

~ Stranger in a Strange Time ~

by Red Hope

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

Violence: There is violence.

Subtext: I really dislike this disclaimer.

Notes: I believe my wild muses have come to life again. I am not sure what exactly I am thinking here but I thought it would be absolutely fascinating. No spoilers here but please read on! When you get to the end, if you enjoy it and want more then please let me know. I may not continue if there's no interest as I have plenty of other fictions waiting.

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The tall, dark woman glided down the lone hallway but she came to a stop before a wood door. Slowly her full lips spread into a wild grin as she silently opened the heavy door. She slipped into the beautiful bedroom that contained every luxury one could possibly require.

The woman stood in the middle of the room, her black eyes scanning every corner of the room. She now lifted her hands with her palms facing the ceiling. Her eyes drifted shut and she began to chant. When her eyes slowly opened again, she scanned the room again but she was still chanting. Suddenly something caught her attention and her gaze centered on the heavy wood trunk nearby the entrance to the washroom.

The trunk glowed with a brilliant green and there was a usually pulsing hum in the room now.

The woman floated across the room while winding through several chairs and sofas. She loomed over glowing trunk still chanting and she touched the lid. She threw open the lid.

She coldly laughed as her right hand came down and her fingers neatly wrapped around a golden shaft. She lifted the item up from the trunk then she stopped chanting. Immediately the green glow died and the hum died.

The dark woman held the golden scepter vertically with her left hand then she brought her right close to the green stone on the top. "Son of Darkness, show me her only

weakness." Her hand finally met the green stone and the contact caused her to silently scream, her mouth wide open and eyes close.

The woman ripped her hand away but she started laughing. "Yes... yes. She is the one. It is time." She quickly grasped the stone at the top of the scepter with both her hands and laughed but her vibrating laughed disappeared along with her.

Janice adjusted the bag over her shoulder. She watched as Melinda opened her suitcase on the other side of the tent. "Everything there, sweetheart?"

The southerner jumped at the deep voice. She slammed her suitcase shut and spun around. "Oo my, Janice." Her hand covered her rapid beating heart.

"Sorry about that." The archeologist sauntered into the tent and stopped by the foot of the small cot. "Will you be comfortable in here 'til we leave?"

Melinda pushed her black glasses up onto the bridge of her nose. "I reckon so. Thank you."

Janice nodded then turned around to travel back to the tent flap. She paused and turned her head sidelong. "Thanks for your help back there, Mel."

The southerner could tell that it was hard for her friend to say that. She offered a gentle smile then replied, "Well it wasn't exactly me that stopped Ares."

"No," considered the archeologist, "it was you." Without another word, she disappeared out of the tent.

Melinda Pappas let out a frustrated breath because of that gruff woman. She shook her head and reopened her suitcase.

Janice continued through the shrinking camp and went to her tent. She told many of her workers that they could go but some stayed behind. There was still some cleaning up to do before they could leave the site. She finally made it into her tent where she tossed her leather bag onto the cot. When she did that, the worn lash came undone and the items spilled out.

At first passing by glance, Janice didn't notice anything but then she stopped at the corner of the cot. Her eyes wondered back to the cot and there spread out over the bed was a bunch of junk and no scrolls. "Holy shit!" She scrambled for the bag and turned

it upside down.

The waterfall of personal belongings spilled out over the cot. On top of the mountain rolled out a worn out grey teddy bear.

"No," hotly whispered the archeologist. "I am going to shoot him myself!" She yelled at the top of her lungs. She threw the bag across the tent then rampaged out of the tent into the early evening.

"Janice, what were yah screaming about?" The southerner had taken her blazer and hat off, her midnight hair flowing over her broad shoulders.

Janice almost stumbled in her next step when she saw Melinda outside her tent. She paused then marched over to her friend. "Jack took the damn scrolls!"

"Ooo my," whispered the translator. "And he's on his way back to New York City."

"I know," yelled the angry archeologist, her hands thrown up in the air. "I am going to kill that nitwit!" She started to stomp off again.

Melinda hastily acted and caught the small woman's nearest wrist. She hauled Janice back to her. "Janice, wait." She couldn't let her friend walk off so angry and upset.

"What?" snapped the other woman. She yanked her wrist free and glowered up at the southern belle. Yet when Melinda recoiled from her hostile attitude, she calmed down. "I'm sorry, Mel. I'm just...."

"I know." The translator placed her hands gently on leather clad shoulders. "We'll get the scrolls back."

The archeologist's shoulders slightly slumped. "This just... really isn't my day."

"Now Janice Covington, don't you start." Melinda slightly lowered her head to get a better view of her friend's face under the brim. "It was a mistake and we'll get them." She saw how Janice was settling down so she released the smaller woman. "Besides Jack doesn't fly out 'til tomorrow afternoon so he ain't gonna go home with 'em yet."

"You're right," softly agreed Janice. She tilted her head back, her gentle grin showing from under her hat. "Thanks, Mel."

Melinda's soft features shined with a smile. She opened her mouth to say more but she faltered when suddenly the wind gusted and her hair lifted up. She turned her head when this odd cracking sound started just off to her right.

"What the hell?" murmured the archeologist. Her right hand instinctively went to her gun on her hip. She didn't trust anything anymore after today's events with Ares and Melinda's body being possessed by Xena.

There were tiny lightening bolts forming about a hundred feet from the pair. The bolts suddenly connected together to make a sphere then a body started to form. There was a bright flash of green that made Janice and Melinda shield their eyes.

Melinda gasped when there was a mysterious, dark woman standing before them with a golden scepter. Her eyes were instantly caught by the beautiful green stone that was held at the top of the scepter.

"Stay behind me, Mel," ordered the archeologist, who stepped in front of her friend. She neatly flipped the thin leather snap that held her gun in its holster. She tightly gripped the revolver for dear life because she could tell this would not be good. She suddenly shivered when the strange woman showed a ruthless smile at them. "Who the hell are you?"

"I think you should be more concerned with what I am," taunted the dark woman. She started for them with the scepter in her right hand.

"Stay back," warned Janice, "I've already had a bad day." She quickly pulled out her gun and aimed. "Do not fuck with me."

The dark stranger stopped but her smirk was never gone.

Janice felt now that she had the upper hand yet she cocked her revolve just to be sure.

The dark woman's chest shook with a silent laugh and she tilted her head as her eyes focused on the small woman.

Melinda quickly sensed something was about to happen. "Janice!" She moved so fast and shoved her friend as hard as she could.

Janice yelled as she went flying then skidded into the sand. Her ears rang with Melinda's heart wrenching scream. She hastily jumped to her feet to see Melinda hunched over in absolutely pain yet nothing seemed to be causing it. Her head whipped around towards the strange woman and Janice knew she was the cause of it. She took aim with her gun.

The dark woman straightened up then her left hand shot out in Janice's direction. "Ah-ah-aaah."

The pain raced through Janice's arm as her vision filled with a scene of a man bringing

an axe down at her right hand. She could still feel her hand but the pain was immense.

The dark woman's lips curled into a deeper grin. She slowly walked towards the screaming archeologist, her eyes only for the archeologist. "My you're the spitting image," she murmured. She stretched out her left hand and clawed the air.

Janice rolled onto her back and screamed even louder. Her chest felt as if it was on fire. All she could see was her body being burnt as she was lashed up on a wood cross.

Melinda shook her head some but she forced her body up. Janice's screams urged her forward and she straightened up.

The dark woman turned her head to see Melinda up again. "You never stay down." Her eyes went to slits when very feral blue ones burned her.

Melinda disappeared in a blur of motion. She followed her body's instincts as she did an amazing jump and landed a few feet from her opponent. She gave a piercing cry and did a perfect kick.

The dark woman yelled as she went reeling through the air and landed hard onto her back.

Melinda softly moaned and shook her head. She raced to Janice's side and bent down next her. "Janice, come on."

Janice was curled up and moaning but the burning was receding. The archeologist's hazy green eyes opened finally and her fingers clawed at her distant gun. She grabbed it then pulled herself up.

Melinda helped her but she turned her head just in time to see their enemy getting to her feet. "We have to stop her."

"I don't know how," whispered the scared archeologist. "But I doubt she's bullet proof... if I could get a clear shot."

The translator saw that the dark woman was coming towards them. "I'll distract her." Despite Janice's yell of protest, she broke out into a run for her opponent.

Janice wiped the blood from the corner of her right lip. "I need to focus." She lifted her gun, took aim, and willed her nerves to settle as her hands were shaking. She watched in amazement as Melinda tried to attack.

Melinda threw a punch and heard the snap of bone under her fist.

The woman stumbled back but her wild black eyes centered on the southerner. "Enough!" She threw out her arms.

Melinda cried out in pain as she was lifted into the air by nothing. Her arms were forced out horizontally and her legs were slammed together.

Janice's stomach dropped. She was dazed by how Melinda floated in midair with her arms out as if she hung from an imaginary cross. Then her heart broke when Melinda dropped her head back and a terrifying scream erupted from her lips. "No," she whispered hotly, "that bitch." She refocused on her task at hand. She had a clear shot of her enemy now.

Melinda was released and she collapsed to the ground in agony. She'd never felt so much pain in her life before as her legs felt now. Her eyes were full of tears and she clenched at her mangled legs.

The dark woman stepped over the fallen Melinda. Her gaze met Janice's. "You are mine!" She lifted the scepter and pointed the green stone at the archeologist.

Janice's eyes widened when the green stone emitted a bright glow. She instantly pulled on the trigger but she screamed when the bright green light hit her. Her scream was quickly cut off.

Melinda whimpered but she opened her eyes. She let go of her legs she forced her body up with her hands. She twisted her head every which way but the woman was gone, and so was Janice. "No," she fearfully whispered. "Janice!" Melinda became hysterical as she clawed across the sandy ground. She could not walk since every bone in her leg was broken. She finally made it to the one item that was the only remnants of Janice. Melinda tangled her fingers through Janice's whip, the same whip that had saved them earlier today. "No," she agonized, "Janice."

Janice's cry exploded loudly again. She plunged to the ground, her head hitting soft grass.

The dark woman with the scepter materialized but she gasped when something unexpectedly hit her right shoulder. She growled then fell to one knee, hunched over, and gasping for air. She released the golden scepter and with her right hand she inspected the wound in her left shoulder. She was actually shaken by the unexpected pain and how it could have happened. Her wound was merely a small circular opening but the pain was strong.

The woman snatched the scepter up and lifted her head. She slightly grinned at seeing

Janice passed out but her enthusiasm was short lived for her shoulder ached badly. With labored breathing, she touched the green stone and disappeared without a trace.

Janice moaned softly and when she lifted her head, her vision swam with green, brown, and blue. She tried to get up using her hands but she was too weak. "Mel," she desperately breathed. But the strain on her body was so great and she fell back to the ground in a heap. The darkness claimed her again.

"Hurry! We have to figure... figure out where that scream... came from!" She waved on her two companions.

"Wait up, Solari!"

The Amazon didn't wait though and kept running faster through the forest behind her were her two closest friends; Ephiny and Eponin.

Ephiny growled because her friend would not listen. She tried to push her body faster so that she would catch up but nobody was as fast as Solari.

Solari jumped over a low bush and nearly lost her mask on her head. She didn't care as she came to a screeching stop. "Sweet Artemis." She remained still and transfixed.

Ephiny and Eponin came around the bush then made a dead stop next to the other Amazon.

"Who is he... she... or what?" Ephiny was utterly confused.

"I don't know," answered Eponin.

Solari shook off her astonishment and carefully approached the huddled form on the ground. "It's definitely a female," she reported to her friends.

"Solari, be careful." Ephiny was worried but she also neared the slumped body.

Eponin reached behind and extracted her sword just in case. She followed behind her friends.

Solari kneeled down next to the female. Very cautiously she stretched her hand out and pressed her fingertips against the woman's throat. She could tell just by her warmth that she was alive but she also felt the pulse. "She's alive... whoever she is."

Ephiny stood next to her friend while Eponin was off to the side.

Solari picked up the funny looking brown thing that was covering the woman's face.

"I've never seen clothes like that before," brought up Eponin.

Ephiny's eyes flickered over to Eponin then back to the sleeping form.

"By the gods, I've seen her before!" Solari dropped the odd brown thing when the blonde's face registered in her mind. "But it's impossible."

"What?" Ephiny's tone was urgent.

Solari lifted her head to Ephiny. "You saw her, remember? That rebel girl that spoke out against the Conqueror and was sentenced to the cross. It was only five days ago... in Corinth."

"That is impossible." Eponin now sheathed her sword. She also came over to them.

Ephiny slowly knelt down and carefully studied the blonde's face. "If this is her then how did she get off that cross?"

"And how did she get here?" added Eponin, her hands on her hips and staring at the mysterious woman.

Solari grabbed her mask on her head, repositioning it properly. "Most importantly, why is she here of all places and completely banged up?"

The three Amazons gazed at one another in confusion and curiosity. Suddenly their attention was drawn down to the stranger that let out a faint groan but never stirred anymore.

Chapter 1 - Introductions

Slowly she released a soft groan; her hand touched her lightly pounding head. She quickly realized her hand against her forehead was bandaged without even opening her eyes. This seemed to remind her of her earlier predicament and she shot up into a sitting position on the hard surface she was resting on.

Janice sucked in a deep breath against the pain all over her chest and stomach but then her eyes widened. Just about twenty feet away from where she rested were two tall women in leathers, masks on their heads, and swords at their sides. "Holy shit," she wheezed in between the pain. "Who are you?"

The seeming guards turned heads to each other. One signaled the other and she opened the door then marched out into the next room.

The archeologist knew she wasn't going to get any answers from the guards. Instead she took a moment to absorb where she was, which certainly wasn't the campsite. The room was rather small and the only other piece of furniture in the room beside her hard wood bed was a wood chair to her right along with a table. The table was covered by bowls, rags, and some type of plant. Finally she lowered her gaze to her body because she sensed it was hard to move her upper body.

Starting from Janice's lower stomach all the way up to the top of her chest she was bandaged up. She still had her pants on but her hat, shirt, jacket, and boots with socks were gone. That also meant her gun was missing, which didn't settle well with her. Suddenly her musing was cut short when that guard returned but with two other women.

Janice was absolutely dazed by the unfamiliar women. She never seen something like this as they all wore leathers, bare stomach, and carried swords. She was quite curious about their masks they had on as her educational mind ran through the possibilities. The only possibility that came to her was also an impossible one.

The two women came to Janice's right side. The one closest had rich brown eyes and her hair was longer than Janice plus much blonder. The second woman behind the first had curly dirty-blond hair, lighter amber eyes, and one stone cold expression.

"I am Queen Cyane of the Amazons," started the closest woman.

Janice blinked at the title of queen. Queen of the Amazons? Her impossible theory was being easily confirmed and her heart began to pound against her chest.

The woman, Cyane, could tell the stranger was uneasy. She held her hand out to the other woman beside her. "This is Ephiny... she was one of the Amazons that found you."

There, she said Amazon again, thought Janice. She moaned as her head fell forward into her bandaged right hand. This could not be real, debated Janice but Cyane's gentle voice pulled her back.

"Do you need the healer?" offered Cyane, who was nearing the pallet some.

"No," finally spoke up Janice, "I'm fine." She lifted her head again and gazed at the Amazon Queen. "The name's Janice Covington."

Queen Cyane straightened up at hearing the name. She found it peculiar to hear the stranger say two names. She deduced she must be Roman as many Romans had two names and she knew the name Janice was also Roman heritage. She decided to leave that alone for now. "We found you within our borders about four days ago. You've been unconscious since then."

The archeologist remained quiet as she tried to process everything that was happening to her. She pushed herself up better on the pallet even though it was painful.

"Do you remember what happened?" queried the queen.

Ephiny shifted her stance, her steely eyes on the stranger. She didn't trust anybody and especially this odd woman. With how the known-world was today, nobody was ever honest.

Janice sighed and ran her left hand through her messy bangs. "Some. Its confusing enough to me but it'll be beyond you."

"Try us," interrupted Ephiny.

Janice's eyes narrowed at the Amazon's clipped tone and attitude. She bit back a harsh retort because she knew she was at the mercy of these people, besides they'd already been giving hosts.

"Ephiny," gently warned the queen. "Let her speak." She returned her focus to the small woman on the pallet.

Janice noticed how Ephiny backed off. She returned to the Amazon Queen. She noted the leather headband that Cyane bore, which had strange markings on it. Janice could tell they were Greek letters but she couldn't translate it and she cursed herself for not knowing Greek syntax better. She knew if Melinda was here that she'd know exactly what that headband said without even thinking about it.

"Tell me what happened," tried the queen again.

Janice broke from her thinking. She cleared her throat then signaled the chair near Ephiny with her chin. "You might need to sit for this."

The queen agreed and Ephiny gave her the chair.

Janice waited for the Amazon Queen to get settled then she tried to think of the best place to start. "Before I ended up here I was in the town of..." Her mind quickly worked to recall the ancient town's name. "Trachis."

"That is only two candlemarks of a ride from here," mentioned Ephiny.

The archeologist tried to decipher the length of a candlemark would be. She had no idea but she did know it couldn't be too far. So she was in Greece but obviously it wasn't 1949 anymore.

"What were you doing in Trachis?" asked the queen.

"Well that's where it gets confusing." At seeing the queen's narrowing eyes, Janice hastily added, "And interesting."

Queen Cyane nodded. "Go on."

"This is going to sound really insane but..." Janice paused to try and thinking about how to put this carefully. She figured there was real no way. "I'm from the future and I don't mean the near future but distant future."

Cyane blinked and stared Janice as if she were Medusa.

Ephiny snorted. "My queen, she's high on henbane."

One of the guards by the door snickered.

Janice ticked one of her back molars with her tongue. She did not like this Ephiny Amazon what so ever.

Cyane twisted in her chair and looked at the Amazon. "And do you have a better explanation for her clothes and that metal thing she had?"

Ephiny sighed but said nothing else.

The queen turned back to the stranger.

Janice slightly perked up at hearing something about her metal thing, her gun. She tried not to show it because she knew it would tip these women off.

"Okay so you're from the future... if this is true how did you get here?"

The archeologist sighed while folding her hands in her lap. "I'm not exactly sure." Her eyes stared at her left hand, which was fine while her right hand was covered. She lifted her head and looked at the Amazon Queen. "I'm an archeologist from my time."

"Ar...arch-eolo-gist," tried Cyane. At Janice's nod, she asked, "What's an archeologist?"

"It somebody that researches history," explained the small woman, "especially by well... digging through the ground." She slightly grinned at her plain definition of her job. "I'm particularly interested in Ancient Greek history."

The queen leaned back in her chair and thoughtfully stared at this strange woman. She wasn't sure what to make of the story so far but she would hear it out. "So you were in Trachis digging up Greek history in the future," summarized the patient queen.

Janice nodded. Her eyes briefly flickered to Ephiny, who was rolling her eyes but kept quiet. "My... friend and I just finished up a dig there when something strange happened."

"You turned into a man?"

Cyane growled at Ephiny for her smartass remark. "Ephiny, be silent."

Janice's expression was dark at Ephiny. "No, I dug up your grave and fuckin' desecrated it."

Ephiny's temper reared up and she stepped forward with her hand moving behind her back.

Cyane made a hidden signal.

The closest guard drew her sword faster and stepped up to Ephiny.

Ephiny became still, her hand on her sword hilt, and her eyes borrowing into Janice.

Janice held her ground, her green eyes flashing with every promise to beat Ephiny if she touched her.

"Step back, Ephiny," coldly ordered the queen. "Or else get out. I've had enough."

The Amazon in question released her hilt, lowered her arm to her side, and backed away from looming over Janice.

The guard resheathed her sword and returned to her post.

"I apologize," offered Cyane. "You were saying."

Janice released her anxiety and focused on Cyane. "Some robed woman appeared in front of me and my friend. She was after me personally but we fought her. We couldn't stop her... she was able to force pain on us without even touching us."

Cyane now had an explanation of the wounds the small woman suffered. Although she found the burn marks a bit odd if they were in combat.

"The woman had some golden staff," explained Janice, her eyes fuzzy. "It had a large green stone on the top that glowed."

Ephiny's brow was taut as her mind raced through memories of such a scepter. For some reason it struck a cord.

"What did this woman look like?" Cyane's voice was gentle but very curious.

Janice shook her head. "Tall... just under six feet." At seeing Cyane's confusion of height she tried to reformulate how to explain the height. Her eyes quickly scanned the room and rested on the guard to the left. "Just taller than her."

Cyane glanced at the Amazon.

The tall Amazon cleared her throat but stayed silent.

Janice looked back at the queen. "She had black hair and her eyes were almost black."

"She didn't say who she was?"

The archeologist moved her head in a no. "Her voice was unusual though... it was scratchy and deep." Like she'd been smoking too many cigarettes in her life, thought Janice, not that they exist right now.

"You said she had a gold scepter with a green stone?"

Janice was surprised by Ephiny's voice. She only nodded her answer.

"My queen, when I was in Corinth I saw such a scepter."

Cyane peered up at her Amazon. "The Conqueror's?"

"Yes." Ephiny folded her arms across her chest. "The Conqueror's scepter in the hands of a tall, dark woman, who is a shaman?"

Cyane's eyes went black for the first time. "Alti," she seethed in a hate driven voice.

Janice easily picked out that Cyane had some long history with this Alti woman. Even the name made Janice's skin crawl. "Who is Alti?" She then recalled they'd said Conqueror. "And who's the Conqueror? Julius Caesar?"

Cyane huffed then replied, "Julius Caesar would be a blessing compared to the Conqueror."

"Then who's the Conqueror?" Janice's mind was reeling with possibilities on who it was then another name hit her. "Alexander?"

Ephiny snorted from behind. "Long live Alexander... if only." Her expression was full of remorse.

Janice was lost now. She looked to the Amazon Queen for help.

"The Conqueror is...." Cyane stopped because to this day she had a hard time choking out the name. She clamped down on her old emotions. "Xena... the Warrior Princess," she whispered as if speaking the ruler's name was a sin.

The color washed away from Janice's face and she tried to desperately grasp what was happening. She suddenly wondered if Melinda's idea about fainting wasn't a good one. She moaned as her hands covered her face. "My god... this can't be right."

The Amazon Queen watched the archeologist tried to handle the situation. She could tell the small woman was genuinely shocked, which told her that maybe Janice was being honest. Everybody knew who the Conqueror was and everybody feared her, almost.

"Janice," tried the queen.

The archeologist forced her mind out of her racing thoughts.

"I believe you did face Alti," started the queen, "but I don't completely believe you're from the future or... anything of the sort." She tilted her head. "And not because it's not impossible... I've seen stranger things in my time. But..." She signaled to Ephiny to finally speak.

Ephiny took a step forward. "The problem is that nine days ago I saw you in Corinth." Her expression wasn't teasing or even demeaning but stone cold. "It is possible for somebody to get here from Corinth in that time but it's impossible for you to do it." She stepped forward again, lowered her hands to the edge of the pallet, and leaned

towards the strawberry-blond. "You were sentenced by the Conqueror to the cross and your legs were shattered." Her eyes stayed locked on Janice's. "I remember your scream."

Quickly a vision flooded Janice's mind of a powerful swinging mallet almost connecting to her ankles. It never struck her in the vision as the vision was originally disrupted by Melinda saving her from Alti.

Ephiny could tell the small woman wasn't offering anything. She tilted her head some. "Your name isn't even Janice is it? Its Gabrielle... you're the rebel leader everybody talks about but nobody sees...until now."

"Gabrielle?" murmured the archeologist. Her eyes widened at the realization that not only did Xena exist here but so did her ancestor. It made perfect sense. "I'm not Gabrielle but I know who Gabrielle is," she argued.

"Your twin sister?" chided Ephiny with a snort.

Cyane was carefully listening to the interrogation.

Janice showed her best smirk. "No but close enough." She gave a challenging look as she stated, "Actually she's my ancestor."

Ephiny opened her mouth to refute it but Janice's explanation sunk in. She didn't know what to say or do so she merely straightened up to her full height again.

Cyane took this as her opening. "Just how far in the future are you?"

Janice folded her arms against her patched up chest. "Roughly two thousand two hundred years... give or take a hundred years."

The Amazon Queen was baffled by how far in the future that meant but she was still intelligent about this. She knew whatever time Janice came from it was beyond her comprehension and it meant that Alti had very precise plans.

"Besides," cut in Janice, "If I was Gabrielle how come my legs aren't shattered?" Her question fell on Ephiny.

The Amazon huffed, folded her arms, and had no answer.

Queen Cyane suddenly rose up to her formidable stature. "There are many things I must think about, Janice before I can decide what's going on here." She rested her hands on her hips now. "Until then, you will remain here and when the healer says you're well enough you may take a guest hut." She saw the narrowing of Janice's eyes. "You're not a prisoner here," she explained, "however I'd like to know what's happening. It sounds as if you don't have anywhere else to go."

The archeologist sighed because she knew the Amazon Queen was right.

"You'll be safe here," stated the queen. "Until then get some rest and recover." She considered something then looked at Ephiny and back to Janice. "If you need

anything, Ephiny will be here to help you."

Ephiny's mouth quickly opened.

Cyane knew it too but she cut her off. "Ephiny is quite competent as an Amazon and despite things, she's very helpful."

Ephiny snapped her mouth closed because she couldn't argue when the queen just complimented her.

Janice chewed on the inside of her mouth. She really disliked this but she didn't have much choice either. "Thank you..." She silently cleared her throat. "Queen Cyane." She never thought she'd hear those words come from her mouth.

"You are welcome." Cyane stepped away and went to the door but she gazed back. She noted Ephiny was planted in place, most likely to see if Janice needed anything. She nodded her head at Ephiny then turned around.

Janice studied the queen's backside. Something caught her eye, which was the defining scar on Cyane's lower left back. She'd seen a similar scar on the front side too and it had an interesting round shape.

The Amazon Queen vanished into the main part of the healer's hut.

Ephiny saw the guards at the open door and she said, "You can take a break if you'd like."

The two guards exchanged looks then made a silent agreement so they walked out with the door closing.

Janice made eye contact with Ephiny once they were gone. "You don't believe me, do you?"

Ephiny's eyes narrowed. "I don't know... but I do know I trust you as far as I can throw you."

The archeologist slightly grinned at this. "Well at least we're finally in agreement about something."

The Amazon glowered at the chatty woman. She then was remotely surprised when Janice started to move around. "What do you think you're doing?"

Janice slid her sore legs off the pallet and touched the floor with her bare feet. "What's it look like, Sherlock?" Her back was to Ephiny but her head was sidelong. "Wait... you don't know who Sherlock is." She chuckled to herself.

Ephiny ignored the remark and walked to the other side of the pallet. "The queen ordered you to stay here."

"Now what fun would that be?" Janice forced her aching, sore body off the pallet. She straightened up to her full yet short height and her head swooned from the movement.

She moaned and stumbled some.

