about being an Amazon."

Gabrielle lifted her head, and her eyes sparkled. She could relate to what Sonata just mentioned. "You should be an Amazon."

Sonata chuckled and shook her head. "I don't think they'd want me, Gabrielle."

"Trust me," the Amazon uttered, "they would take you."

Sonata had a perplexed face, yet she couldn't get her words out before the first wife spoke.

"Alessa," the number one wife called, "Gurkhan wishes for you to dance."

Sonata touched the Amazon's knee just before Gabrielle stood. "Good luck."

Gabrielle only gave an appreciative look, then she hurried to take her position. She had sweaty palms. She couldn't control her frantic heartbeat when she gazed upon Gurkhan and the Conqueror. She tried desperately not to look at Xena too much or else her focus would shatter.

The Conqueror slightly tilted her head when the distinct music began. She'd already ended her conversation with Gurkhan and now keenly watched the starting performance from Gabrielle. She'd already seen Gabrielle's dances when they'd traveled the Mediterranean, yet this was far different.

The Conqueror felt flushed by the eye-catching attire her lover had adorned. Then the jewelry reflected the light in accurate spots that drew Xena's attention to Gabrielle's stomach, breasts, or lower to muscular thighs. Xena tightly clenched her padded knees so that she'd have some resolve. She'd never been the wanted lover, but she couldn't deny her sharp-set want for Gabrielle right now.

Gurkhan must have picked up on the Greek ruler's feverish desire for the young wife. He leaned closer to the Conqueror and murmured, "Beautiful, isn't she?"

The Conqueror had yet to look away from the dancing wife. She had dark, hooded eyes and a feral smile. "Very, Gurkhan... you have excellent taste." Then Xena held her breath when Gabrielle lifted her arms, head bowed, and Gabrielle's hips swayed to the rhythmic music.

Gurkhan licked his lips in agreement to the ruler's appreciation. "Perhaps you'd like some... private time with my wife."

The Greek ruler's voice rumbled when she replied, "Yes." When Gabrielle continued her dance with the long, sheer veil, Xena leaned closer and murmured, "She'll help soften the deal."

Gurkhan deeply laughed and muttered, "Yes." He straightened up and continued to enjoy the erotic dance.

Gabrielle carefully moved across the floor and neared the two seated powers. She seemed to have dark eyes thanks to her black liner. She passed her husband a leering expression then twisted around so she had her back to them. Gradually Gabrielle came to her knees, and she leaned back. She moved her hands with the beat and slowly leaned further back. Her upper body moved with the music.

The Conqueror barely kept her eyebrow down as she received an ample view of

Gabrielle's full breasts. She didn't recall teaching Gabrielle this trick, yet she fully appreciated the addition and view. She then slightly lowered her gaze and saw the bard's eyes closed. Yet what heated her was how Gabrielle's lips were parted in an inviting way.

Gabrielle opened her eyes, and she briefly locked eyes with her lover. She felt on fire when she saw Xena's passions heightened in those crystal blue eyes. She straightened up faster than earlier and continued her alluring dance. No longer did Gabrielle focus her dance on them both - she solely wanted this for Xena.

The Conqueror never felt her passions out of control like she did now. If she wasn't here before Gurkhan, she would have taken Gabrielle by now. Yet the fact that Gurkhan knew nothing of her true purpose here or that she and Gabrielle were lovers excited her greatly. She mapped out a plan for tonight to take Gabrielle, and Xena would make sure that Gurkhan heard how she could truly please a woman. Tonight the Conqueror would conquer Gurkhan's new wife.

Gabrielle had moved back across the floor and stood in front of Gurkhan and the Conqueror again. She had her long veil which she suddenly brought across her shoulders and arms. She closed the sheer veil over her body as she went to her knees. She then bowed and held the veil closed over her mostly bare body. She'd completed the dance.

Gurkhan had a hard time taking his eyes off his new wife, yet his dark eyes flickered to his first wife.

Coriander set her dangerous expression on Gabrielle. "Your dance has pleased Gurkhan."

The Amazon bowed her head deeper then carefully stood up. She kept the veil over her body, and she returned to the other wives.

Gurkhan then gave a brief clap, which signaled for the soft music to start again. He then turned to his possible ally and chatted with her more.

Sonata scooted closer to Gabrielle, who just sat down. "Where did you learn that?"

The bard chuckled and replied, "The Amazons."

Sonata flashed a grin. "I didn't know the Amazons could dance."

"Oh we're very good at it," the bard revealed, "we do a lot of ritual dances."

Sonata was fascinated.

Gabrielle touched Sonata's knee and softly said, "The Amazons are a family. You would like it."

"If I could join, I would," Sonata admitted.

The bard squeezed the woman's knee then released it. She wouldn't say anything since

she wasn't sure what the plans were right now. She didn't even know that Xena would be here, but she was relieved for it too. She couldn't guess why her partner hadn't mentioned this part, and she hoped there was a damn good reason.

The Conqueror spoke with Gurkhan quietly. She then stopped when the servants came with food for them. She casually received the plate and lightly picked at the food. While Gurkhan busied with getting his plate, Xena stole a glance over at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle mentioned something to Sonata, yet she stopped when she felt that familiar and passionate gaze on her. She bit back her smirk, and locked eyes with her lover. She swallowed hard when the Conqueror flashed a dark, carnal grin then looked away. She exhaled deeply and wondered what that would mean later.

The dinner continued for almost two candlemarks before it started to break apart. The wives eventually made their way back to the common room, and they all gossiped about the Conqueror and Gurkhan. Some wives started questioning whether Gurkhan would bed the Greek ruler. It just seemed so strange that the enemies were here together, and something was in the air.

Gabrielle had listened to the gossip, and she almost prickled at the talk about Gurkhan bedding the Greek ruler. She managed to clamp her emotions before they started. She made a mental note not to mention that moment to her partner or else she'd never heard the end of it. She faintly grinned at the thought of her lover teasing her for any remote jealousy.

The wives went silent though when a guard entered the common room. He called for Alessa to follow him.

The Amazon was perplexed, but she did what she was told. She neared the guard, went up the steps, and slowly headed out of the room. She briefly looked over her shoulder and saw Sonata and Lana's worried faces.

The guard brought the new wife through several corridors and entered another part of the palace. He finally came to a door, which already had another guard. The guard that'd brought Gabrielle stepped forward and opened the door.

Gabrielle hesitated, however, she cautiously entered the dim room.

The guard closed the door and returned to his post beside the door. He briefly glanced at his comrade to his left.

The Amazon listened to the door close behind her, and she sought out who may be in the room. She centered on what undoubtedly was her lover's tall form in front of the window. She admired the black, silk robe that hid her lover's muscular body.

The Conqueror turned her head sidelong. She simply removed her hand from the windowsill and held it out in invite.

Gabrielle crossed the short distance and slipped her left hand into the larger one. She felt just how warm Xena was than normal. "I didn't know you were coming," she whispered.

The Conqueror appreciated the fact that Gabrielle kept her voice low. She turned her head to the bard. "I was unsure that I could arrange it. Nor did I want you dependent on my arrival."

"I'm glad you're here though." Gabrielle admired her partner's striking profile.

The ruler slowly turned and faced the petite blond. "So am I." She let her eyes trail over her lover's gorgeous body, and she huskily whispered, "I enjoyed your dance."

"Mmmm." The bard grinned and teased, "I noticed." She leaned in some and asked, "What was that look earlier?"

The Conqueror knew what Gabrielle was referring to, but she wouldn't give into the question just yet. "Have you spoken to your sister?"

Gabrielle let it go and seriously replied, "I need to catch her when she's alone." She placed her right hand on the ruler's burning chest. "How long will you stay?"

"For as long as I can stretch this out," the ruler promised. "Talk to your sister tomorrow... at first light." She moved closer and lifted her hand. She traced the bard's jaw line slowly. "I'll keep you here for tonight."

"The... guards," the distracted bard reminded.

"Don't worry," the Conqueror murmured. She brought her fingertips to Gabrielle's soft lips. "And speaking of guards, we have to continue our show tonight."

The bard was growing more distracted, although she desperately tried to focus on her partner's words. "How?" Her eyes grew heavy from passion, and she closed them. She then sensed Xena's hand on her stomach.

The Conqueror lowered her head some and brushed her lips over Gabrielle's. "You trust me?"

Gabrielle lazily opened her eyes, yet she sincerely replied, "More than anything."

Despite the heated moment, the Conqueror felt a sense of peace from those words. She brushed her lips Gabrielle's cheek and brought them close to the shell-like ear that was so soft. "Then tonight I'm only the Conqueror."

The bard understood the implications, and it excited her from her stomach and further down. "Yes... my liege." She slipped her arms around the ruler and tightly clung to her. "I'm yours tonight, Conqueror."

The Conqueror nipped the bard's ear and earned a sharp hiss of pleasure. "Don't be silent tonight." She withdrew some then captured Gabrielle's lips in a hungry kiss.

Gabrielle whimpered at the end of the kiss, but she was carefully guided through the room to the bed. She couldn't see that well since there were only a few candles lit. It didn't matter to her right now.

The Conqueror settled her partner into the foot of the bed, then she signaled Gabrielle to move back.

Gabrielle slowly crawled back. She never broke her eye contact with the commanding woman that trailed after her. She coaxed her lover down for another kiss.

The ruler pressed her body down against the bard's. Then she slipped her hand behind Gabrielle's back. She broke the kiss but began nipping at the bard's neck.

"Oh gods," Gabrielle whispered. She then hissed when Xena nipped harder. Gabrielle tangled her right hand in the ruler's hair while she used her other hand to hold her body up. She then slid her hand down to Xena's sash that held the robe closed.

The Conqueror was fast, and she caught the Amazon's hand. "No," she coldly stated. Then she quickly came up and kissed Gabrielle.

The bard was not at all upset by the harsh reaction from Xena. It was something she grew tolerant of because it went into the role playing. She knew her lover was up to something so Gabrielle would go along.

The ruler lightly nipped at Gabrielle's bottom lip after the kiss. "You won't touch me tonight," she informed. She was met by inquisitive green eyes. She simply explained, "Tonight is about you."

Gabrielle's curiosity almost got the best of her, but she just yielded. She freed her hand from Xena's then brushed the ruler's cheek. She leaned in for a softer kiss and expressed her longing for the ruler.

The Conqueror gradually escalated the kiss then started to remove the bard's clothes.

Gabrielle sat up better and assisted her lover. She continued the hungry kisses that caused her to moan louder. Then the cold air met her hardened nipples, and she pressed her body against the Conqueror's. The warm silk robe felt amazing against her burning skin. Gabrielle instantly dug her nails against the ruler's back.

The Conqueror remained on her knees, and she held her lover close to her. She lowered her head and captured Gabrielle's moist lips for a long kiss. Then her hand made a snaking rise for one of Gabrielle's breasts.

Gabrielle's voice grew louder and deeper. She showed increasing need for her lover's quenching touch. She recalled Xena's earlier command that she should not at all be quiet. She often tried to keep a certain clamp over her pleasure, but she was free tonight.

The ruler gently placed the bard on her back in the middle of the large bed. She hovered over the prone woman, who only remained in her skirt. Xena traced her lips over Gabrielle's right breast and teased the nipple. She darted her tongue over the aching nipple.

Gabrielle became frustrated, and she clawed the ruler in demand. She only delayed

Xena's lips from her desired spot. The bard arched her back slightly and begged.

The Conqueror had drawn it out enough. She covered the hard nipple with her moist lips. She let her tongue toy with Gabrielle even more before she closed her teeth over the nipple.

"Gods," the Amazons growled, "Conqueror." She pushed up higher and enjoyed the feeling of Xena's mouth taking more.

The Conqueror wanted her lover louder, and she knew Gabrielle was still holding back. She encouraged it further by tracing her fingertips over Gabrielle's inner thigh. She then grazed her fingers past Gabrielle's center then came up to her stomach.

"Please, Conqueror," the bard hotly tried.

The Conqueror took the bard's nipple between her teeth and gave a sharp bite. She enjoyed Gabrielle's brief cry. She moved her head up, kissed the bard's collar bone, and brought head next to Gabrielle's. "Please what?" Xena brought her right hand back to Gabrielle's moist center. She achingly push between the woman's folds.

"You know what," Gabrielle replied and brought her nails down the ruler's back.

"No," the Conqueror's voice rumbled, "tell me, Gabrielle." She lightly stroked Gabrielle's clit. "Tell me."

The bard growled and arched her back again. "Touch me, Conqueror."

The Conqueror shook from a deep laugh, and she huskily replied, "I will." She then pulled her hand away and brought it up to the skirt. She worked to remove it.

Gabrielle clenched her teeth from pure frustration, yet she assisted her lover in removing the skirt. She felt relieved when it was gone because her skin burned. She then pulled Xena in for a feverish kiss. She withdrew and opened her eyes to see her lover's passionate face. "Please touch me, Conqueror."

The ruler had felt how ready the bard was, and she hoped Gabrielle was just as mentally ready. She commanded, "Turn onto your stomach."

The bard didn't understand, yet she followed the order. She wasn't sure how to place her head so she turned it to the right. Then she mostly felt Xena move behind her and then over her. Briefly she sensed the silk robe pass over her back so she realized Xena had removed it.

Gabrielle could see less than earlier because the candles were dwindling. There seemed to be more moonlight from the window than anything. She then concentrated on Xena's legs brushing against the insides of hers.

The Conqueror slightly lowered but stopped and instructed, "Spread your legs for me, Gabrielle." She remained on her knees between the bard's slightly spread legs. She watched in full appreciation as her view of Gabrielle grew more detailed when Gabrielle opened her legs.

The Amazon Queen closed her eyes just as Xena's hand met her right thigh. She felt her pulse heighten each beat that Xena's hand slid higher up her thigh. She felt the ruler shift on the bed, and she didn't know what would happen, yet she was excited by the mystery.

The Conqueror had been nude under the silk robe, and now that the robe was gone her own nipples had hardened from the cool night. She was focused on her careful task. The Conqueror slowly lowered her body towards Gabrielle's and moved her body up closer.

Gabrielle's skin molded against Xena's as Xena became lower. Gabrielle then gasped when the Conqueror entered into her, but Xena felt different.

The Conqueror carefully pressed her hips deeper into her partner. She heard the bard's exhilarated inhale, but she kept pressing down. Once she was fully inside Gabrielle, she had her hips against Gabrielle. The Conqueror moved her arms freely and brought them above Gabrielle's head. She easily sought out the bard's hands.

Gabrielle felt her lover's longer fingers laced through hers. She tried to comprehend how the Conqueror was inside of her, but they held hands. For an instant, Cleopatra's words flashed through her mind. Gabrielle lost all rational thought when the Conqueror's hips pulled away from her then slowly came back down.

"Oh my gods," Gabrielle cried, and she closed her eyes harder. Then she shouted again when her lover repeated the process slowly.

The Conqueror had a wild grin at hearing the bard's voice. She could tell Gabrielle was confused earlier, but now it didn't matter. Gabrielle simply wanted Xena to keep going. The ruler obliged and repeatedly brought her hips up and down against the bard.

Gabrielle's cries followed the careful thrusts. She started to clench her partner's large hands. Then her heart pounded against her chest.

The Conqueror felt how excited Gabrielle was; the Conqueror was becoming coated in a mix of her and Gabrielle's essences.

Gabrielle turned her head some and buried her face in the bed cover. She sensed the build in her body that ravaged her. She lifted her head and shouted when the Conqueror's hips went deeper than normal.

The ruler moved her head off the bard's shoulder, and she placed a kiss to the bard's temple. She then was rewarded when Gabrielle turned her head and met her for a kiss.

After the deep kiss, Gabrielle gasped for air but pleaded, "Go faster." Her plea was quickly met, and the Conqueror drove faster into her. Gabrielle shouted louder, and her voice surely echoed outside of the room.

The Conqueror gradually increased the tempo. She felt her front slightly move across Gabrielle's back from their heated bodies. The Conqueror didn't falter her thrusts.

"Conqueror!" Gabrielle yelled. She slightly lifted her back and pushed harder. "Don't stop," she loudly urged.

The Conqueror freed her hands from Gabrielle's. She lifted her body from Gabrielle's just as she came up. She planted her palms on the bed then was able to increase the drivers harder and faster.

Gabrielle's voice also grew louder. She clutched the bed sheets and went between gritting her teeth to shouting. She and Xena had never done this in the past, and the mystery thrilled her closer and closer to the edge.

The Conqueror continued the drivers and sensed Gabrielle near her limit. She lowered her head and placed a few kisses on the bard's sticky shoulder blade. She could taste the tension in the bard's muscles. Xena was further encouraged.

Gabrielle dug her fingers deep into the bedsheets, squeezed her eyes shut, and her breath held for a beat. Then Xena's hips pushed deep into her, and Gabrielle cried her lover's title in sweet ecstasy.

The Conqueror remained still and held herself off of the bard's shattering body. Then she watched the satisfaction release all the passion from Gabrielle. Xena felt the tension leave the bard, who became slumped on the bed finally. Xena gingerly lowered down, but she remained inside of the still tight bard.

The Amazon detected her lover's hot body against her back, and she faintly smiled. She turned her head to the right and tried to catch her breath. She had her eyes closed, and her cheeks were flushed. She did notice that Xena remained in her, yet she knew her muscles were starting to relax.

The ruler cautiously withdrew from Gabrielle then adjusted her body a certain way. She kept her weight mostly off her lover, however, she was able to place a kiss to Gabrielle's cheek.

Gabrielle moved her right hand and caught the ruler's into hers. "I wasn't too loud, was I?" She slyly grinned when Xena's chest vibrated from a chuckle.

"Not at all," the ruler murmured. She kissed Gabrielle's shoulder then added, "Perfect."

The Amazon Queen still couldn't figure out what Xena had done to please her, but she loved it. Her more curious, bard side wanted to know how this worked. Yet at the same time, Gabrielle found the mystery of it quite exciting, and she figured that was Xena's intention.

Xena rested her cheek against Gabrielle's shoulder so that her face was in the same direction as Gabrielle's. "This is far from finished."

Gabrielle's eyes quickly opened at those words. "Really?" she squeaked. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. She felt somewhat more in control of her weak body.

"Mmmm." The ruler squeezed her lover's small hand. "I didn't hear you complaining."

The Amazon's cheeks became flushed again, but not from earlier. "Uh... well... this is different." She tried to keep away from asking questions.

Xena chuckled again and replied, "It seems to be a good difference."

Gabrielle suspected that her partner may have had some doubt about doing this earlier. In fact, she was pretty sure considering their conversation several days back about Cleopatra's comments. She wondered what'd changed Xena's mind to reveal this little secret. Whatever the cause, Gabrielle was happy Xena changed her mind and added the new dynamic to their relationship.

The Conqueror could tell Gabrielle's bard mind was in full gear. She decided to quickly bring the mood back before Gabrielle's thoughts deepened. "You seem to like this from behind."