Ephiny quickly moved and caught the woman before she collapsed or bumped into anything. "Get back on the pallet."

The archeologist pushed her dizziness aside. "No." Her eyes met Ephiny's. "I've been on there for four days. I need out." She stepped around the taller woman and went for the door.

The Amazon was fast and stood between the short woman and the door. "I can't let you go," she hotly stated.

Janice put her hands on her hips and stared down the woman. "What you going to do? Wrestle me onto the pallet?"

"I will if you don't." Ephiny held her hands up in demonstration.

The archeologist grunted. "I'd love to hear you explain this to your queen about why I'm even more injured." She wagged her index finger at the Amazon. "Tsk, tsk... you have to be sweet to your guests."

Ephiny's amber eyes went into slits. She knew she was losing this battle so she relaxed her hands at her sides again. "Fine. If you're so damn pigheaded about this then at least get dressed."

Janice held out her arms while saying, "If I knew where the rest of my clothes were I would love to."

The Amazon sighed then ordered, "Stay here... I'll get them." She slipped out of the room to hunt down Janice's clothes.

Janice though went to the pallet again and sat on the foot of it. She took the quiet time to check her wounds but pulling the bandaged away from her body. She peered down between her cleavage to get a view of her stomach. She was surprised to see her stomach was definitely burnt but the burns weren't too bad. She picked out the scent of some medicine but she wasn't sure what it was since she wasn't too familiar with them. She then lifted her right hand and unwrapped it some. She instantly regretted it with a cringe at seeing so many deep cuts on the top of her hand. She picked out some stitches too that seemed to be well done.

Janice was shaking her head while wrapping her hand back up. "I can't wait to see that bitch again." She knew she would too and when she did she'd make sure Alti paid for this, especially Melinda. She sighed at the thought of Melinda but she was pulled out of her reverie when Ephiny returned and with another Amazon.

"This is our healer, Eilis."

The healer smiled at seeing her patient up and moving. "I hear you wish to leave the hut."

Janice nodded. "I need to move around."

"I understand." Eilis looked to Ephiny. "Why don't you wait outside? Leave her things on the chair too."

The Amazon went to the chair and placed the boots down first then piled the clothes on top. She silently left the room.

Eilis was an older Amazon but she seemed quite nice Janice noticed. Eilis first went to the table and fiddled with all of the items. "Your burns will probably not take as long as those cuts on your hand." She found what she was looking for and picked up a clay bowl with white paste in it. "I'll need to take off your bandaging and put more of the salve on."

The archeologist was skeptic about revealing her body to the healer but she knew too she wasn't in any position to refuse.

"Don't worry." Eilis chuckled. "I've see it all plenty of times."

Janice rolled her eyes despite she couldn't help the grin. "Alright." She slid off the pallet and Eilis helped her unravel the seeming endless bandage.

"How do you feel?"

"A bit shaky and sore."

The healer nodded as she placed the wrap down on the pallet next to the salve. She dipped her fingers into the salve and put a thick coating over her hands. "I suggest you ask Ephiny to take you to the dining hut then." She came behind Janice and began liberally yet carefully rubbing the balm into the red skin.

"What is that stuff you're putting on me?" inquired the stranger.

Eilis smiled and replied, "It's a balm mixed with Acacia Nut... its rare actually... from Egypt. The Acacia helps properly heal burns and hopefully you won't have any marks left." She dipped her fingers back in the balm before ordering, "Turn around."

Janice hesitated but she faced the woman but with her eyes closed.

The old Amazon smirked and didn't say anything about it. Instead she busied herself with getting the balm over Janice's chest, upper breasts, and her stomach. "You really have a fair colored stomach."

Janice blushed then cleared her throat. "Are you finished?"

The healer quietly laughed. "Yes, turn around and I'll bandage you back up." She quickly worked to wrap Janice back up but it wasn't exactly a fast process. "You have a usual accent by the way."

"It's Yankee."

Eilis was clearly confused but she decided it was easier not to ask. "I'll check your

hand later when you come back."

"Ooo no." The archeologist faced the healer. "There's no way in Hell I'm sleeping on that bad excuse for a bed again. It's probably why I'm so goddamn sore anyway."

Eilis stood still, her hands on her hips, and her head bent. "I meant for a check up."

Janice blinked then her defensive demeanor dropped. "Oh."

"You can stay in a guest hut but I want you to come by each night and morning until you get a bill of perfection from me."

Janice stepped around the Amazon with a grunt. "That'll be neva then."

The healer went to the door but paused. "See that you stop back here tonight, Janice. I can tell you're a stubborn one."

Janice shot a devilish smile at the healer. "I will... thank you."

The Amazon nodded then quietly left Janice alone.

The archeologist took a few minutes to get ready even though it was painful process. It was especially hard for her to get her boots on then lace them up. Her hand hurt too much while curling her stomach as she was bent over was also excruciating. She finally straightened up with her booted foot hitting the floor. She whipped her belt off the seat and laced it through the loops very slowly but she didn't buckle it. Janice was beginning to feel more herself and in control merely from having her clothes back.

The last part was her shirt, which she shrugged on and button by button she seemed to feel more alive. All she needed, in her mind, was her gun and she could beat any of this hocus pocus going on today. After she had her shirt tucked in, she buttoned her pants up and buckled her belt perfectly. Janice went to the door and grabbed the large handle but it took a lot of effort to get the heavy door open. So maybe she wasn't in perfect, prime condition like she thought but it was better.

The healer lifted her head from her scrollwork at her desk and said, "Ephiny is just outside." She signaled the door straight ahead.

"Thanks." Janice wanted to tip her hat to the Amazon but she was missing that piece of article along with her jacket. And that gun, that damn gun she grumbled inwardly.

Ephiny twisted her head up when the short but glowing woman stood at the top of the steps to the healer's hut. She took a heartbeat to adjust to the dress style despite she'd already seen Janice in these clothes.

Janice stomped down the wood steps with her heavy boots. She grinned at the Amazon. "Where to?"

Ephiny blew at a loose piece of curly hair on her forehead. "Dining hut," she clipped.

The archeologist enjoyed Ephiny's annoyance at having to baby sit her. At first it

hadn't sat well with her that Ephiny was her keeper but now she realized this could be a lot of fun.

"This way." The Amazon headed off in the direction of the dining hut. As they traveled across the village, she noticed two things. First was that Janice was engrossed in her surroundings and taking in every detail. And second, well every passerby Amazon was just as curious about Janice. Ephiny was wondering if they would have a trail of Amazons following them but luckily not.

Janice turned her head to Ephiny. "I see there are a lot of guys here."

Ephiny narrowed her eyes at the small woman. "I guess you missed out on your history about Amazons huh?"

The archeologist actually knew quite a bit about them. She smirked. "In my time, the Amazons are just myths... stories about women running around with arrows and axes... and no left breast."

The Amazon came to a dead stop and faced the stranger. "I happen to not be a myth." She then bent her head down closer. "And I have both my breasts."

Janice slowly smiled at the annoyed Amazon. "I can see this."

Ephiny sighed dramatically, rolled her eyes, and continued onward. She mumbled something under her breath though.

Janice was smug and thoroughly enjoying this. She was a master at getting people's goods and she couldn't resist Ephiny's. "So there are never any men here?" She already knew the answer though but she liked playing dumb.

"Not unless they're guests otherwise no." Ephiny now took on a proud tone as she spoke. For some reason, she decided Janice required a real history lesson. "It's a man's world right now and not because it should be but because we let them. The Amazon world is based on truth, on a woman's individual strength."

Janice licked her lips as she listened to Ephiny. Her eyes darkened a shade and just glowed with mischief. "Damn right, Eph." She curiously looked up at the Amazon. "You don't mind Eph do you?" Just as Ephiny was about to snap out her harsh answer, she cut in, "Great. I like it too." She then suddenly stopped.

The Amazon went a few steps further but did an about face.

"You know, you're right." Janice put her hands on her hips. "It's even a man's world in my time period too. I'm all for the Amazon... thing. You know, I consider myself a single-minded woman."

Ephiny rolled her eyes.

"I would become an Amazon," proudly stated the archeologist.

"Ooo sweet Artemis," moaned Ephiny.

Janice thoughtfully weighed this then stated, "But I think first I'd ask my husband if it's okay."

Ephiny's expression darkened and she menacingly stepped towards the stranger.

Janice laughed and jumped back with her hands up in defense. "Now Eph, you don't want to do anything silly." Her teasing voice wasn't helping Ephiny decide though. "It was just a joke."

Ephiny stepped closer though and lifted her right hand then fisted it. "I could just...." She furiously growled and spun around then marched off.

Janice happily snickered to herself. What other fun could she have with this Amazon? It was almost too easy to toy with her keeper. She hurried after Ephiny while muttering, "I guess being an Amazon wouldn't do me much good in my time though."

Ephiny had a furrowed brow. "Why's that?"

The archeologist smiled up at the Amazon. "They don't exist anymore."

The Amazon was losing her patience very quickly. She ground her teeth but kept silent knowing that was the safest bet to keeping her last wits. She finally came to the food hut and ducked into the entrance.

Janice's senses were suddenly taking in the wonderful smell of food. Her stomach agreed with a rumble.

Ephiny stared at the small woman's talkative stomach. "I can't believe it's as loud as you."

"Ha... real funny, Eph." Janice stepped past the Amazon and went for the food line.

Ephiny turned on the balls of her feet and watched her go. "I hate that nickname," she complained but followed after her charge.

The archeologist got in line next to an Amazon, who was looking her up and down. So Janice just smiled and played along like she did this everyday. She had no problem figuring out how the buffet line worked since it was much like home. She'd easily collected a wood plate and scooted down the line.

Ephiny yanked a plate from the stack and trudged behind the stranger.

Finally the pair had their meals and went to an empty table. Janice was on one side while Ephiny sat across from her. Ephiny quietly ate but she noted how Janice started out by inspecting her food curiously.

"Got any pepper?" complained the small woman.

The Amazon started at Janice like she was stupid.

Janice couldn't help her laugh now because the look wasn't very becoming of Ephiny. She shook her head with a few more laughs and poking her food with her fork.

After a little bit, Ephiny sensed somebody coming up to her side and she gazed up with her neck bent around.

"Hey, Ephiny." Solari smiled at her friend then her eyes trailed over to the stranger. "I see she's up and moving."

"And annoying too," complained the frustrated Amazon.

"It's not polite to speak about somebody in third person when they're here," butted in Janice.

Solari greeted Janice with her best smile. "Hi." She stepped around and held out her arm. "I'm Solari."

Janice prepared to clasp the new Amazon's hand but instead ended up with her whole forearm. She was momentarily shocked but recovered quickly by shaking arms. "I'm Janice... Janice Covington."

"Ooo are you Roman?" At seeing the small woman's perplexed look Solari explained, "Romans have two names typically."

The archeologist grinned as her arm was released but she remained twisted around and head back. "No, I'm a cold blooded American." She knew Solari would have no clue what that meant but that was okay. At least she was being honest.

Solari's lips puckered as she tried to understand. "I see." She glanced at Ephiny for help but received none. "Is that east or west of Greece?"

Janice tried to remain very serious. "Very west of here."

"Oh." Solari pretty well knew the kingdoms west of Greece and Rome but America did not ring any bells for her. She cleared her throat as she felt uneasy.

"Solari," interrupted Ephiny, "Janice here says she's from the future."

Solari's eyes widened at Ephiny then she too stared at Janice like she was Medusa.

"What the Hell is with that look today!" complained the agitated stranger.

Solari chuckled at the woman then said, "So you're from the future huh?"

"Sure am, sweetheart." Janice brought out her best, winning smile.

Solari's lips curled into a grin. "Well this I have to hear so don't move. I'll need a few drinks for this." She laughed and dashed off to the food line.

Janice turned in her seat and saw Ephiny shaking her head uncontrollably. "What? You don't like losing out on the attention from your friend?"

Ephiny snorted and shot a glare. "Hardly." She then felt some of her tension dissolve when Solari took a seat by her.

Solari wiggled into her seat and got comfortable. She brushed back her brown hair and took a healthy drink of her diluted wine first. "Okay, so fill me in." She heard the unnecessary sigh from her friend but she ignored it like Janice. She carefully listened to Janice weave an amazing and unbelievable tale about how she arrived here in their borders.

When Janice finished her story, she felt relieved to get it out. Each time she went over the story, she seemed to get a clearer idea of what was happening but she still didn't have her questions for the answers.

"So you research history in your time?" Solari played with her mug. "That's what an archeologist does?"

"Yes," replied the archeologist in question. "My specialty is Ancient Greece... or other words this time right now."

Solari chuckled but gave a devilish grin. "Really? Okay... let's see." She narrowed her eyes playfully at the small woman. "What you know about the Amazons?"

Ephiny smirked at Janice. "Yeah, what do you know?"

Janice licked her lips and puckered them out as if she really had to think this out. "Well... the Amazons first started in Pontus near the shore of the Euxine Sea by Queen Hippolyta, who's name actually means 'she let's her horses lose'. They also spread out to other areas such as Smyrna, Sinope, Paphos, and particularly Ephesus. In Ephesus the Amazon Nation built the beautiful, amazing Temple of Artemis, which actually no longer exists in my time."

Solari stared in awe at the archeologist. "Wow," she breathed.

Ephiny huffed. "Alright... who's Antiope?"

Janice's hungry smile showed she loved this challenge. "They say she's the daughter of Ares but her sister was Hippolyta and Melanippe. She married Theseus the King of Athens at the time. Then she died by the hands of Molpadia when she was seriously injured during the Attic War." She paused then whispered, "She didn't want to return to Theseus after just siding with the Amazons again."

Solari was speechless.

Ephiny was irritated. "Alright then who is Otrera?"

The archeologist grew smug. "Everybody knows Otrera... not only is she the mother of Hippolyta, Antiope and a few others but she's the mother of the Amazon Nation some say. She really started the first Amazon Nation before her daughters then later the founder of the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus."

Solari chuckled and elbowed her friend. "She's got you, Ephiny. Give it up."

The Amazon grumbled but decided to let it go. She would make sure to get even with this impertinent woman later on that'd been playing her all along.

Janice pushed her empty plate aside then asked, "I will admit though despite I think I know a lot about Greek history I had no clue about the Conqueror."

Solari was bent forward over her mug of wine. Her eyebrows were tied together. "What do you mean?"

The archeologist sighed folded her arms on the table so she could lean against them. "You see, in my time nobody knows anything about Xena and she's my main interest. I'm trying to discover proof that she's real."

"Ooo she's real alright," hotly complained Ephiny.

"I know that," started Janice, "but the thing is what information I do have on her, she was never a ruler." She stopped in consideration of things then it struck her. "Actually what's really strange is the fact there is no record or knowledge of her being a ruler. There would have been something left behind of her legacy with that sort of power."

"Yes, a legacy of death." Ephiny sadly sighed and glanced at her quiet friend.

Solari had a sad expression too. "The Conqueror is very powerful," she informed Janice. "She rules Greece, Rome, Gaul, Britannia, and is in control of Egypt as well as Chin."

Janice ran the name Chin through her mind and realized that she meant China. "So the Conqueror isn't the ruler of Egypt?" This could help her if she knew who the ruler of Egypt was currently.

"She controls Egypt indirectly," explained Solari. "The ruler there is Cleopatra."

Janice's eyes widened in realization. "Shit... that puts the date somewhere before 30 B.C."

Ephiny had a curious look as she tried to decipher what Janice meant.

Solari though added, "Cleopatra sided with the Conqueror when Julius Caesar and Mark Antony began civil war in Rome. They tried to court her for her navy."

Ephiny smirked then chimed in, "It seems though that the Conqueror courted her better."

Solari rolled her eyes but agreed with her friend. "Supposedly."

The archeologist was carefully listening to every piece as she tried to glue them together. She could only wonder what this would lead up to. What still wasn't making any sense was how her scrolls and records of Xena depicted her has a warlord turned hero. Never did the scrolls say she was a ruler and especially of Europe including

England. If that were true then there would surely be records left behind of her existence as such and not this meager trail that Janice had been following. Besides that when Janice met Xena, well in Melinda's body, she didn't exactly seem like the ruler type. Janice knew she was missing a piece and probably a big one.

"So who's this Alti person anyway?" asked Janice. She hadn't heard much about her kidnapper yet and still needed to know. All she had was that Alti was a shaman that knew Xena somehow.

"Alti?" repeated Solari, her tone was cold. "She's Hade's spawn... even worse."

"You said she's a shaman?" Janice's question went to Ephiny.

The Amazon slowly nodded.

Solari cut in by explaining, "She's also an ex-Amazon." She took a nice gulp her wine then continued talking. "She was actually in Queen Cyane's Nation many, many moons back."

Ephiny propped an elbow on the table to rest her face in her hand and she listened to her friend tell the tale of Alti, Queen Cyane, and the Conqueror.

Janice was also quite entranced as carefully listened to every detail.

"This was back when there was more than one Nation... like you said when the Amazons were further east in Smyrna, Sinope, and Ephesus was the capital." Solari sighed while shaking her head at memories of the good days.

"What happened?" queried Janice.

"Well it started when this warlord came from Chin to Queen Cyane's Nation in Macedonia."

"Xena you mean."

Solari nodded at Janice. "Yes, the warlord was Xena. She befriended Queen Cyane and the Amazons but became close to Alti." She noted how Janice's face took on realization. "Alti was a weak shaman at the time but she saw the dark potential that Xena harbored so she took it. Alti promised Xena she would rule the known-world and in return Alti would stay by her side and receive all the power she needed."

"What is her power?"

Ephiny for once spoke up. "A dark shaman, like Alti, feeds off of hatred and fear by taking both light and dark souls. When somebody is killed she'll drink their blood then controls their very soul for how ever long she decides."

"Which is always forever," added Solari. "At the time Queen Cyane didn't trust Xena or Alti. She became suspicious about their growing relationship and just before she was going to ban Xena from the Nation she attacked her and several other Amazons."

Janice absorbed the long winded information thrown at her. "I see that Cyane survived."

"Barely," retorted Ephiny.

"It's still talked about to this day." Solari fiddled with her mug, her eyes peering into the empty container. "They still talk about how Xena was dishonorable and attacked the Amazons. She betrayed them... us." Her eyes lifted to Janice. "She left Queen Cyane to die... hanging on a thick tree limb through her stomach."

The archeologist flinched because even she couldn't imagine. Now she understood why the Amazon Queen had those scars on her stomach and backside.

"Alti did manage to steal Cyane's blood as she hung from the tree." Solari shook her head. "To this day, the queen believes her soul will not be hers when she dies."

Janice's emotions came to life when she heard this. She was beginning to admire this queen.

"Needless to say, Alti and Xena escaped back to Xena's waiting army. Together the pair marched over Greece. Alti grew in spiritual power while Xena grew in feared power." Solari broke from her story and gazed at her best friend beside her. She looked back at Janice. "The only reason we're still here is because of Queen Cyane. The Conqueror drove us from Ephesus, through Macedonia, southeast into Epirus and now here into Thessaly. And it was Queen Cyane that kept us together and kept us safe through everything. Now... we're a stones throw from Corinth just so the Conqueror can sit there and watch us."

"Why doesn't she send an army to destroy the Nation?" urged Janice.

Ephiny straightened up now. "Because she enjoys watching us dwindle into nothing. Her favorite thing is a slow death... in many forms."

"It won't happen though," challenged Solari, "not with Queen Cyane. She's the driving force behind the Nation." She looked at Ephiny then said, "If she can survive the Conqueror then so can the Nation."

Ephiny nodded her head in agreement.

Janice released a deep breath she'd been holding. She was absolutely fascinated by the events despite she was also bewildered. "So the capitol is in Corinth then? Not Athens?"

"Athens is gone," reported Ephiny. "The Conqueror leveled it a long time ago."

The archeologist was mystified. "Why?"

"Some say it was because she hated the arts and the Academy of Performing Bards was located there. She believed if the people were cultured then they could rise up against her. She prefers her people to be dumb and fearful."

Janice stared at Solari then asked, "What's the other reason?"

"She just liked the view better in Corinth than in Athens," answered Ephiny.

Janice thought it was a joke but she could tell it really wasn't at all. She huffed out and straightened up from leaning against the table.

"Trust me, if that's all you hear about the Conqueror... you'd be so lucky." Solari swiped at her empty mug. "I need to get onto patrol duty." She turned to Ephiny. "I'll see you later." She offered a smile now to Janice. "It was nice to meet you Janice... Covington."

The archeologist mirrored back the smile. "You too, Solari."

Ephiny waited for her friend to get out of earshot then she chided, "How's that for a history lesson?" She didn't wait for a response and got up with her plate.

The archeologist frowned at Ephiny's question. It certainly wasn't history that sat well in her stomach on top of her food. None of it made sense but she knew it would eventually. She gathered her plate and utensils then followed her keeper. "So where to next?"

Ephiny stood by the table where the dirty plates and dishes get dropped off. "How do you feel?"

The archeologist wait a second then finally answered, "Pretty good."

"We'll do a tour then." The Amazon directed the stranger to follow her and into the sunny day.

"What season is it?" Janice was gazing off to the sun and determined it must be about the middle afternoon or so.

"It is a moon before the Fall Equinox."

Janice's mind quickly worked out the time and figured it must be roughly August 22, 30 B.C. but give or take a few years along with days. Hmmm wonder if it's Friday, thought Janice, 'cause a stiff drink would be perfect.

"I will show you the sparring fields first." The Amazon took off in that direction.

"Sparring fields?" muttered Janice. She wasn't about to pass this up or any of the tour. She just wished she had a paper, pen and a camera with plenty of film. This was a chance not even in a lifetime but her memory would have to do her. She was thanking god that she had a perfect memory and an eye for detail. For Janice, she was a kid not just in a candy jar but in a candy factory.

Ephiny came to an abrupt stop and held her hand out. "These are the sparring fields." Her hand fell to her side.

The archeologist stepped up and focused on the scene of many leather clad women with swords that were sparring. Off in the distance were also women practicing their aim as archers. She stood rooted and memorizing the scene. It was breathtaking and overwhelming.

Ephiny folded her arms across her chest and studied how the stranger was just mesmerized. She'd seen this everyday of her life but she had no idea how this scene would look from new eyes. She gazed out over her sparring sisters and just couldn't make that mental leap.

"Does anybody... train them?"

The Amazon nodded then answered, "Eponin is our weapons master." She turned her head to the small woman. "She also found you."

Janice gave Ephiny a curious look. "How many people found me?"

"Solari, Eponin, and I... we were on patrol duty when we heard you scream."

The archeologist slowly grinned at the Amazon. "So did my scream sound like the same one from Gabrielle?"

Ephiny narrowed her eyes. "Let's continue." She spun around on her boots and stomped off.

Janice ran her tongue along the front of her teeth. She knew she needed to stop aggravating Ephiny but it was just an uncontrollable need for Janice. She hurried up to catch Ephiny and they stopped by a building that was much larger, more beautiful, and very defined compared to anything else in the village. Janice tilted back as her eyes followed to the top of the building. "A temple."

"Very good," tormented Ephiny.

"A temple to Hades?" teased the archeologist.

Once again Ephiny found herself rolling her eyes then ascended the steps of the temple. She held open the door for the stranger.

Janice stood by the open door and smirked at Ephiny. "You're good at being a door holder. You might want to think about changing jobs, Eph." Before she got the hot response she knew she would get she hurried into the temple.

Ephiny stood still, her eyes closed, and calming her irregular breathing. "Artemis, why? What have I done so wrong to deserve this?" She finally went into the temple and was surprised to see Janice just making a circle where she stood.

The archeologist slowly rotated as she stood in the middle of the temple. She was absolutely awed by the beauty as she took in every careful detail. She'd never seen such amazing statues, art pieces, and a table covered by more offerings than she could imagine.

The Amazon stepped around Janice when a small but pronounced woman approached them. She bowed her head in respect.

Janice finally realized there was a newcomer and she grinned.

"It's good to see you, Ephiny."

Ephiny straightened up and offered a smile. "You too, Yakut."

Janice filed the name away with the woman's beautiful, petite face. "I'm Janice... Janice Covington." She held out her hand.

Yakut slowly smiled at the abrasive stranger. "I am Yakut." She took Janice's entire forearm and shook.

When the pair broke the arm contact, Ephiny informed Janice of Yakut's position. "Yakut is the shaman of the village."

Janice stiffened at the news, which wasn't lost on anybody.

"A good shaman at that," clarified Ephiny.

The archeologist curiously studied Ephiny to confirm it then looked back at the shaman. "Sorry. I had a bad run in with Alti."

Yakut was now stiffening up and she quickly gazed at Ephiny. "What has happened?"

"It's okay," assured Ephiny. "We don't know everything but it has something to do with Alti."

The shaman folded her arms. "I will speak to the queen about it then."

"It would be best," agreed Ephiny. She then cleared her throat as she braced to tell Yakut more. "Janice was..." She glanced down at the small women then back at Yakut. "She was kidnapped by Alti from the future and brought here."

The shaman didn't act surprised at all by Ephiny's words. She'd seen many things in her days, especially with being a shaman. "When was this?"

"Four days ago."

Yakut nodded at the Amazon's words. "Well, welcome to the Amazon Nation," she offered to Janice.

The archeologist had a wide grin. "Thanks."

"If you require any guidance, Janice my door is always open." Yakut bowed her head some. "If I am not then surely Priestess Idola will be here."

Janice opened her mouth to ask something but she was too dumbstruck.

Somehow Ephiny picked this up. "We have a shaman and a priestess. Typically Nations only have a priestess but Queen Cyane's Nation only had a shaman while all the others had a priestess."

"So she just kept both then," concluded Janice.

"Yes," agreed Yakut. "Priestess Idola handles the worship of Artemis. I, however, handle anything in the spirit world... especially those Amazons that have passed on. I make sure they make it to the Amazon Lands safely."

Janice's head was just swimming with information. She wasn't sure what to do with it all.

Ephiny could tell the stranger was having a hard time taking everything in at once. She looked to the shaman. "Thank you, Yakut. I believe Janice has seen enough for today."

"Very well." Yakut gently smiled at the stranger. "I am sure I will see you again, Janice. Please rest up." With that, she turned and glided across the stone floor.

"I think you need some rest," suggested Ephiny. For the first time, her voice held a note of concern.

The archeologist touched her forehead with her left hand. She could feel the throbbing starting when she thought she'd rid of her headache earlier. "Maybe so."

The Amazon was surprised there was no argument. "I'll show you to your hut." She guided her charge out of the temple, down the steps, and through the busy village. She finally came upon the hut that Queen Cyane had assigned for Janice whenever she was ready. Ephiny pushed the door open and stepped in to find everything in order.

The archeologist was humbled by the simple surroundings of the room. There was a bed, small desk with chair, a fireplace, and an entrance into another small, dark room. Now she wondered what the bathroom situation was here. She decided she was in no mood to find out right now.

Ephiny stood in the doorway of the hut. "Dinner will not be until sunset. That'll give you plenty of time to rest." When Janice faced her again she continued speaking. "There will be two guards at your hut if you require anything... or me." She caught the devilish grin from Janice, which made Ephiny huff. "I will see you then."

Janice brushed back her loose hair and said, "Thanks, Eph."

The Amazon hesitated in mid stride of walking out and she softly replied, "You're welcome." Then with that, she was gone.

The archeologist went to the bed and stared at it. She could tell the mattress idea was beyond the ancient world but this was far better than the wood pallet. "Well... not like I'm not use to roughing it." She chuckled then went to the desk to sit down. She took several painful minutes to get her boots off, socks, and she decided to just go ahead and remove her shirt. The bandages pretty well covered her upper body and nobody

would care.

Finally Janice found herself in the bed and was quite surprised by how comfortable it was on her. "God... not bad." She snuggled in under the smooth sheets and remained on her back. She preferred being on her stomach but that was out of the question.

Janice remained awake for some time as her mind tried to work out today's events and information. She had no doubt she was in the past and it was in Cleopatra's age. That much was a proven fact and so was her being in Greece. What was beyond her was this whole Xena the Conqueror thing. She slightly shook her head at the idea. It was practically impossible for Xena to be such a powerful ruler then nobody ever know of her in the future. Even when Egypt tried to erase their first queen from history it didn't work.

So far Julius Caesar, Antony, Alexander, the Amazons, and the Attic War were real events and people. Somewhere in the thick of all this there was a break in history and Janice had to find it. She would have to keep probing to find this break to get her answer. She just didn't know why there was a break or what it meant. And even if she did find it then what good would it do if it didn't get her home?

Chapter 2 - Truth be Told

The gruff archeologist slightly jumped in her seat when the healer removed the stitching from her right hand. She was amazed that her hand had healed within two weeks so easily. Once Eilis had the threads out, she flexed her hand into a nice fist and felt satisfied at the lack of pain.

"Hold on," persisted the healer. She stood up and turned to the shelving to her right. She scanned through the jars until she found the one she wanted. As she sat down again, she placed the jar on the table between her and the blond stranger. "I'll put some light salve on it. You won't need the bandage anymore."

Janice only nodded. She watched the old Amazon gently rub the white balm into her skin. Finally it was done and she asked, "Am I free?"

Eilis slowly smiled at the impatient woman. "Yes, but I still want you to stop in a few days from now. I want to make sure everything is healing up just fine."

The archeologist let out a dramatic sigh.

"After that check up, if you're fine, then I won't hassle you anymore," bantered the healer.

Janice's eyes lightened and she smiled. "Thanks." She quickly stood up, grabbed her fedora off the corner of the table, and strolled out of the healer's hut. When she stepped out, she found Ephiny waiting for her below. "Miss me?"

Ephiny smirked. "Endlessly, Jan."

The archeologist sighed again as she loudly came down the wood steps. She really hated Ephiny's nickname for her. In recent days the Amazon had come up with the nickname, Jan, which just set Janice off every time without failure. She figured though that it was only fair so Janice vigorously worked up new ways to aggravate Ephiny. Yet it wasn't so much fun when Ephiny quickly caught up. Now it was becoming a game between the pair.

"We need to go to the queen's office hut."

Janice perked up at this news. She adjusted her hat some on her head. She was relieved to get it a few days after she woke up. She also received her jacket back but didn't wear it as it was too hot. "So what's up, Eph?"

The Amazon shifted closer and quietly replied, "I believe the queen wishes to string you up by your boot laces."

The archeologist gave a dower look. "Funny."

"I'm not sure," confessed the Amazon. "We should go... the queen doesn't like dawdlers."

Janice rolled her eyes. "Let's not linger then." She started off on the journey across the village.

Ephiny grunted and strolled along side her charge. She noted the quietness of Janice, which was unusual as she was anything like that. She could tell there was something on the archeologist's mind by the way Janice's brow was tightly creased, her eyes unfocused, and lips sealed firmly. "Dinar for your thoughts?"

Janice blinked out of her reverie and realized what Ephiny had asked. "I just..." She shook her head then fell silent.

The Amazon twisted with concern for the first time. She stopped and grabbed the smaller woman's shoulder. "What?"

The archeologist turned to the Amazon; her expression written with surprise about Ephiny's concern. "I'm just starting... starting to think I won't make it home."

Ephiny picked out the quiver in the usually stoic woman's voice. She was amazed. "Listen don't give up on getting home, Janice. Really." She stepped closer, grabbed the woman's shoulders, and dipped her head to lock her gaze on soft green eyes. "The only reason the queen has kept you here is because she wants to make sure you're well. I think she wants to discuss with you what your plans are now that you're well."

The archeologist shook her head then lowered it so that her brim hid her face. "The only way home is with that scepter." She finally lifted her head to meet Ephiny. "Not only do I have to get through Alti but the Conqueror too."

Ephiny sighed because she knew how the odds looked. "If it was me," she confessed, "I would go for it. What is here to stop you?"

Janice tilted her head to one side. "Very true."

"Come on." The Amazon released her charge and guided her through the village.

Finally they arrived at the queen's office hut and Ephiny rapped on the door. When they were called in, she let Janice in first then she followed suit. Queen Cyane signaled the chairs in front of her desk and asked them to sit.

"I have heard from Eilis that you're almost healed," stated the queen first.

Janice nodded.

"And I've heard you've done much research about the Amazon Nation and our history," added the queen.

"I have... its rather fascinating." Janice folded her hands in her lap. "I've found a higher appreciation for the Amazons."

"I am glad to hear this." Queen Cyane now leaned back in her chair to get comfortable. "Have you put any thought into your plans now?"

The archeologist remained silent for a second or two then finally said, "I need to go home." Her eyes were down to her lap but she looked up now. "I don't belong here."

Cyane read the determination in the stranger. She knew there was no way she could stop Janice nor would she try. "And do you have a plan?"

Janice licked her lips. "I just plan to storm the castle with guns blazing." Well make that gun blazing, mentally corrected Janice, if she could get her gun back.

Ephiny inwardly sighed at the smartass remark.

"Well that sounds like a... stupid plan," stated the queen.

"Thank you," murmured Ephiny.

The archeologist sharply looked at Ephiny and reacted by smacking her just as fast.

The Amazon ignored Janice though and turned to the queen. "Perhaps what Janice requires are a few sword lessons before she does any... storming."

Queen Cyane eyed her Amazon then she leaned forward against her desk. "Do you plan to teacher her, Ephiny?"

Ephiny just could not understand how she kept getting into this position with Janice.

"Yeah, Eph... how about it?"

Ephiny's amber eyes dimmed at the small woman. Then an idea occurred to her and she quickly looked back to the queen. "If I can have Master Eponin's help."

"As long as she agrees," conceded the queen. "Otherwise you can train your charge alone."

"What if this charge doesn't want to be trained?" interjected the stranger.

"And what godsbedamned weapon have you mastered, Plato?"

Janice bared her teeth at Ephiny. "Give me my goddamn gun and I'll show you... personally."

"Is that a threat?" retaliated the Amazon, who was leaning over her seat towards Janice.

"That's a goddamn promise, featherhead," spat the tempered archeologist.

"Enough!" growled the queen. She sighed because she seriously felt like a parent separating kids.

Ephiny held her ground against the brass archeologist but she snorted and turned away.

Janice adjusted her hat in a typical habit. She grunted at her keeper's loose tongue but she focused back on the queen.

"You said a... gun?" inquired the queen.

The archeologist instantly cursed every dirty word known to past and present. She slumped in her chair. "Yes, my gun."

"What is a gun?" Cyane was nervous about this but she had an idea of what Janice was referring to earlier. "Was it the metal thing we found on you?"

Janice tried to control her apprehension because she needed to be careful here. "Yes, that thing is a gun... or a revolver." She hesitated but quietly added, "It's a weapon."

"It doesn't seem like much," chided Ephiny. "What you do with it? Shove it up your-"

"Ephiny," interjected the queen, "I've really had enough." She was amazed by her Amazon's constant hostility towards Janice. She would have thought after half a moon's cycle that the pair would have gotten along. "Janice, what does this gun do?"

The archeologist had her hands laced together in her lap now; her own grip was strong. "Well... the best way I can explain it is that acts like a bow and arrow or... a blow dart." She held her breath while her mind worked it out. "I put these... projectiles in it called bullets. When I pull the trigger, it shoots off the bullet to wherever I aimed."

The queen was extremely interested now. "These... bullets can't be very big."

The stranger held up her right hand and demonstrated the height with her thumb and index finger. "They're about that large but the damage can be... fatal."

"Can you really kill somebody with it?"

Janice turned her head to Ephiny and whispered, "Easily."

The Amazon held her tongue, her gaze returning to the musing queen.

Cyane wasn't concerned about the weapon right now since it was safely tucked away. She was more concerned with Janice possessing it, especially when Janice first arrived but now she debated.

Ephiny could tell an internal battle was going on within the queen. She had her inclinations on what it was so she spoke up. "I believe Janice will be safe with it, my queen."

The queen was shocked by her Amazon's words. She didn't expect Ephiny to speak on Janice's behalf when they'd been clearly arguing earlier. "Do you trust her, Ephiny?"

Janice held her breath.

Ephiny considered Janice for a few heartbeats then stated to the queen. "Completely."

Cyane truly honored Ephiny's opinions and she nodded while sitting back in her chair. "Very well, Ephiny. You know where it is located... see that you return it to her." After a deep breath, she stated, "Now that the gun is settled, what are your plans, Janice?"

The stranger grabbed her hat and pulled it off her head. She settled it into her lap. "I do need to return to my time... I can't be here. I know the only way I can do that is to get that scepter." She stopped while chewing on the side of her mouth for a moment. "My gun only has so many bullets so it can only help me for so long. Ephiny is right... I need to learn a weapon."

"I believe that is a wise choice," agreed the queen. "By then, perhaps you'll have worked out a solid plan."

The archeologist bowed her head in agreement. "Hopefully."

"Is there anything else, my queen?"

Cyane ran things through her head then shook her head at Ephiny. "I believe that is it... for now." Her next words were directed at Janice. "I will know how your progress goes. When you are ready then find me."

Janice leaned forward some and she picked up her hat to let it rest on her right knee now. "I take it then you believe I am from the future?"

"I believe you're not from here, yes." The Amazon Queen laced her hands on the edge

of her desk. "Let that be from the future or some other... reality but I am not too concerned."

"What of Aliti?"

Cyane hardened at the name.

"Aren't you even worried about why she was in your borders?" challenged Janice.

Ephiny tensed at this line of questioning.

Finally the queen spoke her thoughts about the topic. "As long as Alti hasn't harmed my Nation then I am only leery. I believe she is more concerned with your movements than the Amazon Nation's."

"Perhaps," murmured Janice but she thought otherwise.

"I believe that is everything," stated the queen, who had grown aggravated by Janice's latter attitude. "See that you continue to help her, Ephiny."

"Of course, my queen." Ephiny bowed her head then she stood up after the queen's consent. She signaled for her charge to get up too and take leave.

The archeologist was grounding her teeth but doing everything to stay quiet. She got out of the hut first and didn't wait for Ephiny as she trudged off.

"Janice!" called the Amazon however she received no response. Ephiny said goodbye to the queen then hurried after the stranger.

Janice threw on her hat then came to an abrupt stop by a hand on her shoulder.

"I said stop," hotly ordered the Amazon.

The archeologist turned sharply on the Amazon. "And you need to fuckin' back off." She jerked her shoulder free and walked off.

Ephiny's anger went up another step. She rushed ahead and stepped in front of the angry archeologist. "I don't think so." She pointed her finger at the small woman. "I just backed your smartass up in there to get that gun of yours back. Do not make me regret helping you because I have no problem getting you exiled from the Nation." She stepped closer and brought her face into Janice's. "Then you can go gun blazing into the Conqueror's, alone, and kill yourself."

Janice dropped her head and stared at the ground and her boots. She closed her eyes so that she could separate from Ephiny for a second and calm her overactive temper. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

The Amazon had her hands on her hips but at Janice's apology she relaxed and straightened up again. "That's a start."

Janice detected the lightheartedness of Ephiny's tone now. She dropped her head back

again so she could see Ephiny. "I just... I don't understand how she can just ignore Alti like that."

"She's not," argued Ephiny, "but she knows there's not much she can do."

"What?" The archeologist was in disbelief. "Some wild shaman comes into her Nation and she's going to fucking ignore it!"

Ephiny suddenly realized nearby Amazons stopped after Janice's explosion. She quickly grabbed Janice's closest wrist and hauled her away into a quiet spot about a thousand paces away from all the activity. "Listen to me really good, Janice and shut up for once." She pointed her finger again at the small woman. "Queen Cyane is very much a goddess to these Amazons... including me. The only reason this Nation is here is because of her persistence and intelligence to keep us together and away from harm." She lowered her hand to her side. "Sometimes reacting to every incident isn't the best."

"Then maybe she should act instead," grounded out Janice.

Ephiny licked her dry lips then softly said, "You can't understand, Janice what she's been through... the Amazons. There is more to this than good versus evil."

"What else could there be?" challenged the archeologist.

"Lives... lots of them." Ephiny remained quiet now to let her charge absorb her last words.

Janice gave into Ephiny's reasoning because it was true. World War II was certainly a testament to all the lives being lost needlessly to one man's twisted visions.

Ephiny sensed the shift in the small woman, which calmed her even more. She softly offered, "Let's go get your gun."

The archeologist mutely agreed and trailed along side the Amazon back into the village and towards the sparring fields.

The pair made it near the sparring fields but Ephiny took Janice into a hut on the edge of the fields where they were greeted by the weapons master.

Eponin stood up from her desk and smiled at her friend. "What brings you here?"

Ephiny rested her hands on her hips while saying, "The queen has authorized Janice to have her gun back."

"Gun?"

Janice had a faint smirk. "That metal thing."

It dawned on Eponin. "The queen authorized it?" She had to double-check even though she trusted Ephiny fully.

"Yes, its fine, Eponin."

The weapons master nodded then said, "Follow me." As they followed her, she heard Ephiny talking behind her about something else.

"Janice also needs a weapon to begin practice with."

Eponin's eyebrow furrowed at this news. "Who is to teach her?"

"You," quickly answered Janice.

Ephiny groaned but explained, "I am actually but I'd like your help... so would Janice."

The archeologist directed a grin at the weapons master. "I definitely would."

Eponin grunted at the pair. "I will help as much as I can." She approached a hut and pushed the door open for them.

Once Janice entered, she was amazed by all the weaponry and armor all over the place. She'd never seen such an armory like this.

"Wait here," ordered Eponin, who vanished into a side room.

"You keep a lot of stock," noted Janice aloud.

Ephiny grinned at the remark. "You can never be too prepared."

"I'll say." Janice approached a freestanding unit of staffs. She trailed her fingertips along each one of them. She'd read in one of the few Xena Scrolls that her ancestor used such a weapon. She knew it was more of a defensive weapon but it could be quite dangerous too.

"You like the quarterstaff?" Ephiny came to Janice's side, her eyes questioning.

Janice pulled her hand away then slowly shook her head. "My ancestor, Gabrielle, she favored... favors the staff."

The Amazon folded her arms over her chest. "Not the Gabrielle I saw... she only had her words."

The archeologist chuckled then her twinkling eyes lifted to Ephiny from under the brim. "That's a weapon too."

"I'm noticing," chided the Amazon.

Eponin appeared with the gun in her right hand then a small leather pouch and gun holster in her left. "Here is the... gun." She held out the weapon.

Janice felt a charge surge through her right hand as her fingers curled around the handle. When the steel weapon was in her possession again, she felt relieved. "What's

this?" She pointed at the leather satchel.

The weapons master opened the pouch and retrieved one of the contents. "These metal things too."

Janice grinned and plucked the bullet from the Amazon's fingers. "Great. I was wondering where the extra bullets went from my jacket." She first took the holster from Eponin and efficiently hooked it back around her waist again.

Ephiny leaned back some, her arms still on her chest, and her attention fully on the stranger.

Janice next took the pouch and poured the handful of bullets into her hand. She shoved them into her left pocket then handed the pouch back. Finally with great enjoyment, Janice flipped open the chamber like a missed habit. She picked a few bullets from her pocket and carefully inserted them one by one into the chamber.

The weapons master was intently watching and wondering what such a small weapon could do. She figured it couldn't be anymore dangerous than a dagger but then again daggers could be fatal if used properly.

Ephiny slightly jumped when the archeologist slammed the chamber shut and gave it a rough spin.

Janice smirked up at Ephiny. "Want me to keep my promise, Eph?" Her gun held up next to the side of her face, her eyes wild.

Eponin didn't like this, her right hand lifting some.

Ephiny waved her off but she leaned into Janice then pressed the side of the barrel against Janice's head. "When you learn a real weapon then yes."

Janice hummed at that, her grin larger than earlier. She lowered the revolver and rammed it into her holster. "It's easy being scared, Eph."

"Well then you better start learning, Jan," chide the Amazon.

Janice's narrowed her eyes at Ephiny but she finally laughed. "You're on." She held out her arm for the challenge.

Ephiny quickly clasped her arm and shook, her eyes bright with excitement and promise.

Eponin was confused but she rolled her eyes at the two. She headed back to the same room again but called out, "Ephiny, help her figure out a weapon."

The Amazon and archeologist broke arms then Ephiny directed her charge through the armory to help her select a weapon.

"How about the sword?" Janice stopped in front of a rack of swords.

"How about that quarterstaff?" taunted Ephiny.

The archeologist pretended to be deaf in that moment as she touched a sword in front of her. The shiniest of the weapon captured her full attention. "A sword."

The Amazon sighed but she freed the one that Janice was so inclined to have in her hands. She stepped back a few paces then gave a demonstration of the weapon.

Janice was dazed while watching the beautiful dance before her. She released her breath when Ephiny finished. "The sword... definitely."

The Amazon chuckled then with a flick of her wrist she spun the sword and held it out to Janice. Her eyes shifted to the weapons master behind Janice and saw the approval nod.

Ephiny quickly retracted the sword, flipped it, and held out the handle to Janice.

The archeologist wrapped her fingers around the solid hilt then lifted it from Ephiny's hands. She was amazed by the weight compared to her meager revolver. She held the sword before her eyes and memorized every detail of the blade until it finally reflected her own image.

Ephiny dropped her head some to the right. She was interested in the stranger's enchantment by the sword. To her, it was merely cold metal and a sharp edge but to Janice it was what much of history was ridden on.

"Janice?" Eponin's voice broke the spell.

The archeologist lowered the weapon to her side and faced the Amazon behind her.

"I believe these are yours too." Eponin held out her right hand.

"Holy shit," exclaimed the excited woman. She grabbed up the six cigars from Eponin along with the lighter. Now life was getting a little bit back on track, concluded Janice.

"What are those?" inquired Ephiny, who stepped up to her charge.

"Cigars," explained Janice, "You smoke them."

The Amazon had her mouth open but she didn't know what to say. She shook her head with her curly locks moving in motion. "Whatever you say, Jan."

The archeologist smirked at her keeper and held up a cigar in salute. "Life looks clearer in smoke." She laughed then tucked her prized property away in her back pocket. "So, when do we start sword lessons?" She tried to mimic Ephiny's wrist swing of the sword but nearly sliced herself while doing it.

Eponin groaned loudly from behind the archeologist.

Ephiny bent forward laughing.

The following days suddenly became very long for the archeologist as she spent the better part of each day with Ephiny and sometimes Eponin. She was being well trained by the two Amazons and on rare occasions Solari would show up to test Janice.

Ephiny found herself rather surprised by Janice's fast progress with the sword. She also became highly amused when the gruff archeologist figured out that her clothing attire was not suitable at all for weapons training. The first day of training broke Janice into an extra healthy sweat and demonstrated just how out of shape she was. That day, Ephiny was relentless about her teasing especially since Janice wasn't so fast on the uptake from being exhausted.

By the second day, in the early morning Janice gave in and returned to the armory with Ephiny at her side. She was hotly grumbling under her breath all the way to the armory hut.

Ephiny loved it, the biggest grin chiseled across her face. She smacked Janice's backside roughly when Janice entered the armory hut.

The archeologist pointed a finger at the Amazon in warning. "Don't even start." She stomped into the hut.

Ephiny strolled in then directed her charge into a side room. "These are all our Amazon leathers."

Janice stood in the center of the room, her hands on her hips, and she stared at the table of endless leathers. "So do any of these have... pants?"

Ephiny couldn't help it, she started to laugh and tried to cover her mouth but it failed to stop her laughter.

Janice growled at her keeper then she stepped up to the table. She started sifting through them and not finding a thing she liked. This just wasn't what she expected at all yet she needed something suitable for all this training.

The Amazon settled down after awhile and she stepped up beside Janice. "How about these?" She held up a very short skirt that she already knew would be rejected.

"I don't think so, Eph." Janice walked away and started around the large table.

Ephiny dropped the leathers onto the stack. She tried to be serious now and hunted through the leathers. "You probably want something plain, huh?"

"What you trying to say?" The archeologist paused, her dangerous glint in her eyes.

The Amazon bit her lower lip and never replied back. She finally came upon something promising and picked up the matching set. "How about this?"

Janice lifted her head and took in the set of leathers.

The skirt wasn't long nor too short but it was a dark brown with little leather tassels along the belt. Then the top, to Janice, was simply a fancy leather bra that also had matching leather tassels on the bottom. The straps were braided leather and the cups of the top had fine but noticeable stitching.

"Well that's not very revealing," snort Janice.

Ephiny's shoulders slumped. "You're not going to find anything in here that isn't."

"I'm starting to figure this out," complained Janice. She came around the table and took the articles from Ephiny.

The Amazon could tell Janice was uneasy about this so she tried to make light of it. "You don't have anything we haven't seen."

The stranger glowered up at her keeper.

"Plus your stomach is pretty well healed from the burns," reminded Ephiny. She shrugged and pointed at the sheathed sword in Janice's left hand. "Plus we can get that sword out of your hand so you don't have to carry it." She gently touched Janice with her freehand. "Just try it."

The archeologist gave in with a curse. "What the hell." She handed Ephiny her sword then she took the leathers.

"There's a changing room over there." Ephiny pointed. She watched as Janice disappeared into it, which gave her some time to search out a better sheath for the Amazon sword. By the time she returned to the leathers room, Janice was padding out in bare feet and in a new outfit. Ephiny tensed up as she absorbed the new look.

Janice held out her arms, her head down, and looking her body over. She lifted her head while shaking it. "There's no way in hell."

"Wait, wait." Ephiny tossed the sword with new sheath onto the stack of leathers. She came over then pretended to fuss over the outfit, straightening things out. "You're just missing something... wait." Ephiny turned on her heels and went to the small table nearby where there was an assortment of jewelry.

Janice studied the beautiful piece that Ephiny selected when she came back. At first she was confused with what the silver bracelet was but she understood quickly when Ephiny slipped it through her right hand and up her arm.

Janice slightly cringed against the chill of the metal. She considered the linked, silver feathers that made an arm bracelet.

"You need some new boots too." The Amazon hurried off to a corner of the room.

"I can't keep my damn gun with me with this outfit," complained the stranger.

Ephiny was bent over, her hand grazing over the tops of boots, and she came to a stop at Janice's words. She grinned before snatching up a pair of the perfect boots. She

came back over and ordered, "Put them on."

The grumbling archeologist shoved her bare feet into them, bent over, and laced them up. "What are these... side laces for?"

The Amazon smirked. "Your gun."

Janice paused in between lacing the boots. "Really?" She finished her task and straightened up. "Let me try." She wondered back into the changing room where she left her gun in its holster. If she could make a few modifications with her holster then this might work. She easily pulled the holster free from the belt then bent down and first she removed her revolver. Next she toyed with lacing the holster to the right side of her boot through the straps of the holster. She finally had it tied snugly to her right leg then she finally inserted the gun and hooked it into place. "Not bad," she muttered.

Ephiny slowly grinned as Janice exited the changing room. She was by the doorway and holding the sword in its new sheath. "Here." She lifted the sword up as the strap fell loose.

Janice ducked her head when the strap came over her, across her chest, and the new weight was on her back.

The Amazon quickly peddled backwards and took in the finished look.

The archeologist rested her hands on her hips, waiting judgment. "I look stupid don't I?"

Ephiny bit her lip but she couldn't help it. "Not anymore, Jan."

Janice growled, her features went dark.

"Just untie your hair though." Ephiny waved at her to do it.

The strange let out a huge sigh but she did it anyway. She put the black hair tie on her right wrist then quickly arranged her hair to feel comfortable.

The Amazon's head was bobbing. "Ooo yeah."

"What?" snapped Janice.

"You're lookin' good."

The archeologist rolled her eyes then went into the changing room.

Ephiny's excited expression dropped as she hurried to the changing room. "You're not-"

"No," snapped the archeologist. "I'm too hot in my goddamn pants and shirt. I'm stuck lookin' stupid in these... leathers."

The Amazon jumped aside when the small woman charged out. "Hey." She caught

Janice by the wrist. "You look great, I'm not teasing."

Janice hesitated and her temper deflated. "Thanks... thanks for the help."

Ephiny now smiled some but it grew when Janice couldn't contain her smile. "Alright, let's take your stuff back to your hut then we'll start training again."

True to Ephiny's word, the pair returned to the sparring fields and continued training for the day. Janice was amazed at the difference she felt just by changing outfits. She wasn't as hot and she didn't feel as slow. It seemed to make all the difference in the world and even Ephiny noticed it too.

The weapons master arrived a couple of candelmarks later and stood on the edge of the field. She carefully watched her friend train the stranger. She knew they were starting with defensive training as Ephiny already went over the proper stances and mechanics yesterday.

Eponin turned her head to Solari, who quietly appeared.

"Is that Ephiny training Janice?" Solari was amazed.

"Yup."

Solari crossed her arms over her chest. "Is Janice wearing Amazon leathers?"

"Yup."

"Does the queen know?"

"Yup."

"You don't like this, do you?"

Eponin grunted at Solari. "Nope." She walked off towards Ephiny and Janice.

Solari brushed back a loose strand of brown hair. "Great."

The proceeding days saw Janice in a lot of rigorous, nonstop training. Janice calculated it'd been three weeks since she's shown up in the Amazon Nation. She was well healed, well fed, and almost trained with a sword. She was feeling more confident each day to take on the challenge of returning home. Ephiny could tell though that Janice was struggling with some plan to how to accomplish this. Even Ephiny knew it wouldn't be so easy or simple and very dangerous. She'd never met Alti or the Conqueror but had certainly seen them from a distance and her skin crawled every time.

It was the twenty-second day and almost the full eighth day of sword training. Janice was on the sparring field engaging Eponin quite well.

The weapons master spotted Ephiny not far from the sidelines. She jumped back as Janice's sword connected against hers. "Stop."

Janice withdrew and lowered her sword.

Ephiny quickly hurried up to the pair, her eyes centered on Janice though. "I believe you're ready."