The bard lost her thoughts and replayed the ruler's words in her head. She nervously laughed and replied, "I guess it's... a little exciting."

"Hmmm." The Conqueror slowly started to shift. "I would have never guessed the rebel leader had such a.... kinky side in bed."

Gabrielle couldn't contain her laugh, and she smirked after. "And I'm so appreciative you can accommodate me, my liege."

Xena mirrored the bard's smirk, but hers was wilder. "My pleasure." And it truly was hers because she'd never performed this since her days with Cleopatra. Those times she'd done it for the purpose to claim Queen Cleopatra and the Egyptian navy for Greece. Xena had to compete against suitors like Marc Anthony, and she knew that Queen Cleopatra would never lay with another woman. So the Conqueror had devised another way to win Cleopatra's affections from Anthony and was awarded a navy and alliance.

Since then, Xena had repeated her actions one other time with Cleopatra during a visit to Egypt. The Conqueror never found any pleasure in doing it, which was strange for her. She hadn't expected tonight, with Gabrielle, to please her, but it did. Gabrielle's screams and satisfaction still filled the ruler, but what made her comfortable was Gabrielle's enjoyable acceptance to the new dynamic.

Gabrielle realized her partner was off the bed now. She slightly lifted her head and wondered what was next. She felt somewhat recovered.

"Come here, Gabrielle," the ruler softly ordered.

The bard turned onto her back, but she could only faintly make out Xena in the darkness. She realized the candles were dead except for one. The only true light source was the quarter moon. Gabrielle made out Xena's sculpted face and especially those mercury blue eyes she loved.

Xena carefully watched the Amazon move down the bed. And she placed her hands on Gabrielle's hips once she was close enough. She guided the bard to the position she wanted for now. She had Gabrielle seated upright on the foot of the high bed. She then spread Gabrielle's legs open by pushing Gabrielle's knees outward.

The bard kept her eyes up and locked on Xena's face. She followed every signal the Conqueror gave her. Then a grin swept over her lips when Xena stepped between her legs. She knew what her partner had in mind so she easily wrapped her legs across Xena's muscular stomach and slid her hands over the ruler's stomach.

The Conqueror moaned at the feel of Gabrielle's wet center against her stomach. She recalled her earlier fire to take and dominate her receptive lover. She lowered her head and captured Gabrielle's lips. After the kiss, she instructed, "Lay back." As the bard lowered, she followed and started another kiss.

Gabrielle moaned from the rekindled hunger in her stomach. She smiled in the kiss when Xena's midnight hair fell around them and tickled her breasts so that her nipples hardened again. She almost complained when the kiss ended all too soon, but Xena halted her with bites to her neck.

The ruler trailed down the bard's neck and made her way to the waiting breasts. Her teasing with Gabrielle's nipples caused the bard to become wetter. Xena felt Gabrielle's hips slide across her stomach in silent demand. Xena decided to further the teasing by slipping her right hand down.

Gabrielle gasped when long fingers slipped between her folds and rubbed her clit. She slightly eased her legs' grip around the ruler's waist and gave better access. She was rewarded by harder rubs, and her earlier moans returned. Briefly the bard questioned whether this passion she felt for Xena would ever calm. She prayed it wouldn't happen.

The Conqueror dipped her fingertips into Gabrielle's center. She hardly went inside yet enough to taunt her lover.

"Conqueror," Gabrielle pleaded. She opened her eyes and saw the dominance in her lover. She absolutely loved this aspect about their relationship, and she would never tell another about it since she was once the rebel leader. Yet few also knew how Gabrielle could easily command the Conqueror, if Gabrielle wanted.

The Conqueror lowered her head and fiercely kissed her partner. She didn't stop massaging the bard's clit and increased the tempo. She calculated that it wouldn't be but a few more beats before Gabrielle had a small climax from the rhythmic motions. She further coaxed the bard by sucking on a hard nipple, then she nipped at it.

Gabrielle arched her back when the climax hit her. She cried out, "Conqueror," then relaxed back on the bed. She gulped for some air and kept her eyes closed. She realized it wasn't over because the ruler started to move her back on the bed some.

The Amazon opened her eyes and noticed her lover was back on the bed too, but Xena was on her knees. Then she felt strong hands on her hips, and she was lifted up. Gabrielle instantly shut her eyes when the returned fullness came inside of her. She

was aroused all over again at feeling Xena inside of her yet those strong hands carefully holding her.

The Conqueror started out slow, and she pushed Gabrielle off her hips then brought her back. She cautiously repeated the motions until she felt Gabrielle's muscles become accepting to the erotic sensations. Gabrielle further encouraged her when Gabrielle unlocked her legs from Xena's waist.

Gabrielle spread her legs wider, and she arched her back. She'd never felt this amazing with her lover. She couldn't stop the excitement at having Xena please her this way, and Xena's hands on her body and controlled her. She may have not fully understand the mystery, but to the bard's mind and imagination it was Xena and that's all that mattered to Gabrielle.

The guards posted at the Conqueror's doors exchanged wide-eyed expressions again when the Gurkhan's new wife repeated her earlier cries. The right guard look away first and cleared his throat. He swore if he had to hear anymore of this then he would have a hard time remaining at his post. He silently admitted that he'd never once heard any wife be this pleased, especially by Gurkhan himself. The Conqueror could truly conquer, the guards decided.

Late into the night, the guards listened to the Conqueror dominate Gurkhan's Amazon wife. Then it wasn't silent until a candlemark prior to dawn. The guards felt absolutely exhausted from it all.

Gabrielle was snuggled deep in her lover's arms, and her eyes were already closed. She was still awake and listened to the ruler's constant, soft breathing. It had a soothing affect on the bard. "I'm sure that made an impression."

The Conqueror smirked then adjusted the covers that were over them. "Most likely." She kissed her partner's bare shoulder.

The Amazon chuckled and pressed her back more into Xena's front. She couldn't feel anymore protected than she did in the Conqueror's arms. And yet here she was in the middle of a ruthless slaver's palace.

"Get some rest," Xena murmured, "I'll wake you when it's time to go."

Gabrielle ran her fingertips over the ruler's muscular arm. "We'll go to Lila?"

The Conqueror nuzzled the bard's head and breathed in the soft scent that was only Gabrielle. "Yes."

"How?"

The Conqueror tightened her arms around the bard. "Don't worry... get some sleep."

The Amazon Queen couldn't argue anymore because exhaustion was catching up to her. She'd never stayed up this late and received this much pleasure.

Xena sensed her lover slipping into a dreamscape. She closed her eyes, but she

wouldn't fall asleep tonight. She was too concerned about protecting them from any harm that could come if she slept. She didn't trust Gurkhan, just as he didn't trust her. She only needed him to trust her enough so that she had this temporary access to his palace. She didn't care if the negotiations worked out between her realm and Gurkhan. Soon those plausible negotiations would be worthless.

The Conqueror was glad she was able to convince Gurkhan that she was open to negotiations for trade between her realm and his slavery market. That was his true business while his business as a merchant was merely a cover for any overlooking eyes. The Greek realm already had a small flow of slaves coming in and out of Greece that dealt with Gurkhan, but it was minimal. The Conqueror promised that if they could work out their difference that she'd widen the trade for Gurkhan. It'd been that promise that'd pulled the wool over Gurkhan's eyes. Xena had pinpointed Gurkhan's weakness a long time ago - greed.

The Conqueror now prayed that she could accomplish her real mission without bringing harm to Gabrielle or Gabrielle's sister. Lila's safety and escape were highly important to the bard, and Xena would make sure they both left Gurkhan's palace without a mark. Xena felt that it was because of her past actions that Lila was now Gurkhan's wife. It was a heavy weight on the ruler's conscious, and she planned to correct it. Then she would begin the demolish of the slavery market by first taking out Gurkhan.

Xena eased out of her mental plans when she realized the sun was peaking through the open window. She slowly moved her hand over Gabrielle's stomach in a rhythmic motion that she knew the bard enjoyed.

Gabrielle stirred from the dreams, and she groaned. "Just a bit longer," she muttered.

The bemused ruler had a thin smile. She shifted her head until her lips were by the bard's small ear. "Come on, Gabrielle," she gently coaxed.

The bard nuzzled the pillow and tried to hide deeper in the sheets. "You... wore me... out." She lifted her hand from under the covers and wiped her exhaustion away.

"I'll be sure not to do that again," the ruler taunted.

"Not... funny," the bard grumbled. "I loved that."

The Conqueror smirked and tested the bard with a loaded question. "More so?"

Gabrielle's mind had to catch up to the question since she was still waking up. She turned in the ruler's arms and faced her now. She placed her hand on Xena's chest. "You're comparing apples and... bananas." She listened Xena's low chuckle, but she continued to speak. "I love both ways but for different reasons." She tilted her head back and softly kissed her lover. She withdrew and murmured, "Either way, it's you who's making me feel everything, and that's what matters to me."

"Hmmm." The Conqueror captured the bard's lips then replied, "Good answer."

The bard pulled her head back until she held the ruler's eyes with hers. "It's not a good

answer... it's an honest answer."

Xena was silent, but she understood Gabrielle's meaning. She wasn't sure what to say back, and she said the only thing she could right now. "Thank you."

Gabrielle realized the ruler needed time to think it through. She didn't take it as a negative thing, but she appreciated that Xena wanted to consider it more carefully. "Come on. We better get moving."

The Conqueror silently agreed by releasing the bard. She and Gabrielle climbed out of bed then quickly moved about to get dressed. The Conqueror finished first then softly instructed Gabrielle to move away from the door's view.

The guards jumped when the door opened. They slightly turned their heads and note how the Greek ruler filled the doorway. They were tense at how the Conqueror's darkness filled the air around them.

"I will take Gurkhan's wife back to the common room."

The guards exchanged looks then the right guard grew the bravest. He nervously stated, "I must return her, Conqueror."

The Conqueror folded her arms over her chest, and she tilted her head. She displayed a smug and almost cocky expression. "I will return her." Then her expression was completely washed away by her anger. "When I'm finished with her."

The now nervous guard fidgeted and quietly answered, "Yes, Conqueror." He let out a huge breath when the Conqueror closed the door. He then glared at his comrade's amused face.

Gabrielle was almost finished dressing, but she felt warm hands start at her shoulder blades then snake up to her shoulders. She turned her head sidelong and smiled. Her eyes fluttered when the ruler's cool wire armor touched her mostly bare back.

"Are you ready for this?"

The bard closed her eyes and honestly replied, "I'm nervous, Xena."

"I know," came the ruler's husky voice.

"What if Lila won't go back to Greece?" Gabrielle opened her eyes and shook her head then whispered, "Or worse yet what if she tells Gurkhan why we're really here?"

"Don't worry about that," the ruler replied.

The Amazon peered up into determined blue eyes. She realized she was fairly safe from any harm, yet she was scared something would go far wrong. "What do I do if she refuses to come with us?"

"You have to accept her choice, Gabrielle."

The bard shook her head and murmured, "I don't know if I could."

"And if we force her to return to Greece then she'll most likely be unhappy."

Gabrielle frowned at this possibility because it sounded illogical. "Could she really be happy here... as his wife?"

"It isn't impossible," the ruler honestly stated. She didn't want to hide anything from the bard, who could already be facing a lost battle.

Gabrielle considered Sonata, who acted rather content to be in Gurkhan's palace. She also knew that Sonata would take her freedom if she could be given it. That made her think about all the other wives that were here. "What about Gurkhan's wives?"

The Conqueror hadn't really considered them, and she realized what Gabrielle's question meant. "I hadn't planned on them, Gabrielle."

The bard now turned around and studied her stoic lover. "Xena, we have to help them too."

The Conqueror sighed, but she'd already lost this battle with her lover. She knew Gabrielle's deeply rooted heart wouldn't let either of them walk away without helping these women. So she could make a minor adjustment or two to her plans, and hopefully it wouldn't cause a large problem. "Alright." Then it all felt right when Gabrielle's bright smile showed.

"Thank you." Gabrielle was on her tiptoes and kissed her lover quickly.

Xena tried to remain stoic, but a faint smile touched her. "Come on. Let's find your sister." She hoped Lila was still in her room that she'd discovered yesterday evening. The Conqueror headed for the door, and she yanked it open.

Gabrielle felt a chill pass through her at how the opening of the door seemed to release the true Conqueror. She lowered her head and passed the eying guards. She kept her pace behind the ruler and didn't speak as many people would expect of her as a wife.

The Conqueror trailed down the long hall - she listened to Gabrielle's gentle footfall behind her. She made a right turn then counted the nonstop doors on her right. She came to a stop at the sixteenth door then scanned the empty hallway.

Gabrielle didn't question and merely waited.

The ruler knocked on the door and prepared to handle the situation if it got ugly. She lifted her chin when the door cracked open, and she found a soft face, gray eyes, and dark hair before her.

The first wife, Coriander, gasped when she immediately recognized the Greek ruler. "What are you doing here?"

The Conqueror was not at all deterred by the cold tone. She politely replied, "I came

to talk to you."

Coriander had angry filled eyes, and she started to close the door while hotly saying, "Leave."

The Conqueror's hand shot out and stop the door.

The first wife became frightened as she knew what the Conqueror could do. She prepared to cry out for help.

The Conqueror was faster, and she shoved the door open. She instantly had her hand over the wife's mouth just as the scream came. She narrowed her eyes dangerously whispered, "If you scream then we're all going to have problems."

Gabrielle entered the room, closed the door for safety, and sidestepped her lover. She stared at the first wife and absorbed her features.

The first wife had a scared face, but she glanced at the new wife that seemed relatively calm. She realized the first wife was most likely with the Conqueror or something. She also felt a sense of familiarity from the new wife. Those green eyes were so warm when they shouldn't be.

The Conqueror drew back Coriander's attention. "We're not here to harm you." Some tension left her when the wife's mercury eyes lost most of her fears. She felt it was safe so she slowly pulled her hand away and was relieved to find the first wife silent.

Coriander gazed between the Conqueror and the new wife. She swallowed and asked, "What do you want?"

The ruler stepped back and let her partner handle the sensitive chitchat. She stood aside, folded her arms, and waited for the pending results.

Gabrielle cautiously neared the first wife and asked, "You're name isn't really Coriander, is it?"

The first wife narrowed her eyes, and the tension built in her.

The bard stepped closer again then offered, "You're name is Lila... Lila of Potidaea."

The first wife's lips parted slightly, yet she had no words. Then those green eyes became so familiar from her past. The new wife's gentle features reminded her of an old life she refused to remember until now when it stood here before her. She stepped back again and furiously shook her head. "No," she whispered, "It can't be." Her hardened face was broken by buried emotions. "Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle's eyes instantly stung when her sister recalled her. She came closer but hesitated. "Yeah... it's me." She wanted badly to touch her sister and make sure this was all real.

Several emotions crashed over the first wife, and she began to cry. "Oh gods... no. This is impossible!"

Gabrielle couldn't control her natural instincts. She immediately pulled her younger sister into her body, but Lila tried to refuse her at first. "Lila, it's okay. It's really me."

Lila pushed away from Gabrielle, but she was pulled back by Gabrielle's strong arms. "No!"

The bard's face was stricken with hot tears, and she soothingly repeated, "It's okay, Lila." She wouldn't released her younger sister, and finally Lila's body slumped into hers.

Lila clung to her sister, and hid her face into the bard's warm neck. The burning tears passed over her cheeks and onto Gabrielle's shoulder.

Gabrielle held her last family member close, and she felt a broken piece of herself brought back. She closed her eyes and gently soothed her emotional sister.

The Conqueror remained away from the reunited sisters. She had a clenched jaw, and her throat was tight, but she kept her stoic expression. Only Gabrielle would have been able to tell that the Conqueror was emotionally moved by the reunion.

The sisters remained close and exchanged tears for longer than anybody could recall. They cried from the past pain of being separated all this time, and they cried at finally being together again. It was no longer a dream, or a faded and painful memory - it was aching, beautifully real once more.

Xena slightly dipped her head when the sisters gradually separated. She now knew that everything she'd work against and for to bring Gabrielle and Lila together was worth it. The ruler raised her head and waited for part that would probably be harder than the reunion.

Lila truly took in Gabrielle's presence and shook her head. "How... I don't understand." She briefly glanced at the silent Conqueror, and she faintly pieced some of it together.

"We came to get you out of here," Gabrielle explained. She wiped her sister's tears away.

Lila took the matching hand into hers. "How did you get in here?"

The bard glimpsed at her partner then back at Lila. "It's a long story, but we have to get you out of here." She waited to see how her words sunk into Lila.

The first wife looked to the ruler, but asked Gabrielle, "You and the Conqueror?" She narrowed her eyes at her sister. "The woman that put me here is helping you?" She started to untangle her hand from Gabrielle's, yet Gabrielle wouldn't allowed her.

"Lila, a lot has changed and a lot is going on."

Lila's hardened face started to return. "That is quite obvious, Gabrielle." She shook her head and criticized, "You've joined the Conqueror."

The bard was ready for this verbal battle. She'd mentally prepared during her trip across the Mediterranean and worked out every angle. "It's actually the other way around, honestly." She bit back her grin when her sister had a confused face. "Like I said, it's a long story, and I can't explain it all to you. We have to get you out of here and back to Greece."

"So that I can be the Conqueror's slave instead? Or be controlled by the Conqueror like you, Gabrielle?" Lila then was surprised by the Conqueror's snort off to the right.

The bemused ruler casually argued, "Your sister being controlled by me?" She gradually inclined an arched eyebrow. "I have better luck controlling the weather than controlling Gabrielle."

Gabrielle turned her head and shot a glower at her lover for the smart remark, despite it was true. "Thank you for the help."

The Conqueror didn't exactly smirk at the bard, but her eyes were bright from mischief. She then seriously regarded the dumbfounded sister. "You're not going to be my slave, Lila or anybody's for that matter. You'll be a freewoman."

Lila blinked because she was still trying to get over the obvious banter between the ruler and her sister. Just what in the known-world was going on around here? She slowly turned to her sister. "I'd heard rumors about a rebel leader that was fighting the Conqueror... I had hoped it was you." She still had cold eyes, and her voice was sharp. "I guess I was wrong."

Gabrielle sighed because she didn't want it to be this difficult. "I was the rebel leader," she explained, "and-"

"You gave in," the first wife snapped. She then directed her cold eyes on the ruler.

The Amazon knew she needed to do this alone with Lila before her partner and sister started off on the wrong foot. She turned her head to Xena, and her apology showed in her eyes. Before Gabrielle could even explain, the Conqueror spoke first.

"I'll be near by if you need me," the ruler simply stated. She quickly went to the door and slipped out of it. When she left, the edge in the room seemed to leave and there was a lightness.

Gabrielle noted Lila's attitude wasn't quite as defensive as earlier. "Lila, I know this is really hard but-"

"No, you don't know." The first wife separated from Gabrielle and crossed the room. She kept her back to Gabrielle but threatened, "I could tell Gurkhan why the Conqueror is really here."