The archeologist opened her mouth to ask about what but hesitated.

Eponin left the pair.

Ephiny unsheathed her sword and faced her opponent. "To keep your promise."

Janice now understood the implications so she spun her sword very gracefully compared her first time ever trying. "Just tell me when you give up, featherhead."

The Amazon laughed and pointed the tip of her sword at Janice. "Only after you surrender... Janny."

That did it for the archeologist; she went blazing in with her sword and blindly swiping at Ephiny.

Ephiny easily parried each uncalculated attack. When she found her opening, she attacked Janice quickly.

The archeologist was caught off guard so she ended up stumbling back. She shook off her earlier temper knowing it just made up for her misjudgments. She hastily reformulated a plan in her head while she busied Ephiny.

The Amazon jumped back when the sword tip almost hit her stomach. Her wild amber eyes met Janice.

Janice smirked at having almost caught Ephiny. "I'm not that easy, Eph."

"We'll see," challenged the Amazon. She gave a battlecry and took a swipe at Janice's feet.

The archeologist lowered her sword, her blade connected with Ephiny's, and she tried something new by kicking at Ephiny.

The Amazon hadn't expected and the boot smashed into her chest. She went stumbling back and coughing to get the air back in her lungs. "Hera's tits."

"What's the matter, Eph? You can't keep up?" Janice laughed evilly then signaled for Ephiny to attack her.

The Amazon took the invite with an upward thrust of her sword at her opponent. She brought her sword and body tightly against Janice, her face in Janice's. "Not bad, Jan. You're improving after all."

The archeologist had a coy smile. "I've learned faster than you did."

Ephiny laughed then suddenly withdrew her sword and spun around Janice.

The archeologist hadn't expected this but she her senses told her what was coming. She hunched down just as the blade came over her head. She quickly rolled away and bounced up onto her feet with her sword up. "I'll have to remember that move."

"Do that." Ephiny was smirking and waving the tip of her sword at Janice. "Come on."

Janice inhaled deeply then charged her opponent. She listened to her body's movement and her newly trained eye understood Ephiny's every movement by how her muscles flexed and relaxed. She was able to anticipate every move that Ephiny tried and failed.

The battling pair fell into a hypnotic dance of fighting. Their swords clanged rhythmically and their breathing was matched. Ephiny was quite pleased with Janice's accomplishments. She knew Janice wasn't a master with the sword but she certainly could hold her own now. It would only take outside forces and experience to hone Janice's skills, which hopefully wouldn't kill her first.

Janice gave out a cry suddenly, which broke the spell between her and Ephiny. She gave an abrupt kick that landed on Ephiny's sword hand. She'd seen this move a few days ago but didn't think she'd execute it right.

Ephiny yelped from the pain and her eyes watched as her sword went flying up, over, and smashed into the dirt a hundred paces away. Her astonished face turned back to Janice but she tensed up when the sword tip was at her neck.

Janice was smug, her eyes burning, and her breathing heavy. "Now do you yield?"

The Amazon slowly smiled. "Yes." She relaxed when Janice pulled the blade away. "Where did you learn that move?"

The archeologist shrugged while sheathing her weapon behind her back. "I saw an Amazon do it the other day. I didn't think it'd work."

"Well it did." Ephiny went to her sword and collected it. She easily sheathed it then faced her charge. "I think that's enough for today."

Janice was glad to hear those words. "Great. I'm starved too." She gazed over at the low western sun.

Ephiny nodded. "Dinner won't be long." She swept her curly locks from her face when Janice approached her.

"Is it possible for me to talk to the queen tomorrow?"

The Amazon suddenly went serious at this request. "About what?"

"I want to talk to her about that scepter and how I can get to it." Janice shifted on her feet some. "I want to see if the Nation will help."

Ephiny swallowed down the forming worry in her throat. "I'll ask her... see if she'll

meet with you."

"Thanks, Eph." Janice patted the Amazon's moist, bare stomach then headed off.

The Amazon rotated as her charge headed off. She sighed while muttering, "No problem." She shrugged off her sour mood and hurried over to Janice, Eponin, and Solari.

"Nice job, Janice," honored Solari.

"Thanks." Janice had a winning grin. "I'm not Hercules but I think I got it."

"Hercules?" repeated the befuddled Solari.

Ephiny too was confused because Janice said it as if they should know who that person was.

The archeologist searched all three Amazon's faces and realized they weren't joking. How was it possible for them to not know Hercules? Even if he was myth, which was proven he wasn't, they would still know the tales about him. Janice was completely at a loss. "Hercules... the son of Zeus? He's a legendary hero."

The three Amazons exchange questioning faces then shook their heads.

Janice's jaw dropped. "He stole Hippolyta's girdle in the stories?"

Solari was shaking her head then finally said, "I've never heard of him, Janice. Nobody ever stole the magical girdle of Hippolyta."

Janice, for once, stared at the Amazons like they were Medusa.

"I take it we're suppose to know him," spoke up Ephiny.

The archeologist touched her warm forehead and tried to comprehend what could have happened. Some things were making sense in history while others were absolutely wrong. She pushed her bangs back onto her head then dropped her hand to her side again. "This doesn't make any sense."

"There are no heroes anymore, Janice," informed Solari.

"Just the Conqueror," stated Eponin in a cold tone.

"The hell there is," she spat hotly and stormed off.

Solari cringed and looked at her friends. "That's not good."

Ephiny gave a brief complaint about this happening too often. She excused herself from her friends then hurried to catch the angered archeologist. She slowed down at Janice's side then curtly stated, "You get angry too easy."

"I'm a little more than angry," chewed out the stranger.

"I've noticed." Ephiny went silent for a few heartbeats hoping it would calm Janice. She then decided to try again. "If you get angry all the time, you'll never have any good judgment."

The archeologist came to a fast stop.

Ephiny was amazed by how calm Janice suddenly seemed.

"None of this adds up, Ephiny," whispered the archeologist. "Xena was never meant to be a ruler. I don't know anything about some evil shaman named Alti. And instead I know more about Hercules than all this cockamamie bullshit." She stepped closer to the Amazon and murmured, "This is not how its suppose to be."

Ephiny was relieved that her charge was more open now. "But this is how the known-world is, Janice."

The archeologist arguments went blank in her mind. It was the first time Ephiny ever called her by her proper name, she realized. "You're right," she finally agreed quietly. Several of the pieces fell into place in Janice's mind. "You'll talk to the queen?"

"Yes," promised Ephiny. "I'll do it now then I'll meet you at the dining hut to tell you her answer."

"Alright, great." Janice smiled finally. "I think I need to talk to somebody." She moved around her keeper and started her short journey to the temple that they'd stopped in front of.

Ephiny watched her charge climb the steps but she wouldn't ask. She merely went on her search for the queen.

Janice threw open the temple door and raged down to the other end where there was a praying figure. She came to a quick stop.

"Janice, welcome." The priestess rose up and faced the small woman. "Is there something you require?"

The strange dipped her head in respect for the priestess. "I need to talk to Yakut."

Priestess Idola smiled softly. "I believe she is free. Follow me." She led Janice through a side door into a short hallway. She stopped at a door and knocked on it.

The shaman lifted her head when her counterpart and the archeologist entered. "Janice," she greeted.

"I need to talk to you."

Yakut could tell it was serious by Janice's clipped tone. She nodded to Idola.

The priestess drifted out of the office with the door closing behind her.

As soon as the door was shut, Janice came up to the desk and grabbed the edge. "You know why Alti brought me here, don't you?"

Yakut remained still and silent as she searched Janice's face. "Yes," she finally admitted. She gradually lowered her body back to the chair, her hand going out to the chairs in front of her desk. "Sit down."

Janice pulled away from the desk and walked away while saying, "I need to stand." She came around one of the chairs and grasped the backside of it. "Tell me why the hell she brought me here? And I don't want to hear any bullshit either."

The shaman could tell the stranger was figuring this out. She couldn't hold her silence any longer nor did she like it from the beginning. "You first have to understand Alti's source of power."

Janice was pacing and listening at the same time.

"Alti draws her power mostly from fear... hatred or anything evil. It is because of the Conqueror that she is so powerful now."

The archeologist stopped and faced the shaman. "So if she lost the Conqueror somehow then she'd lose power as well?"

"For the most part, yes. She also harnesses her strength greatly from the souls she's captured."

"What kind of souls?" questioned the pacing archeologist.

"Dark souls, weak ones, and powerful ones," answered the shaman. "There are only a few... what we call white souls. Those are the souls that Alti fears because they are self-sacrificing... they're from the Light."

Janice had her head dipped down, her eyes unfocused, and her thoughts quick. "What am I?" She stopped and gazed at the shaman.

Yakut leaned against her desk. "You are in the middle, Janice but a few turn of events could lead you either way."

Janice stepped up to Yakut. "There's a path, I agree but I'm still fated one way or the other."

The shaman rocked back into her chair. "You are correct." After a long pause she finally answered, "You're fated for the Light. You've only begun to touch into your self-sacrificing role." She tilted her head to the side. "This is your legacy... for generations now."

"I'm starting to figure that out," complained the gruff woman. "But why would Alti bring me here when I'm a threat?"

Yakut let out a sigh because she wasn't a hundred percent sure why. "I believe to destroy your soul completely and end your karma."

Janice straightened up and suddenly backed up until she was sitting in a chair finally. "Shit... that's serious." She pushed her bangs back but her attention returned to Yakut. "Why me? There has to be other white souls out there besides me. You said it yourself."

"Yes," slowly agree the shaman, "but none are bound to the Conqueror's like yours."

"If my soul and the Conqueror's are linked then doesn't Alti fear I could... change her?"

Yakut released a large sigh as she tried thinking out to explain this part. "It is a gamble," agree Yakut. "Alti is confident that the Conqueror will stop you. The Conqueror has already stopped Gabrielle."

"Who's also linked to the Conqueror," concluded the archeologist. "Alti gains an immeasurably amount of power from the Conqueror killing Gabrielle, didn't she?"

"She will," corrected the shaman.

"Will? I thought she was dead."

Yakut shook her head. "I doubt it but I am sure she will die in the next day or two. She may even today. Death on a cross is very painful and slow."

Janice swallowed because she knew how people truly died on crosses. It wasn't just from starvation or dehydration but a human's intestines and organs began to weigh too much. Very slowly the organs and intestines collapse to the bottom of the body and kill them. It was a painful way to die and the worst sensation to finally feel your insides give way. A shiver rippled up Janice's spine at the thought.

"When Alti receives word about Gabrielle's death, she will then order her body back from the fields. Alti will take some of her blood and then take her soul."

"I thought she feared souls from the Light?" Janice was lost again, her brow furrowed together.

Yakut slowly nodded. "Yes, when they are not in her control but if she can take them... then she'll have great power. When they are not in her control, she cannot stop them but only fight them. She uses the Conqueror to kill not only their bodies but their hearts."

Janice quietly groaned and slumped in the chair. "So why exactly would Alti want me to face the Conqueror?"

"It is her guarantee." The shaman reached up and removed her antlered headdress. She placed it on the left corner of her desk. "If she can control your karma in both the future and past then you'll never threaten her relationship with the Conqueror."

"Wouldn't she have control of my karma once Gabrielle dies?"

Yakut let out a hefty breath because of all the details of shamanism. "Yes, in theory but Alti is not that strong... yet. She is close to it."

"But if she can get the jump on my karma then she'll have ultimate control of several lifetimes?" At seeing Yakut's nod, the archeologist straightened up in the hard chair. "What about the Conqueror's karma? I mean, can't she break from Alti even if my karma is... not mine?"

Yakut shook her head then explained, "The Conqueror and Gabrielle's karmas are linked and they are a balance of one another. One cannot exist without the other... without Darkness there is no Light and-"

"Without Light there is no Darkness," concluded Janice. "So if Alti can control my karma... Gabrielle's karma then she has more power and controls the Conqueror's. Its like killing two birds with one stone."

"Essentially yes."

"We have to stop her, Yakut," announced the stranger.

The shaman's gaze faltered. "It isn't that simple, Janice." Her saddened eyes lifted again. "Alti has claimed too much power for anybody to stop her. And if the Conqueror is willing to kill her soulmate then there is nothing left."

Janice bounced up onto her feet. "There has to be something."

Yakut was now slumping in her chair. "I'm sorry, Janice."

"Well sorry isn't fucking good enough." Janice suddenly pointed off to her right with her arm stretched out. "You can't let that fucked up shaman run this world. You can't just sit here and do nothing!"

The shaman suddenly rose up and faced the stranger to this world. "You don't think I want to, Janice? I hate everyday of my gods' forsaken life because I can't do anything to stop her... either of them." She paused then sadly added, "If Gabrielle could not stop them then nobody can."

"Fuck that," spat Janice, "I'll stop them." She made her quick exit of the shaman's office as her temper was too large to remain there anymore.

Yakut remained paralyzed by the discussion, her knuckles white against her desk.

Ephiny was waiting outside the temple after just talking to the queen. She wanted to see if Janice was still here or not and she stunned when the fuming archeologist erupted through the temple doors.

Janice stalked down the steps and came right up to Ephiny. "Did you know?"

The Amazon stepped back at seeing the fiery green eyes. "Knew what?"

"Why Alti brought me here?"

Ephiny's face was constructed with confusion.

The archeologist sighed and murmured, "Yakut knew why Alti brought me here." The queen most likely knew too, concluded Janice.

"I didn't know at all, Janice." The Amazon calmed some. "The queen will see you in the morning."

"Good," growled the hot archeologist, who started off to the dining hut.

Ephiny hurried along the fast paced stranger. "There's a catch though."

Janice huffed and eyed her keeper. "What's that?"

"You're meeting the council too. I think the council wants to hear your plans."

"Just... perfect." The archeologist's shoulders dropped and she furiously pulled her fingers through her hair. "I'm thrilled."

Ephiny could tell the archeologist was truly angry and she could imagine why. Most likely Janice felt deceived by the queen but she knew too that it was never the queen's intent. Still though, Ephiny could understand Janice's view, which didn't even settle well with Ephiny. Ephiny was starting to question some things herself.

Chapter 3 - To Corinth!

Queen Cyane stood up when Janice stalked into the meeting hut with Ephiny behind her. "Welcome, Janice."

The archeologist only gave a cold nod.

Ephiny slipped up against the wall where there were several other officials in the room.

Janice took in the scene of the eight Amazons at the wood table. She counted seven council members running down the sides of the table but the queen was at the head of the table.

"You may sit if you wish, Janice." The queen held her hand towards the seat at the other end of the table.

"I'm fine thanks," curtly replied the archeologist.

Cyane decided to start the meeting with an explanation. "As you all know, Janice was found within our territory... unconscious, burned, and with cuts. She has since healed and also been taught the sword thanks to Ephiny and Master Eponin." She stopped and studied the tense archeologist. "Now she wishes to be on her way. Janice?"

Ephiny licked her lips and the Amazon beside her, she noticed, was very interested on what was about to be said this morning.

Janice Covington grasped the top of the chair that she stood behind. She'd spoken in many conferences in her past but this was quite different. Still she reached in for her confidence and began speaking. "I am not from here... I'm not from this time. I am a stranger... to everybody and everything. I was brought here by Alti." She hesitated when the meeting hut filled with a din of chatting.

Cyane held up her hand for silence and everybody obeyed.

"The only way I can get home is by getting the Conqueror's scepter that she has. To do that, I need to go to Corinth."

The queen dipped her head some but she asked, "And do you have a plan, Janice?"

"I wouldn't say a concrete plan but I have some ideas... I won't know until I get there."

The council members began talking amongst themselves then one spoke up louder than the rest.

"How can you be sure you'll find this scepter?"

Janice slightly grinned. "I doubt Alti went through all this trouble just to get rid of it. She has it."

"And do you realize who Alti is... what the Conqueror is capable of?"

The archeologist slowly nodded. "I do."

"You should be fearful of them," stated an older council member. "They are not to be taken lightly."

Janice huffed. "You want to know something?" She straightened up from leaning against the chair. "I am fearful of the Conqueror... of Alti, just like you all." Her eyes searched all the faces of the Amazons then she loudly stated, "But the difference between me and you, is that my fear gives me courage to face them and not hide." She squared her shoulders as every Amazon in the hut called out in protest. She inhaled sharply and spoke very loudly over the chatting. "There is a famous quote from my time...." When the Amazons went silent at her voice, she continued. "It was said by a... bard from Britannia known as Edmund Burke. He said that all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

There was a loud clamor of voices in the meeting hut at Janice's words.

The Amazon Queen ordered everybody silent then she took the floor. "And what would you have us do, Janice? Should I send my three hundred warriors to Corinth to battle legion after legion of hoplites? They do not call the Conqueror the Destroyer of Nations for no reason."

"I don't ask that," refuted the archeologist, "that would be suicide. I am asking you to

help me stop Alti... she is just as much of a threat to the Conqueror as she is to us."

"And the Conqueror protects her," reminded a council member. "To stop one you must stop the other."

Janice now flashed a grin. "Not if you can separate them."

"How do you expect to do that?" challenged the queen.

"If that scepter can bring me here then it can take me further into the past." The archeologist's eyes were lit up by an idea. "I can travel back to when Alti and the Conqueror first met... and stop Alti."

"This is absolutely ludicrous!" called out a council member.

Then a lone figure in the corner behind the queen stepped up by the queen. "If you go back to when Alti and the Conqueror met and change history, the affects could be devastating."

Janice's gaze settled on the shaman by the queen's side. "I think I rather take my chances."

Yakut held up a hand at Janice to hold her tongue. "Even if you kill Alti before she met the Conqueror, the Conqueror will still rule the known-world... with or without Alti." Her hand dropped to her side again. "The only difference is that the Conqueror will be even more ruthless than now. She will not have Alti there for insurance so instead she'll make her own... one death after another."

"Then the Conqueror is fated to be the ruler?" questioned a council member.

Yakut nodded her head. "She is fated to be the Conqueror... it is her karma in this lifetime."

That was a big help, mentally complained Janice, who was trying every direction to come up with a reason why the Amazons needed to help her.

"You're running out of ideas here, Janice." The queen's dark brown eyes returned to the small woman at the other end. "You must accept that certain things are destined in this world."

"I won't accept that I'm meant to be here," argued Janice. She threw up her hand for a second and demanded, "Give me a contingent of Amazons to help me get the scepter."

The Amazon Queen shook her head. "I will not needlessly endanger Amazons' lives for a vain chase for a scepter. You have no plan, you have no knowledge of where this scepter is, and you have no power against Alti. You're walking into your own grave."

Ephiny could tell how desperate her charge was to work this out. Something in Ephiny gave in and she stepped forward, next to Janice. "My queen, my sword has always been the Nation's but I ask that I may escort Janice safely to Corinth." She heard several council members' murmurs. "We can at least safely escort her to there if

nothing else. It would seem Janice's own fate is to face the Conqueror and Alti... with or without us."

Queen Cyane slowly sighed as she had an internal struggle. She saw the council members didn't seem to be disagreeing with the offer, especially since it came from one of the best warriors in the Nation. She let out a huge sigh then gradually nodded. "Your wish is granted, Ephiny however you must take five other competent Amazons with you. You will take Janice as close to Corinth as possible without endangering your lives. All six of you are expected to return safely."

Ephiny solemnly nodded because she knew this was all that could be done for Janice. It wasn't much but maybe it was a start. "Thank you, my queen."

"This meeting is dismissed then." Cyane remained still in her chair as everybody filtered out of the hut. She finally got up and made her way to the door as well.

Janice remained still and quiet beside Ephiny, her head slightly hung down and her grip tight on the top of the chair. Her anger wasn't helping her and she knew it but she couldn't believe that this Nation was so scared. She straightened up just as Yakut came near them. "Thanks for the help, Yakut," shot the angry archeologist.

Yakut stopped next to Janice. She stared at her with a worn, saddened face then without a word she walked by and left the hut.

Ephiny and Janice were the only ones left.

Ephiny stepped closer and lightly touched the small woman's bare shoulder. "I'm sorry, Janice."

"No." The archeologist shook her head then lifted it. "You did more than anybody else, Ephiny. Thank you."

Yet the Amazon felt as if she failed despite she was able to provide Janice with some protection. "Come on, we'll do some sparring to work that temper off."

Janice ran her fingers through her hair. "Christ... I think you're starting to figure me out, Eph."

Ephiny snorted as she made her way out of the hut. "Gods strike me dead now."

Janice laughed and playful swatted her keeper. "Hardy har har."

The pair found their way to the sparring fields and practiced for most of the day. It wasn't until mid-afternoon that Solari showed up from finishing patrol duty. She caught the tail end of the practice between Janice and Ephiny but when the pair neared her, she could tell Janice was worn out.

"I'm sorry about this morning," offered Solari.

"You heard already?" inquired Ephiny.

Solari just nodded then peered down at Janice. "I would like to escort you to Corinth."

The archeologist now smiled at the offer. "Thank you... that'd be great, Solari."

The Amazon mirrored the smile back. "There are already many other Amazons that wish to take you. I am sure that Ephiny will help you select them."

"How many?" interjected Ephiny.

Solari stared up at the cloudy sky as she did a quick estimation. "I'd say at least fifty." Her head bobbed a few times. "Right around there."

"Wow," murmured the shocked archeologist.

"There are many behind you." Solari clasped Janice's shoulder. "Unfortunately there isn't much we can do without the queen's word."

"I understand," softly spoke Janice.

"I do have one concerned," started Solari, "The people of Corinth may think you're Gabrielle."

Ephiny's eyes widened at realizing this. "I didn't even think about that."

"Damn," muttered Janice. "That could cause a stir."

"Yes," confirmed Ephiny, "as many people saw Gabrielle. They would take you for her instantly."

"Damn it," hissed Janice.

Solari held up her hands. "Now wait, there may be a way to stop that... at least not catch their attention." She lowered her hands to her side. "It may help if we change your hairstyle, Janice... maybe the color too. At least you won't look exactly like Gabrielle other than your facial features."

"And height and eye color and-"

"We get the point," cut in Ephiny. "But Solari is right, at least this way the people really won't recognize you. Once you're up close and personal with the Conqueror that'll be another thing."

"And you're just in luck." Solari beamed a huge smile. "I happen to be great at cutting hair and coloring it."

The archeologist eyed Solari very suspiciously. "Just what did you have in mind? I'm funny about my damn hair."

"Solari is good with hair," promised Ephiny. She then grabbed a lock of Janice's strawberry hair. "Besides you could do with a change it looks like."

"Hey!" Janice yanked her hair free. "Want me to pull on your curls, Eph?" She glowered up at the Amazon.

Ephiny shrugged and smirked.

Janice turned back to Solari. "Fine. Just don't make me look dumb."

Solari smirked but it was Ephiny that said it first.

"You're already that."

Janice suddenly yelled and came at Ephiny.

The Amazon was prepared and she jumped away with her hands up. "Now who helped you this morning, Janny?"

The archeologist was seething, her eyes were slits and her teeth bore at the Amazon.

Solari covered her mouth with her hand as she chuckled at the pair. She pulled her hand away and licked her lips but kept every comment behind her mouth. She cleared her throat though when Janice took a menacing step towards Ephiny. "Maybe we should start getting you ready, Janice. The sooner it's done the sooner you can head off."

This seemed to stop the archeologist. She straightened up to her short height and nodded at Solari. "Alright."

The two Amazons and Janice started back to the village but Solari spoke up first between them.

"We need to stop at the healer's hut. Eilis has some paste that I can use to change your hair color."

Janice gave Solari a dangerous look. "What color?"

"It'll make your hair blonder."

The archeologist tilted her head. "Why not just use lemons?"

"Lemons?" repeated Ephiny.

Janice laughed as it struck her. "I forgot, Ancient Greece doesn't know about citrus fruits."

"Citrus fruits?" Solari shook her head. "We have grapes, apples, pears... figs."

"No, citrus fruits are lemons, oranges, limes, or grapefruit." Janice ran through her educated mind then further explained. "They come from Chin but they don't make it here for some time."

"Oranges?" murmured Ephiny as if she knew the word. "It sounds familiar."

"It's possible some royalty has them," argued Janice. "Just not the common people or much of the upper class."

A dramatic exhale came from Solari. "Probably the Conqueror has had them."

"I'll be sure to ask her when I meet her," joked Janice.

Solari grinned at the joke. She then spotted the healer's hut just ahead so she said, "Stay here while I get the stuff." She hurried ahead while Ephiny and Janice waited for her.

"What's this stuff she's using anyway?"

Ephiny shrugged. "I don't think even Solari knows."

"Nice," muttered Janice.

Solari jumped down the last step but both her hands carefully carried the jar of something. "Alright, let's go to my hut."

"Lead the way then," offered Janice.

The band continued their trek to the opposite side of the village. They eventually ended up in Solari's hut and Ephiny took a seat while Solari worked her magic. She'd seen the hair color change trick once before but the hairstyles were Solari's specialty.

Solari grabbed the second chair by Ephiny and placed it in away from everything. "Sit here," she ordered. As Janice got comfortable, Solari put the jar down on the table next to Ephiny then went into the washroom.

The archeologist turned her head to Ephiny and caught the huge smirk. "What?" she bit out.

Ephiny chuckled, shook her head, and kept her silence for safety reasons.

Janice rolled her eyes and twisted her head to the right when Solari arrived with two short blades. She instantly swallowed.

Solari placed one blade down by the mystery jar. She came behind Janice and wiped the small blade across her skirt. "Any requests?"

Janice turned her head sidelong as she tried to gauge Solari's seriousness.

"Yeah," spoke up Ephiny, "Shave it all off."

Janice glowered at her keeper but she ordered, "Wait." She stood up and lifted her sheath strapped over her head. "I think I'll need to be comfortable for this." She threw the sword in sheath at Ephiny.

The Amazon neatly caught it and carefully lowered it to the floor by her feet. "Chop away, Solari."

An audible groan left the archeologist but she was ready.

Solari held the blade up over Janice's head yet she hesitated as her mind worked out a mental image of a haircut style. She suddenly grinned wildly and began.

Janice quietly whimpered then closed her eyes when she saw a clump of hair fall before her eyes.

Solari tilted Janice's head to the right and continued carefully cutting the hair away. She occasionally would stop, walk around to the front, judging things, and continue her cutting. After half a candlemark, she stopped for a long moment and carefully judged the style. She realized she needed to balance it just a bit better so after a few more trimmings she had it perfect. "There."

Janice slowly opened her eyes but she didn't want to see yet. She decided instead to gauge it off of Ephiny's reaction.

Solari stepped out of the way.

Ephiny had a clear view. She blinked then gaped. "Sweet Artemis." She glanced at her friend. "You're going to color her hair too?"

"Yup."

"It's that bad huh?" complained Janice.

Ephiny smirked. "You'll see."

Solari came over to the table and grabbed up the jar. "Okay, its easiest if your hair is wet, Janice. Go in the washroom, I filled up a bowl with water."

The archeologist nodded in understanding. She went into the washroom.

Ephiny grinned at her friend. "It looks good, Solari."

The other Amazon winked. "Thanks... I've always had a knack for this." When Janice came back with wet, not dripping, hair she signaled her to sit again. She had the jar open and placed it in Janice's lap. "Hold it."

The archeologist sighed and cupped the jar in her hands.

Solaris's hands were already coated in the white paste material. She quickly began working it through Janice's hair. Occasionally she would stop and get more of the paste until she was satisfied that Janice's hair was well coated in the stuff.

Janice lifted the jar to her nose and the powerful, burning smell made her jump back some. "Wooo."

The Amazon laughed and teased, "Now you know how I feel right now." Solari finished up then quickly moved away so she could get some fresh air. "Just let it sit for a quarter of a candlemark."

Janice eyebrows tied together as she stared at the two Amazons by each other. "Quarter of a candlemark?"

The Amazons exchanged glances.

"Just stay there until I tell you," commanded Solari. She then decided she needed to clean her hands so she vanished into the washroom.

"Eph, can you take this damn jar."

The Amazon chuckled, came over, and collected the offending object from the stranger. She put the lid back on yet made sure to push it away too.

Solari came back out of the washroom then came up behind Janice. She took a deep gulp of air and held it while she reached up with her thumb and index finger. She easily pulled some of the paste away from Janice's hair so she could note the color change. "Not much longer."

Janice blew at her nose to get the smell out. "I hope not. This stuff is retched."

Solari moved away but not without a laugh. "The dyes they use for hair is much better than this stuff."

"I bet." Janice grumbled and drummed her right hand against her knee. She suddenly realized that Melinda would be struck dumb when they see each other again. At the thought of Melinda, Janice became grim and wondered what the tall southerner was doing right now. She inwardly grunted, as if Melinda is even alive right now, she chided mentally.

Ephiny was bent forward and staring directly at Janice. She read the flickering emotions across her charge's features and she could only guess what it was all about. She knew they weren't good thoughts going through the archeologist's mind.

"Alright," broke Solari's voice through the silence. "Go wash it out of your hair."

Janice was more than happy to do that as she hurried to the bathroom.

"There should be a small towel there too," called Solari. She then knelt down beside her friend and whispered, "I'm worried about her making it."

Ephiny licked her lips but her eyes were locked on the washroom entrance. "Me too."

"She can't beat Alti, Ephiny... it's impossible."

Ephiny was biting her lower lip as she finally gazed over to her friend. "She doesn't have to beat her... just get around her so she can go home."

"Not the way she's talking, Ephiny. She wants to stop the Conqueror and Alti."

"I know," murmured the worried Amazon.

Solari suddenly stood up when Janice came out of the washroom with the towel in hand and drying her hair still.

The archeologist pulled the towel away as she approached the Amazons. "Alright, how does it look now?" She straightened her hair out until it felt comfortable.

"Wow you're as blond as you are dumb," joked Ephiny. She was suddenly attacked by a damp towel in the face.

Janice pointed a dangerous finger at the Amazon. "I really hate you some times."

"And love me at other times," tormented Ephiny. She tossed the towel onto the table.

The archeologist didn't argue but she didn't agree either. "Alright Solari, what's your opinion?" She knew this would be an honest one.

Solari stepped up to the stranger and smiled happily at her. "You look hot, Janice." She thoroughly enjoyed the blush that crept down Janice's face and over her neck. She played with Janice's damp, blond hair.

Ephiny sat back and enjoyed the scene. She actually liked the new style a lot as Janice's hair was a soft blond, her bangs were still there. The rest of the style was short in the back yet longer compared to the front in a cropped, v shape. She finally pushed her body out of the seat and come up to Janice. "You don't look like such a kid now."

The archeologist had her hands on her hips. "Are you done, Eph?"

"Never," promised the Amazon.

Janice rolled her eyes as her hands fell from her sides. "Seriously, how's it look?"

Ephiny let out her smile that she'd been holding back the entire time. "You look real good, Janice."

The archeologist was playing with her hair more but she halted and smiled back at Ephiny. "Thanks... Ephiny."

Solari suddenly reached behind and unsheathed her sword. She held it in front of Janice then tilted it until she felt Janice could see her own reflection.

The archeologist reached up to steady the blade then she saw the hairstyle. She laughed at the immense change as she didn't just look older but like another person. "Looookin' good!"

Ephiny and Solari laughed together at the stranger's smartass joke. Solari sheathed her sword expertly as Janice faced them now.

"We should work on who to take," seriously stated Ephiny. "Then maybe tomorrow we can get the queen's approval to go."

The archeologist nodded her agreement.

Ephiny turned to her best friend. "Who volunteered to go?"

"Well..." Solari picked up the chair that Janice had been using earlier. "Here." She held the chair out to Janice.

Janice took the chair by the ladder back side and carried it to the other one.

"Go sit down," offered Solari to Janice and Ephiny. As they sat down, Solari took the time to sweep up the mess with a bristle broom that'd been in her washroom. "So far I've heard from Amarice."

"Too young," countered Ephiny.

"The princess wishes to go," informed Solari. She swept the hair towards her front door but hesitated and looked at Ephiny.

"Terreis?"

Solari smirked at her best friend. "Well what other princess would I be talking about?" She opened her front door and pushed the hair out.

"Who's Terreis?" inquired Janice from across Ephiny.

Ephiny glanced at her charger. "She's from Melosa's Nation... she's Melosa's sister."

"Melosa?" tried Janice.

Solari turned back after closing the door, broom in hand. "Ephiny, Eponin, and I are from Melosa's Nation."

"I thought this was the only Nation left?" countered Janice.

"It is," explained Ephiny, "but this Nation is a mix between Queen Melosa's and Queen Cyane's... this is all that remains. Melosa and Cyane joined forces in the last battle against the Conqueror... we barely survived and Melosa was killed."

"At the time Queen Cyane didn't have a princess selected so Princess Terreis took that position when the Nations joined." Solari went into the washroom but when she came out she added, "Most of Queen Melosa's Amazons are behind you, Janice."

"How many are there?" inquired Janice.

"At least half the Nation," explained Ephiny.

Solari strolled over and sat on the foot of her bed, her feet just dangling off. "Queen

Melosa raised her Nation with an iron fist. She taught us never to back down from a fight."

"Queen Cyane isn't the same?" tried Janice.

Ephiny negatively shook her head. "Queen Cyane believes in diplomatic affairs first then war." She gazed at her best friend. "Who else has offered?"

"Let's see..." Solari held up her hand and ticked off each finger as she said the names that stuck out. "Eponin, if she could. Velasca. Callisto. Vara. Medora. Tanya. Calandra. Otere. And plenty of others." She dropped her hand to her lap.

"Callisto?" squeaked Janice. Two questioning Amazons stared at her. "Is she a tall, white-blond that's really skinny?"

"That is her," agreed Ephiny. "Why?"

The archeologist shifted uneasily in her seat. "I've read a scroll about her... she hates Xena but it never mentioned her being an Amazon. She was actually a warlord."

Solari's face was twisted by confusion and staring at Ephiny.

Ephiny shrugged but stated, "Callisto is a competent Amazon and an accomplished warrior. She came to the Nation when we saved her from slavery. Her home was destroyed by the Conqueror seasons back, her family killed."

Janice was biting her lower lip because she knew this was definitely the same Callisto, well almost. She figured it was best to remain on the topic at hand. "So who should we take?"

"Well if we take the princess we can't take Velasca."

"Why's that?" questioned Janice to Solari.

Ephiny smirked. "They don't get along at all. Velasca was Melosa's adapted daughter and Princess Terreis argued with her sister about adopting her. Melosa ignored her and took in Velasca."

"Their personalities just don't click," explained Solari. "Well the princess seemed more adamant about going compared to Velsca."

"Then she goes," agreed Ephiny.

"Callisto?" questioned Solari. When Ephiny nodded her head she tried, "Vara?"

"One more." Ephiny leaned back and offered, "Otere?"

"She's quick and she's fast," reminded Solari, "Almost like me."

Ephiny chuckled and nodded her head.

"So you..." Janice pointed at Ephiny then at Solari, "and you, Callisto, the princess, Vara, and Otere?" She suddenly shot up from the chair. "Let's go see Queen Cyane." She tried to move out but Ephiny's hand caught the back of her leather skirt and yanked her back.

"Not so fast, Janny. We need to check with them first."

Janice exhaled dramatically then snapped, "Let's go ask them then."

Solari bounced up onto her feet. "You heard her, Eph... Ephiny."

Ephiny quickly stood up and pointed a finger at her best friend. "And don't you start with me too!" She picked up Janice's sheathed sword and slammed it against Janice's chest, which effectively knocked the wind out of Janice. "Let's go."

Janice put the sword over her back and shifted closer to Solari. "Nice job, Solar." She made a hasty retreat after her jest.

Solari narrowed her eyes at Janice's back and hurried after the pair.

By the next day in the early afternoon, Janice and her volunteer band of Amazons were starting their journey out of the gates of the Nation. Ephiny was in charge of the party with Solari's help. They all rode horseback as it was much faster than a slow march. At first, Janice absolutely refused to ride a horse until she was green in the face at the thought of being so high up off the ground. Finally Ephiny basically threw the archeologist up onto one of the mares and threatened her to ride it. Although later on Ephiny found herself giving Janice a crash course in riding horseback but it was sufficient enough to get them to Corinth.

It was early evening and Ephiny ordered the party off the road and into clearing by a small stream. The other night she'd selected what Amazon to do what job during the camp setup and breakdown. Janice was amazed about how efficient and knowledgeable the Amazons were about making and breaking camp. A part of her wished she could steal them all and take them back to Greece for her archeological digs.

Right now though, Janice was down by the lake and relaxing on top of a cool rock by the shore. She occasionally would bend down, pick up a stone, and throw it as far down the stream as she could. She sensed a crunch of a tree branch, which made her turn sharply in the direction. "Hey, Eph."

The Amazon smiled as she approached her charge. "Any room?"

Janice understood what the Amazon meant so she scooted over and patted the rock. "Sure."

Ephiny sat and propped her boots up against the rock. She too grabbed a few stones and idly tossed them into the stream. "Have you thought anymore about what you plan to do?"

"Not really," confessed archeologist. "I'm just going into this blind." She shook her head then roughly threw a stone. "I have no idea what this time is like or what I'm up

against. I'll just have to assess things as I go."

There was a long silence with Ephiny's head bent down in thought and Janice still throwing some pebbles.

"Have you considered not doing this?" Ephiny peered up at her charger.

Surprise immediately filled the archeologist at Ephiny's question and somewhat confession. "Ephiny, there's nothing here for me. I'm a stranger... in a... fuckin' damn strange time." She grunted and tossed another stone.

"Maybe so but maybe..." The Amazon shrugged the rest of her sentence off.

"Maybe what?" urged the archeologist. "Maybe I'm meant to be here?" She now sensed a smooth stone in her hand so she tried to skip it this time, which actually got the stone across to the other side of the stream. "This isn't home for me, Ephiny."

The Amazon sighed and lightly touched the bare knee next to hers. That got Janice's attention on her. "It could be home."

Janice stared at her keeper for some time as she tried to decipher what the Amazon was getting at with this conversation. "What is it? Seriously, Ephiny?"

The Amazon removed her lingering touch then confessed, "I couldn't stand you when I first met you." Despite Janice's grunt of agreement she continued explaining. "And I know you feel out of place... a stranger." Her crystal amber eyes held Janice's for the first time. "But you're not a stranger to me."

Janice's emotions instantly formed a lump in her throat, her eyes watery at the Ephiny's words. "Thank you," she whispered. "You've done a lot for me when all I've done is complain."

Ephiny brushed back her curly locks that were in the way. "I'll admit you're good at that." She mirrored the grin on Janice's face but she lost it just as quickly. "You'd make a great Amazon though... once you got that temper thing worked out."

The archeologist laughed and smiled at the Amazon. She lowered her head down while playing with her short hair for a second. "I have to try to at least, Ephiny because if I don't... then it'll haunt me forever." She met Ephiny's worried gaze. "I know I don't know what I'm going against, I know the odds will kill me, and I know this is just plain stupid but I have to try."

"I know," whispered the Amazon. She collected Janice's hands into her own. "Just don't risk your life... too much." At Janice's curled grin she kept going. "You do have a home here too." Ephiny released one of her hands and gently touched Janice's right cheek. "And you do at least have one friend you can count on."

The archeologist was surprised by the Amazon's tenderness growing through. She slightly leaned her face in, her eyes glowing, and she caught Ephiny's hand that was on her face. "Eph?"

"Yea?"

"I know I'm blond but... are you hitting on me?"

The Amazon cleared her throat and quietly answered, "You're too much of a pain in the ass for me, Jan." She saw that beautiful smirk she'd come to love on Janice's face now.

"That's what I like to hear." Janice straightened up and put space between them. Her breathing was labored with how close she was to the Amazon.

Then something caught Ephiny's sharp hearing and she quickly dissected herself from Janice just as Solari showed up.

Solari paused at seeing the pair on the stone, so close. She nervously pushed her hair back behind her ear and came closer to them. "Dinner is almost finished."

Ephiny got up and faced her best friend. "What is for dinner?"

Solari remained poised on the small hill top. "Rabbit stew and flatbread."

"Mmmmm," rumbled Janice happily.

Solari grinned at the archeologist's excitement about dinner. "Hurry up you two." She turned and vanished in the tree line.

Janice came up beside her keeper. Well she's a friend now, mentally corrected Janice. She placed her small hand on Ephiny's mid back and whispered, "I think Solari is better suited for you."

"You think so huh?" Ephiny's amber eyes were light and teasing. "Wait, I heard a rumor." She started the trek to camp.

Janice went along and also gave a curious look about this rumor. "Which was?"

"Something about Solari being called... Solar."

The archeologist suddenly played dumb and tried very hard to think about this. "Now who in hell gave her that name?"

"I can not even begin to imagine," chided the Amazon.

Solari saw the pair finally returned and she already had their food ready. "Here, Ephiny." She handed the bowl over with the flatbread neatly on top. She then held up Janice's while saying, "Enjoy... Janny."

The archeologist had the flatbread in one hand and she pointed it at the Amazon. "Watch it, Solar." She stomped off and sat beside Ephiny. When she got comfortable, she realized Callisto came over and sat beside her. Janice did everything she could to not let it bother her less she'd get indigestion tonight.

Callisto was no fool as she detected the uneasiness in this stranger. "Let me guess, I killed your ancestor's husband or something."

Janice choked on her spoonful of rabbit stew, a piece of meat lodged in the back of her throat.

Ephiny put her bowl down the ground and smacked Janice's back hard to help her.

The archeologist finally had it under control but her face was bright red and nobody was sure if it was from the choking or embarrassment. She was suddenly handed a water skin from Ephiny, which helped sooth the last of the tickle in her throat. When she gave the skin back, she gazed at the thin blond beside her. "It wasn't exactly like that..." At seeing fiery eyes on her, she hastily added, "Well maybe a little like that."

Callisto showed a toothy smile suddenly. "You can be honest... honesty is the best policy. Don't you think?"

Janice peered down in her half eaten bowl of stew then lifted her gaze again. "Nothing and nobody are as they seem... I've come to figure this out lately."

The Amazon now had a softer smile and she leaned closer. "I like you, Janice Covington." She straightened up while saying, "Maybe you do stand a chance against the Conqueror and Alti." She dipped her spoon into her stew. "I know I certainly didn't."

Janice's jaw flexed and loosened at Callisto's quiet submission. She decided there wasn't much else to say at this point so she went back to eating her meal.

The night went on quietly as everybody chatted around the campfire. Janice listened to many old war stories about the Conqueror and Alti. She found them as informative as much as horrifying. She had that sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach at the ruthlessness of the Conqueror yet she would not stand down. If she had any opening to getting back to 1940, back to Melinda then she would take it. She understood that she and the Conqueror were linked through their karma yet Janice realized too that the Conqueror was a completely different person compared to Melinda. The current state of her karma was much different than that of the Conqueror's and she wondered if it wouldn't be like throwing gas on fire when they meet face to face. Better yet it would be a bomb dropping, concluded Janice, who was now resting on her back in a bedroll and thinking over tonight's stories. As she lay there, staring at the beautiful stars, she wondered if Alti truly knew what she was doing or just running blind into this just as much as Janice. Tomorrow around midday, Janice figured she would discover what was fated.

Early the next morning, the party broke camp early with six well rested Amazons and one moody archeologist. Ephiny found herself again forcing and arguing Janice up into the saddle of the mare. Ephiny was able to talk her into it by reminding Janice that it was only a few more candlemarks to the Corinth then the horseback ride would be over. That seemed to win Janice over thankfully, for Ephiny's sake.

True to Ephiny's word, they made it to Corinth and pulled off the paved road that led directly into Corinth as Ephiny was fearful of troopers spotting them. She led the party

up a hill and stopped on the crescent just within the trees. She dismounted her mare and signaled for everybody else to do the same. She then turned to Janice and ordered, "Follow me."

The archeologist obliged and followed Ephiny through the tree line but she also noted Solari and Callisto following suit.

Ephiny's body was turned to Janice but her eyes were gazing out over the great city of Corinth.

"Holy... shit," rasped Janice as she absorbed the ancient city right before her eyes. She couldn't believe it at all. She'd never seen anything like this nor could she, until now. "There's the Temple of Apollo." She pointed at it as she recognized it even though she'd only seen it in ruins. Suddenly something caught her attention and she stepped closer to the edge of the steep hill. "Is that... that's fuckin' impossible."

Ephiny followed her friend's line of sight. "The Conqueror started the project as soon as she became the ruler. I believe she'll succeed too."

"That's impossible," repeated Janice. "The Corinth King, Periander, tried to build the Corinth Canal but failed... miserably."

Ephiny folded her arms over her chest. "Yes, he failed and instead built a-

"Diolkos," simultaneously finished Ephiny and Janice.

Ephiny smiled at her friend and nodded. "The Conqueror does not accept defeat very well."

"I can tell." Janice was dazzled by the Conqueror's persistence to build the famous Corinth Canal that would connect the Aegean Sea and Ionian Sea. Such a project required a lot of money, a lot of labor, and plenty of time. It was a feat that many past rulers tried and failed each time, even the great Julius Caesar. "If she completes the projects then..."

"Then Corinth will grow in power from the ships that don't have to go around the Peloponnese Peninsula," finished Callisto. "Even I have to admit, the Conqueror has a great vision."

"She's intelligent and clever," agreed Solari.

"Over here...." Callisto pointed off the right where there were a lot of people milling around. "That is the marketplace."

Solari pointed next at a magnificent building with the largest pillars that were built into a hill side. "That is the Conqueror's. She lives there."

Janice noted how the front of the building faced out over the city and harbor, which must have been the most beautiful view. So maybe Ephiny wasn't joking about the Conqueror's choice of Corinth over Athens. There was also a magnificent square in front of the Conqueror's temple like home. "Is that the square where...."

Ephiny understood the unfinished question. "Yes, it happened there... it all happens there."

The archeologist's head slumped some as she shook it.

Ephiny touched her friend's small shoulder. "Its best you get into the city before it gets later. Hopefully then you'll find a place to stay for the night." She turned back to the city in the snug harbor. "I suggest staying closer to the port. There are many taverns and inns there." She then paused and gave a hidden signal to Solari and Callisto. After the two Amazons left she returned her attention to the archeologist. "You must lean to control your tongue while you're here, Janice. The Conqueror has eyes and ears everywhere and if she catches wind of you then you can be guaranteed a spot in her prison until judgment. Once you're in the hands of the Conqueror there is nothing... nothing anybody can do to help you."

Janice let out her held breath then nodded. "I understand."

"Let's go back... I have some things for you." The Amazon guided her friend back to the party but directed Janice to her horse. Ephiny fished around in her saddlebags then produced a leather pouched that was tied off. "This is fifty dinars that we've all contributed for you."

Janice saw how the Amazons were gazing at her and she quickly held up her hands. "I can't." She stepped back.

"Yes you can and you will." Ephiny stepped forward and pulled Janice's hand down. She put the pouch in her cupped hand. "You can't eat otherwise. You can't find somewhere to sleep. So you must."

The archeologist sighed then relented with a sad nod. She easily tied the pouch next to her other one on her right side. The other pouch she already had contained her extra bullets for her gun.

"Then keep this on." Ephiny was whirling around from her saddlebags again with a dark cloak whipping around. She brought the cloak around her friend and clipped the Amazon feather at the neckline. "It'll help hide some things. You may want to get a change of clothes as well to blend in better."

Janice slowly nodded then quietly asked, "What about my things back in the Nation?"

Ephiny faltered at the question yet she sadly smiled. "I will keep them with me." She leaned her head down closer to Janice's and whispered, "Incase you decide to return."

The archeologist peered up into soft amber eyes, which made her smile. "Thanks, Eph."

The Amazon ruffled her friend's short, blond hair then said, "Its time." She directed Janice through the trees and back to the cobble road that led down the hill and into Corinth. "Follow the road and it'll take you right to Corinth... into the marketplace first."

Janice stared at the road that was quiet for now. Right, follow the little yellow brick road... to the Conqueror's house, inwardly grunted the archeologist.

"Be safe, Janice." The Amazon moved in for a long hug.

Janice squeezed her friend tightly and willed some strength. "Thank you for everything, Ephiny." She withdrew but didn't break the embrace. "You're the most amazing friend I've ever had."

"I try," teased the Amazon. She leaned in and placed a kiss to Janice's cheek. She broke the embrace then forced her body to move away from her friend. She was close to the forest's edge yet she stopped and looked back at Janice. "Janice?"

The archeologist was already on the road and she hesitated too so she could gaze back at her friend.

"I once heard a quote from a famous philosopher named Plato." At Janice's coy, teasing grin she continued and stated, "He said 'We are twice armed if we fight with faith.'" She then held up her hand in a wave and called, "Good luck, my friend." Then with that she diminished into the woods.

Doctor Janice Covington straightened out her cloak, checked her sword under her cloak, and caught a glimpse of her gun strapped to her right boot. "Well Covington, history doesn't get any better than this... when you're making it. Maybe I should skip on my way down," she joked to nobody but herself. Instead she calmly continued the trip down the road into Corinth with each step bringing her closer to her fate.

Chapter 4 - First Day in Corinth

Janice Covington dipped her head as she pulled her hood to conceal her face better. She was in awe by everything in the market; the people in togas or other attire, the soldiers marching through, the items the merchant's sold, and the food sitting out too. She tried to not let it defocus her so she decided it was best to go to the port and find an inn for the night.

The archeologist swiftly moved through the market and it was far larger and puzzled than she expected. It was almost a perfect maze except for the occasional sign nailed up on a building that pointed to this or that. Janice came to a stop in the middle of the market and tried to decipher what was written on the directional arrow. She squinted as she tried to translate the ancient syntax that only read: ??μ??a?.

"Goddamn," she breathed, "what the hell does that say? Where are ya, Mel?" Just as she finished her complaint, something or somebody slammed into her from behind. Janice stumbled forward and almost fell but she caught herself and got up. She then spun around to figure out what'd happened.

"Stop her!" bellowed a merchant, who was pointing at the young girl that ran into Janice.

The archeologist's eyes darkened but she saw the girl hurry off without a word. She then stiffened when three soldiers raced after the girl they'd caught a glimpse of briefly. Janice stepped aside when the soldiers flew past her and through the market. Her mind replayed the girl's scared features and how she had a piece of flatbread tucked in her arms. Janice suddenly understood what'd happened. "Shit," she growled and broke off into a full run.

Janice rushed ahead and saw that the soldiers actually had the small girl cornered between two joining walls in the market. She felt her anger weld up about how they could take such a young child that was only trying to survive. She reached behind while muttering, "Time to blow my cover."

The barking soldiers that towered over the girl were yelling at her and one even had a sword out. The other two had spears and were pointing them at the crumpled girl to scare her. Yet the soldiers suddenly straightened up when they heard that distinct sound of metal scraping through a scarab. One soldier dared to turn his head and saw the cloaked figure spin his sword but he quickly corrected his assessment of the figure being a man when he or rather she spoke.

"Why don't you try me, boys?" Janice's wild grin shined through her hooded features. She spun her sword in a beautiful display of any warrior. "Come on!"

Two of the soldiers were laughing while the third one decided to test her first. He charged her with a yell.

The archeologist braced herself and willed her strength that she knew she had inside. She caught his wild blow and stuck her foot out to make him stumble and fall face first into the hard cobblestone street. His face was broken open and blood seeping out between the cracks of the stone.

"Who's next?" Janice flicked her wrist, which caused her sword to spin again. "Don't be shy now."

One soldier decided not to be shy so he handed his spear to his buddy then extracted his short-sword at his side. He cautiously approached Janice.

Janice's grin appeared from under the hood again as she took small steps. She readied her sword then planned on getting the jump on the man by attacking first.

The soldier was unprepared and the sword slashed his sword arm. He hissed in pain

then tried to attack.

Janice matched each blow then ended the meager fight with a winning blow to his groin. She smirked when the soldier fell to his knees with his sword forgotten. And they didn't teach that in the Amazon Nation, joked Janice. She quickly got over her small celebration and pointed her sword at the remaining soldier. "You want a try too?"

The soldier holding two spears quickly threw them on the ground and fingered his sword hilt. He thought better of it and slinked away a few steps then quickly ran off in fear.

The archeologist snorted at the sight then lowered her eyes to the young girl in the corner. She sheathed her sword behind her back and gingerly neared the scared child. As she bent down beside the girl, she could hear everybody in the market muttering at once into a clamor.

"It's a woman."

"I bet she's an Amazon," remarked another merchant.

"Whoever she is," quietly stated a customer, "she'll be dead by nightfall."

Janice ignored all of them as she saw to the girl. She gently asked, "What's your name?"

The girl's scared eyes softened at her savior. "I'm... I'm... Melpomene." She hugged the flatbread against her chest, which was almost as big as her. "My friends call me Mel though."

Janice's heart broke at the nickname that she adored so much. She saw the girl wore a dirty brown skirt, a worn out white blouse, and her deep brown hair was messy. There were even a few scratches on the child's cheeks.

Melpomene slightly smiled at Janice. "You're my friend, right?" She saw gently green eyes inside of the hood then an amazing smile.

"I am," agreed Janice.

"Then you can call me Mel too."

Janice sighed but the sight of the two soldiers getting up and running away caught her eye. She took that as her cue to go too so she held out her hand, "We need to go, Mel."

The girl was hesitant at first but she slowly took the larger, callused hand. She stood up with the stranger's help but she still hugged that bread in her left arm.

When Janice stepped into the center of the small section of the market; everybody fell silent. Janice scanned all their faces and noted they were mostly trembling and drawn away from her. She could only imagine what type of hold the Conqueror had over these scared mice.

"Stay close and hold me hand," ordered Janice.

Melpomene nodded and squeezed the larger hand tighter.