Gabrielle's defenses instantly came to life. She quickly came to her sister's back, grabbed her shoulder, and spun her around. "Don't you dare," she menacingly warned. "She is risking her life by being here." She lowered her head closer to the Lila's surprised face. "I'm risking my life." She clenched her teeth then angrily stated, "I may

not have been a slave all my life, and I can't relate." She lifted her hand and pointed at the door the Conqueror walked through. "What I can relate to is only seeing the Conqueror as evil." She dropped her hand. "I've spent my life blaming that monster for my parents' death and my sister's enslavement."

Lila felt her tears burn behind her eyes, but she fought them.

Gabrielle took a steady breath. "Do you know who took me in after Potidaea was attacked?" She waited for her sister's negative head shake. "A woman in Amphipolis took me in and adopted me. Her name is Cyrene... she's the Conqueror's mother."

The first wife stared in horror, but she had no words.

"I devoted my life to stopping the Conqueror," the bard told. "I tried to undermine her rulership and give the people something to believe in. Then one day the Conqueror was facing death, and I was the only person willing to defend her." She hesitated and thought back on the memories in the Amazon village. "I never feared her. I stood up against her. And I hated her... I hated the monster."

Lila bowed her head, and the tears broke free.

"But I realized that even if I had some revenge over the Conqueror that I still would have no peace. I had to conquer my hatred and anger or else I'd be no better than her. So I stopped her from being killed." Gabrielle touched Lila's cheek and that brought Lila's head back up. "It was the best thing I ever did, Lila. There's more to the Conqueror than this monster that's been created in her." She solemnly smiled and whispered, "There's a beautiful woman under all that armor, and she's trying to fix what's happened."

Lila closed her eyes and muttered, "I don't know if I can forgive her... like you, Gabrielle."

"Nobody can force you," the Amazon agreed. "But you should give her a chance. You may find out how easy it is to forgive once you see who she really is in there."

The first wife swallowed and slowly opened her eyes. She was met by concerned green eyes.

"She regrets what happened to Potidaea, Lila. She's trying to fix it... that's why she's here." Gabrielle stepped closer and lowered her hand to her sister's shoulder. "She never even ordered Potidaea to be attacked."

The young sister felt her burrow tightened, and she didn't understand.

"One of commanders at the time," Gabrielle explained, "disobeyed her. He attacked Potidaea and Cirra when he was suppose to offer alliances."

Lila shook her head and muttered, "That only softens the blow, Gabrielle."

"I know." The Amazon tilted her head. "Xena stills feels fully responsible for what happened."

Lila noticed how her sister called the ruler by her first name as if they were best friends. She felt her stomach slightly knotty, and she was unsure.

Gabrielle detected the apprehension, but she didn't think Lila was angry like earlier. She was about to say something, but a soft cry from her left stopped her. She became baffled because it sounded like a child.

Lila quickly broke away from her sister and followed her initial instincts. She hurried through the open doorway into the small room nearby. She had a soft voice and crooned.

Gabrielle slowly neared the room and stood in the doorway when her sister lifted a baby from a wood crib. She had wide eyes and stared in awe at the child in Lila's arms.

Lila slightly twisted her torso back and forth in a rhythmic motion and coaxed the baby. She kissed the baby's temple and murmured, "It's okay. Momma is here." She gradually turned until she faced her sister.

Gabrielle eased closer, and she couldn't stop staring at the baby. She felt her eyes sting, and a smile broke her stunned face. "Oh my gods." She peered up at her sister.

Lila was smiling at the baby then she lifted her head upon hearing her sister's words. She swallowed and peered down at her child. "Say hello to your Aunt Gabrielle, Sarah."

Gabrielle covered her mouth with her hand and started to cry. "Oh gods." She withdrew her hand from her face and gingerly touched her niece. "You're a mother?" She absorbed her sister's happy features, and she whispered, "I'm an aunt." She felt her tears come more freely.

"I had Sarah about four moons ago," Lila softly revealed. "I wasn't Gurkhan's number one wife when I became pregnant." She licked her chapped lips and continued to swing her body to comfort her daughter. She glanced at Gabrielle then mentioned, "Gurkhan isn't Sarah's father. Sarah's father was a Greek slave that Gurkhan had for awhile." She dipped her head at the thought of her former lover, who she now missed. "He's gone now... sold to another master."

Gabrielle was studying Sarah, but she peered over at her sister. She carefully listened and wondered what Lila would tell her.

"When I found out I was pregnant, I realized that my child would have a hard life." Lila's eyes fluttered, yet she held herself strong like she had all these moons. "I knew the only way for her to have any future was for me to be the number one wife. I did anything I had to, to become the number one wife. I wanted to ensure Sarah had a brighter future than the rest of Gurkhan's children."

"He doesn't know Sarah isn't his?"

"No," the first wife murmured, "I keep praying I'll be pregnant again but with a boy so

that Gurkhan will overlook Sarah's lack of resemblance."

Gabrielle could see that it would be hard for Gurkhan to ignore it. Sarah's hair was growing out blond, and she had rich hazel eyes that she suspected was the father's. Gabrielle knew those were not Gurkhan's traits whatsoever. "Lila, I think Sarah is all the more reason you should come with Xena and I." She carefully touched her niece's head.

"Sarah is also another reason why I'm reluctant," the first wife admitted. "I have to think about my daughter, Gabrielle. I don't trust the Conqueror."

"I'm not asking you to do that," the bard urged. "I'm asking you to trust me." She studied her sister's clear apprehensions. "I didn't come all this way for you to refuse me, sister." She watched Lila's eyes drop from hers. "I won't leave here without you."

Lila nibbled on her bottom lip. She nervously questioned, "You trust the Conqueror, Gabrielle?"

"I trust Xena," Gabrielle emphasized, "with my life."

The younger sister now studied Gabrielle's confident attitude. "You care for her."

Gabrielle sensed that it wasn't a question, yet she nodded.

Lila braced herself then whispered, "Do you love her, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle briefly closed her eyes, and she questioned her heart. She opened her eyes and met her sister's watchful gaze. "I'm not sure yet, Lila. I feel a lot for her." She slightly bowed her head and watched Sarah's curious face. "With everything that's been happening I haven't had a moment to stop and consider it." She again touched her niece's cheek, and Sarah lifted her small hand. Gabrielle smiled when Sarah captured her index finger. She lifted her head and seriously stated, "Xena means a lot to me, Lila. She says I've shown her so much, but she's helped me see a lot about life and myself." She paused then murmured, "I am so grateful that she's done all that she has to bring me to you."

Lila carefully thought out what may have had to be done for the Conqueror and Gabrielle to be here. Enough was obvious that it did require a lot of planning and foresight. She couldn't argue Gabrielle's point in the least, and Lila felt her resolve break apart. "How does she plan to get us out of here?"

Gabrielle raised her head up, and her sister's words made her smile. "I'm not sure yet... I still need to talk to her." She touched Lila's arm and promised, "She'll get us out of here."

Lila nodded then gazed upon her daughter. She then lifted her head and turned to her sister. "I think Sarah would like for you to hold her."

Gabrielle sensed her heart giving way to the new family member in her life. She stepped closer, lifted her arms, and gently took the baby. She situated Sarah in her arms and smiled at the baby's soft face. "Gods, Lila... she's so beautiful."

The proud mother couldn't hide her smile. "I think she has her aunt's blond hair."

The bard softly laughed, and tears came down her cheeks. "I'm really an aunt." She softly laughed and lifted her tear stained face to Lila.

Lila reached over and wiped Gabrielle's tears away. "You really are." She came to stand beside her sister. She slid her left arm around Gabrielle's bare waist. She dipped her head and studied Sarah's happy features. "Say hello to your auntie, Sarah."

Gabrielle chuckled and watched the happy baby.

Sarah smiled broadly at her mother and aunt. She lifted her right hand and tried to grab for something.

Lila lifted her hand and stuck out her index finger. Instantly her finger was gripped by the baby's small hand. "Come on. Say m-m-maaa." She wrinkled up her nose at Sarah and tried, "Auntie-auntie-auntie."

The Amazon softly laughed and shook her head. She'd hadn't smiled this much in a long while. She also couldn't halt her happy tears.

"M-m-ma," Lila coaxed a second time.

Gabrielle chuckled and teased, "You'll have this child talking in threes, Lila."

The mother instantly laughed and grinned at her tearful sister. "Well, we are a family of three now." She reached up and dried her sister's tears again.

Gabrielle closed her eyes, and she felt a sense of peace come over her. She never imagined her life coming to this beautiful moment as it had now. She couldn't believe she had her sister back in her life, and she was an aunt on top of it. She also felt an aching, deep gratitude because of Xena's unrelenting support to help her and Lila. Then Lila's earlier question about her feelings for Xena surfaced again, and for the first time she reflected on the question with some depth.

Lila dropped her head onto her sister's shoulder. Then her soft voice broke the peaceful silence, "I'll be happy to go home."

Gabrielle opened her eyes and studied her niece's beautiful face. She then turned her head and showed her smile to Lila. "We are home, sister."

Lila mirrored her older sister's gorgeous smile. She may have been away from Gabrielle for so long, but Gabrielle was always in her heart. Now Lila felt that same faith that was instilled in her sister. Just maybe her and Sarah's future had promise in it.

## Chapter 7 - Passage to Freedom

The Conqueror was bent over the small table, a quill in her right hand, and she carefully signed her name on a document. She paused and scanned her signature before she slipped the quill's shaft into the inkwell then straightened up.

Gurkhan had a thin smile now that he had an alliance with the Greek realm. He followed the old Greek tradition for any warrior; he held out his right arm.

The Conqueror gradually lifted her right arm and collapsed the slaver's arm tightly. She had bright blue eyes, and a deep smirk.

"To a better future than a past," Gurkhan commented.

The Conqueror released the man's arm then replied, "To a prosperous future for Mogador and the realm."

The slaver chuckled and started towards the closed office door. "It will be rich." He opened the door and guided the ruler through the maze like palace. "You will return to Greece?"

The ruler placed her hands behind her back but inside of her cape. She strolled along and kept a passive face. "Yes, we plan to set sail this evening."

"Hopefully Poseidon will be kind to you," Gurkhan commented.

"I pray too." The Conqueror passed a few palace guards, then she entered to the main foray. She faintly nodded at Iolaus, who waited for her. "We will be in touch, Gurkhan."

"Of course, Conqueror." The slaver bowed slightly. "Safe travels back to Greece."

The Greek ruler briefly bowed her head then turned to Iolaus. She signaled for him to go, and she led the way out of the palace.

Iolaus fell into step behind his leader, but he wouldn't speak until they were far from the palace. He noted that the Conqueror dropped her hands to her side and become highly dignified as they walked across the grounds to the main gates. He spotted Najara and her squad waiting for them by the gates.

The Conqueror passed through the iron gates when they opened for her. She ordered Najara and the squad to follow her back to the port.

Iolaus shifted to the ruler's side and patiently kept quiet until the ruler was ready.

The Conqueror's tense shoulders slowly loosened, and she peered down at her tetrarchès. "We'll return to the ship, but I want you and the captain to go out to the triremes. The mission will require about fifty soldiers."

Iolaus glanced back at the dekarchos and inquired, "Are we including the squad?"

"Yes." The Conqueror considered the numbers carefully and how many enemies they would face. She had all the information she needed to carry out her mission, and she explained it all to Gabrielle. She just needed the timing to be perfect or else it'd be costly.

"What of the Amazons?"

The ruler was briefly silent but finally replied, "They'll come with us. They'll escort Queen Gabrielle and her sister back to the ship."

Iolaus digested the plans, and he realized why the Conqueror planned to directly send Gabrielle back to the ship. He could not imagine how Gabrielle would respond to it because he suspected she may not know what else the Conqueror had in mind.

"We'll talk more about this when we get onboard," the ruler softly mentioned.

The tetrarchès understood that the plans were sensitive so he just nodded. He soon boarded the ship after the Conqueror, and they went below deck until they made it back into the quarters. He entered the Conqueror's quiet quarters then was told to take a seat by the small table.

The Conqueror didn't sit, and she had her head dipped in thought. "We're going to take a page out of Janice Covington's book."

Iolaus tilted his head and had slightly slotted eyes. "Infiltrate Gurkhan's palace?"

The Conqueror started a slow pace through her quarters while she spoke. "Yes." She glanced at the tetrarchès. "Alexio mentioned there's a back passage into the palace that we can use."

"It has to be guarded," Iolaus theorized.

"Mmmm." The Conqueror stopped and explained, "Lutalo will be there to let us in."

The tetrarchès recalled the third spy, who nobody had met yet. "Can we trust him, my liege? He his Gurkhan's soldier."

"I don't like it either," the ruler relented, "but time is thinning on us." She began to pace again. "The longer we wait the more endangered Gabrielle becomes."

"Once we get into the palace...?" Iolaus left the question open.

"I want you and Najara to get the wives out," the ruler ordered. She sensed that the tetrarchès still wanted more information, and she decided to agree to it. She halted her paces and simply stated, "The soldiers and I will sweep through the palace."

The tetrarchès bit his lower lip then his next words were cautiously brought out. "Are we to leave nobody behind?"

The Conqueror stepped closer to the high ranking soldier. She had a dark expression

and icy blue eyes. "I want every one of Gurkhan's soldiers killed." She then had a faint snarl when she stated, "I'll deal with Gurkhan, personally."

Iolaus released a deep breath. "As you wish, my liege." He averted his eyes because no matter all the seasons, he still wasn't accustomed to the darker side of the ruler.

The Conqueror moved away then casually announced, "Gurkhan will be an example to all the slavers."

Iolaus instantly thought of Gabrielle and what Gabrielle would think of Conqueror's pending act. He inwardly sighed because he hated to think of the bard's reaction. He hoped it wouldn't drive a wedge between them or maybe Gabrielle could stop it before it started. He faintly shook his thoughts away.

The Conqueror and Iolaus soon left the quarters after strengthening their plans. The Conqueror felt confident that the plans could be carried out tonight, and she wanted to be out of Mogador before Helios even thought about kissing the eastern horizon. The Conqueror disembarked the ship and ordered Najara and her squad to come with her. Then following the Conqueror were the Amazons, who didn't have too much of an idea what was happening beyond the fact that their queen would be free tonight.

Iolaus commanded the captain of the transport ship to leave port. The captain set sail for the mouth of the small harbor and went out into the ocean to meet the triremes. Once the transport ship joined the triremes, fifty Greek soldiers on the triremes would load onto the transport ship and hide below deck.

The Conqueror, Najara, the squad, and the Amazons spread out through the city of Mogador so that they wouldn't be overly notable. The Conqueror took residents at an inn then Najara and Vara joined her in the quiet room. She briefed them both about the mission tonight, and Vara did everything she could not to say something. She knew it was not her place. Vara could tell that Najara wasn't too thrilled with the plans, but like Vara, Najara was silent.

Vara eventually broke away from the meeting with the Conqueror and rejoined her fellow Amazons at tavern. She took the last open seat and ordered a drink.

Lacy waited until the barmaid was gone. She then quietly asked, "What's happening?"

Vara snorted and leaned against the table. "The Conqueror doesn't change much." She noted the Amazons' curious looks. "She plans to kill every person in that palace... all of Gurkhan's men."

Taren shook her head. "That is typical." She huffed and felt a bitter taste in her mouth.

Amarice, Grete, and Lacy had remained quiet, but it was Amarice that spoke first. "You have to cut her some slack."

Taren glanced at the young Amazon, who had been saved thanks to the Conqueror's efforts. She dropped her eyes and stared at the wood table.

"I wonder if the queen knows what the Conqueror plans to do," Lacy idly brought up.

"I doubt it." Vara smiled up at the barmaid, who gave her a mug. She told the barmaid that in a candlemark they'd want to put in a dinner order. She turned back to the group. "The queen won't be too happy."

"You know," Amarice suggested, "we should tell the queen."

Vara quickly looked at the younger Amazon. "Amarice, I wouldn't jump into that fire."

Amarice sighed and folded her arms. "If we tell the queen then she'll stop the Conqueror from doing it."

"And you can forget the Conqueror ever saving your feathers again," Taren joked.

Grete shook her head and studied Amarice. "You're better off not saying anything, Amarice. It's between the queen and the Conqueror."

"Grete is right," Vara agreed. "We just need to focus on getting the queen and her sister back to the ship."

"If some alarm is sounded while this is going on," Taren started, "this'll be turned up side down." She sighed and her shoulders dropped. "The Conqueror is being reckless with the queen's life."

"Well what's your idea?" Amarice challenged. "I mean the queen didn't exactly pick the safest mission."

Lacy chewed on her lower lip then murmured, "I'd done the same as the queen if that was my sister."

Vara quickly cut into the conversation before it turned into a debate. "Let's just focus on getting the queen back safely. We've already screwed up twice as it is."

Amarice hung her head at the memory from both occasions. She closed her eyes, but she felt Lacy's hand on her knee. She lifted her head and sadly smiled at Lacy's concern.

Lacy squeezed the young Amazon's knee then pulled her hand away. "We should get some cloaks to hide the queen and her sister. They'll most likely be recognized if they're wearing clothes from the palace."

Vara nodded then asked, "Taren, can you get us some cloaks?"

Taren touched the pouch on her side and detected she had some money. She glanced at Grete and Amarice. "Why don't you two come with me?"

Amarice and Grete stood up together, and they followed Taren out of the tavern.

Lacy glanced at Vara and softly mentioned, "I'm worried something will happen, Vara."

Vara sighed and shook her head. "I think it'll work out." She leaned back in her chair and considered the situation carefully. "As much as I can't believe I'm saying this... I think the Conqueror will do anything she has to, to keep the queen safe."

Lacy mulled it over then slowly nodded. "I think you're right." Then her eyes clouded over, and she wondered what the queen was doing right now. She couldn't imagine.

Gabrielle remained in the common room, and she shared idle chitchat with the other wives. She seemed relaxed and calm on the outside, but she was extremely tense. She'd briefly caught a glimpse of the Conqueror leaving the palace around late morning. It'd taken away some of her earlier security, yet she chided herself for depending on the Conqueror for such security. She now understood why the Conqueror had never mentioned the possibility of her arrival in the palace.

The bard now simply waited the day out until the sun would sink low and the stars came visible. She prayed Xena's plan to get her, Lila, and Sarah out would work right. She knew there were plenty of variables nor had she met this third spy, Lutalo. The Conqueror had only explained that Lutalo was being paid quite well to be the Conqueror's informant, and Lutalo would be in contact with the other spies. The other two spies would relay messages to Lutalo about the Conqueror's plans for tonight then it would go from there. Gabrielle knew it was mid afternoon, and she suspected that the Greek ruler had already spoken with the other two spies.

Sonata currently sat beside the Amazon. She was chatting away with Lana, yet she knew the Amazon's distant stare. She stopped and touched Gabrielle's nearby knee. "Alessa?"