With that, the archeologist moved as quickly as she could through the market. She wasn't sure where she was going but she knew she needed to get away from that general area since that's where the fight had been. She could guess that within ten minutes there would be at least one squad of soldiers hunting her down. She knew she had skill with the sword but not enough for ten or more soldiers.

Melpomene hurried along side the fast moving woman. She wasn't sure where they were going but she spoke up after they went down two streets. "Where are we going?"

"Well," Janice glanced down then lifted her head, "I was hoping the port."

Melpomene stopped and pointed at the road to their right. "That goes the port. Come on." She retook Janice's hand and guided her through the streets.

Janice was surprised at the girl's sudden speed so she had to keep up. "Where are your parents, Mel?" she questioned as they wound through the streets.

"In the Elysian Fields," answered the small, quaking voice of the child.

The archeologist felt like smacking her forehead for the upsetting question. "Well who do you live with then?"

The girl glanced back and up at the mysterious woman. "Nobody but I always find somewhere to sleep."

Janice inwardly groaned because this just wasn't getting any easier. She lifted her gaze off of the child and saw the beautiful blue seas at the very end of the street. She felt some sense of relief. She decided to stop and pulled the girl closer to her. "Are you hungry?"

Melpomene suddenly beamed at the offer. "Yes." She held up her flatbread in offer.

Janice inspected the flatbread but shook her head then knelt down. "It's not safe to eat that." She pointed out the dirt that was on it. "We'll get something better."

"We shouldn't waste it," argued the girl logically.

The archeologist couldn't help her laugh now. "Very true." She held out her hand for the bread.

The girl nervously handed the bread over and wondered what the stranger was planning to do.

Janice rose up to her full stature. She guided the child to a food vender and asked, "What will you give me for this?"

The vendor eyed the odd woman then inspected the bread himself. He admitted it was a bit dirty but it was edible nonetheless. "I'll give you three apples for it or a bag of figs."

The archeologist figured the figs would be easier to transport compared to apples or bread. "Figs then."

The merchant picked up the thin leather pouch from under his table and handed it over.

Janice handed the item to her small friend. "Thanks." She then got up on the street and realized there weren't as many vendors here except for food vendors. She now slowly walked down the stone sidewalk and studied the various inns and taverns. "Are you familiar with any of these inns, Mel?"

The girl quickly stopped and considered the request. "The Fish Head inn I hear is good."

"Lead the way," agreed the stranger.

Melpomene smiled at the woman's trust in her. "It's not far." She weaved them through people and streets until they came to a stop at a set of stone steps to a tavern. "In here." She pointed at the inn.

Janice dropped her head back some, which caused her hood to fall back a little.

Melpomene memorized the stranger's beautiful features that she finally had a chance to see better but not completely.

Janice tried to read the tavern's name but the syntax was too hard. "Alright." She

lowered her head and ascended the steps with the girl. "I wonder if they serve cheeseburgers and fries," she quietly joked. "And a nice sweet soda... with a touch of vodka." Her stomach grumbled at the purposed menu but it wasn't going to happen.

Melpomene didn't understand much of what Janice said but she giggled anyway. She liked this woman's odd humor because it was so different.

The archeologist realized she was steered directly to the bar where she found herself staring at a gruff looking owner. She cleared her throat and asked, "You have any open rooms?"

"Yea," clipped the innkeeper. He then thought he heard a noise so he peered over the bar to see a kid. He huffed and looked at the stranger. "Cute kid."

"Not mine," argued the archeologist.

"I take it yer hungry too?" muttered the innkeeper.

"Ya got it," joked the archeologist.

The innkeeper grunted and pointed at the empty tables in his tavern. "Sit down. I'll check the rooms."

Janice didn't argue and went through the tables filled with patrons already. She took a quiet spot in the corner and figured it was the safest since she could see the traffic coming through. She smiled at the child that sat across from her.

Melpomene was swinging her feet that never touched the floor. "So what's your name?"

Janice suddenly realized she hadn't told the girl her name at all. "It's Janice."

Melpomene suddenly smiled at the woman's Roman like name. "Are you from the Roman providence?"

What is with that assumption mentally complained the archeologist. "No, I'm from far away."

The girl bent her head down and gazed up at the gentle features hidden under the hood. "Why you wear that?"

Janice Covington sighed and drummed her fingers on the table despite she was enjoying this child. The kid was as chatty as Janice. "Because I don't want anybody to see my face," she logically stated.

"Why?" Melpomene was still smiling. "You have a pretty face."

Melpomene's smile was catching onto Janice's face but she quickly shook it free when the barmaid showed up. The barmaid hadn't asked for orders or anything but she had two large plates of smell good food.

Janice blinked since she wasn't exactly use to this custom.

"What you want to drink?"

The archeologist tried to quickly think of what in the world they drank these days besides diluted wine.

"I want water," spoke up the girl.

"Make that two," clipped the gruff stranger.

The barmaid said nothing and strolled off with her skirt flowing around her.

Janice picked up her wood fork but pointed it at the girl's own plate. "Eat before it gets cold."

Melpomene stopped swinging her feet and did what she was told. As she quickly ate, she noticed how much slower the stranger ate and quite eloquently too. She'd seen such eating habits with the upper class but not from somebody on the streets. This stranger truly perked the child's interest. "So where are you from?"

Janice slightly grinned at the girl's persistence about the topic. "I'm from far, far... faaar away."

Melpomene was so baffled by this. "How many leagues?"

The archeologist was rethinking about saving this child however she really knew the truth. "More than you can count," she teased.

"I can count pretty high too," proclaimed the child between a mouthful of fish.

"How high?" challenged the archeologist, her cocky voice coming out.

"Up to a hundred," proudly answered the girl.

Janice's chest shook with a silent laugh. "That's pretty high." She now lifted her head when the barmaid silently delivered their drinks. She went back to eating her meal.

"You know what else I know?"

"What's that?" Janice had forked some of her fish but waited for the girl's response.

"I know what color the Conqueror's eyes are... I bet you don't."

The archeologist had a wide grin yet she was going to play along. "No, I don't... what color?"

"Blue," declared the girl.

"Ah." Janice nodded a few times as her mind wondered to such a blue pair that she missed. She sighed then asked, "How's the food?"

"It's the best," answered Melpomene.

Janice had to agree, it wasn't too bad after all. She knew it was all fresh and homemade, which couldn't get any better.

"You know what else I know that I bet you don't know?"

The archeologist almost groaned aloud; she had to ask though. "What's that, Mel?"

"I know where there's a secret tunnel into the Conqueror's temple."

Janice almost lost her fork at this information. Her head whipped up and her eyes met Melpomene. "Are you sure?" She hadn't expected this and it could pay off too.

"Yup!" The girl had a bright smile. "I can show you... it's really neat."

"Yea... you'll have to show me," agreed the stranger. "How'd you find it?"

"I was playing along the beach... by the Aegean Sea." Melpomene stopped though then leaned forward as if this was top secret. "I found a cave," she whispered, "and it led to the Conqueror's temple."

"You followed it?" questioned the surprised archeologist.

"Uh huh... it went on for leagues and leagues."

Janice's coy grin toyed with her lips. "It couldn't be that long."

The girl relented because she knew she got a little carried away. "It was long though..."

dark and wet." She shoveled her fork through the last of her food.

Despite the tunnel could be a mislead she figured it wouldn't harm checking it out. It could purpose an easy way to enter the Conqueror's without being detected. Yet Janice had no doubt in her mind that the Conqueror knew of the tunnel and most likely built it as an escape route for emergencies.

Finally the pair of unusual friends finished their meal and Janice guided the girl back up to the bar. Janice eyed the innkeeper at the other end of the bar.

"Look mate, I don't have another room but I thought I did." The keeper folded his hands on the bar. "Try yer luck down at the Jellyfish... tell 'em I sent ya."

The archeologist refrained from sighing. "How much for the meals?"

"Three dinars."

Janice nodded then fished around in her cloak. She produced the money and handed it over to him. She really wished she could figure out the value of a dinar compared to an American dollar but she had no way to gauge it. She peered down at her tiny friend. "You know where Jellyfish is?"

"Yup!" The girl bounced on her feet. "Just two streets over."

"Great." The stranger hurried out of the stuffy tavern and was relieved to step outside. She shifted off to the side of the entrance and needed a minute to breathe before they took off. She watched as a few patrons came up the steps, passed her, and went into the inn.

Melpomene pointed off to her left. "It's right over there."

"Alright," agreed Janice. Just as she was prepared to get moving, a squad of Greek soldiers came around the corner. Janice's heart leapt into her throat and she held her breath. They couldn't know, could they? wondered Janice.

"There they are!" cried out a soldier, who was all too familiar with Janice.

"Shit," hissed the archeologist. "Time to go, Mel." She didn't ask or think about it as she scooped the child up into her arms. "Hold on!" She cried and took a running leap off of the inn's deck. She landed squarely on her feet with bent knees, a precious bundle wrapped around her, and she glimpsed back at the soldiers that were charging after her. Janice didn't wait another heartbeat as she broke off in a desperate run with ten men hot on her trail.

"Get her!" yelled out the lead soldier.

Janice raced as fast as she could and dodged people, animals, and some badly setup vendor stands. Just as she went around a sharp bend there came a slow moving cart that blocked the street completely and the sidewalks were swamped with people.

"Shit," hissed Janice. The soldier's cries rang in her ears and they'd catch her any second if she didn't make a choice. "Hold tight, Mel." She pushed forward then calculated her leap at the right second and she went flying up and into the wagon. She bent her knees to absorb the shock then she glanced back to see some of the soldiers chasing them and taking aim with their spears.

"Holy shit, they're nuts." Janice quickly sprinted down the cart that quickly came to a halt when the owner saw them in it. She took a small jump to land on the edge of the cart then another leap onto the mule's large back. Just then the mule cried out in protest and was prepared to buck when a spear hit his rear.

Janice screamed as she sprung off the mule's back and hit the stone street. She could hear the lead soldier yelling for the cart owner to get the thing out of the way. Janice wasn't about to wait so she broke out into a sprint again down the street. She hurried faster down the street, made a right, and a quick left down an alley and exploded into another busy street. She stopped for a second to catch her breath and mentally thanked Ephiny for getting her in shape.

The archeologist picked up on the soldiers' yells and bustling noises so she kept moving.

"They can't be far! Find them!"

"This way! Hurry up, you idiots!"

Melpomene lifted her head from being buried in Janice's cleavage. She scanned where they were and she was about to tell Janice to make a left but it was too late. "No, not this way," she cried.

Janice came to a skidding stop when there were walls on all three sides of her along with stunned merchants and citizens. She did a fast about face and started for the way out however she was cut short.

The squad of soldiers blocked the exit and the lead soldier stepped forward with his sword out.

Janice walked backwards and held the girl tighter against her burning body.

"Give us the girl and we'll let you go," offered the leader. "We won't harm you."

Janice bitterly laughed. "Sure you will," she spat and backed away some more. She bent down a little and released the girl. "Get behind me, Mel."

"They're gonna hurt us," whimpered the girl.

"Nobody is going to hurt you," quietly promised the stranger. "Stay behind me." She stole a quick glimpse at her gun that was still faithfully with her. She only had so many shots and she'd been saving them for Alti but at this rate it meant this child's life. Janice rose up with her right hand unsheathing her sword.

The crowd of people all gasped at the sight of some strange taking on ten soldiers alone. They all plastered themselves to the wall and tried to pretend like they weren't there, weren't watching.

The leader signaled his men to fan out so that Janice was completely blocked off.

Janice scanned all the fearful faces of the people. A lot of help they are, grumbled Janice to herself. Then it occurred to her that maybe they could be of use. "You're not going to let these soldiers harm this girl, are you?" She yelled to everybody.

The leader soldier stopped his advances on Janice and carefully checked each face of the civilians. He could tell they were far too frightened and it made him grin back at Janice. "It looks like they don't care."

Janice needed something to spark them, to light a fire under some scared asses. "Already one young woman was crucified for speaking out! Now they're willing to take this girl... who's trying to survive!"

Some of the people shifted off the wall at Janice's words.

The archeologist stepped back, her left hand behind and pushing the child back. "Her name is Melpomene! And she has no parents... she has nobody!"

More of the crowd peeled off of the shadowy walls and stepped forward.

The leader soldier saw it but he was not fearful. He instead advanced closer to the stranger and girl.

"If you don't help her," yelled Janice, "if you don't stop these soldiers then who else will?" She spun her sword in warning of a battle. "Who will stop them when they take your children!"

Suddenly it seemed like an explosion of chaos as there was yelling and an onslaught of people racing into the center of the small square.

Janice was amazed how the people attacked the squad of soldiers so bravely. So the mice did have fangs after all. She lost her grin though when the squad leader broke through the chaos and stepped up to Janice in an angry fury.

"You!" The soldier pointed his sword at the small stranger. "Are dead!"

Janice didn't wait and instead engaged him with two running steps. She parried each of his powerful blows and she utilized her faster speed to get around his advances. Just as she came close to disarming him easily she took one of his surprise kicks. Janice hit the ground, her sword several feet away, and her cheek split open from the fall. Her face was still hooded, which actually ruined her view of the soldier bring his sword at her. Yet Janice sensed it and rolled away easily. She remained knelt down, her back to the soldier, her breathing irregular, and a pair of fearful grey eyes on her.

"Janice!" yelled the girl, as she pointed at the soldier raising his killing blow.

The archeologist hastily acted by grabbing her gun, cocking it, and raising her arm up as she twisted around. Her index finger began to pull back on the trigger and she focused her aim but she stopped.

The soldier stood frozen, his eyes to the Gods, and a trail of blood trickling down the corner of his mouth.

Janice's eyes lowered to the shiny pieces of steel that protruded through the soldier's leather chest. Quickly the sword disappeared back through its entrance and the squad leader collapsed to the ground but not without landing on his sword.

The archeologist lowered her gun and learned to breathe again. She hastily tucked her gun back into its home with the hammer put back. She grabbed up Melpomene and tucked her within her cloak as she faced the person that killed the soldier.

A man with a young face that was rather scarred stepped up to them. "Are you okay?"

Janice's breathing was still heavy but she nodded. "Yes, thank you."

The man glanced back to see that the fight was almost over against the soldiers. He turned his head back with a flashy grin. "Nice speech by the way." He enjoyed the reward of a sly grin under the hooded features of the female. "We should go."

Janice wasn't sure who he was but she wasn't going to argue with somebody that saved her. She grabbed Melpomene's hand and picked up her sword that wasn't too

far.

"Hurry," ordered the young man, "there will be more of the Conqueror's men to follow."

"Come here, Mel." Janice bent down and picked up the child again. She then quickly followed the mysterious man that probably thought she was just as odd. She was led through several streets that wound and turned then through a few alleys but finally the man slowed down and made a leap into an abandon home.

The archeologist made a nice jump up too and ducked into the run down building and disappeared out of view from the entranceway. It was dark inside and musty smelling but it was safer than being in the open right now. When her eyes adjusted she saw several old, homeless people curled up in corners of the building.

The young man was by the window, his back against the wall, and his head twisted around the corner to see what was going on. He exhaled heavily and gazed at the stranger and the girl tucked in her cloak. "You put up a good fight."

The stranger huffed and shook her hooded head. "I could have done better."

"Don't berate yourself... he was formable."

Janice tilted her head to one side then quietly stated, "You talk like you know him."

The young man smirked while brushing back his short but dark brown hair. "Not quite but I know sword skills enough." He then tilted his head to the side and asked, "Why do you wear that hood anyway? You'll attract more attention that way."

Janice huffed as she debated his idea. She was attracting attention no matter and it wasn't the kind she wanted. "I'm beginning to think you're right."

The young man glanced out the window again but saw nothing out of place. He moved away from the window but the light from the window helped him to see some of her features yet only so clearly. "Who are you?"

The archeologist figured it didn't matter anymore so she reached up after a grumble.

Melpomene dropped her head back as the stranger began to remove her hood.

"The name's Janice," introduced the archeologist when her hood fell behind her.

The young man's eyes widened in disbelief and he suddenly stumbled backwards, almost falling on his butt. "By... the gods."

"You're not Janice," cried Melpomene, "You're the rebel Gabrielle!"

The archeologist cursed and she hastily bent down so she could face the child. "I'm not Gabrielle," she argued. From the corner of her eye, she saw the young man was carefully listening despite he was shaking his head, his hand on his forehead.

"Yes you are," fought back Melpomene, in a small, choked up voice, "You have to be her. She's the only one that can stop the Conqueror." She hesitantly touched the stranger's cheek. "You've come back from Elysia to save us."

Janice collected the girl's hand into her own. "Mel, I'm not Gabrielle... but..." She hesitated then quietly added, "I'm a close relative of Gabrielle's."

"Then you're gonna save us, right?" whispered the worried girl.

Janice's eyes flickered over to the homeless people in the corners. She shiver at the thought of little Melpomene following the same path these people were. Her heart clenched and her determination was fired with new meaning. She smiled back at the child as she knew that this was no longer about getting back home. This was about stopping the Conqueror and saving this girl along with so many others. "Yes, Mel... I am."

Melpomene glowed with a smile now and her hero worship eyes watched as the small yet legendary woman rose up to her height again.

Janice gauged the young man's reaction since she concluded he must have known Gabrielle somehow.

"Who... who are you?" He stepped closer again and absorbed her features that were identical. "You can't be her... its impossible."

"I'm not," argued Janice.

He vigorously shook his head. "Gabrielle has no relatives... let alone a twin sister."

Janice narrowed her cold eyes at him. "You mean Gabrielle," she emphasized, "had no relatives?"

The young man tensed up and touched his sword hilt at his side.

Janice realized he must have made some error. "You knew Gabrielle, didn't you?"

Melpomene shifted slightly so that she was behind Janice. She could feel the tension

building between them.

Janice held up her right hand while saying, "I'm not going to fight you. We're both on the same side."

The young man slowly released his sword hilt then nodded. He moved away from the wall so that he was closer. A part of him wanted to touch the stranger to confirm that she was real and not some hallucination of his mind. "Gabrielle looks just like you," he breathed in astonishment, his eyes squinted and dazed.

The archeologist heard the wrong tense again and she suddenly became angry. "Gabrielle is dead." When the young man's eyes widened in fear and took a step back, she narrowed her eyes at him. "Or is she?" She stepped around Melpomene and closed in on the man. "Is Gabrielle alive?"

The young man held up his hands then whispered, "Gabrielle was sentenced to the cross, yes." He contained his breath as he quietly finished, "But she's alive, well, and safe."

"What?" roared Janice, who suddenly got up into the man's face. "Gabrielle is alive!"

The young man jumped but not because of Janice. He realized they were in front of the window so he rammed forward, covered Janice's mouth, and spun her away from the window.

The archeologist was slammed against the hard wall between the open doorway and window with the guy's body pressed hard against her.

"Ssssh," he whispered. At Janice's nod, he lowered his hand.

The archeologist stopped breathing because she thought maybe it'd give them away while the soldiers were mulling about just outside. Her eyes lowered to Melpomene nearby. 'Don't move,' she mouthed to the child.

Melpomene nodded several times yet she was petrified and shaking. She saw a soldier coming up the two steps and stopping just outside the doorway.

The soldier had his sword by his side and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark room.

The girl remained still and silent and she was mostly frozen by fear. Her chest heaved up and down.

Janice clenched her hands at her side and prayed to God or Gods that would spare

them.

The young man's sweaty hand clenched his sword hilt so tightly, ready to burst forth.

"See anything up there?" bellowed a deep voice from the street below.

The soldier's head turned sidelong. "Nothin' but a bunch of stinkin' homeless."

"Well let's go, we'll find them."

The soldier turned and stomped down the steps to hit the stone sidewalk.

Melpomene watched him disappear out of her view then her horrified expression lifted to Janice.

The archeologist couldn't take it anymore so she shoved the guy off of her and scooped Melpomene up into her arms. "Its okay, Mel."

The girl's eyes stung against the tears that wanted to break free. She clenched onto Janice's cloak and buried her face into the older woman's warm neck.

"You did just fine, sweetie," crooned the archeologist. "He's gone now." She lifted her gaze from the shaking child and turned to the young man. "You're going to take me to Gabrielle."

His breathing was just settling now and he considered the options. His back straightened up when Janice stepped up closer to him. He'd seen such a fire in green eyes before and he prayed he'd never see it again.

"Fuckin' take me to Gabrielle...now."

The young man pulled himself off the wall then nodded. "I'll take you to her." He held up his right hand and bent around the corner to peer out the entranceway. He saw that all the soldiers are gone so he whispered, "Let's go." He walked out of the abandon house as if he owned it and did that everyday.

Janice kept soothing the frightened child as she followed suit. When they were at street level, she whispered, "Can you walk, Mel?" At the child's nod, she lowered the girl to her feet.

"By the way...." The young man faced the odd pair of friends. "My name is Perdicus."

The little girl smiled, "I'm Melpomene."

"Hi, Melpomene." Perdicus smiled at the girl then slightly lost it when he looked to Janice. "Gabrielle isn't too far from here. Stay close and we should be fine."

"Lead the way then," offered the archeologist.

Perdicus was about to move but stopped and quietly added, "Put the hood back on." He spied that some of the people in the street were pointing at Janice. "Enough people know who Gabrielle are thanks to her speech a moon ago."

"Right," murmured the archeologist. She lifted the hood and her features darkly disappeared. "Let's get outta here."

Perdicus second the idea and briskly walked left down the street. He guided them through many streets that were mostly wide, busy, and some a bit dirty. He then rushed down two alleys and back into three more streets.

Melpomene had a hard time keeping up with the fast moving pair.

Janice easily picked it up and also picked up the child into her arms again. She hid the child in her cloak with exception of her head.

Perdicus dodged into another alley that was clean yet pretty grim on light. He slowed down then finally stopped in front of a wood door. He stepped up, close to it, and gave some kind of unique knock. The door slowly creaked open and he slipped in hastily while saying, "Come on."

Janice didn't need a second invite as she dashed through the door that immediately closed behind her. When she made it safely into the building, she lowered the child beside her and scanned the small living space. There was a makeshift kitchen to the right, a dining table to the left, and straight ahead was a living room with a burning fireplace. Just ahead to the left were a set of wood steps that wound upstairs to another level. Her green eyes followed the stairs up to where she could make out the ledge of the second level.

"Perdicus, how are you?"

Perdicus smiled at the woman that'd opened the door. "I'm great. How are you?"

"I'm getting better... almost over this cold I've had."

"That's great to hear." Perdicus then followed the woman's eyes to the two strangers beside him. He recalled why he was here in the first place. "Cyrene, is Gabrielle awake?"

"Yes, she's upstairs... working on her scrolls." Cyrene gazed up at the second level where there was a flicker of firelight.

"She has some visitors," explained the young man.

"So I see."

Perdicus cleared his throat then said, "Excuse us." He wasn't about to explain everything, especially how this stranger looked and sounded just like Gabrielle. "Follow me," he ordered.

Janice glided through the house, just behind Perdicus, and with Melpomene at her side who was clutching her left hand. As she ascended the stairs her heartbeat became so fast at the realization she was about to meet her ancestor. She was almost sure Melinda's page about fainting was going to come over her.

Janice came to the last step and turned as Perdicus did the same. Her heart was wild, her pulse erratic, and her chest heaving. It was as if she was about to meet the greatest, mythological hero that everybody believed in. Yet Janice's view was abstracted by Perdicus.

Perdicus stepped aside while saying, "Gabrielle, there are some... visitors to see you."

Janice stood rooted to the top of the steps as she stared at a pair of inquisitive green eyes that matched her own. And the best thing she could come up with at that very second was, "Hoolyyyy... shit."

Chapter 5 - Introductions... Again

Gabrielle remained transfixed by the hooded stranger poised at the top of the steps. Her next words though were directed at Perdicus. "She has quite the mouth."

Janice's heaving chest was slowing some. She knew it was a joke, which made her grin. Yet she kept staring at her great ancestor that remained lying back and relaxed on a lounge chair, a scroll and quill in her lap, and spread out over the floor were plenty of other scrolls.

Gabrielle turned her head up to Perdicus. "Did you pick her up at a bar?"

Perdicus couldn't help a quiet laugh as his warm brown eyes switched to Janice. "Not quite." His right hand rested on his sword hilt casually.

Gabrielle returned her attention to the quiet stranger. "And who are you, may I ask?"

The archeologist planned on the shock factor first as she reached up, pulled her hood back, and introduced, "The name's Janice."

Gabrielle's hand that'd been holding her scroll and quill in her lap faltered and the scroll with quill slipped. There was a quiet yet resounding clunk when the scroll met the wood floor. "The gods be damned..." she exhaled in her last surprised breath.

Janice's amused smile appeared on her features. "It seems the mouth runs in the family."

Perdicus was doing his best not to laugh, his teeth holding onto his lower lip.

Gabrielle was still in bewilderment; her green eyes mixed with interest, confusion, and even fear.

However at that point, Melpomene decided to make herself quite known so she bounced up to Gabrielle with a beautiful smile on her face. "Hi, I'm Melpomene. Are you Gabrielle? The rebel leader?"

Gabrielle's forest green eyes lowered to the child and her smile couldn't refuse the girl. "Hi, Melpomene." She touched the girl's messy hair and tried to straighten it out a little while saying, "And yes, I'm Gabrielle."

When Gabrielle's hand left Melpomene's hair, she started to rock on her feet. "I saw you in the square that day... a moon ago."

Gabrielle's features saddened at the girl's confession. "That's not a safe place for you, Melpomene."

"I had to go," debated the girl, "because I heard so many stories about you. I wanted to see the famous Gabrielle." She leaned in closer and quietly asked, "Were you scared... to face the Conqueror?"

Gabrielle also leaned in just to go along with the child. Her whispered response was, "I was but you know what?"

"What's that?"

"Despite how scared I was... I also had faith I'd be okay."

"How did you know?" murmured the girl.

Gabrielle touched her chest, just over her heart. "I knew in here because not even the Conqueror can steal away my faith."

Melpomene had a bright smile at the woman's wisdom. "You were brave," she spoke louder while straightening up. "Janice is just as brave. She stood up against three soldiers to save me."

"Did she?"

Janice remained in her same spot; she studied the inquiring green eyes that flickered up to her for a heartbeat.

"She then spoke out to the people to attack ten other soldiers." Melpomene glanced at Perdicus then back at Gabrielle. "That's how we met Perdicus."

Gabrielle now was able to piece some of the day's events together. It still however didn't explain this stranger's mirror image.

"Are you and Janice going to stop the Conqueror together?" Melpomene put her hands behind her back then rocked on her feet again.

Gabrielle read that the child had every hope in the fact that her and this Janice would challenge the Conqueror together. The faith that Melpomene harbored was rather contagious too. "I think so, Melpomene." Now her gaze rose up to this unusual stranger that felt awkwardly familiar to her.

Perdicus cleared his throat to attract Gabrielle's attention. "I think I will go downstairs to see how Cyrene is." He stepped up near the child and Gabrielle. "Did you want to come down, Melpomene?" His head was bent down.