The bard didn't instantly respond to the name, but she caught up and half heartily smiled at the wife. "I'm sorry."

Sonata showed a concerned face. "Are you okay?" She tilted her head. "You haven't been yourself." She shifted on the large pillow she was seated on.

Gabrielle licked her parched lips then shrugged. "I think I'm tired is all."

Lana exchanged looks with Sonata because they knew that the Conqueror had kept the Amazon up late the last two nights. Lana, like the other wives, had heard rumor of the Conqueror's vociferous nights with the Amazon.

Sonata then grinned and teased, "I'd be exhausted too, Alessa."

Gabrielle took a beat to catch up to the joke then she subconsciously blushed.

Sonata leaned closer to the seated Amazon. "So what was she like in bed?"

The bard eyed the curious, grinning wife and challenged, "I thought she was too much of a murderer for you...?"

Sonata dropped her shoulders and reminded, "And I could imagine she wasn't for a couple of nights."

Lana shook her head then murmured, "I don't think I could be with another woman." Yet she became curious and questioned, "What is it like?"

The bard hadn't expected the conversation to go this route. The shade of pink deepened to a red on the bard's round cheeks. "Well..."

Sonata giggled and teased, "It must be good."

Gabrielle closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "It's... different." She slowly opened her eyes and met the wives' intrigued faces.

"Good or bad?"

The Amazon Queen gazed upon Sonata then softly replied, "Good."

Sonata smirked. "So we all heard." She leaned closer to the Amazon and urged, "What was it like?"

Gabrielle sensed a girl talk coming on, and she really didn't mind for some reason. She hadn't discussed her sexual relationship with anybody, and she somewhat happy to share it. "It's different than being with a man."

Lana giggled and shook her head. "We know that, Alessa. But how?" She waved her hands. "Not in the mechanical sense."

"Right," the embarrassed bard muttered. "Well... I... couldn't exactly say. I mean..." She lost her words when Sonata started to laugh loudly.

Sonata settled down then displayed a broad grin. "Wait... now I get it." She lowered her voice's volume. "You're an Amazon so you've never been with a man, right?"

Lana was wide eye when she pieced it together too.

The bard sighed and debated whether to answer, but she gave in and grinned. "Yes... pretty much." She closed her eyes and failed to hide her blush when Sonata started to cackle again. She then was grateful when Sonata stopped, and the wives urged her to talk about it. Gabrielle at first was slightly reluctant simply because she hadn't ever discussed it with anybody. She then became quite engrossed in the conversation when Sonata and Lana joined. She could tell they both were quite intrigued, and the group tried to do a comparison of the good and bad. Lana sided that being with a man was better, Sonata was between, and Gabrielle decided she'd probably never be with a man. Finally by the end of the debate, Gabrielle could tell she was winning Sonata over, and Gabrielle suspected that Sonata would give it a try at some point.

A candlemark after sunset, the wives were escorted into the dining room. They took various seats on the floor cushions and continued many of their conversations from earlier. Gurkhan was in his usual spot, and he had several guests again. He busied with them.

The first wife sat away from the wives, and she quietly ate. Occasionally she would

glance down at the wives and briefly watched her sister. She hadn't privately spoken with Gabrielle since the first morning, but she had talked to the Conqueror. The Conqueror had disclosed the plans to her and informed her to stay close to Gabrielle when the time came.

Gurkhan discreetly waved for his number wife to come to him. He waited until she bent towards him, then he whispered something to her. He faintly heard his wife's breath catch, and he softly laughed.

The first wife could not refuse her husband's wishes. She mutely consented, then she straightened up. She bit the inside of her mouth briefly and went to the wives. She lifted her chin and coldly studied the lower wives. "Alessa," she started, "you are to dance for Gurkhan."

Gabrielle stiffened at the unexpected news. She could tell by Lila's eyes that something was going on, and she grew concerned. She slowly climbed to her feet and straightened out her sheer white skirt.

The first wife turned away and returned to her earlier spot on the upper floor. She heard her sister's light footfall over the stone floor and gradually Lila's stomach dropped lower.

Gabrielle took her position before Gurkhan and his guests. She waited until the mix changed to the appropriate melody then she began her slow and sensual dance. She tried to steel her fearful thoughts about what was going on or else she'd draw too much attention.

Gurkhan watched the erotic dance with open interest. He felt his pulse heightened, and he wanted his new wife tonight. He tilted his head and carefully watched the Amazon's trim stomach move about in a rhythmic motion.

The first wife carefully observed her husband's keen interest in his sister. She felt her jaw tightened and an aged anger bubbled up higher. Those steel eyes of hers became chilled.

Gabrielle danced closer towards Gurkhan, then she spun around so her back faced him. She moved her hips around in front of him then she twisted back around quickly just as Gurkhan tried to grab at her skirt. She had a flash of worry, but it washed away from her focus. She finally ended her dance then bowed out when Gurkhan gave his approval.

The dinner continued for another candlemark, then the wives were taken back to the common room for the rest of the night. The first wife returned to her room and spent some time with her daughter before she would be called away. She arranged for one of the servants to care for Sarah while she was away tonight.

Some time later, Lila heard a soft knock at the door. She was greeted by the servant that Gurkhan had obviously sent. She gave Sarah a soft kiss to her forehead then she carefully handed over her child to the female servant.

The servant smiled at the first wife, who she'd come to admire after all these seasons.

She also adored the first wife's baby.

Lila thanked the servant then quietly left her bedchambers. She began the journey through the palace towards her destination. Her thoughts went out to her older sister.

Gabrielle ran her fingers through her hair after just getting the braids out finally.

Sonata smiled at the seeming new hairstyle the Amazon sported. "You almost had those in too long."

The bard finished combing her hair with her fingers. "I know." She felt better to have the tight braids out, but she knew she'd need to wash it soon to completely get the braided look out. She was about to comment again, yet a guard's voice called her name.

"You are to come with me," the guard commanded.

Gabrielle sensed Sonata's worry, but she had no choice right now. She brushed her fingertips over Sonata's arm and walked past her. She ascended the stairs then fell into step behind the guard.

Sonata watched the Amazon go then she detected Lana beside her.

"She's going to experience her first man tonight," Lana sadly whispered.

Sonata dropped her head and her heart went out to the Amazon.

Gabrielle silently followed the guard, who would not speak to her. She considered whether it was Lutalo or not, but she decided it wasn't him. She realized she was headed back towards the palace that held all the bedchambers. Her earlier fears quickly returned.

The guard stopped at the only double door that was at the end of some hallway. He opened the right door, held it, and waited until the wife passed. He then closed it.

Gabrielle cautiously entered the well lit room, and she stopped by the door. She was clearly stunned at the scene before her.

On the large, blue covered bed was Gurkhan on his back and clothed. Then Lila was straddling his hips and had just come up from a kiss. Gurkhan lifted his head when he heard the entrance, and he gazed past his number one wife. He grinned at the new wife. Lila twisted around, and studied her shocked sister.

"Join us, little one." Gurkhan held out his left hand in a receptive manner.

Gabrielle thought her knees would give out under her. Her heart tried to jump from her chest, and Gabrielle felt her world go out of control.

Lila quickly moved from Gurkhan and came off the bed. She'd grown hardened emotions over the long moons since her enslavement and the current situation did not outwardly shock her. Lila cautiously neared her sister, held up her right hand, and

coaxed, "Come with me, Alessa."

Gurkhan now sat up and had his hands behind him to hold his body up. He had a dark grin.

Gabrielle looked away from Gurkhan and focused on her calm sister. She saw her sister's held up palm, and she couldn't do anything but place her hand into Lila's.

Lila felt her hand match her sister's in a perfect hold. She stepped closer, leaned in, and brought her lips close to Gabrielle's ear. "Our chance is now." She pulled back then turned.

The bard's steps match her sister's. She went to the bed, and her mind started to process Lila's whispered words. She met the bed, closed her eyes, and mentally cried out for the Conqueror to be here and now.

At the other end of the palace, the Conqueror was currently in the passageway and held the door open. She briefly glanced at the three dead soldiers she'd already killed.

The Greek soldiers flowed into the passageway and quickly moved as they'd been instructed. After they all squeezed into the torch lit passageway, the Amazons hurried in last and scanned around for their queen, who was not here.

"Conqueror?" a man called.

The Conqueror had resealed the passage door and turned to the soldier that was Gurkhan's. She raised an eyebrow at him. "Where are they, Lutalo?"

Lutalo pushed back his helmet and mentally braced himself. "I couldn't retrieve them, Conqueror." He tensed at the ruler's already dark features. "They're with Gurkhan... and the first wife's daughter is in her room."

The Conqueror almost exploded there as her plans started to crack. She quickly recalculated everything then ordered down to Iolaus. "You and Najara get the wives. Go now." She then turned back the Amazons. "Stay here and guard the passage door."

"But-"

"Do it," the Conqueror snarled. She ignored the Amazons after that then ordered to her fifty soldiers. "I want ten men with me. The rest of you, fan out and secure the palace."

The soldiers took their commands then quickly moved down the passageway that Iolaus and Najara had already disappeared down.

"Take me to Gurkhan," the Conqueror ordered the spy.

Lutalo nodded then hurried down the passageway. "Time is everything now." He moved quickly, but he knew they'd have to be quiet once they came into the main part of the palace.

The Conqueror waved for her ten men to follow her. Her stride was long, and her cape flowed behind her.

The Amazons were left behind and exchanged worried glances. Taren shook her head and stared at the three dead palace guards off to the right. "This is just great."

"We should find the queen," Amarice commented.

"Just stay put," Taren snapped. "Somebody does need to stay here and watch the door." She started to pace though because she didn't like waiting around.

Back in Gurkhan's bedchambers, Gabrielle had just climbed onto the bed and kicked off her sandals. She slowly crawled towards Gurkhan and her sister. Then she thought she'd be sick there when she watched Gurkhan draw down the first wife for a long kiss.

Lila used the kiss to encourage Gurkhan as she knew he loved it. She couldn't let him know anything was wrong. She pulled away from the kiss then urged her sister closer.

Gurkhan then sat up and touched the Amazon's right cheek. He coaxed her to come closer.

The bard clamped down on her emotions and told herself to forget what was happening. She closed her eyes and pictured the Conqueror when her lips met Gurkhan's. Yet Xena's image was shattered when Gurkhan's mustache tickled her lips. Then her stomach lurched at how the kiss was so foreign and cold.

Gurkhan pulled away from the kiss. He studied the two wives, and he grinned. He sat up some more then lifted his hands. He held the wives' chins and turned their heads to each other.

Lila knew what her husband was demanding, and her resolve started to shatter. She couldn't do this. She closed her eyes when she felt that anger return.

Gabrielle saw the mix of anger and fear in Lila's eyes when those gray eyes fluttered opened. She quickly tried to think of something to stop this. Gabrielle's thoughts were as frantic as her heartbeat, yet she leaned in closer to Lila.

Gurkhan smirked when the wives' lips were so close. He had hooded eyes, and he intently watched with pure excitement.

Gabrielle swiftly moved away from Lila, and for the first time since she came into this room, she acted instead of reacted. She growled and shot out her hands at the slaver's lower throat.

Lila gasped when Gurkhan became stiff and fell back into the bed. She peered over at her shaken sister.

Gabrielle exhaled her nerves and looked to her sister. "Don't worry... he can't move or talk."

The first wife was still stunned, and she stared down at the paralyzed slaver. "What..."

"Come on, that's the least of our problems right now." Gabrielle held out her hand to her sister. "Xena should be in the palace any heartbeat."

Lila took her sister's hand then quickly moved off the bed.

Gurkhan couldn't move or say anything, but he was listening. He felt the life drain out of him when the new wife mentioned the Conqueror's name. He also didn't like the fact that the Amazon said the Conqueror's name so plainly. Gurkhan knew this wife was undoubtedly with the Greek ruler, but he was a paralyzed duck now.

Gabrielle and Lila hastened to the door, and they weren't sure what they'd do once they were out of the room. The bard reached for the door's handle and just as she was going to pull, the door shoved open. The sisters jumped back in shock and fear that they'd been caught already.

The Conqueror suddenly filled the room and stood in a tall fury. She instantly took in her partner and Lila which calmed her slightly. "Are you okay?" She briefly glimpsed at the unmoving slaver.

"We're fine," the bard replied. "I... I used that pinch on him."

The Conqueror slightly grinned and remarked, "So I see." Instantly her grin was gone. "It's time to go."

"No argument here," the bard muttered.

"I have to get Sarah," the first wife spoke.

The Conqueror nodded then back stepped slightly. She looked to her nine soldiers - one had already been killed in a small skirmish. "I want you to take Queen Gabrielle and her sister to get the child."

One soldier stepped forward. "It'll be done, my liege."

"See that they're not harmed or else," the ruler coldly warned. She then felt a small hand on her arm so she turned to her partner.

"Where are you going?"

The Conqueror faintly arched an eyebrow, but her eyes went to Gurkhan then back to Gabrielle. "I have a debt to pay."

Gabrielle only needed a heartbeat to interpret what Xena meant. She stepped closer and kept her voice low so that the soldiers wouldn't hear her. "You're not going to kill him." The only response she had was silence. "Xena, that's murder."

"No, it's justice," the ruler argued.

"Xena, please," the bard softly begged, "Don't do this."

Lila carefully studied the chemistry between the dark ruler and her sister. She'd heard fragments of the conversation, and she doubted her sister would win. She couldn't imagine Gabrielle having any type of position in the relationship.

The Conqueror knew they needed to go and there was no time to argue. She had to head this off even if it'd be costly later. "Let me adjust the pressure points on him... otherwise he'll suffocate slowly."

Gabrielle briefly studied the blue eyes above her then she nodded.

"Go get Sarah. I'll meet you there." The Conqueror stepped back once.

Gabrielle's hand slid off the ruler's strong arm. She took Lila's hand then tugged her out of the room. She glanced back at the dark ruler.

The Conqueror stood motionless and waited until her lover and Lila were protectively swarmed by the soldiers. She then turned her head to the left and stared at the gasping slaver. She revealed a predatory grin.

Gurkhan's eyes became wider as the Conqueror's dark features filled his view. He wanted to speak and plead with the ruler, but he knew it wouldn't have mattered anyway. His fate was sealed.

The Conqueror stood beside the bed and bent over. She cocked her head and quietly informed, "We'll meet again, Gurkhan... in Hades." She swiftly moved her hands.

Gurkhan could briefly breathe then there were sharp stabs to his upper throat; just under his chin. He realized he could talk and move, but now he couldn't really breathe. "No," he rasped.

The Conqueror said nothing, quickly turned, and marched out of the bedchambers. She shoved open the slightly parted doors then hurried down the halls to Lila's room.

Gurkhan clawed at his throat, but his eyes started to roll back and blood was trickling from out of his nose. He dropped his hands to his throat. Gurkhan's body went still.

The Conqueror soon made it to Lila's bedchambers and spotted the sisters coming out with Sarah neatly tucked in Lila's arm. "Are we ready?"

Gabrielle pulled the servant slave, who had been taking care of Lila's baby. "She's coming too."

The ruler warningly looked at her lover, yet she wouldn't bother to fight this at all. She nodded and ordered, "Come on." She waved the soldiers to follow.

Gabrielle adjusted the pack she had on her back. It contained some of Lila's possessions.

The small group weaved through the palace and went down several long corridors. When they made a sharp right turn, they ran into a small problem.

The Conqueror was leading, and she grinned when three of Gurkhan's guards spotted them. She grabbed for her chakram then easily threw it on a perfect track to the guards.

The guards had their swords out already, and they raced for the intruders. They abruptly stopped when the flying weapon came at them. They released a few shouts when the chakram broke one sword, hit another guard unconscious, and bounced off the wall.

The chakram returned to its owner and was neatly snatched out of midair.

Gabrielle had carefully watched her lover use the weapon. She'd never seen it used until now, and she was absolutely dazzled. She'd always wondered what the chakram was capable of, but this was beyond her bardic imagination.

The two standing guards kept their swords up and stared at the dark Greek ruler. The guard with the broken sword dropped his then back peddled. The other guard decided to follow suit. He turned and broke into a sprint.

The bemused ruler shook her head and continued down the hallway. She carefully stepped over the unconscious guard then continued.

"We need to make the next right, Conqueror, " Lutalo informed from behind.

The Conqueror recalled the route, but she was grateful for Lutalo's reminder.

In the dim passageway, the Amazons nervously waited, yet they made out a faint running sound. They grew more anxious and Vara ordered everybody to draw swords. She wasn't sure.

Vara stepped in front of her comrades. She lifted her sword as the shadowy figures hurried down the hallway.

"Vara," called a warm voice.

Vara lowered her sword when she heard the queen's voice. "Thank Artemis." She sheathed her sword behind her back and approached the group. "Are you alright, my queen?"

The two groups merged into one, and the Amazons tried to get closer to the queen.

Gabrielle smiled at her Amazons. "I'm fine."

"Is this your sister?" Amarice spoke up.

"We'll do introductions later, Amarice." Gabrielle gave an apologetic look then peered up at her partner beside her.

The Conqueror fully agreed with Gabrielle's words. "The Amazons are going to take you and Lila back to the ship."

"What about you?"

The ruler wasn't use to being questioned in situations like this. She tried to keep her patience so she replied, "I'm going to check on Iolaus. He and Najara are getting the wives."

Gabrielle bit her lip because she wanted to stay with her sister as well as the Conqueror. She knew her partner could much better defend herself than Lila could protected herself.

The Conqueror sensed the internal struggle in her partner. She touched the bard's shoulder. "Please go so I know you're safe from here."

Gabrielle relented, but asked, "Be careful?"

"Promise." The Conqueror stepped away. "I'll see you in a bit."

The Amazon Queen urged her quiet sister forward. She traded a worried look with her partner, yet she knew it was safer this way. She sensed her Amazons surrounding her and Lila so she went towards the passageway door.

The Conqueror ordered her men to guard the door. She then hurried down the passage.

Gabrielle was given a cloak to hide her flashy and revealing outfit. She was grateful that her Amazons had thought this out and done the same for Lila. She then slipped out of the door when Taren opened it. She stepped out and walked into a very dark alleyway. She felt her stomach knot at the eerie surroundings, but she suspected they were somewhere in the city.

Vara slipped past everybody and softly ordered, "This way to the port." She moved quickly down the dim alley and came out onto a larger street.

The Amazons clumped around the queen and Lila. They kept their eyes open for anything out of the ordinary, however, they expected little problems at this time of night.

Lila stayed close to her sister. She checked on Sarah, who was still asleep. She prayed that Sarah would stay asleep all the way to the ship. She kept her baby neatly tucked in her arms and used the cloak to keep her warm.

Gabrielle glanced down at Sarah and smiled some. She peered up at Lila. "How is she?"

"She's tired."

The slave that'd joined them eased closer to the first wife. "She fell asleep a little after you left the bedchambers."

Lila nodded, then she smiled at the servant. "Thank you, Akia."

The slave, Akia, returned the smile. She understood that the first wife was grateful for all her loyal services over the seasons. Akia had grown quite fond of the first wife, who'd been mostly open with her than anybody else. Akia at first thought that the first wife was a cold and angry woman, yet she found out otherwise when Sarah was born.

Lila looked to her sister and softly asked, "They call you queen...?"

The bard was struck blindly by the question. She realized that her sister knew little of her life just as Gabrielle knew little about Lila's life. She couldn't begin to guess how much catching up her and Lila had to do. "Yes."

Lila was amazed, and she observed the Amazons, who were dressed in leathers and carried swords. She couldn't imagine how her older sister became the queen of the Amazons. She also didn't know how Gabrielle had become so close to the Conqueror. She suspected there would be a good story involved, and Lila recalled how well Gabrielle could tell a story when they were kids. The memories of Gabrielle telling her stories to put her to sleep came back to Lila, and she wistfully smiled.

Gabrielle glanced over and caught the smile on her sister's face. "What is it?"

Lila broke from her memories and glanced at Gabrielle. "I'm just remembering our childhood."

The Amazon Queen was touched, and she placed her hand on Lila's back. "Now we have our future together."

Lila smiled and peered down at her sleeping daughter. Yes, she silently agreed, they had their entire future ahead of them now. Shortly, Lila spotted the port that she hadn't truly seen since she'd first arrived in Mogador by a slaver ship. She always believed that if she saw the port again that it'd meant the Fates were angry with her again and planned to send her to a worse slave owner. She never imagined that the ship that awaited for her meant her freedom.

Vara glanced back at her queen. "We're almost there."

Gabrielle simply nodded, but she had plenty of questions. They would have to just wait until they were onboard. She kept thinking about the Conqueror and wondered how her partner was making out back in the palace.

The Conqueror was currently pleased as the palace was now secure. Her soldiers had mostly taken all of Gurkhan's guards by surprise, and they were tied up in various spots. Originally the Conqueror had given orders to have the guards all killed, yet she belayed the orders after she considered what Gabrielle would say. It'd initially been hard for the Conqueror to clamp down on her old rage she felt against Gurkhan. Yet she managed once she realized the guards were following orders much like her men would do for her.

The Conqueror hurried down the passageway and grew agitated because of the clamor from the large group of wives. "Be silent," she hotly ordered to them.

The wives' voices faded out rapidly, and they turned heads to the dark ruler. The

wives that were closest to the ruler gasped. They reigned over their fears and trusted that the ruler would save them from the palace, from Gurkhan.

"You have a choice," the Conqueror announced, "you're welcomed to board my transport ship and be taken to Greece. Or else you can remain here in Mogador."

Iolaus scanned the wives exchanged looks, but he mostly heard Greece between the women's lips. He gazed down at the Conqueror and caught the ruler's raised eyebrow. He discreetly nodded then turned to Najara on his right. "We're going to split up into small groups. Three soldiers per wife."

The dekarchos quickly understood and began the orders to get the groups broken up with each wife. Iolaus helped her.

The Conqueror had several soldiers behind her, who had returned from their duties in the palace. She wanted to get out of the palace before the shift rotation began in the palace. As soon as the new shift of guards came to the palace, it could be messy. She discovered that there was no wife that wished to remain in Mogador, which did not surprise her. There was nothing in Mogador for these women but slavery.

Sonata shoved through the clump of wives and stood before the Conqueror.

The Greek ruler eyed the woman that had some bravado.

"There's still one wife left in the palace - my friend Alessa."

The Conqueror's cold composure slightly softened when she realized this wife held a friendship with her partner. She hushed her voice and stated, "She and the first wife have already left the palace. They should be aboard my ship by now."

Sonata surveyed the ruler briefly, then she nodded. "We have your word that we're freewomen? That soldier..." She pointed at Iolaus. "Said that we do, but I want to hear it from the ruler of the realm."

The Conqueror admired the woman's abrasive manner. "You have my word." She then heard the passage door opening. "It is time to go." She signaled the men behind her to press forward. "Stay close."

Najara and Iolaus quietly ordered each group out at certain intervals. They didn't want a constant stream of people coming out of the passageway into the dark alley or else it'd draw too much attention. Finally they came to the last group, which was the Conqueror and fifteen soldiers.

The Conqueror looked to her remaining men then at Iolaus and the dekarchos. "Go ahead. I will catch up."

The tetrarchès guessed what the ruler may be up to now. He commanded the fifteen soldiers to break up into five groups. Once he had them out the door, he, Najara, and the Conqueror slipped out into the alley last. Iolaus silently closed the door then faced the ruler.

The Conqueror collapsed the tetrarchès's glowing armor. "I'll be there in quarter of a candlemark. See that the captain has the ship prepared to sail."

"Yes, my liege."

The dekarchos was halfway down the alley but waited for Iolaus.

"Be safe," Iolaus softly added.

The Conqueror's grin flashed in the moonlight. "You too."

Iolaus didn't wait any longer then hurried off to Najara. He and the dekarchos quickly walked out onto the torchlit street and made their way back to port.

The Conqueror inhaled deeply then took a few running steps. She catapulted and swallowed her warcry before it sounded out from her lips. She neatly landed on the rickety rooftop to her right, but she moved quickly towards Gurkhan's palace. She wanted to check the shift rotation.

Back on the Greek transport ship, Queen Gabrielle was almost squeezing the life out of the handrail. She now spotted the rushing dekarchos and tetrarchès, but she didn't see her lover. She grew worried and met the two soldiers at the top of the gangplank. "Where is she?"

Iolaus stepped off the plank but first ordered Najara to check the men. Once Najara was away, he turned back to the concerned Amazon Queen. "There's a shift rotation in the palace. She planned to keep an eye on things until we had the ship prepared. She's concerned Gurkhan's guards will sound the city alarm about our presence."

"But Mogador already knows the Conqueror is here," the bard objected.

"And we've trespassed," the tetrarchès reminded. He didn't want to add that the Conqueror had most likely killed Gurkhan which would stir up more trouble than anything. "She'll be here soon, Gabrielle, but I have to speak to the captain."

The bard relented and stepped out of Iolaus's way. "Thank you, Iolaus."

The soldier squeezed the young woman's arm and whispered, "She'll be safe, Gabrielle. If anybody can handle any kind of situation it is the Conqueror."

Gabrielle solemnly smiled. "I know. Go, please." She pressed him towards the bridge deck. Once he was gone, she gazed back towards the city and prayed her lover was safe. Earlier she'd seen to the wives and instructed them to be taken below where it'd be safer. Sonata had tried to corner her and question her, but Gabrielle promised she'd explain it all later.

The bard then had taken Lila down to her and Xena's quarters for now. She could tell Lila was very exhausted, and Sarah would probably wake up shortly from hunger. Gabrielle hoped that Lila would feed Sarah then the mother and daughter could doze off together in the large bed.

The Amazon Queen slightly jumped when the sailors had the main sail down. She heard the large ropes that held the ship to the dock had become taut from the wind's draw. She stepped up to the rail and held it tightly. Where was Xena, and what was she thinking in staying behind like this?

Gabrielle became increasingly worried when the heartbeats felt like candlemarks. She went to the gangplank again then silently went down it without anybody's notice. She stepped off the plank and gazed about the dead port. She folded her arms over her chest when the sea breeze came around her. "Come on, Xena." Then she spotted a dark shadow moving from a small alley.

Gabrielle touched the gangplank's rail and feared whether it was her lover or not. She started to think better about leaving the ship without some security. Then her breath caught when weapons reflected in the sliver of moonlight, and the shadow took on a woman's shapely form.

The Conqueror quickly approached her lover and stated, "You should be onboard."

"I was worried."

The ruler slightly calmed, but she wanted to get out of here. "Let's get on board." She hurried the bard up the plank.

"Was an alarmed sounded?"

The Conqueror glanced over her right shoulder when there was a surge of horns from the center of the city. "Yes," she remarked.

"Oh Hades," the bard shouted. She decided a run would be much better at this moment. She bounded up the plank with her lover on her heels. Gabrielle only had a heartbeat to conclude why Mogador would be so concerned about the Conqueror trespassing. She decided it must be some strict law in Mogador because suddenly the city seemed to come to life from the horns.

"Get the lines!" the Conqueror hollered to the captain.

The sailors were responding, and they came to the gangplank. Two sailors first helped Gabrielle off then they prepared to take up the plank once the Conqueror was off.

"Stop there!" called out a man's voice from the bulkhead dock. He wielded a sword and raised it at the large transport ship.

The Conqueror grabbed the rail and gazed at the Mogadorian soldier, who had several soldiers with him.

"Return to port!" the soldier commanded. "Or we will attack." He knew in several beats that the moving ship would be too far away.

The Conqueror grunted and yelled, "Attack if you wish to make an enemy of the realm!" She then spotted several squads of soldiers marching down the alleys to join at the port.

The soldier wasn't deterred by the threat then ordered his men to pull out their crossbows.

The Conqueror narrowed her eyes, but she heard that distinct sound of arrows loading into crossbows. "Gabrielle-

"What are they-

"Gabrielle," the Conqueror snarled. She turned and followed her instincts. She scooped up the bard into her arms then hunched to the deck with her cape covering the bard's entire body. "Stay down." She then lifted her head and hollered, "Arrows! Take cover!"

Gabrielle gripped the ruler's body, hid her face in Xena's neck, and closed her eyes. She heard the rain of whistles over her head, but she was completely safe under the ruler's body. She feared though that her partner would take an arrow in the back or worse. Then she heard a deep hiss from her lover so she demanded, "Are you okay?"

"Fine," the ruler remarked after the whistles stopped. She dared to get up, yet she kept the bard behind her body. She had a sneer at the Mogadorian soldiers far back at the port's edge. She knew they would probably fire once more, but the transport ship was almost becoming too far.

Suddenly the Conqueror's head snapped to the right when she heard that low whistle. She shot out her right hand and halted an arrow from almost piercing Gabrielle's right chest.

Gabrielle stared at the arrowhead that was a poux from going through her breast. She peered up at her angry lover and thanked Xena for her quick reflexes.

The ruler snapped the arrow's shaft and tossed it into the water. She ripped her chakram free, neared the rail, and aimed at the soldiers on the dock. She gave a sharp cry when she threw her weapon.

The soldiers all shouted at once when the chakram either cut through their crossbows or their fingers. The injured soldiers fell to their knees and clenched their fingerless hands. The leader soldier was shocked, but he angrily waved his sword at the fleeing Greek ship. He cried out something acidly in Berber this time.

The Conqueror stretched out her hand and caught the somewhat bloody weapon. She swiftly cleaned it with her cape then hooked it back at her side. She turned to her partner. "Are you okay?"

The bard nodded but asked, "Are you?"

"I'm fine." The ruler shifted her weight to her left leg mostly. She then glanced at the captain at the helm, then she focused on her partner again. "Go below deck. I'll be down in a bit."

Gabrielle knew best not to argue. She did mention, "Lila is in our room. I'll put her

into that room across from ours."

"It should be empty," the ruler agreed. "Go on down."

The Amazon Queen silently consented. She wanted to touch Xena and make sure she was okay. She could tell by Xena's current state that it wouldn't be the right moment. She bowed her head slightly then turned and headed for the small doorway to the lower decks.

The Conqueror released her held breath, then she twisted her head to the right. She peered down at her calf and slotted her eyes at the arrow shaft sticking out of her calf muscle. She simply knelt down onto her left knee then reached around with both hands. She then sensed a presence in front of her.

Iolaus listened to the snap of wood then he observed the broken arrow shaft in the ruler's hand when she stood up. He tilted his head yet waited.

The Conqueror rolled the shaft between her fingers and studied the red feathers. She lowered her hand with the shaft and focused on her tetrarchès. "We'll wait until midday before we raft with the triremes."

The soldier understood that the ruler wanted to be clear of Mogador before stopping. He didn't like much having all the soldiers on the transport ship, but it'd have to do until they could transfer them back to the triremes.

"How are the wives?"

Iolaus cleared away his thoughts. "I placed them four to a quarters. It's tight, but it'll do until we get to Corinth."

The Conqueror silently consented. "The queen's sister will be in the quarters across from ours." She watched the tetrarchès's nod. "I don't want her disturbed... she has a child."

"I understand, my liege." The tetrarchès hadn't heard of any children, but it made him all that more concerned. "What of Gurkhan?"

The Conqueror felt the arrow shaft's feather tip brush her leg, and she moved it away. "He's in Hades by now."

Iolaus placed his hands on his bronze hips. "The slaver is a slave to the underworld," he commented.

"So I suspect too," the ruler agreed. Then her memories of Tartarus passed her, but she ignored her fate that still waited for her when her final day would come. "That was not the cleanest operation we've performed."

Iolaus's lips puckered between thoughts and memories of previous missions he and the Conqueror had performed. "No, but it got us the results we wanted."

"Yes." The Conqueror slightly grinned and muttered, "I prefer more creativity

though."

Iolaus chuckled and dipped his head to hide his amusement.

"Let's speak to the captain together."

Iolaus nodded and stepped aside. He waited until the Conqueror tossed the arrow shaft overboard, then they walked towards the bridge deck. He ascended the steps after the ruler.

The talk with the captain was quick, yet specific too. The Conqueror wanted the transport ship would join the triremes in a few candlemarks, then the Greek vessels would continue north towards the realm. The Conqueror wanted the course to keep the ships closer to the realm's waters incase there was some unexpected problems from Mogador. She doubted though that Mogador would hunt them down since Mogador had such a meager navy.

After the discussion ended, the Conqueror and the tetrarchès headed below deck. They silently passed soldiers that milled about in boredom until they could be returned to their respective trireme. When they came to the quarters area, Iolaus stopped and stepped closer to the ruler than normal.

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at the soldier's concerned features. She could tell something was on his mind.

Iolaus peered up into icy blue eyes. He knew the bounds between him and his leader, but he still cared enough anyway. "Be sure to have your leg cared for, my liege." He left it at those simple words.

The Conqueror hesitated between a cold remark and being gentler. She didn't give into either one, but she just collapsed the tetrarchès's smaller shoulder. She patted once, turned, and started down the hallway towards her quarters. The remaining arrow shaft protruded from the ruler's rear calf, and blood oozed around it and trailed down over her leather boot.

Iolaus shook his head and didn't bother to guess how the ruler managed without a limp. He turned and felt his high lifted shoulders sink down. He expelled a silent breath then started down the hall. He felt a faint smile touch his lips because it turned out alright after all.

Gabrielle was seat in the chair next to the small table that was anchored to the floorboards. She was slumped in her chair, right elbow on the chair arm, and her forehead sunk into her hand. She heard the door open, and she peered up with drowsy features. She softly smiled at seeing her partner again.

The Conqueror approached her slumped lover and asked, "Did you get Lila into the other quarters?"

"Yes," Gabrielle softly replied. "I think she and Sarah passed out as soon as they hit the bed." She straightened up soon and dropped her arm. "Is everything okay above deck?"

"Everything will be quiet until noon high."

Gabrielle had a confused look.

"We need to raft with the triremes so that the soldiers can disembark the transport ship."

The bard now understood so she nodded. "We can sleep until then." She mustered a grin, but it evaded her mostly. "How long 'til dawn?"

"I suspect in three candlemarks," the ruler estimated. She studied the bard's worn features, and she felt the same way inside. "Come on, Gabrielle." She held out her hand in offer.

The bard faintly smiled and took the larger hand. She climbed to her feet with little effort. She edged closer to her lover and touched a chiseled, warm cheek. "Thank you for everything, Xena."

The ruler softened from her usual cold demeanor. "It was a bit messy on my part."

Gabrielle could tell her partner wasn't happy about that aspect, but to her it didn't matter. "Everybody is safe, and we're headed back to Greece. I don't think that qualifies as messy."

"Perhaps," the Conqueror muttered.

The bard shook her head and teased, "Perfectionist."

The Conqueror quirked a grin then retorted, "Well I have a reputation to uphold that a certain bard manifested."

"I did not manifest a thing," the bard argued. "And now that I know what that round thingy does, I have plenty more to add to my next story."

"Chakram," the ruler supplied.

"Bless you," the bard thoroughly teased. Gabrielle giggled at the ruler's narrowed but twinkling blue eyes. She could tell she was coaxing Xena back out of the Conqueror. "You'll have to spell that for me later."

The Conqueror rolled her eyes and decided to disengage herself from the bard. She headed for the washroom, but a small hand halted her attempt.

Gabrielle touched the ruler's opposite cheek and drew her down.

Xena's hardened resolve cracked under her lover's sweet lips. She slightly withdrew but hoarsely asked, "He didn't..."

Gabrielle needed a beat to catch up to what the ruler's broken question was. She sighed and traced her lover's taut jawline. "No. I put the pinch on him before anything

really happened."

The ruler felt her chest lower and released her apprehension. "Good." She then felt a pulse of pain go up her right leg from the arrowhead still being embedded. She needed to remove it before it decided to get infected. "Get ready for bed."

The bard nodded and mentioned, "I'm going to check on Lila real quick." She moved away from her partner and headed to the door. She quietly opened the door and slipped out.

The Conqueror quickly pulled out the medical kit from her personal belongings. She hefted the kit then disappeared into the washroom, which was already lit by the lamp light. She was going to need some time to deal with the wound.

Xena had her dagger out, and the tip was cutting around the arrow's entrance. She was knelt down beside the water basin, and she clenched the iron pipe that was connected the basin. She'd already cut away the leather from the backside of her boot. The wound just needed to be open wider so she could rip out the arrowhead.

Gabrielle quietly slipped into the bedroom after she'd found her sister and Sarah fast asleep. She'd stood there for a bit and just watched her sister sleep. She couldn't believe it was all real now, but it was and only because of the Conqueror. Several tears had slipped free earlier, and Gabrielle's cheeks were still slightly damp.

The bard figured her partner was in the head. So Gabrielle milled about to get ready for bed. She never felt more exhausted or any happier all at once. She moved slowly and wiggled into a clean, soft nightshift.

The Conqueror kept her head back, jaw locked, and her eyes closed. She held her silence while the arrowhead slowly gave way and came free. Finally the arrowhead tore out of the ruler's calf and left behind almost a drachma size hole.

The heavily breathing ruler lifted the bloody arrowhead that still had a piece of the shaft left. She bitterly stared at the red arrowhead and the blood that oozed over her fingertips. "Bastards," she muttered.

"Xena?" Gabrielle wandered over to the bed. She sat on the end and pressed her pressure point on her left wrist.

"I'll be out in a beat," the ruler called. She'd taken a seat on the wood stool, which was nailed to the floor near the wall. She quickly worked to pack salt into the open wound then rubbed balm around it. "How was your sister?"

The Amazon Queen lowered down onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. "She and Sarah were asleep. They're pretty worn out." She closed her eyes. "I think we all are."