Melpomene quickly shook her head then firmly stated, "I want to stay with Janice."

Perdicus was grinning and it went wider at Janice. "Well, I'll be downstairs if anybody needs anything." With that, he floated down the steps and saw to Cyrene.

Gabrielle brushed back her bangs then with her arms she pushed herself up better in the lounge chair. She signaled to the other lounge chair and offered, "Please sit, Janice. I think we have... a lot to talk about."

The archeologist dipped her head in agreement then took the lounge chair yet she made sure her boots never touched the end of the chair. She wasn't about to dirty the warm, soft chair. "Mel, you want to sit with me?"

Melpomene quickly agreed by crawling up into the lounge chair then wiggling into a comfortable spot between the arm and Janice.

"Okay?" gently probed the archeologist to the child.

Melpomene's response was a content smile then she rested her head against Janice's chest.

Gabrielle cleared her throat then leaned forward to play with her skirt because she was uneasy about this situation. "I'm not sure where we should start."

Janice tilted her head as grin formed. "The start is usual the best."

Gabrielle couldn't agree any better so she waited for that start from Janice.

"I just wish I knew where the start is," muttered Janice, who grunted at her own words. "This won't be easy to explain... or even believe."

Gabrielle swallowed yet she slowly nodded. "I have seen many things in my lifetime. And it seems I still have yet to see many more."

Janice was already enjoying this conversation. "We'll start with how I am... well look just like you."

Gabrielle quietly chuckled while adding, "And sound."

"And sound," agreed the archeologist. "I'm actually..." She faltered and rubbed her neck, which caused her to glimpse down at Melpomene. She noticed how the girl was very tuned in and her eyes filled with reverence for Janice. Janice dropped her hand to her lap and quickly finished what she started to say. "I'm from the future and I'm your descendant."

Gabrielle inhale deeply and held it for some heartbeats. She gradually released it in a decrescendo of whirling emotions. "Well... that wasn't... what I expected but I think I can handle it."

The archeologist quietly laughed and despite her past assumptions about her ancestors, she was beginning to reevaluate.

"If you're from the... future," tried Gabrielle, "How did you end up here?"

"That's the interesting part." Janice swept her fingers through her short, blond hair then proceeded to answer. "I'm sure you know Alti?"

Gabrielle's green eyes went three shades dark into a cold hunter. "The Conqueror's shaman... I know of her. I take it she somehow brought you here."

"Yes, with the Conqueror's scepter."

Gabrielle pondered what scepter Janice spoke of then it occurred to her. "I have seen that scepter." Her hazy green eyes centered on Janice again. "When I stood up against the Conqueror... it was positioned beside her throne. I didn't realize somebody could time travel with it."

"I don't think anybody knows of it... except for Alti."

"So it would seem as the Conqueror would utilize such a power if she knew she had it."

Janice ran her tongue along her back molars then she humorously stated, "And it's sitting right under her nose."

Gabrielle briefly smirked yet she lost it as her earlier wondering thoughts returned to her. "I thought maybe you were an Amazon." She indicted Janice's garb.

"No, I'm definitely not." Janice studied her leathers that showed now that her cloak had fallen off to the sides. "After Alti kidnapped me, she dumped me in the Amazon Nation."

Gabrielle's expression filled with understanding. "I'm surprised they took you in." She shifted in her chair from being a little uncomfortable. "They're known for being selective and secretive."

"Really?" The archeologist was remotely taken aback. "They were great hosts to me."

Gabrielle slightly nodded then explained, "They were once a great race, more superior than many until they faced the Conqueror and Alti. Since the last great battle between the Amazons and the Conqueror they've pretty much disappeared... they're almost a myth now."

Despair filled Janice at hearing her ancestor's words.

"Who is their queen now?"

"Cyane," answered Janice, her interest peaked when Gabrielle had a shadowy grin.

"I didn't think Queen Cyane was still alive. She was one of the Conqueror's greatest adversaries."

Janice huffed at this then remarked, "Now you are."

Gabrielle sighed heavily while lowering her gaze to the floor. "I wouldn't say I'm the greatest." Her head lifted again. "I am an adversary though."

"From what I hear," disputed Janice, "you're already a legend."

"To be a legend requires doing something great, which I never have... I've only spoken out."

The archeologist's eyes were light from enjoyment of this debate. "And yet nobody else in this godforsaken world would even dare think about speaking out much less do it."

Gabrielle wasn't pleased with Janice's assessment but she had no other arguments either.

"How did you get off that damn cross anyway?" brought up Janice.

Melpomene shifted when she heard Janice ask the question that was on everybody's lips.

Gabrielle's attitude shifted into something more pleasing. "I am no fool. I knew what the costs would be for speaking out against the Conqueror."

The archeologist had slit eyes but her lips curled into a fine grin. "You planned on her sentencing you to the cross. You knew somebody on the inside."

Very slowly Gabrielle nodded. "However I wasn't expecting to have my legs shattered." Her eyes lowered to her legs, to where her skirt stopped just above her mid thighs. "This," gesturing with her hand, "was a minor setback."

Janice still gazed at the bruised and somewhat red legs. "Are you healing okay?"

While shaking and sighing at once, Gabrielle replied, "The healer has told me I will always walk with a limp." She swallowed against the old, stinging emotions from when the healer had told her of the news. She vowed to not let it steer her from her mission or even slow her down.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle," comforted the archeologist.

Gabrielle pulled back her emotions then shook her head. "No, I am happy because I am still breathing." She paused then her convicting voice vowed, "So long as I am

breathing I will fight the Conqueror."

"Do you have plans to stop the Conqueror?" urged Janice.

Gabrielle, the famous rebel to all, had a heartbreaking expression. "I've been making plans since she destroyed my village. I'm constantly battling her." She directed with her hand to the scrolls on the floor. "These scrolls are my words against the Conqueror."

Janice gazed down at them yet she couldn't read any of the syntax. "What are they about?"

Gabrielle was about to respond but she didn't when she saw Cyrene at the top of the stairs.

"I thought maybe you both would like some tea," offered Cyrene. She first offered a pottery mug to Gabrielle then came to Janice.

The archeologist blinked but accepted the tea. If Cyrene was at all shocked by her resemblance to Gabrielle, she said nothing about it or showed it.

"Cyrene, this is Janice."

Cyrene warmly smiled at the archeologist. "It's nice to meet you, Janice."

Janice mirrored the smile back as she cupped the warm mug. "You as well, Cyrene."

Cyrene lowered her gaze to the child snuggled between Janice and the chair.

Melpomene instantly knew as she beamed a smile. "I'm Melpomene."

Cyrene chuckled as her smile transformed into a grin. "It's nice to meet you too, Melpomene. Would you like anything to eat or drink?"

The girl honestly considered it then shook her head. "Maybe later... if that's okay?"

"Of course." Cyrene straightened up while brushing back her salt and pepper hair that'd fallen forward. "Just give a yell if you ladies need anything else." With that, she went back to the stairs and disappeared down them.

Gabrielle sipped on her tea but her features were amusing at seeing how Janice stared at Cyrene's vanishing form. She lowered the mug to her lap and warmly teased, "She's seen it all in her day."

The archeologist broke from her staring and shot a grin at her ancestor. "I've noticed." She took a sip of her warm tea and was amazed at how nice it was. The warm liquid flowed down her throat and heated her belly. "So you were telling me about your scrolls?"

Gabrielle had taken another sip of her tea but she nodded. After she swallowed the flavorful tea, she explained her scrolls to Janice. "Many of the scrolls are the reforms that Conqueror needs to make. Others are about her conquest for Greece... the tales about her exploits. Then I scribe opinions about her new laws. I've even done a few comical plays about her, which I know is her least favorite."

Janice quietly laughed between what Gabrielle told her and that grin on her ancestor's face.

"Then there is the poetry I compose to give the people faith and hope." Gabrielle tilted her head as she considered what else she'd written over time. "I even write true stories about the Conqueror's childhood."

The archeologist was puzzled by this. "Why?"

Gabrielle inspected her mug's contents but she grinned up at Janice. "The people believed that the Conqueror was immortal... or a god. They believed her father was Ares himself, which I disproved." She huffed. "On her conquest for Greece she came against her father, who was a warlord."

Janice narrowed her eyes and quietly asked, "What happened?"

Gabrielle played with the half full mug in her hands. "She killed him." Her eyes lifted to Janice. "I wrote the childhood stories to show she is just as mortal as we are."

"How... how did you find out about her childhood?" Janice was absolutely puzzled yet amazed. She lifted her mug to take a drink while her ancestor responded.

Gabrielle smirked. "Cyrene is the Conqueror's mother."

Janice gagged on her warm tea and covered her mouth to keep it in her mouth. She didn't feel like upsetting Melpomene with such a mess. She finally worked the warm brew down then removed her hand. "That's her mother?" she loudly shot back.

The bard smiled at her descendant. "Yes." She drank the last of her tea then figured she should explain more. "After the Conqueror attacked my village I had nobody left; my parents were dead and my sister taken into slavery. I survived only because I was chased into my father's barn. I hid there until my hunter left but he made sure to torch the barn in hopes to burn me alive." She faltered and studied her bruised legs for a

heartbeat. "By the time I escaped the barn the raid was over, my parents were dead, and my sister gone."

Janice couldn't finish her tea now. She leaned to her right and was able to place the mug on the floor. When she straightened up her ancestor continued her story.

"Everything was gone...." Gabrielle's hallow eyes flickered with images of her childhood. "I wandered the country side and ended up in Amphipolis but I didn't know it at the time that it was the Conqueror's home. I was hungry, wet from recent storms, dirty, and had some burns from the barn fire." She shoved her memories away as her attention focused on Janice again. "I went into the marketplace desperate for food so I tried to steal some flatbread."

Janice clenched her jaw when she heard this. It was an echo of Melpomene's life in many ways. Her chest constricted against her emotions as she listened to the rest.

"The merchant caught me of course but before he could haul me off to the constable Cyrene stepped in. She happened to be there picking up food for her tavern. She paid the merchant double what the flatbread was worth then she took me back with her." Gabrielle finally smiled as fonder memories came to her. "After that she pretty much adopted me as her child."

"How did you both end up here?"

The bard tilted her head then rested it against the back of the chair. "When I grew of age I told Cyrene I wanted to stop the Conqueror... her daughter. We argued for a good moon but she realized she couldn't sway me. She also refused to let me do this alone because she wasn't going to lose another daughter."

Janice had a smile but it was mixed with warmth and sadness. "So you both moved here... to Corinth."

Gabrielle faintly nodded then whispered, "Into the belly of the beast."

Janice quietly grunted at the joke. She glimpsed down at her young friend and saw the she was fast asleep, it made her smile.

"What are your plans, Janice?" Gabrielle lifted her head off the chair and waited.

Slowly amused green eyes rose up to Gabrielle. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

The rebel huffed and stated, "I have been planning most my life how to rid of the Conqueror."

"And have you figured out how to do that?"

"Not all the details," confessed the bard, "however I know the ultimate solution."

Janice's eyes narrowed when she heard Gabrielle's voice chilled for the first time.
"What is that?"

"Assassinating the Conqueror."

Gabrielle's words hung in the thick air between the descendant and ancestor for many heartbeats.

Janice exhaled a shaky breath after completely absorbing Gabrielle's desired plan.
"Maybe assassination isn't the answer, Gabrielle." Not when I know the Conqueror's descendant like I do, inwardly added Janice.

Gabrielle suddenly bitterly laughed at the archeologist's ridiculous words. "What else could there be?"

"Maybe the Conqueror needs to be reformed."

The rebel quickly leaned forward so that her eyes had Janice locked in place. "Tell me Janice, what tyrants do you know have ever reformed?"

The archeologist's historical mind flipped through every tyrant in history. Finally she came up blank with any such tyrant.

Gabrielle knew she'd won her case so she rested back in her chair. "The only solution for tyrants is death so they can pass into Tartarus."

Janice sighed and ran the facts through her mind. She began speaking while her mind worked this out. "You have to look at it from both sides... think about how big the Conqueror's Realm is? If she is assassinated then who is to take her place?"

The bard didn't like this line of thinking or questioning because a long time ago she'd already resolved to assassinate the ruler.

"The Conqueror brings order to these lands whether or not it's good or bad order. If she is killed then there will be chaos."

"No revolution is complete without chaos, Janice. I rather take my chances as there are none worse than the Conqueror."

Janice closed her eyes at her ancestor's bitter anger for the ruler. She knew Gabrielle had every right and she knew too she'd feel the same way. Yet she knew Melinda and she knew the heart that rested within Melinda. There had to be some remnants of it in the Conqueror too because nobody is ever born that way.

Gabrielle dipped her head and tried to judge why Janice was so upset by this. She quickly calculated all of Janice's factors then it struck her blindly. "You know the Conqueror's descendant."

The archeologist opened her eyes and met Gabrielle's gaze. "Yea... we're friends." She tried to control her surfacing feelings about Melinda. "The same day we met was when Alti showed up." She turned her head and she became dazed by the fire in the fireplace. "Melinda saved my life... protected me."

The rebel now understood why it was so hard for Janice to accept that the Conqueror must be assassinated. Somewhere in Janice's heart she truly believed that some piece that made up Melinda was hidden in the Conqueror. "Janice," she whispered, "the Conqueror and Melinda are two different people."

"Maybe," murmured the archeologist. She rotated her head back. "Maybe not."

Gabrielle ached for her descendant as she wished there was something better than this. "If there was a way to reform the Conqueror... I would take it." She bit her lower lip then gently whispered, "There is no other way."

Janice combed her fingers through her hair in hopes it'd brush away her emotions too. "I know," she half heartedly accepted. She buried her dull ache and reminded herself how this would save so many people. "I think I know how we can assassinate the Conqueror."

Gabrielle straightened up at her descendant's words because it wasn't what she expected. She never dreamed of accomplishing her quest anytime soon but she never strayed from it. "What do you have in mind, Janice?"

Janice forced her body to relax as she laid out some ideas to her ancestor.

Gabrielle carefully listened to each idea and only made a few suggestions or offered what she could to help. She was amazed as much as concerned about all the variables in the plan but there was no way around it. She could tell that Janice would be determined to see the plans through and not stop until the Conqueror was dead.

"The only thing is for any of this to work, Alti must also be stopped."

The bard nodded at the archeologist's logical conclusion. "Alti protects the Conqueror

as much as the Conqueror protects her. You will have to kill them both for this to work." She read Janice's glowing eyes carefully. "Are you sure you can do this, Janice? Can you really assassinate the Conqueror?"

"Yes," vowed Janice, "I don't care what it fuckin' takes. This world cannot keep going like this."

"You could be killed," gently reminded the rebel. "You could play the martyr."

The archeologist shook her head as her teeth gritted against her bubbling emotions. "It's a small price... nobody would even notice." She grinned at her joke despite her ancestor wasn't but she quickly added, "Besides, the people will only think I am you. If they see you're still alive after then you're a god in their eyes."

"I'm not sure I would like that type of power over the people," confessed the bard.

"Yet you can utilize it," offered Janice, "to bring peace before the chaos begins."

"I'm not a ruler," debated Gabrielle.

"Neither was the Conqueror," reminded the archeologist. She saw her ancestor was about to fight back again so she held up her hand to stop her. "Time will tell... this may not even work right."

"Have faith," warmly offered Gabrielle, "because it comes in many forms."

Janice's gaze lowered to the sleeping bundle pressed against her. "Yes... yes, it does."

"We should get some rest." Gabrielle still cupped her now empty mug.

The archeologist had a coy smile. "I'm actually a little hungry."

The bard pressed her lips tightly together to stop her laughter. She lowered her head and cleared her throat before looking up again. "I'm sure Cyrene can make something." She saw Janice about to make a fuss so she cut her off ahead of time. "Cyrene loves to cook for people."

"She must since she had a tavern." The archeologist peered down at Melpomene.

Gabrielle twisted in her seat and pointed just behind herself. "My bedroom is in there, I have two beds if you want to put her to bed."

"I think I better," agreed the stranger. She carefully maneuvered around until she had the sleeping girl in her arms and she was up on her feet. Janice went into the candlelit

room and figured the empty bed must be the one without the scroll satchel on it. She lowered Melpomene onto the bed.

The child stirred awake and was completely confused but she settled when she saw Janice unlacing her worn boots. "Janice?"

The archeologist smiled at the small voice as she glimpsed down at the child's sleepy features. "Come on, time to get some rest." She placed the boots on the floor and said, "Get under the covers, Mel."

The child did as she was told and crawled under them. She then grabbed Janice's hand when she was straightening up. "You're not going to bed too?"

Janice bent back over the girl. "I'm going downstairs to talk to Gabrielle, Perdicus, and Cyrene." She carefully brushed back Melpomene's bangs. "You'll be okay?"

The girl slowly nodded but quietly asked, "Will you stay with me tonight?"

The archeologist's chest shook with a silent laugh. "I will," she promised. "Did you want dinner?"

"No, I'll eat in the morning...?"

"You promise?" Janice gave the girl a very inquisitive look.

"Double promise." Melpomene included a beautiful smile.

"Okay." Janice organized the blankets over the girl. "Go to sleep. I'll be up soon." After her own promise, she went into her full stature and quietly slipped out of the low lit room.

Gabrielle had just gotten up from her chair after organizing her scrolls on the floor. She'd had quite the mess earlier but now they were all piled on top of each other. She picked up her walking stick on the other side of the chair and between her arm muscle and weak leg muscle she was able to stand.

Janice wanted to help so much yet she clenched her hands at her sides to stop her instincts. She knew that her ancestor mostly likely was stubborn like her and would refuse the help. "Does it hurt?"

The bard flashed an assuring smile. "It always will but life goes on." She slowly started for the steps but she offered, "You can go first, Janice... it takes me awhile."

The archeologist shook her head then respectfully held her hand out to the steps. "I

have all the time in the world."

The rebel grinned then began the painful descent of the stairs but she made it to the bottom just like every time in the past.

Cyrene dazzled a smile at the pair coming from upstairs. "Care to join us?"

Periducus turned in his seat and smiled at seeing the two blond beauties approaching them in the dining area. He got up and pulled out a seat for Gabrielle when she was close enough.

"Come sit, Janice." Cyrene patted the chair on her side of the rectangular table.

"Thank you," answered the archeologist as she took her seat.

Cyrene's eyes went to slits. "What happened here?" She touched the archeologist's cheek that had a blood stain and a cut.

"Ah sorry." Janice tried to wipe the dried blood away, which only caused the wound to reopen. "I got it when I was fighting that soldier."

Cyrene let out a huge sigh then sprung up from her chair. "Stop touching it." She walked into the kitchen to retrieve a wet cloth for cleaning. When she returned, she loomed over Janice with her left hand tilting Janice's head back.

Janice remained still as Cyrene fussed over cleaning the wound. Her eyes flickered over to Gabrielle with a plea for help.

The bard shrugged then teased, "Don't fight her, Janice... she'll win."

"Must run in the family." The words rolled out of Janice's mouth before she could stop them. She just wanted to hit herself at that point, her shoulders slumped and her eyes closed.

Perdicus tensed at Janice's remark.

Cyrene hesitated but she continued her administration of the wound.

Janice finally cracked her eyes open some only to be regarded by very soft blue eyes. She was momentarily lost in them but she whispered, "I'm sor-"

"No," murmured back Cyrene, "there's no reason to be sorry." She pulled back with her rag hand lowering to her side. "I'm rather proud that I'm so stubborn... it's what's kept us alive." With that, she was gone.

Janice watched Cyrene go into the kitchen again. She wondered who Cyrene was referring to when she said us. She broke away from her thinking when Gabrielle spoke.

"Cyrene-

"I'm already on it, sweetie." Cyrene held up her frying pan with a wide grin.

The bard laughed and teased, "Am I that easy to read?" She hesitated then joked, "Don't answer that."

Cyrene chuckled then busied herself with getting some meals prepared for the young group.

"Perdicus," Gabrielle saw him look at her, "Janice is my descendant."

Perdicus was clearly bewildered as he glanced between Gabrielle and Janice for further help.

Finally Janice blurted out, "I'm from the damn future, man."

Perdicus open his mouth, closed it, and opened it again then sputtered, "How?"

Janice smirked as her husky voice teased, "Well you see there's this thing in nature called conception and what happens is-

"Alti," cut in the bard, "she brought Janice here." Her voice held a note of tolerance for Janice's smart answer yet she couldn't refuse her own grin.

Perdicus rotated his head back to Gabrielle after forcing himself from staring at Janice. "She must have some plan if she brought Janice here."

"She does," informed the archeologist and when she saw both curious features turned at her, she decided to explain. "Alti's hope is that I'll face the Conqueror and if I do then most likely the Conqueror will kill me." She waited a beat, shrugged then mildly stated, "Alti wants my karma."

"You mean our karma," corrected the rebel leader.

The stranger huffed and nodded. "Pretty much."

"Why?" charged on the bard.

Janice quickly realized some of the mistake she made in telling her ancestor about Alti's motives. She her mind quickly worked out a truthful but not complete explanation. "Our karma is from the Light... we're self sacrificing."

"That makes sense but Alti feeds off of weak souls and certain emotions," debated Perdicus.

The archeologist smirked at the man then torment, "Smart boy, Perdy but you forget that Alti also feeds off of souls from the Dark and Light. She'll take anything she can get."

"The Conqueror is a Dark soul," tried Gabrielle, "and I'm from the Light." She shook her head then asked, "Wouldn't she fear me?"

"She does," agreed Janice, "She fears that you could undermine the Conqueror."

Gabrielle quickly turned to Perdicus. "Alti set me up I bet."

"What do you mean?" queried Janice.

"People that are sentenced to the cross never have their legs shattered," informed Perdicus. "The sentence also has never been carried out immediately in public."

"That's out of character for the Conqueror," further explained Gabrielle. "It was my hope to make it to the dungeons before my sentence was carried out."

"So you could escape," clarified the archeologist.

"Yes," started Gabrielle, "I know some people that work the dungeons."

Janice narrowed her eyes. "How?"

"Its amazing what bribery can do," joked the rebel leader.

The archeologist grunted and peered up when Cyrene came over with plates of foods. Her plate was absolutely full and had the most delicious smell ever. Her stomach answered the call of food with a loud rumble.

Perdicus smirked. "Well the appetite runs in the family."

Cyrene came back from the kitchen again but with her plate and Perdicus's. She maneuvered into her chair beside Janice then stated, "The Conqueror will be even more out of character once she hears of Janice."

"She won't hear," argued Gabrielle.

Cyrene picked up her fork yet hesitated and eyed her adopted child. "You know, as well as I do, that the Conqueror has eyes and ears everywhere." She leaned forward then whispered, "Even in our own walls."

The bard dipped her head down because she knew Cyrene was right. "Let her try, Cyrene."

Cyrene exhaled deeply then decided not to argue anymore so that it wouldn't spoil dinner. She began eating along with everybody else. "So what are the plans?" she brought up.

Descendant and ancestor exchanged worried features about whether to tell the Conqueror's mother. This wasn't easy and Gabrielle hadn't truly considered Cyrene's reactions to such a proposal as she'd never mentioned it in the past. Gabrielle knew it was up to her to explain it since Cyrene was very much her mother.

"We plan to assassinate the Conqueror."

Perdicus stopped eating, his hooded eyes on Cyrene.

Cyrene's fork stopped from pushing the feta and olives around then started it again. "When?" she murmured softly. Her grey-blue eyes finally rose up to Gabrielle.

"As soon as we can," admitted the bard. "Cyrene, I-

"No," stopped the Conqueror's mother, "I can longer watch my child destroy so many lives." She swallowed hard while her eyes burned from rising emotions. "How will you do this?"

"First we need to talk to the council and have them agree."

Cyrene mutely nodded.

"If you get the council's agreement, then what?" persisted Perdicus.

Gabrielle reeled into an explanation of her rough plans. Janice silently listened despite she had a few extra ideas in mind too. This would not be easy on any level, especially emotional and certainly most taxing on Janice and Cyrene. Finally the talk about the plans slowed down then Gabrielle explained some of her rebel faction to Janice, which greatly interested the archeologist.

"Each head council member has a personal guard," clarified Gabrielle, "and Perdicus

is mine."

"Then who's is Cyrene?"

Gabrielle pushed her empty plate away and picked up the clay mug of water that Cyrene had gotten her earlier. "Another young man by the name of Joxer."

Janice's eyes widened at this news. "Is he about Perdicus's height, short black hair, beady black eyes, and acts like bumbling idiot?"

The rebel leader tilted her head. "Yes to everything but the bumbling. He's quite an excellent fighter."

The archeologist was completely in doubt about something like that.

"Many of the guards are from the Conqueror's army. Like Perdicus, he was forced into the Conqueror's army when they came to Potidaea. He had to serve a minimum of twenty seasons before he was released," explained Gabrielle.

"You two have known each other since childhood?" inquired Janice.

Perdicus nodded his head slowly. "Gabrielle and I are childhood friends." He glimpsed at the bard then back at Janice. "Her parents had betrothed us at a young age."

Janice was almost positive her jaw hit her lap. Now the tidbit she'd read in one of Gabrielle's scrolls made sense about Gabrielle's husband being killed by Callisto. She knew Perdicus's name was familiar but it'd never made sense until now. "Why aren't you two married?" she popped out before it was too late.

Perdicus saw how Gabrielle hung her head and stared at her empty plate. He had to answer for them both. "Things change, Janice... a lot."

The archeologist went silent now that she brought up plenty of old wounds tonight.

Cyrene easily broke up the uneasy silence by saying, "We should get some rest." She turned her attention to Perdicus. "Why don't you stay here tonight...?"

"If that's okay?"

Gabrielle patted her friend's knee under the table. "I think it's safest... especially with Janice and Melpomene here."

The young man conceded with an agreeing head. He then stood and collected the

empty plates around the table.

The bard gazed at her descendant. "You'll stay up in my room tonight?"

Janice softly smiled at the invite. "Yes, thank you."

The rebel reflected the smile back then gazed back at Cyrene. "Will you be up early tomorrow?"

"Now Gabrielle," Cyrene laughed.

"I know, silly question."

"What do you need, sweetie?" Cyrene leaned back in her chair and briefly watched Perdicus sit back down with them.

"I'll need a message delivered to the council members."

Cyrene quickly nodded. "I'll take care of it."

"Great." Gabrielle now rested back in her chair, her hands folded on her full stomach. "I'll write it tonight and leave it down here for you."

Cyrene merely nodded, her thoughts wondering off to the future.

Gabrielle stifled a yawn.

"Come on." Janice was in agreement about rest since it'd been a busy, long day for her. She got up just as Gabrielle did the same.

"Do you need help, Gabrielle?" politely offered Perdicus.

The rebel leader was a few steps away, towards the steps. She simply threw him a look for her answer then proceeded to the steps.

Perdicus, the guard, shrugged and gazed back at Cyrene.

Cyrene chuckled and teased, "She has my stubborn streak."