The Conqueror couldn't agree more. She'd painstakingly removed her boot and now carefully wrapped the wound. "Well, we have plenty of time to rest until we return to Corinth."

Gabrielle chuckled, yet she went serious when she considered how long it would take.

"Um... how long?"

Xena grinned at her lover's concerned tone. She decided to have some fun with the bard. "If the winds are kind then we'll make it to Corinth in a moon and half."

The Amazon Queen rocketed straight up from the bed. "A moon and half?" She blinked and tried to guess whether her lover was serious. "What are we doing? Going south around Africa... the long cut?"

The Conqueror stood up after she finished the wrap and removed her other boot. She went to the washbasin and cleaned the blood from her hands. "I thought you'd like the scenic route, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle was fairly sure her partner was tormenting her. "Uh no."

Xena picked up her boots, the medical kit, and strolled into the dim bedroom. "You said you wanted a vacation from your vacation." She shrugged and bent beside her tangled mess of bags with Gabrielle's.

"Funny, funny." Gabrielle shook her head then crawled up into the bed. She flopped on top of the cool sheets. "I've had enough vacation and enough water. Right about now, I think my job is looking more like vacation." She then grunted after her own joke.

The Conqueror soon was in her black nightshift. She collected her chakram and sword from the small table where she'd set it. She came over to the bed, hooked her chakram through her sword's cross-guards, and propped the sheathed sword against the wall.

Gabrielle peered up at her lover and sleepily smiled at her.

Xena grinned at the drowsy smile given to her. She then lifted the covers and ordered, "Get under." She waited until the bard was comfortably under the covers, then she slipped in next. "I had plans for tonight."

The bard's head shot up, and she carefully inspected her lover's passive expression. "Well, I don't know what your plans are, but I plan to sleep. So if you could keep it down, that'd be great."

The bemused ruler revealed a dark smirk. She then reached for her partner and silently commanded for Gabrielle to snuggle up to her body.

Gabrielle obliged and soon had her stomach pressed against Xena's. She placed one arm across the Conqueror's chest, and she used her right arm to snuggle a pillow to her right side. Finally she rested her head on the ruler's broad chest. She absolutely loved this comfortable spot she'd discovered with Xena. She released a pleasurable moan when strong arms circled her back.

The Conqueror adjusted the sheets over them and settled her head into a comfortable position. She closed her eyes, and in a new habit, she ran her fingertips over the bard's bare arm.

"Xena?" came the bard's groggy voice.

"Mmmm?"

Gabrielle shifted her head some then murmured, "Thank you for everything."

The ruler was briefly quiet, but she softly replied, "There's nothing to thank... I owed this to you and your sister."

"I don't see it that way," the bard muttered.

"I know... but I do," Xena gently stated. "Get some sleep."

Gabrielle moved her head enough and placed a kiss to the ruler's warm chest. She returned to her comfortable position and settled in for the night. "Sleep well." She slowly started to drift off, and her breathing eased. Just before she made it to her dreamscape, her lover's voice floated around her.

"Goodnight, Gabrielle." The Conqueror returned the earlier sentiment, yet her kiss to the bard's head lasted a few beats longer. She then turned her head to the right side and slowly dozed off.

The couple slept for several candlemarks, and the ship's soft rocking motion gave them further peace in their dreams. When dawn approached, the sunlight crept through the porthole and gradually crawled towards the bed. Finally it climbed the bed and continued towards the fair haired bard's head. The sunlight trailed over the bard's head and pierced through her eyelids.

Gabrielle grumbled at the sun then adjusted to so it wouldn't bother her. Now that she was slightly roused, she felt how hot she was, but it wasn't from the sun. Gabrielle raised her head up and sleepily studied her partner.

The bard tried to process why she felt like she was burning up right now. Then as she lifted her body up higher, she sensed how slick her left arm was across Xena's damp chest. She faintly shook her head then focused on her lover's body. She furrowed her eyebrows when she realized Xena was actually the source of heat, and Xena was coated in sweat.

Gabrielle became fearful and hastily pressed her left hand over the ruler's moist forehead. She gasped at how hot her lover felt. She then discovered hazy blue eyes peering up at her. "Xena, you have a fever. You're getting sick...?" She pressed her the backside of her hand against the ruler's cheek. "Gods."

The Conqueror took the small hand away from her cheek. "I'm fine."

"The Hades you are," the concerned bard stated. "There has to be something in the medical kit to-"

"It's okay," the ruler assured, "It'll be gone soon enough."

Gabrielle was extremely confused, and the tiredness wasn't helping her. "Xena..."

The Conqueror faintly smiled at the bard's worries. Then the smile faded, and she explained, "It's from a wound... my body is just fighting an infection from the wound."

"Wound? What wound?" Gabrielle's fears were far from being stilled. She grew anxious and surveyed what she could see of her lover's body. "Where is it? Why didn't you-"

"It's okay." Xena touched the bard's cheek. "It's nothing."

"You have a wound and a fever, and you call that nothing?" Gabrielle's features darkened. "Where is it?"

"My right calf," the ruler simply stated.

Gabrielle's sleepy mind slowly caught up, then she asked, "An arrow?" She shook her head when she realized when her lover had gotten it. Xena had been protecting her, and Gabrielle recalled how her lover had flinched momentarily during the attack. "Why didn't you say anything, Xena?"

"It's nothing serious," the ruler remarked.

The bard now detected the wrap over her lover's right leg when she brought her leg over. "Oh gods, Xena. You should have told me." She carefully pulled her leg away. She then adjusted the blankets so that they wouldn't be so hot.

"Don't worry," the tired ruler murmured. "Go back to sleep."

Gabrielle lightly grounded her teeth so that her mix of worry and annoyance stayed capped. She'd relent for now, but she planned to blast her partner later for this move. Gabrielle didn't like how Xena was so casual about the wound, and Gabrielle didn't like being in the dark about her lover's injury.

The bard knew she couldn't do much right now. So she carefully lowered her head back down and started a soothing motion over her lover's damp shoulder. She hoped it'd lull the fever stricken ruler back to sleep.

Soon enough the Conqueror was back into a fever ridden dream. She hadn't had these type of dark and angry dreams in a couple of moons until now. She'd never considered why her darker dreams had faded away until now, when they came back to haunt her.

A half a candlemark before Helios high, the Conqueror urged herself to awaken. She slowly made her way out of bed despite the dull ache coursing through her leg. She was just free of the bard's arms when she was halted.

"You're not going anywhere," Gabrielle argued.

The ruler was half turned out of bed, but she gazed over her shoulder. Gradually her right eyebrow lifted into a perfect arc. "The triremes will be rafting soon. I need to be there."

"I'm sure they've done it plenty of times in the past without you there." Gabrielle felt herself waking up quickly because of the pending argument.

The Conqueror wasn't in the mood for this. She simply wanted to make sure the soldiers were off the transport ships, then she'd come back to rest again. "I won't be long." Without another word, she pulled out of her lover's arm and went to the packs.

Gabrielle sat up and glared at her partner's back. She silently cursed, threw the covers off, and ungracefully popped out of bed. She felt her temper rising, yet she kept quiet because she wouldn't win. This was a moment when the bard disliked the ruler's stoic side.

The lovers quietly got dressed, and Xena led the way to the door. Briefly the ruler considered whether to argue with Gabrielle about going back to bed but doubted Gabrielle would listen. She instead let it be, and she needed to get above deck.

Once on deck, Xena and Gabrielle separated into different directions. The Conqueror went to the helm deck and met up with the captain. Gabrielle couldn't offer much in the way of help for rafting triremes, but she planned to watch after her lover. She stole away to the starboard side of the ship and watched the sea pass her. For a moment, the bard pressed her pressure points on her wrist, and the queasiness ebbed in her stomach.

Gabrielle listened to the sails move behind her, and she started to notice the ship was slowing down. She leaned against the rail and gazed off her right shoulder. She now spotted the two triremes about a league away. She estimated it'd take them a quarter of a candlemark to catch up to the transport ship.

Just as the Amazon Queen straightened up again, she sensed a new presence beside her, and it wasn't Xena. Gabrielle turned her head to the left and took in Sonata's worn features. "How'd you sleep?"

Sonata glanced at Gabrielle then went back to studying the sea. She slowly leaned against the handrail. "I haven't been on a ship in a long time."

Gabrielle could relate but this was Gabrielle's first time on any ship. "You'll get use to it soon." She offered a warm smile.

Sonata faintly mirrored the smile, yet it fell, and she became serious. "Why didn't you say something sooner, Ales..." She shook her head then corrected, "Gabrielle." She turned her head to Gabrielle and studied the bard's length as if the bard was a stranger.

Gabrielle touched the former wife's arm and sincerely replied, "I'm sorry, Sonata." She squeezed then relinquished her hold. "I wasn't sure who I could trust... nor was I expecting to befriend you or Lana."

"You just planned to free your sister," Sonata murmured. She caught Gabrielle's agreement, and she wistfully smiled. "Thank you for getting us out of there."

Gabrielle had a brighter smile this time. "I didn't do much."

At Gabrielle's words, Sonata glanced up at the helm deck and briefly studied the Greek ruler. She wasn't sure what to make of the Conqueror or who the Conqueror was compared to the stories she knew since her younger days. She swallowed and focused back on Gabrielle. "You and the Conqueror are... you're together?"

Gabrielle had never been directly asked that question, and it made her flush slightly. She wasn't embarrassed by the relationship but by the fact she'd never had to be this open. Nobody had ever questioned her or Xena yet everybody just knew the truth. "Yes, we've been together for three moons."

Sonata had a smile pulling at her lips. She nodded and leaned back against the rail again. "So you're that rebel leader that everybody talks about?" She smirked over at her friend.

Gabrielle softly laughed and her mood lightened up from earlier. "I was, yes. A lot has changed though."

"I can see," the former wife whispered. Sonata's tone held no malicious but only curiosity. "You'll have to tell me some time." Sonata then revealed a devilish grin. "Especially the good stuff."

The bard laughed and shook her head. She quieted then gently offered, "Sonata, you know if you want to be an Amazon then you're always welcomed to join."

Sonata carefully considered the invite, but she asked, "You're the queen?"

"I'm one of two queens," the bard explained. "I'm the Queen of Artemisia."

Sonata had furrowed eyebrows. "I've never heard of such a place." She slightly smirked and teased, "Although it sounds very Amazonian."

The queen softly laughed and somewhat shrugged. "I think that was the idea." She felt her mood soften compared to earlier, and she enjoyed her conversation with Sonata. "Artemisia was once Athens." She became more solemnly when she noticed Sonata's expression was changing. "The Conqueror gave the Amazon Nation the city's former lands so that we could build a new city."

Sonata was silent for awhile, and she carefully absorbed the information. She'd listened to all the legendary battles between the Warrior Princess and the Amazons, and she couldn't guess what'd changed it. She brushed her hair back then quietly asked, "The Conqueror and the Amazons are no longer enemies?"

"No," Gabrielle murmured, and a faint smile tugged at her lips. "We're allies now."

Sonata leaned heavily against the handrail then after a long silence, she stated, "A lot has changed." Then her attention was caught by the first wife, who'd just appeared on deck from below. She briefly touched Gabrielle's arm and promised, "I'll see you later."

The Amazon Queen smiled, brushed Sonata's hand with hers, and watched her go briefly. She then straightened up when her sister came to her side.

Lila adjusted a shawl over her shoulders to keep the breezy chill from her. She took a spot beside her sister and also studied the sea. After some silence, she studied her sister's sunny profile. "When will we make it to Greece?"

The bard briefly considered it then answered, "I'm not exactly sure but it'll be at least a fortnight. I'll ask Xena." She fell silent after mentioning her lover's name.

Lila wrapped her arms over her chest and waited for a beat. She then softly mentioned, "Thank you." She felt her sister's stare on her so she met it. "Thank you for coming for me."

Gabrielle moved closer until her hip pressed against Lila's. She then snaked her right arm around her sister's back and held her. "Thank you for believing in me."

Lila shook her head and didn't feel good about Gabrielle's words. The guilt for how she first treated her sister when they met bothered her greatly.

Gabrielle detected the upset in her sister, and she placed a kiss on her sister's temple. "It's in the past, Lila. Now we have the rest of our lives together." She crinkled up her nose and cheerfully added, "And Sarah too."

Lila smiled at the mention of her daughter. "We do." Lila sighed contently and realized she did indeed feel free now. She wasn't sure what her future would hold for her now, but she had her freedom, her sister, and her daughter. There were so many possibilities for her and Sarah. She knew she wouldn't be in this place if it wasn't for her sister and the Conqueror.

Lila broke the silence and murmured, "This is going to take me awhile."

Gabrielle took a beat to understand what her sister was referring to, but she figured it out. "I know, Lila. I really know because it took me some time too." She took in Lila's curious stare so she softly explained, "The Conqueror has changed a lot, and I couldn't accept it at first. All my life, I've seen her as the monster that only wanted to destroy life."

Lila shook her head and argued, "But how did you manage to befriend her then?"

Gabrielle carefully considered the question then released a sigh because her answer wasn't solid even to her. "I think the part of me that has always be optimistic... that's always believed in love conquering all just won out."

Lila carefully listened and recalled how her sister was back when they were kids. Gabrielle had always been a spirited, lively, and tender person from the very core. Lila was always amazed at how compassionate Gabrielle was as a child, and she suspected it never left the bard despite the hardened times.

The bard shook her head then looked to her sister. "I just started to see the woman that was behind the Conqueror mask. I've seen a lot of her, I haven't seen all of her, and each day I see more of her." She bit her lower lip then emotionally whispered, "Xena and I can relate because all our lives we've both been lost. We understand each other,

and we help each other find meaning in a dark world." She licked her dry lips then shook her head some. "The last part of me that was angry at the monster didn't want to accept that her and I could be alike. I didn't completely let it go until Xena proved to me how wrong I was, and she gave me back my dreams and hopes that I blamed her for trying to take from me." Gabrielle recalled her beautiful birthday present from Xena that had healed the deepest of wounds in her. It had forced her eyes opened and freed her heart from aged anger that fought against her better will.

Lila sadly smiled, and she reached up carefully. She wiped away Gabrielle's sparkling tears and then slipped her arm around her sister's waist. She soon had her head resting against Gabrielle's head. She hadn't felt this sense of peace since her childhood.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and basked in the warmth all around her. She felt a wonderful ache in her heart from all the beautiful emotions that surged inside of her. She couldn't imagine her life becoming anymore amazing than it was now, and she would hold onto this moment for seasons to come.

The Conqueror had observed much of the tender moment between the sisters. She'd been beside the captain, but her attention was drawn to them. Where she'd been grumpy earlier, she was now softly smiling and something in her grew lighter. She'd forgotten how wonderful she could feel by being this woman until Gabrielle reminded her. She felt a sense of flying because the darkness could not chain her down. Xena started to believe in Gabrielle's dream that Xena could become this loving woman that Gabrielle saw in her. Xena just had to keep her faith, like Gabrielle.

## **Epilogue - The Rosa**

The Conqueror stood in front of the large map that was mounted to the wall in her office. She had her arms tightly crossed over her bronze armored chest. She carefully studied the map that depicted her vast empire that spread north, south, east, and west from Corinth. On the map were carefully marked locations of the realm's legions, phalanxes, cavalry, siege weapons, and naval units.

Xena intently surveyed the portion of the map that was Britannia and where several red markers were located. Those markers represented the current rebel militants that'd risen up and were trying to overthrow her regime. The Conqueror had no intent on letting Britannia go as she'd worked far too hard to obtain it so many seasons ago. What she hadn't expected was for the rebel militants to last this long against her legions. The battles had been going on for almost two moons since her return from Africa. Each day, she grew more agitated because she heard nothing but failure or minor wins from Commander Meleager. Xena felt the warrior pulse inside of her, and she held back from riding to Britannia simply because of her family. It was a harder struggle each day for her because the woman inside of her wanted to stay in Corinth but the ruler in her, the warrior wanted to end the worthless battles in Britannia.

The Conqueror had remained in Corinth so that she could help get Lila settled into a new lifestyle. Nor did she want to worry her mother about going to war. Most of all,

she secretly feared going before Gabrielle and telling the bard she had to go to Britannia, alone. She undoubtedly knew that Gabrielle would be between upset and angry so Xena just held out.

Xena moved away from the map because she didn't want to keep thinking about the rebellion. It was constantly in her thoughts among other worries and concerns. She took a seat at her sofa and slumped against the back of it with her legs stretched out.

The other concern that kept her from leaving Corinth was the Britannia spies that she had yet to capture. Iolaus had been working on the problem constantly, and each time he was close to nabbing them they'd disappear. The spies were in Corinth that much the Conqueror knew without a doubt. She harbored a deep anger because she couldn't capture the mice when it'd been so easy in the past with previous spies. The fact that these spies were so resourceful and acted like ghosts did not ease the ruler's fears. And if she went to Britannia, would they strike out against her family? She didn't doubt that they would try, and she'd already increased her city patrol to a daunting twenty-five squads that marched the city or guarded the fortress every candlemark.

The Conqueror shook away her thoughts and dropped her head against the sofa. She closed her eyes, and she imagined her lover's face on a whim. A faint smile touched her lips, yet she lost it when she considered the mounting guilt in recent moons. She had yet to tell Gabrielle about Gurkhan's death, and she knew why she'd been deterring the talk. Xena didn't wish to see Gabrielle's reaction or hear what angry words the bard would have for her. Whenever did Xena become so concerned about somebody's reaction or words about what she'd done in life? When did Gabrielle become so much apart of her world? The Conqueror did not have the answers.

There was a quiet but familiar rap at the door, which brought the ruler out of her daze. She assumed a more regal posture and called, "Come in."

The bard slipped into the large office, closed the door, and took in her lover's hidden stress. She felt her heart sink because she knew the rebellion in Britannia was taking a toll. She came over to the coach and took her usual spot beside Xena. "You know, it's getting late."

The ruler knew sunset had been several candlemarks ago, but she had yet to leave her office. She slumped against the sofa again. "You're here late too."

Gabrielle had a lopsided grin at being caught. She'd been spending late hours trying to prepare the new decree for the family name convention, which she had in rough draft mode. She only had a fortnight to finish it up when the Isthmian Games would begin, and Xena would make the decree. "I'm finished, and the candles are snuffed in my office."

Xena briefly studied her partner then quietly asked, "Are you staying tonight?"

The bard had already considered that aspect a candlemark ago so her answer was quick. "Yes, if you don't mind...?" She knew she didn't have to ask, and she chuckled when her lover rolled those blue eyes. She reached up with her left hand and traced the ruler's jaw line. She leaned up and brought her lips close to Xena's. "I hope you don't mind...?"

The ruler briefly grinned then gave into the soft kiss.

Gabrielle pulled back from the kiss, and she noted something in Xena's eyes. She brushed her fingertips across the ruler's cheek and asked, "What is it?" She tilted her head, and her eyes darkened with curiosity.

The Conqueror turned her head away when she'd given herself away. She was becoming an open scroll to the bard anymore, and she found that hiding her emotions were impossible. She tried to remain in good humor when the bard was near her so that nothing was spotted, but she was tired tonight and weary from stress.

Gabrielle tilted her head back when Xena stood up and walked away from her. She knew something was quite out of place so she popped up from the sofa next. She came up to Xena, who turned to her again. She took Xena's hands into hers and carefully urged, "What is it, Xena?"

The ruler tried to break away from the bard, but she was held in place. She realized she needed to reveal her secret tonight or else the guilt would drive a wedge between them before she knew it. She dipped her head and her eyes became unfocused. She made her choice then centered her gaze on the bard again. "We need to talk about something."

"Alright," Gabrielle gently started, "I'm listening." She squeezed the larger hands in hers.

Xena didn't feel comfortable in her close position by the bard. She had dim features, and she broke away from the bard. She moved a few paces then stopped, but she kept her back to Gabrielle. "I haven't been honest with you."

Gabrielle's stomach dropped, and she carefully neared her lover. She sensed her knees weaken with each step, but Gabrielle held strong. Her imagination reeled out of control about what the ruler could mean by those ambiguous words. She carefully touched Xena's bare arm. "About what?"

Xena glanced at the soft touch on her arm, and she mentally chided herself for being so emotionally weak. She'd survived the most fatal wounds and the deadliest wars known to man, yet she feared Gabrielle's pending reaction. She held her breath then bluntly stated, "I killed Gurkhan."

The bard was still inside and out for an instant, then she dropped her eye contact. Briefly a memory flashed of Xena standing in front of Gurkhan's bed where he rested, paralyzed. She removed her hand from Xena's arm and combed her hair back as the shock hit her. "But you told me..."

"I know," Xena simply replied.

Gabrielle dropped her hand to her side, and the initial shock started to fade away. "Xena, why did you... How could you kill him like that?" She loathed the slaver for what he'd done to her sister, but she never wanted to see his life end in such a manner.

"He was a threat, Gabrielle."

"To what?" The bard hotly argued. "To the realm? He was all the way in Mogador, Xena. He was an insect compared to the size of the realm."

"And insects have a way of biting in the right ways." Xena now stared at her lover's back. "It was due justice for him."

Gabrielle turned around, and the rare fire was back in her eyes. "And you're always the judge, aren't you?"

The Conqueror felt the ice comment go deep below her skin. Gabrielle's reference back to the cross sentencing from moons ago struck her hard. It was one of the many choices in her life she would always hate. She painfully realized it was still a wound in her partner.

Gabrielle's anger instantly died when she read the regret in the ruler's eyes. She cursed herself for bringing up old history that they'd moved past, or so she'd thought. She quickly tried to recover and neared the ruler, who would shut her out any heartbeat now. "Xena?"

The Conqueror sensed the bard's gentle touches on her arms, but she carefully slipped away from Gabrielle.

Gabrielle moved swiftly and pulled Xena back to her. "I'm sorry. I was wrong to say that."

Xena had her head turned away, she was still, and she let her lover hold her in place. She hoarsely whispered, "No... it's true."

"It was true," the bard corrected. "I'm angry, and I snapped. You made another choice without me." She loosened her hold on Xena's left arm but ran her hand up and down slowly in soothing motion. "Nor do I think you killing him was the answer. Now his blood rests on your hands."

"My hands will never be clean, Gabrielle." Xena shook her head. "Not in this lifetime."

Gabrielle's shoulders slumped, but she pursued the topic anyway. "I know you'll always be a warrior first and a ruler second. You can do both for the Greater Good."

"You know that, and I know that, Gabrielle." Xena hesitated and tried to find her words that would explain how she felt about Gurkhan's death. "My methods may not always be peaceful or gentle like yours, but I know if I left Gurkhan to live that he'd continue to strengthen the slave market."

The bard dipped her head and considered what her partner meant. She couldn't argue the fact that Gurkhan would probably never stop what he was doing as a slaver. She also agreed that despite Xena's methods could be dark they also ended with positive conclusions that were lighter. Gabrielle sighed and murmured, "Fight fire with fire."

The Conqueror could tell that Gabrielle was starting to understand her way. "I didn't want to tell you my plans while we were in the palace."

"We would have argued," the bard summarized. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Xena looked away from her lover, then she slipped past the bard. She went to the tall, open window at the opposite end of her office. She folded her arms and stared out over her torch lit capitol city.

Gabrielle slightly hung her head; she thought out what it could be that bothered her partner. She lifted her head and studied the ruler's flickering profile in the dark spot by the window. She slowly neared Xena once she realized what had been holding Xena back all these moons. "You had the choice to never tell me, and I would have been none the wiser."

The Conqueror shifted some and leaned against the corner of the window. She continued to stare out at the city. "I didn't want to hide it from you, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle gently touched her lover's nearby, bare arm. "Thank you," she sincerely stated. She found confused blue eyes directed at her now. "You've never answered to anybody." She carefully studied the ruler's eyes, and she was able to piece together the underlying emotions in the ruler. Gabrielle quickly figured out that Xena had been afraid to tell her, and Gabrielle felt herself lighten because of the simple fact that Xena confessed to her. "You don't know what it means to me that you told me."

Xena swallowed then turned her head away. She was silent for awhile then softly mentioned, "I fear it'll only take a simple moment of betrayal, and we'll be at odds again with each other." She leaned her head against the window's stone frame. "The Conqueror and the Rebel Gabrielle again." She sensed Gabrielle's soothing hand motion over her arm, but she kept speaking. "I don't want to be in that place again. I don't want to tear the realm to pieces because it will do just that. And our families..." She closed her eyes at the thought of her and Gabrielle's tangled families going through such a battle.

"Xena, we're not going to that place again." The former rebel leader shifted around some until she had a better view of Xena's face. "You've changed too much for it."

The Conqueror peered down at the bard. "What if-"

"What if what?" Gabrielle cut off. "What if's don't matter."

Xena's mind skipped to the rebellion up in Britannia, and she could only guess how Gabrielle felt about it. She and Gabrielle hadn't spoken much about it and only glazed past it in a very formal setting. Xena was squashing a similar rebellion that Gabrielle may have called upon moons back if things had been different.

"What if..." Xena saw how Gabrielle prepared to stop her. She held up her hand some and waited until Gabrielle held her words. "If I become that monster again... or you find out that I never really lost that monster then it's possible we'll be at odds." She lowered her hand. "There's no way we won't end up on opposite sides."

"And I understand you can use that dark side to help the Greater Good. You can take advantage of it... turn a negative into a positive." Gabrielle felt her heart speed up. She never wanted to return to the way her and Xena were, and she believed they never would do it. "I won't fight you again."

The Conqueror absorbed the devoted words from Gabrielle. She sensed her walls crumbling, and she had to say her next words no matter what it would bring. She fully turned to Gabrielle and clutched Gabrielle's shoulders tightly. She slightly bowed her head then whispered, "I'll need you to fight me."

Gabrielle instantly became angry, and her eyes brimmed. A deep growl came from her throat, and she forcefully shoved the ruler away some. "No," she hotly yelled. She stepped back once to break her physical contact. "I won't."

"But you need to, Gabrielle," the Conqueror softly spoke. She lowered her hands to her sides. "No matter how much it'll hurt you."

"And I'm suppose to ignore that fact, right?" the bard snapped. "When do my emotions ever account for anything? All my life I have tried to find the happiness and hope in the darkest of corners. Just when I feel that my life is getting lighter, you ask me to do this?"

Xena waited a beat and let the bard catch her breath. She simply replied, "And what of my emotions too?" She saw how Gabrielle's shoulders fell. She and Gabrielle have struggled through life and tried to find the goodness in life. Gabrielle was different in the fact she clung to it while Xena gave into the darkness. "This isn't about us, Gabrielle." She cautiously stepped forward. "This is about the realm...the people."

Gabrielle hung her head when Xena's last words struck an old cord. She'd become the rebel leader for the people and to save the realm from the tyranny that the Conqueror brought onto them. It was an old fire in her heart, but it wasn't a dead fire, and it never would die.

The ruler easily detected that fire in the bard again. She knew it was deeply buried inside of Gabrielle, but she felt it alive just as Xena felt it the day Gabrielle stood before her during the cross sentence. The Conqueror felt a cold chill ripple down her back at the memory of Gabrielle's powerful defiance so many moons back. The Conqueror could still bask in the titan struggle between her power and the rebel's will.

Gabrielle raised her head up when strong hands were on her shoulders again. She softened when she felt she gazed upon the skies in Xena's eyes. "I don't want to lose us."

Xena moved her right hand and gently touched the bard's cheek. "I'm not planning on it, but I am planning on the realm's safety... with every measure. You're my best weapon."

Gabrielle quickly lifted her right hand and pressed it against the ruler's chest. She felt the heavy beat of Xena's heart. "This is your best weapon."

Xena found no argument. She lowered her head closer and searched the bard's

emotional eyes. She merely whispered, "And you gave it back to me."

Gabrielle closed her eyes when Xena's lips met hers. She became more emotional thanks to Xena's last words. She began to cry in the middle of the sweet kiss. Xena pulled back and carefully moved her hand about to rid of the tears. Gabrielle also brushed them away.

The Conqueror shifted and managed an arm across the bard's shoulders. "It's late."

The Amazon Queen silently agreed, and she was guided out of the room.

As the couple made their slow walk to the door, the candles extinguished one by one until the rulers quietly slipped out of the room. The Conqueror's office became pitch black except for the faint glow coming through the open window thanks to the city torchlight.

The days in Corinth quickly moved by and a fortnight came with an abrupt decree and announcement. The Conqueror issued that the Isthmian Games were to begin, and she took Gabrielle's last name convention scroll into her hands. The final copy had been prepared for the court, and the Conqueror stood up at the start of court. She'd unraveled the long, step by step scroll, and the Conqueror made the last name convention a new decree throughout the entire realm. The court silently listened to each word Gabrielle, the head of the polis, had carefully written over the moons. They advisors couldn't help but be impressed by Gabrielle's carefully thought out plans for the family name convention. After the reading, nobody protested the Conqueror's decree and returned a favor to fulfill it within the allotted time that Gabrielle had set forth.

After the day's work and opening of the Isthmian Games, the Conqueror stole away in Cyrene's closed taverna. She had a mug of her mother's homemade ale in her hands, and she quietly sat at an empty table.

Cyrene finished wiping down her bar after today's insane business. It was very late at night, but she was grateful for such wonderful business thanks to the Isthmian Games. She tossed her rag onto the counter, and she came over to her daughter.

The Conqueror's worn expression visibly showed, and her posture was slouched, which was so unbecoming of her normal form.

"Go home, little one." Cyrene sat down and studied her child's exhaustion. "I'm sure Gabrielle is waiting for you."

Xena grunted and leaned back in her chair. "She was busy still talking back at the coliseum."

"You both have been working too hard," Cyrene argued.

"Such is our rulerships," the Conqueror reminded.

Cyrene sighed and rested back in her chair. "Another vacation is far from sight huh?"

"Afraid so." Xena carefully drank from her mug then she lowered it to the table again. "How does Lila fair here?"

Cyrene softly smiled at how well Lila had been progressing. She was grateful for the extra help in her taverna along side Melpomene, Xavier, and her regular barmaid. "Lila is doing well. I think she's getting settled into the house finally."

"Her nightmares are lessening?"

Cyrene considered it after the moons. "Yes." She smiled and nodded. "And Sarah is getting a new routine."

Xena chuckled and joked, "It won't be long before Sarah switches routines again."

"That child will be a handful," the mother commented, "mark my words."

"Sarah won't compare to me when I was a child," the ruler teased.

Cyrene chuckled and shook her head. "You may be right there, daughter."

Xena softly laughed too, and she took a sip of her ale. She set the mug down then brought up a topic she'd be meaning to for awhile. "We have to pick out a family name, mother."

Cyrene became more serious when she heard the topic. "Gabrielle mentioned you made the decree today. Did it go over well?"

"Surprisingly yes, but I think that's due to Gabrielle's efforts to make it go smoothly. She put a lot of detail into the design and procedure."

"She was working hard at it," Cyrene conceded. "She told me there are some steps to picking out one's family name and who can fall under it."

Xena nodded then carefully considered her words. "I would prefer to have Toris here."

Cyrene understood what her daughter meant. She sighed and softly argued, "And I would love for him to be here to help us select the name." She paused then honestly stated, "But you have been the man in this family. You've been providing to us all."

"I think you've held your own, mother." The Conqueror knew her mother wouldn't argue the point. Since the day Cyrene opened the taverna, she hadn't asked Xena for any money and now became the owner of the taverna instead of just the proprietor. "It's our choice... Toris will have to just like the family name he's given."

Cyrene shook her head, but she was amused by Xena's words. She sobered and asked, "Have you any ideas?"

"I'm more concerned about who falls under our family," the ruler argued.

Cyrene bit her lower lip. She understood her daughter's concerns because Gabrielle and Xena's families were so intertwined anymore. Sometimes it seemed hard to

understand where the families separated if at all. "Have you and Gabrielle discussed about having separate family names?"

"Gabrielle realizes that she and I cannot carry the same family names. The decree won't allow it." Xena slightly bowed her head because she disliked that discussion with Gabrielle. It'd been a hard choice between them because Cyrene had become Gabrielle's mother during Gabrielle's childhood. "We're not blood."

Cyrene raised an eyebrow that mimicked Xena's technique. "And it would publicly ruin your relationship since that'd make you sisters."

The Conqueror smirked and joked, "Since when did politics matter to me?" She lost her smirk and switched back to the seriousness. "There is one way to make sure Gabrielle carries our family name later on."

Cyrene tilted her head and wondered what plan her daughter had in mind.

Xena couldn't believe she'd considered this earlier, but she had to discuss it with her mother. She took a drink of her ale first then proceeded to dive into the topic. "Gabrielle wanted to make sure that every family was distinguished from another and that it wouldn't get diluted over time. Nobody is allowed to switch family names."

"So that it'd be easier on the polis," Cyrene agreed.

The ruler nodded but explained, "Gabrielle did make one loophole. If a couple decides to marry then the wife is allowed to take on the husband's family name. The polis will discourage it heavily by financially taxing both sides of the family for the scrollwork to change family names. Also each family must agree to release the wife of her proper family name and take on the husband's family name."

Cyrene sat quiet for a beat. She took in each word her daughter revealed and what it added up to in simple form. She breathed heavily and softly stated, "You and Gabrielle will marry."

Xena was silent and tried to absorb those defining words that her mother spoke. She and Gabrielle never spoke of marriage, and Xena hadn't asked why Gabrielle left that loophole in the family naming decree. She didn't question it, and she would only ask later down the road if it'd been a subconscious loophole on Gabrielle's part or not.

Cyrene reached across the table and took Xena's hand into hers. "How serious is this?"

The Conqueror lowered her eyes and studied the ale in her mug. "I'm not sure yet." She peered over at her mother again. "It's too early to tell yet." She bowed her head and bit her lower lip as a few thoughts came to mind.

Cyrene felt something in the air, and she cautiously urged, "What is it?"

"I fear that someday I'll lose Gabrielle to my own darkness. If she gets any closer something could hurt her."

"She knows the risks... you know the risks," Cyrene debated. "I doubt though that your

darkness will ever drive a wedge between you two. It already tried to, and it failed... didn't it?"

Xena sadly smiled at her mother's true words.

Cyrene squeezed her daughter's hand and softly mentioned, "The time to fear about such things is when you stop worrying about such things."

Xena was confused briefly, but she pieced it together quickly. If she let go of her guard and self-conscious about her actions and words in life, like she had before Gabrielle, then she'd be back to the darkness. As long as she remained aware of herself then she would always have control. Xena had stopped caring about her actions in life after Lyceus died and that's when her anger was released.

Cyrene could tell that Xena understood. She released Xena's hand and patted it. "As far as you and Gabrielle marrying, you have my blessing for it... when you're ready."

Xena lost all of her coldness at her mother's enduring words. She smiled warmly, and her eyes glowed. "I pray I'll have a reason for your blessing."

Cyrene knew that was Xena's hidden way of saying she wanted to marry Gabrielle in the future. She felt wonderful at the thought, but she agreed it was too soon to tell. There was still some healing left between Lila and Gabrielle's time as the rebel. Gabrielle had told her about the Gurkhan argument from a fortnight ago, and how Gabrielle snapped at Xena about the cross sentence again. Cyrene believed Gabrielle reacted out of anger more than vengeance from the past, but Gabrielle didn't believe it. The bard was utterly self-conscious about what she'd said to the Conqueror that night in the office, and it plagued her greatly. It was the simple fact that Gabrielle was so self-conscious about it that made Cyrene more positive that it would work out okay.

"What of Melpomene and Xavier?" Cyrene brought up.

The Conqueror felt that her thoughts had been read by her mother. She wanted to have Xavier and Melpomene adopted into families since neither of them had their parents left or known blood family. "Gabrielle and I talked a bit about it. She thinks that we should adopt Melpomene, then she and Lila will take Xavier."

Cyrene instantly smiled at the idea. "I think it's perfect." She then continued to talk to Xena about the official family name that would follow them throughout the generations.

The family name decree ordered that each family followed certain guidelines when they chose their family name. Today was the marker that wives completely became the husband's family, and that there would be no other moment that wives could take on the husband's family name. It was a quick and easy way to cut out the headaches. The children all fell under the husband's family name. Next, the oldest living father in the family would reign over the name selection. If the grandfather was still alive then his selection would supersede the son's and so on. Finally, the eldest father's name could be used to represent the family name plus the eldest father could reference their name to their tradesman. To follow this, the eldest father was required to add a suffix that described where they were from in the realm. For both Xena and Gabrielle, the

suffix to their family name had to end with an "as" or "is" for Macedonia.

Cyrene and Xena spoke late into the night about their family name. They both quickly agreed not to take on Atrius's name for the family name. Xena wanted to use Cyrene's name as the basis for the family name, but Cyrene argued that she wasn't the husband of the family. She only gave in when she lost the battle against Xena's words. Cyrene had been the father to the family for all of her children's lives, and Xena wouldn't have it any other way.

After the long discussion, Xena and Cyrene decided on the family name they would use. They planned to talk to Melpomene later and acquire her agreement to enter their family. Xena bid her mother goodnight and slowly made the trek back to the fortress. She was quite weary and ready for a long night's rest if she would be allowed it. She doubted it though because the games would begin again at first light, and she had to be there to precede over them.

Gabrielle was coming out of the washroom, her hair wet, and she spotted her lover coming in the door. "You were out late."

The Conqueror moved away from the now closed door. She admired her lover in the silk, white robe that she'd picked out for Gabrielle ages ago. "I was with mother."

"I'm sure she's exhausted like the rest of us." Gabrielle caught Xena's chuckle, which told her it was true. She crossed the room, and she came to her tiptoes when she was next to Xena. She placed a soft kiss to the ruler's full lips. She then moved away and went to the ruler's closet where Gabrielle would toss her belongings whenever she came for the nights.

The Conqueror was dressed in her warrior attire, which was most regal with the extra gold accessories. She would never wear so much in battle, but she had to dress the part for the Isthmian Games. Tomorrow she could switch to her Chin style dress that she preferred for such events.

Gabrielle was knelt beside her three bags in the open closet. She kept rummaging through her things, but she paused and glared at the bags. "I always forget to bring something from Cyrene's." She quietly cursed under her breath and brushed back a few loose, wet strands.

The Conqueror unclipped her sheathed sword from her back and propped it up against the wall, near her bed.

The bard grumbled and hotly stated, "It'd be so much easier if I had everything in one place." She yanked a leather pack out of the closet and rummaged through it again.

Xena pressed her lips together tightly as she considered the bard's words. She freed her chakram and hooked it in her sword's cross-guard. She turned around and coolly remarked, "You could always move all your belongings here."

Gabrielle immediately stopped then repeated the Conqueror's words in her head. She had weakened knees, but she stood up and turned towards the ruler. "Was that a serious offer?"

Xena remained still briefly, then she came over to her lover. She hooked Gabrielle's chin with her index finger and tilted Gabrielle's head back. "It's a serious offer." She wouldn't leave any room for questioning about whether she was being honest or not.

Gabrielle completely lost her earlier annoyance. She smiled and took Xena's hand from her face. She held tightly to the ruler's hand. "I would love to." She crinkled up her nose when Xena showed her own smile.

And it was the right time for Gabrielle to move out of Cyrene's home. Lila had become accustomed to her new life, and Sarah took on a regular routine to her days. Cyrene's home was becoming rather cramped since Lila, Sarah, and Xavier had moved in now. Gabrielle had often considered asking Xena whether she could move into one of the bedchambers, but she never brought it up because she wanted to help her sister adjust. Now it seemed as if it was time for Gabrielle to move out, and Gabrielle was excited it was into Xena's bedchambers.

The next day brought on the second day of the exciting Isthmian Games. Corinth was breeched at its walls with visitors from all over the realm. The Isthmian Games were almost as famous as the Olympic Games once were in Athens. The people also heard rumor about the Conqueror releasing about two thousand slaves from their bonds for building the Corinth Canal that connected the two seas and would bring more trade to the city. The main bridges had been built, and the Conqueror started the grand opening for the canal. A show of a hundred dressed triremes was made, and they traveled down the canal for the christening of the canal. Finally, the Conqueror made the waited announcement to free the slaves that'd worked on the canal, which left gasps on all the people's lips except for two people. Gabrielle and Cyrene had shared knowing smiles and were filled with pride at the growth and change the Conqueror showed before the realm.

The Isthmian Games lasted for a fortnight, and the last day would go on throughout the day and night until sunup. The city would never sleep, and the people had higher spirits than they could ever recall. The Conqueror felt the life in her people. She couldn't ignore it. She couldn't hide the fact that she enjoyed seeing her people this happy. Gabrielle had been right all along.

On the last day of the Isthmian Games, Gabrielle found herself headed down the hallway to her office. It was late morning, and she promised Xena that she'd show up at the coliseum by early afternoon for the games. She had some work to do quickly in her office before she could go. Tomorrow would be the usual court day, and Gabrielle wanted to make sure the next step of the family name convention went smoothly. Tomorrow the Conqueror would be the first to acquire and record her family name, next would be Gabrielle, and then it would move down the power chain. Also the people would begin to pour into their local civil offices to have their family names acquired and recorded.

The bard slipped into her quiet office, and she came closer to her desk. She stopped beside her desk, and she furrowed her eyebrows. She stared at the unexpected but beautiful object on her desk.

In the left corner of the desk, closest to Gabrielle, a long-stemmed rosa proudly stood

up in a red, clay vase. The rosa was a soft, gentle yellow but the tips of the pedals were a rich red that matched the vase.

Gabrielle was awestruck, and she stared at the rosa for awhile. She finally lifted her hand and gingerly touched the pedals. She thought it was unreal yet the pedals were soft to the touch. She then leaned over and inhaled the unique, gentle scent of the rosa.

Gabrielle then noticed the small piece of parchment that rested beside the vase. She picked up the piece and read the precise handwriting that she grown familiar to seeing now that she worked with Xena. She smiled and quietly read the words aloud. "Like the first rosa of the Summer Solstice, you're the first love of my heart."

Gabrielle always thought herself the poetic bard, but she lost her words against Xena's short yet deeply telling words. She traced her fingertips over Xena's signed name at the bottom of the beautiful words. She gazed back at the beautiful rosa on her desk.

There was no question that the bard and the ruler needed to have a serious talk later. The bard had kept her emotions quite confidential other than telling Cyrene on occasions. She knew that Cyrene wouldn't divulge anything to Xena, yet she began to wonder what Xena may be saying to Cyrene. Gabrielle was starting to point her finger at Cyrene for matchmaking skills.

Today didn't lend to Gabrielle and Xena getting any private time. The Isthmian Games stole all of their time, and they retired to their bedchambers rather late. Gabrielle had mentioned the beautiful rosa and repeatedly thanked her lover for it. It was obvious that Xena had been nervous about giving it along with the accompanying note.

The following day became much calmer, but the court took much of their time. Gabrielle initiated her procedures to take on the family names that the people had selected for the past fortnight. The first record was the Conqueror's name and family name followed by her living family members such as Cyrene, Toris, and Melpomene. To follow Xena's family was the next in the power position, who was the head of state or rather Gabrielle. The bard recorded her family name and proceeded it with Lila, Sarah, and Xavier's names for her family. Afterwards the other advisors in the court entered their family names and members.

The process took much of Gabrielle's day. She then had to leave the fortress and go to the two civil offices at opposite ends of the city. She spoke to the officials in charge and gave them the procedures to collecting and recording the people's family names. In a moon, the process would spread out to the other cities in the realm and eventually to the countryside. It would be a long endeavor, but a worth wild one in Gabrielle's eyes.

By the evening, the Conqueror finished work earlier than Gabrielle, which was a rare occurrence. She snuffed out her candles then snuck away into the bard's office next door. She was called in, and she softly smiled at the rosa on the bard's desk.

Gabrielle peered up from her scrollwork and smiled at her lover. "Done huh?"

"And you're not?" the ruler teased.

The Amazon Queen groaned and leaned back into her chair. "I'm at a stopping point." She tilted her head and mentioned, "I need to pick up Sarah later. You're sure about her staying for the night?"

"I'm sure." Xena took a seat at chair in front of the bard's desk. "I just don't change her clothes when she messes."

Gabrielle smirked. "You say that now, but if I left you with her..."

"I don't think so," the ruler shot back and grinned. She glanced out the window by the bard's desk and saw that the sun was sneaking towards the west. "How about a walk on the beach, then we get Sarah?" She turned her head back to the bard.

Gabrielle glowed at the idea. "I'm up for that." She decided her scrollwork could wait until tomorrow. She hastily rolled it up, set her quill in the inkwell, and she popped out of the seat.

The bemused ruler led her partner out of the office, fortress, and finally into the busy streets of Corinth. The couple weaved through the people and streets and finally made it to the edge of the port. They slipped past the people and made it onto the beach, which had some other couples walking about on it. The Conqueror and Gabrielle stole away from the crowds by walking further down the beach than most.

Xena came to a stop when they were far away from the other beachcombers. She also saw that the sunset would be soon. She neared a long stone that was buried in the beach. She sat and straddled it then patted the open space.

Gabrielle took the signal and sat down too. She sat between the ruler's leg, and she propped her legs up on the remaining length of the long rock. She then felt strong hands pull her shoulders back. The bard melted into the ruler's warm body and cool armor behind her.

The Conqueror wrapped her arms around her lover's trim waist. "The start of the family name went well."

Gabrielle smiled at the praise. "It did, but it'll hit some bumps along the way."

"Only a few, I imagine," the ruler argued. "You've done well for your first decree."

"It's not complete yet." Gabrielle twisted her head and partially showed her grin. "I do like your family name you chose."

"I had help," the ruler admitted.

"Well I figured you had to get Cyrene's permission." Gabrielle softly laughed. "I'm glad you adopted Melpomene. I think that meant a lot to her."

The Conqueror couldn't agree more. "Plus she still can call you aunt."

The bard chuckled and shook her head. "I suppose so." She leaned her head against the ruler's broad shoulder. "I wanted to ask you about something."

Xena sensed the pending topic coming to the surface. She had a knotty stomach, yet she urged, "Yes?"

Gabrielle bit her lower lip, then she pressed forward. "Why the rosa?" She couldn't see Xena's face so she turned around on the rock and faced her lover. "That was incredibly romantic, Xena... and meaningful."

"And you want to understand the meaningful part?"

Gabrielle simply nodded her head. She took Xena's hands into hers, and she noted Xena's palms were somewhat damp, which was strange. Gabrielle peered up into hesitant, blue eyes. "I'll tell you a secret first, Xena."

Xena was about to argue, but Gabrielle stopped her.

"It's okay." The bard squeezed her lover's hands. She took a deep breath then softly spoke over the light sea breeze in the air. "The rosa has been the sweetest gesture ever given to me. It was so simple yet so complex too... just like you, I know that." Gabrielle ran her thumb over her lover's right hand. "Kind of like us, and how I feel about you."

The Conqueror lowered her head some and sadly smiled at the bard's words.

"We're past the honeymoon stage, right?" Gabrielle questioned, and Xena nodded her answer. "I didn't know what to expect after that stage, but I wasn't expecting to feel this much." She released Xena's left hand and brought her freehand to the ruler's cheek. She grazed over Xena's high cheekbones and defining jaw line. She traced the full lips that she loved to kiss. "I can't hide anymore, Xena. The more I see of you behind the ruler's mask, the more I feel." She searched Xena's sky blue eyes, and Gabrielle finally whispered, "I know it now. I'm falling in love with you, Xena."

Xena lowered her head quickly and sought out Gabrielle's lips. She released a whimper that she'd never done before when she felt Gabrielle's lips against hers.

Gabrielle was briefly overpowered by the emotional kiss from her lover. She quickly recovered and returned the unexpected passion. She then felt her cheeks dampen from warm tears that were not her own. She pulled back in shock when she realized Xena was crying.

"Xena?" The bard hastily wiped away the ruler's crystal tears that shined in the sunset. Gabrielle's heart sunk at such emotions clearly displayed on Xena's face. Gabrielle had never witnessed such a scene, and she was unsure how to deal with it. "Xena?"

The Conqueror tried to close her eyes and turn her head away. Gabrielle refused to let her move away. She finally gave in and hid her face in the bard's small hands.

Gabrielle lost her heart again to Xena. She lowered her head closer and pulled Xena into a tender kiss. She tasted the piercing salt, which slowly subsided in the long kiss. She slightly pulled back and huskily asked, "Tell me you're okay?"

"I'm far better than okay," Xena hoarsely replied. She lifted her head and showed her eyes that were bright from emotions. She shook her head then whispered, "You broke my darkness, left me helpless, and wrapped me in humanity again. I owe you my heart."

"No," Gabrielle softly fought, "you owe me nothing."

Xena knew the bard would say as such. She sadly smiled and gently promised, "It can't be undone, Gabrielle... you had my heart the day you defied my darkness. I know that now."

Gabrielle quickly reclaimed the ruler's lips. She had a wild heartbeat that matched her emotions. She realized that it'd been the right time to reveal her secret to Xena. Xena fully met her emotions in the long, tender kiss.

The lovers slowly separated after several kisses. Gabrielle then shifted around until she faced the last of the sunset. She was snuggled deep in Xena's protective arms. She felt stress of keeping her secret now leave her. She couldn't feel more amazing than she did now. There wasn't much else in her life that she could ask for now that she had Lila, Sarah, and Xena's love.

Eventually after the sunset, the couple wandered back down the beach and went into the city. They stopped by Cyrene's house and picked up Sarah along with the baby's seeming endless supplies. Xena carried all the baby supplies while she let Gabrielle carry Little Sarah, who was wearing a cute outfit that her Auntie Gabby had bought not long ago.

Xena unloaded the three packs in the bedchambers then moved aside her small table from the lion fur on the floor. She could tell Gabrielle was grateful because the bard lowered Sarah onto the fur.

Sarah required a bath in a candlemark then her bedtime would soon follow. Until then, she planned to play with her Auntie Gabby.

The Conqueror kissed her lover on the cheek, mentioned she had to go to the office briefly, and that she'd be back soon with dinner.

Gabrielle quickly returned the kiss and focused back on her niece. She listened to Xena's quiet departure then she played with Sarah.

The Conqueror had been gone for about a half of a candlemark. She returned to the closed doors of the bedchambers and paused. She instantly picked out Sarah's upset cries behind the doors and Gabrielle trying to soothe the child. Xena smirked because Gabrielle's coos weren't winning Sarah over at all.

Xena briefly glanced at the tray of warm food in her hands. She knew if Sarah didn't settle down then she and Gabrielle would be having a cold dinner. She made a decision and shoved open the doors.

Gabrielle heard her partner's return, but she was too focused on her crying niece in her arms. She was seated on the sofa and tried to rock the baby in her arms. "It's okay,

Sarah. Come on."

The ruler set the tray down on the small table that she'd shoved aside earlier. She crinkled her nose at the child's piercing cries.

The bard shook her head and looked at Xena. "I've fed her, checked her, and she still is upset. I don't know why." She frowned at the fact she couldn't calm her niece.

The Conqueror quickly came over and bent down. She held out her hands. "Let me." She saw Gabrielle's doubtful features so she ordered, "Come on."

Gabrielle stood up and stepped closer to her lover. She carefully transferred Sarah into her lover's arms.

Xena adjusted the crying baby into her strong arms. She naturally held the baby as if Sarah was her own child.

Gabrielle was stunned at how easily Xena went into a maternal mode. She hadn't expected such a display, but she still waited for whatever trick Xena had up her gauntlet that would help quiet Sarah.

Xena crooned at the baby while she moved away from Gabrielle. She smiled tenderly at the baby in her arms, then her voice softened and lightened to a beautiful pitch. She soon began to sing a baby's song to Little Sarah.

Gabrielle's jaw loosened and her mouth was wide. She never had a clue that her lover could sing so beautifully. "By the gods," she rasped and sunk into the sofa with complete shock.

Xena slowly walked around the large bedchambers and continued her gentle song. "Everywhere that Sarah went, Sarah went, Sarah went. Everywhere that Sarah went, her lamb was sure to go." Xena paused for a breath then softly continued, "It followed her to school one day, school one day, school one day. It followed her to school one day that was against the rule."

The bard was shaking her head, but she couldn't help but be soothed by Xena's beautiful voice. She realized that Sarah's cries were silent now and all that remained was Xena's song.

"It made the children laugh and play, laugh and play, laugh and play. It made the children laugh and play to see a lamb at school."

Gabrielle was dazzled, but her mind quickly caught up to the song. It was the same exact song that Cyrene sung to her when she was a child and had nightmares. Cyrene would hear the bard's cries at night, and Cyrene would come to the bard's room and sing her the song to lull her back to her dreamscape.

Xena had finished the song, but she continued to softly hum and slowly circle around the room while she rocked the now sleeping baby.

Gabrielle climbed to her feet and crossed the short distance to her partner.

Xena stood in place but rocked the baby still. "I think she can have her bath tomorrow."

The bard grinned and nodded. "I think so too," she murmured back. "She was just tired."

"Eat, sleep, and changings... that's all they want at this age," the ruler softly declared. She then made the slow trip to Sarah's small crib that Gabrielle had picked up from Lila awhile ago.

Gabrielle had a silly smile on her face. She watched Xena carefully slip Sarah into the crib. The bard then adjusted the blanket over Sarah and kissed her niece on the forehead. "Goodnight, cutie." She straightened up to see Xena's tender features.

"Dinner time for us." Xena held out her hand.

Gabrielle collapsed the ruler's large hand and followed her back to the sofa and skewed table. She soon was sitting down to a warm meal and conversation with her lover. Gabrielle was eating some feta and mentioned, "I never knew you could sing."

The Conqueror smirked and stated, "I have many skills."

The bard chuckled and teased, "It seems maternal instincts are one of the many."

"Hmmm." Xena bowed her head as she collected the warm soup bowl from the tray. "I have some experience."

Gabrielle was slightly confused by what Xena meant. She paused from getting another piece of flatbread.

"I often had to take care of Lyceus," Xena filled in, "when we were young. Mother was always busy with the taverna."

The bard now ripped the bread apart and sat up with her piece. She understood what Xena meant because she'd cared for Lila at certain times when her mom was too busy with the farm and garden.

The couple reeled into their childhoods and shared some old memories. They laughed together and enjoyed the light conversation. Slowly they made their way to bed after snuffing out the candles. Gabrielle checked on Sarah one last time then curled up in bed with her lover. She was fast asleep like Sarah once she was in Xena's arms. Gabrielle's dreams that night were quite strange in nature.

The Conqueror slept lightly that night because of her dark dreams. She had surfacing memories from her early days in Chin and when she first met Lao Ma. The memory filled dreams ran further to when Xena traveled to the Land of the Rising Sun then later to India where she earned her legendary chakram. It was a stage of her life that Xena had long set aside, and tonight it consumed her dreams. The memories were somewhat diluted by the dream and odd in nature. Xena could make little sense of them when she woke up in the early morning.

Xena slipped out of bed silently and made sure not to wake Gabrielle or Sarah. She suspected Sarah would be up soon and get her aunt up too. She quickly pulled on her leathers, wired armor, and hooked her cape into place. She scooped up her sword and locked chakram and headed for the door. Xena left the bedchambers and hurried down the hallway towards her office. As she walked down the hall, she easily hooked her chakram into its home followed by her sheathed sword.

The Conqueror entered her dim office and quickly lit a few candles to help her see until the sun was completely up. She went behind her desk, sunk into the desk chair, and stared at her scrollwork. Was she really up to the work just yet? The dreams more or less made her want to do some sword drills to burn off her anxiety. Xena would just have to wait until full sunup before she could call out the squads for practice.

The ruler pulled out a scroll from her in-basket. She unrolled it, set it down, and stared at it. She slumped back in her chair and positioned her elbow on the right chair arm. She lowered her head to her hand when a faint headache started behind her eyes.

A soft moan left her lips, and Xena rubbed the bridge of her nose. She rarely ever woke up with a headache. She closed her eyes and tried to will her headache away, but without her notice, Xena's eyes grew heavier each heartbeat. Gradually the Conqueror lifted her head, dropped it back against the chair, and her eyes completely shut.

The Conqueror, Xena Archyrenis of Amphipolis, surrounded to her dreamscape without a fight.

After the ruler of the largest empire drifted asleep, a very light, feminine voice softly floated through the office. "Sweet dreams." Then several girlish giggles quickly followed the enthusiastic words.

**The End.**