"Cyrene, I'm afraid to tell you but she's had that long before you."

"I heard that," called an annoyed voice from part of the way up the stairs.

"I resent that too," hollered the descendant.

The older woman softly chuckled at the pair. "I believe you're right." She got up and said, "I think I'll prepare for bed."

Perdicus only nodded as he understood what Cyrene was saying to him. He waited there at the table to let Cyrene to some private time.

Gabrielle took a seat at the foot of her lounge chair. "Janice, can you get my scroll satchel from the bedroom? I'm worried I'll be too loud." She indicated her walking stick in her right hand.

The archeologist said nothing yet slipped away into the low lit room. She made out the outline of the satchel bag and silently lifted it. She glanced over at Melpomene and saw she was contently asleep.

The rebel leader smiled a thank you when she had her satchel. She rested it up on the lounge chair and dug through it. She discovered a blank scroll and she picked up her quill from the stack of scrolls on the floor. After unrolling the scroll in her lap, she slowly composed a message to the council members.

Janice meanwhile gathered her ancestor's scrolls on the floor and despite she was curious to read them, she knew she couldn't without Melinda's help. Instead she neatly tucked them inside of the scroll satchel.

"Thank you," murmured the bard between her writing.

Janice scooted the satchel out of the way then sat beside her ancestor. She studied the neatly written words on Gabrielle's scroll but she couldn't make sense of the syntax. With frustration she sighed and stared down at her lap to wait for Gabrielle to finish.

The bard paused and glimpsed at her descendant's frustrated features. "What is it?"

The archeologist stopped grinding her teeth for a moment to actually respond. "I can't read what you're writing."

The dumbfounded bard stared at her descendant as if she was waiting for a laugh for a joke. "You're serious?"

Janice pulled her head away from Gabrielle's surprised gaze. "My friend... Xena's descendant she can read Greek syntax but I can only pick out pieces."

"You cannot read any of this?" tried Gabrielle as she tilted the scroll to the archeologist.

The stranger's eyes squinted as she glazed over the unfamiliar language then she paused and pointed at one word. "I know that says sheep." She then furrowed her eyebrows as she considered why her ancestor was writing about sheep.

Gabrielle sensed the stranger's puzzlement so she slightly smiled. "I write in code whenever I send out messages to the council or other members. I don't need the Conqueror discovering my plans."

Janice was clearly impressed. "Has the Conqueror ever broken your code?"

"Not to my knowledge," breathed out Gabrielle, "however I try to change it some each moon." She lowered the scroll back into her lap. "The council members are required to memorize the code and code changes each moon then the code decipher is burned."

"Wow," murmured the archeologist. "How can you trust that they do this?"

"The code is changed during our meetings. They memorize it then I burn it myself," informed the rebel leader. "I trust my council members but I do it in front of them so that nobody will ever have room to question motives."

Janice knew she'd never given her ancestor any credit however she was rethinking her judgments of her ancestor.

Gabrielle returned to scribing but she quietly asked, "If you cannot write Greek what do you write?"

"English," answered the archeologist yet she knew Gabrielle would be confused easily. "It's derived from the Germanic language... the people north of the Rhine in the Norselands. Latin also influenced it greatly."

Gabrielle stopped writing, lowered her quill, and lifted her head to Janice. "Do you only speak English then?"

"Yes, but...." Janice's brow was tightly woven and she was mystified. "Am I speaking Greek?"

The rebel leader opened her mouth to reply with explanation yet she had none.

The archeologist laughed and played with her short hair. "This is really... really fuckin' weird."

Gabrielle chuckled and switched back to her scroll to finish it.

"I'm just not going to even ask," muttered the archeologist while she patiently waited

for her ancestor to finish her message. She then noted Gabrielle had finished so she offered, "I can take it downstairs."

The bard had finished rolling it up then tying the thong in place. "I can get-"

"You see, Gabrielle through the generations the stubbornness has gotten stronger." Janice yanked the scroll from her ancestor and popped up. "So has the temper," she muttered and went for the steps.

The bard was shaking her head but she had a smile. She picked up her scroll satchel then slowly rose up to her painful, hunched stance. She made the slow journey into the bedroom, sat on her bed after lowering her satchel to the floor, and she bent down to work at her boots.

The archeologist slipped into the room and saw that Gabrielle was preparing for bed.

"Do you want a sleeping shift?" whispered Gabrielle.

Janice shook her head. "No, I don't want to dirty up something clean." She grinned then added, "Besides I'm use to sleeping in my clothes." She reached up to her neck to work on the feather clasp that held her cloak around her.

"You can take a bath tomorrow," softly offered the bard. She got up and went to the small dresser near the foot of her bed. She collected a nightshift from the top drawer then slowly maneuvered her clothes off and her shift over her body.

Janice sighed at the thought of a warm bath plus it'd probably be good for Melpomene too. As she thought more about it, it wouldn't be bad to get the child new clothes in the market tomorrow before the bath. After a minute or two though, Janice had her cloak removed, her sword in scarab off, and her boots off too. She left those items on the floor near the end of the bed, slightly tucked under so nobody would trip on them but she made sure to free her gun. Finally, Janice came to the head of the bed, placed her gun on the nightstand between the two beds, and easily crawled in behind the girl.

The rebel leader made her limping way to the bed and sat on it, propped her walking stick against the nightstand, and pulled the sheets back to get in too.

Melpomene stirred some yet she settled down again when larger, stronger arms pulled her in against a warm body. She slipped back into a much sweeter dreamscape than she often had in the past.

Janice didn't know why she'd done it but it'd felt so natural to place a tender kiss to the girl's head. She forced her mind to relax much like she always did when she went to bed. If her mind went over the day's events, the past, or anything in the future then

she'd lay awake all night. Her thoughts slowed then cut off and finally she discovered a peaceful sleep.

Gabrielle's eyelids were heavy yet she kept staring at the two strangers in the other bed. She was still absorbing all that'd happened today and it was a lot to grasp. She did have a new sense of hope and that deep determination returned to her that'd been originally shattered by the Conqueror a moon ago. The Fates had brought Janice to her, not Alti, and she knew this would forever change her.

Chapter 6 - Preparations

Janice woke up with a startle but her rapid heartbeat eased again when she recalled where she was now. Her eyes adjusted and she finally took in the simply bedroom thanks to the light streaming through the window from the opposite side. Melpomene was no longer wrapped in her arms and Gabrielle wasn't in her bed on the other side.

The archeologist stretched then rolled her body out of bed. She put on her boots first but it seemed like a long process since she had to yawn in between it. She strapped her gun back into its home on her right boot then she put the sword in scarab on her back. Janice straightened out the bed quickly but left her cloak on the foot deciding she wouldn't need it right now.

Gabrielle heard the footfall descending the stairs so she directed her smile at the sleepy form of her descendant. "How'd you sleep?"

The stranger let out a grumble of complaint, came to the table, and flopped in the empty chair by her ancestor.

The rebel smirked and patted Janice's closest knee. "That well huh?"

"The damn beds are so hard," whined the archeologist.

Gabrielle stared at her then stated, "Our beds are relatively soft compared to some."

The archeologist opened her mouth to refute it but she decided it just wasn't worth arguing about this morning. Instead she turned her head to the bright face of a young girl. "Good morning, Mel."

"Hi, Janice," greeted the chipper girl. "I slept really well."

The archeologist grunted, stifled a yawn, and then remarked, "That's because you were sleeping on me."

Gabrielle had a wide grin then teased, "That was nice of you."

Janice's tongue ticked one of her back molars.

The bard knew it was best to change topics and hastily at that. She wasn't a much better morning person. "Cyrene is making breakfast already."

Janice gazed into the kitchen and saw indeed that the woman was doing just that. "I have fabulous timing," she muttered.

It wasn't long before the group was happily eating a wonderful, light breakfast. Cyrene joined them as well however Perdicus wasn't there as he'd left some time in the early morning just before dawn. At the end of breakfast, Janice informed everybody that she and Melpomene would be taking a walk down to the market to get some items.

Gabrielle insisted they wait until a guard arrived to escort them. At first Janice refused but under Gabrielle's formable tongue, she caved in and conceded. After breakfast Janice was leaning against the table, drumming her fingers on the table, listening to Cyrene and Gabrielle talk, and impatiently waiting for this guard to show up.

Cyrene's right hand suddenly shot out across the table and captured Janice's drumming fingers.

Janice jumped at the fast movement and she flushed at Cyrene's obvious annoyance. "Sorry," she mumbled.

Cyrene gave an assuring grin then continued chatting away with Gabrielle.

The archeologist let out a gigantic sigh and this time she was smacked on the knee by Gabrielle. "Jesus Christ!" she bellowed and shot up from the chair in frustration. "I'm gonna get my cloak." She stomped over to the steps but hotly stated, "And if this damn guard isn't here when I come down then I'm going." She loudly proceeded up the steps.

Cyrene carefully watched the strange then she grinned at Gabrielle. "She's your descendant huh?"

"I'm starting to wonder too," joked the bard, who was still absorbing that idea anyway. "So he was confident that everybody would show this afternoon for the meeting?"

Cyrene first nodded then stated, "He'll deliver the message to everybody then come here around noon high to let you know. Rhodes may not make it though."

"That's understandable," murmured the rebel leader. She peered around when Janice

came stomping back down the steps. She shook her head while watching the archeologist swing on her cloak and began clasping it.

"Well it looks like I'm guardless," mentioned the brass archeologist. "Ready to go, Mel?"

The girl smiled happily because she was tired too of listening to the chitchat. She slipped out of the chair.

Cyrene narrowed her eyes at Janice and coldly stated, "Neither of you are leaving until a guard arrives."

Janice stilled in the middle of closing her clasp. She held Cyrene's stoic gaze and she half heartedly smiled while muttering, "I was joking anyway."

Cyrene became smug and returned her attention to Gabrielle yet before she could say what was on her mind, a knock interrupted her. She picked out the unique knock so she rose up and went to the door.

"Good morning, Cyrene." The young man dipped his head in respect then slipped into the warm house.

"How are you this morning, Joxer?"

Janice's head shot up just when she finished with her clasp. She stared at the spitting image of Jack Kleinman but he actually seemed a bit more handsome. Jack's ancestor also had a rougher and worn appearance about him with a scar down the right side of his temple that trailed to his right cheek. He wore a pair of light brown leather pants, a loose white shirt, and a black cloak to keep him warm. Then poking through at his right hip was the hilt of his sword.

Joxer smiled as he turned his attention to Gabrielle. "Good morning, G... a... b...." His eyebrows knitted together and he stared, mystified by the woman behind Gabrielle.

The bard thoroughly enjoyed Joxer's confusion, which made her chuckle. She cleared her throat then said, "Joxer, this is my descendant." Her tone was highly amused now but she finished her introduction. "This is Janice."

The archeologist glowered at her ancestor, who was getting too much pleasure from this.

Joxer remained still and even more bewildered as his eyes flickered between Gabrielle and Janice as if evaluating how similar they truly were. He half expected it to be a

joke and that Janice would rip off a mask.

"Sit down, Joxer... I'll explain," offered the bard.

Janice rolled her eyes because that meant it'd require another solid thirty minutes before she and Melpomene could leave. She grabbed a chair and tugged Melpomene along with her but she hefted the girl into her lap.

Melpomene cuddled right into the welcoming warmth of her friend. She twisted her head up and asked, "Why are we going to the market?"

Janice lifted her right hand and poked the small nose. "To get you some new clothes then when we get back we'll take bathes."

"We'll need you at the meeting today, Janice," mentioned Cyrene, who was sitting beside the stranger.

The archeologist quickly nodded then promise, "We'll be there." She then glanced over at Gabrielle and Joxer. She noted how Joxer would keep looking at her then back at Gabrielle then back at her and then... well it was getting annoying to Janice. She let out a frustrated sigh then hotly announced, "Mel and I are leaving while you two rattle on about me."

Melpomene easily slipped out of Janice's lap and became excited about leaving.

The archeologist started for the door but she hesitated when a presence came up behind her. It made her grin and she opened the door.

"We'll see you this afternoon, Janice," called the rebel leader.

"Yea, yea," mumbled the stranger, and she was gone.

Gabrielle's body shook with a silent laugh while watching Melpomene, Janice, and Joxer leave together. She started shaking her head and lowered her gaze to Cyrene.

Melpomene took on the duty of leading the group to the market since she knew the city so well.

Joxer walked on Janice's left side while Melpomene was on the other side. Joxer adjusted his cloak for no real reason then quietly asked, "So you're really from the future?"

Janice gave a wild grin, reached up, and pulled her hood over her face as they stepped out onto the street from the alleyway. "I sure am."

"Hmmm." Joxer kept turning this over in his head despite he'd heard the story from Gabrielle.

"How long have you known Gabrielle and Cyrene for?" quietly asked the archeologist.

The guard gave an idle shrug then reported, "For more seasons than I care to count."

"You don't sound so happy about that," commented Janice.

Joxer suddenly smiled then replied, "I'm honored to be in the faction." He hesitated as his smile fell from old, hard memories. "This has been a better life than my previous one."

"You were in the Conqueror's army?"

"For twenty seasons," confirmed the guard. "It was through Perdicus that I became apart of the faction."

Janice found this interesting but she couldn't ask more since they were coming upon the market. "Mel, we need to find a shop for clothes that'll fit you. Do you know where to look?"

"Yes, it's this way." Melpomene bounced then tugged her friend along.

Janice yelped as the surprisingly strong child hauled her off to a sharp left.

Joxer was chuckling but he hurried right along.

The archeologist came to a quick stop in front of a clothing stand. She nodded her approval of the garments while the child dove right into them. She folded her arms and carefully watched Melpomene inspected the clothes for something she liked.

Melpomene suddenly called to Janice in an excited voice.

The archeologist had a huge grin as she neared the girl and she bent forward.

"Do you like them?" The girl held them out.

Janice wasn't the best on taste considering she typically wore the same thing day in and day out when on digs. Yet she took in the selected brown skirt and white blouse with a cute dark blue design sewn in it. "I like it." She smiled then asked, "Are there any boots?"

Melpomene lowered her arms with the articles but she peered down at her worn boots. "My boots are fine."

The archeologist chuckled and now squatted down so she had a closer inspection of the boots in question. "I don't think so, Mel." She pointed at the right boot that was developing a small hole. "They're almost shot."

"Leather boots cost a lot," muttered the concerned child.

Janice had a lopsided grin as she played with Melpomene's hair. "And you're priceless." She rose up, held her hand out, and whispered, "Come on."

Melpomene laced her hand into the warmer hand. She was guided to the end of the merchant's stand. There at the corner was a selection of boots. "That's my size." She pointed at the boots near the end of the line.

"You sure?" questioned Janice.

"Positive." Melpomene also bobbed her head for further confirmation.

Janice grinned, picked up the boots, took the clothes from Melpomene, and turned to the merchant.

The merchant had been at the other end of the table but he hurried down at the prospect of customers. "How can I help you... ladies?" He stated after seeing the lean, beautiful form hidden under the cloak.

"How much are these?" Janice signaled to the clothes and boots in her hands.

"Twenty dinars," replied the man.

The archeologist almost blew up right there. "Holy shit, man that is expensive. Try three dinars."

"I mind as well give them to you for free," shot back the merchant.

Janice smirked. "Since you mentioned it."

"Seventeen," snapped the vendor, "nothing less."

"Seven dinars," argued the archeologist. "You'd be lucky to get this junk for five."

"I could get it for at least fifteen," challenged the merchant.

Janice laughed and glanced back at Joxer, "Hey Joxer, wasn't that other merchant selling this same stuff for cheaper on the other street?"

Joxer was mute for a second then he caught on quickly. "Yes, he was offering ten dinars."

The merchant growled in annoyance then hotly stated, "Twelve and that's my final offer."

Janice sighed and acted like she was really weighing this one way or the other.

"Eleven," gave in the vendor.

Janice suddenly smiled and huffed out, "Okay... okay." She handed the items to Melpomene, which freed both her hands. She worked the money out of her small pouch at her side in her cloak. She handed over the money then thanked the grumbling merchant. She then peered down at the girl. "Do you know where we can get a leather bag or pack, Mel?"

Joxer joined the pair and took the items from Melpomene to help her.

"There's a good one this way." Melpomene held out her hand then once she had Janice's hands, she took off.

Janice almost stumbled yet she held tight while being steer through the busy market. Soon Janice had a new well tanned leather pack and she placed Melpomene's items in them. She knew later she'd need the pack for other things to help her out.

After seeing the tanner merchant, Janice knelt down before Melpomene and gently asked, "You remember, Mel you told me about that cave?"

"You mean the one to-"

"Yes, that one," cut off Janice, who was concerned somebody would over hear. "Will you show it to me?"

Joxer was perplexed as he tried to understand what they were whispering. He knew they were suppose to be returning back to Cyrene's home.

"I'll show you," proudly offered the girl.

"Will it take us long?" inquired the archeologist.

Melpomene tapped her chin with her right index finger, her eyes fuzzy for a heartbeat.

"Maybe a few candlemarks."

Janice had no clue how long that meant but she really didn't care. She was far too interested by this mysterious cave that Melpomene had discovered. "Take me to it, Mel." She adjusted the pack on her back then stood up.

"Follow me." Melpomene hurried Janice along through the street.

Joxer hesitated then he quickly followed the pair. He noticed they were going in the opposite direction of Cyrene's home, which worried him. He came up to Janice's side and asked, "Where are we going?"

Janice grinned wildly and joked, "For a walk on the beach."

"What?" Joxer shook his head then added, "We need to return to Cyrene's house."

"We will... but later," promised the archeologist.

Joxer suddenly became frustrated because he had no idea what was going on so he grabbed Janice's arm roughly.

The archeologist came to an abrupt stop and tugged Melpomene slightly behind her. She pushed Joxer off to the side of the sidewalk so they were out of the flow of traffic. "There's something I need Mel to show me on the beach."

"Whatever it is it can wait," stated the guard.

"Look soldier boy," growled Janice as she got into his face. "You can go back but I need to do something." She poked him in the chest. "So either you can come or you can go."

Joxer's eyes narrowed. "Gabrielle will-"

"Have to suck it up and deal," chided the archeologist. "She'll be pissed at you either way. At least if you come she'll only be half pissed since you didn't leave Mel and me alone."

Joxer could see by the fire in Janice's eyes there was no way he'd talk her out of it. He also knew he'd be seeing that same fiery green when he saw Gabrielle again but Janice was right too. He let out a long sigh then relented. "Fine."

Janice smiled broadly then teased, "Green-eyed blondes are so convincing, aren't they?" Not waiting or wanting an answer, she continued the journey down the street.

It was about noon high when the group turned into beachcombers on the Aegean Sea side of the peninsula. Janice was trying desperately not to complain about the sand developing in her boots since she brought up this idea. She kept scanning the small cliff side to her left but she wasn't seeing anything resembling cavern entrances.

Melpomene came to a quick halt then pointed straight ahead. "There it is."

The archeologist narrowed her eyes at the small hole in the cliff wall that actually allowed the Aegean waters flow in and out of it. She almost cursed aloud now that she realized the cavern entrance was in fact mostly underwater. "Mel, how'd you get in there?"

The girl turned to her friend and explained, "I found it at low tide... at the new moon."

Janice ripped her hood back and wanted to smack her forehead. Of course it was at the new moon cycle that the tide would be low and Melpomene would just stumble across it.

"Well that was a waste of time," remarked Joxer, a smug expression.

Janice release the girl's hand, swung off her pack, and slammed it hard into Joxer's chest.

The guard gasped for air then he gaped when he saw Janice taking her cloak off too. "You're not going to...."

"I don't have much choice," offered the archeologist.

"What's so important about this cave?" urged the man.

Janice knelt down and started unhooking her gun. She knew that the salty water of the sea could easily rust out her gun, which she certainly didn't want happening. "Just stay here and watch Mel for me." She rammed the gun into her satchel that Joxer held. "And if I'm not back in half an hour, worry."

"Half an... hour?"

Janice sighed as she yanked off her now unlaced boots. The time issue was getting on the archeologist's nerves. "If I'm not back in a reasonable time then get back to Cyrene's."

Joxer opened his mouth to argue.

"Just do it," snapped Janice and she didn't wait for another word. She adjusted her sword on her back and started for the stream that broke the beach in half.

Melpomene sadly watched her friend go but she took two steps towards Janice's direction. "Be careful, Janice!" she called over the din of the crashing waves.

Janice flashed a brilliant smile then took several running steps. She jumped, dove into the deep stream, and swam for the dark opening of the cave. She could only pray she'd make it especially because it'd been years since her last swim. She kept her eyes open against the sting of the salt water and she desperately searched for safety. Her eyes strained against the pitch black water then a dim light exposed itself up ahead.

Janice clenched her teeth when her lungs began to burn and her heart's beat was slowing down. She forced her legs and arms to go faster to shoot her body through the brisk water. The archeologist followed the only light, her eyes aching, and her chest on fire but she suddenly erupted at the top.

The cavern pool filled with a loud gasp from Janice's frantic intake of air. She brushed her wet bangs out of her face and hastily scanned the dark cavern for any signs of life. Her feet lightly skimmed over the bottom of the cave but she dared not touch her feet to the bottom incase of sharp rocks. She swam for the rock shoreline and hauled herself up onto the somewhat slimy edge.

The archeologist finished her last large gulp of needed air. Then she picked out a silhouette of something on the cavern wall so she went to it. With her hands and eyes, she figured out it was a torch yet she had nothing to light it. Janice could only wonder so she knelt down and her hands scanned over the hard surface then she came up with two interesting, rough rocks. She took a chance and banged the rocks over the torch and was rewarded by sparks setting the torch on fire.

Janice watched in amazement as stalactites suddenly formed above her from the light of the torch. Her eyes widened at the beauty of the yellow teeth that bore down at her. She released an unknown held breath then she moved forward through the cave for some time. She carefully watched her footing incase there was anything sharp on the cavern floor. Along the way, she observed other torches anchored to the walls that were scattered here and there. It was confirming her suspicions that this may lead to the Conqueror's fortress.

Janice was never positive how long she traveled for in the beautiful cave but she came around a sharp turn then before her was a heavy wood. Behind the door, she heard a hushed voice followed by some sharp noise then another stifled voice. The door blocked her from going forward and when Janice knelt down after seeing the keyhole, she peered through it carefully.

A warm air breathed through the keyhole onto Janice's face and she inhaled a foul, dying stench that turned her stomach. Gradually the archeologist's keen eye for detail sharpened to the small yet plentiful image through the keyhole. The image filled her vision suddenly and it almost made Janice gasp loudly but her hand muffled the cry.

The man behind the bars dropped his head back again and screamed when the whip hit his back. His head fell forward as he dangled from the chains around his bloody wrists. He kept crying and taking the punishment that he could not refuse anyway. His red back was mutilated by ravishing whip marks.

Janice quickly turned her head away with her eyes slammed shut yet the whip's crack then the man's scream filtered through the keyhole into her left ear. She hastily climbed to her feet then stumbled back a few feet, her hand still over her mouth. She tried to control her upset stomach as much as the images but she lost it.

The archeologist was hunched over in a corner, her breakfast emptied from her stomach, and her legs shaking. The only thing that kept her up right was her left hand pressed against the cavern wall. She forced her legs to lifted her back up and she turned the torch back on the black wood door that kept her away from what she believed was the Conqueror's very own Tartarus on earth.

She shook her head at the door and murmured, "I hope Mel never witnessed that." At the thought of the child it made her realize that most likely Melpomene would be in that such position like that tortured man. The idea stirred Janice's deepest anger and made her realize just how this ruler was blackening her very heart each day.

Janice gripped the torch in her right hand harder. Her thoughts about Melpomene reminded her that she needed to get back before it was any later. She turned back and hurried down the cave but stayed vigilant about her steps. She stopped at the cavern pool, bent over, and extinguished the torch in the cold water. After she returned to the torch to its home, she slipped into the chilled water then swam close to where the cave's wall touched the water. She took three big breathes then dropped into the water with every intent to make it back safely.

The archeologist pushed forward and quickly through the biting water as she followed the tunnel of light. She glimpsed below her body and caught the sight of the hungry teeth of stalagmites grinning up at her. She knew she was safe as she exploded to the surface in the stream between the beaches.

"Janice!" cried a familiar voice. Melpomene jumped up from sitting on a washed up, worn tree stump.

Joxer had been leaning against the cliff side with a worried face. He smiled at seeing his charge still alive.

Melpomene helped her friend get out of the stream and onto the beach again.

Janice shivered against the sea breeze brushing against her already chilled skin.

"Here." Joxer held out the archeologist's cloak.

Janice happily received it and wrapped it around her body to block the breeze.

"Are you okay?" asked the worried girl.

Janice knelt down in front of the girl and she tried to ignore her need to wipe at her stinging eyes. "Mel, did you find that door at the end of the cave?"

Melpomene stared at Janice with puzzled features.

Janice abruptly grabbed the girl's arms and fiercely demanded, "Mel, did you find that door?"

The child was shaken by Janice's sudden aggressiveness but she hastily shook her head. "N-n-no... I didn't find any door."

"You swear?" urged the archeologist.

Joxer stepped closer because he could tell that the girl was frightened some. He held back when green eyes flashed a warning at him.

"I swear I didn't," promised the child.

Janice exhaled all her frustrations then realized how she was acting. She wanted to give the girl a hug but she couldn't with being so soaked. She released her tension then tried to smile at Melpomene. "I'm sorry," she murmured, "I didn't mean to scare you."

Melpomene slowly smiled now then whispered, "Its okay." She enjoyed the returned tenderness when Janice's fingers fixed her disarrayed hair from the sea breeze.

"How about we get back and get our warm baths?"

The young girl showed her beautiful smile. "Yes, since you really need one now. You smell like seaweed."

The archeologist laughed but leaned in and growled, "What'd you say?" Her hands slipped down to the child's side.

Melpomene suddenly screamed in protest when sneaky fingers found her most ticklish spots at her side and tummy. She stumbled back to get away from her attacker but she bumped into Joxer. She peered up at Joxer and demanded, "Don't let her tickle me!"

Janice smirked up at the man then her glowing eyes lowered to her young friend. "He's a sissy, Mel. You better pick a better protector."

Melpomene folded her arms against her chest and proudly stated, "Joxer isn't a sissy."

The archeologist inwardly chuckled at this display. Her hooded eyes lifted to Joxer, who was puffing out his chest in pride too.

"I'm not, Melpomene... thank you."

Melpomene smiled up at him then gave a brisk nod at Janice.

The archeologist relented with a soft laugh as she rose up. She efficiently clasped her cloak together with her feather pin. She stepped up to Joxer, slapped her right hand against his chest, and muttered, "Your decadent is the biggest sissy I know." She smirked then before there was any protest, she went to her pack, scooped it up, and began the walk back to the city. As she went along she worked out her gun from the satchel then paused to slip it into its holster on her right boot.

Melpomene was horrified and she gasped. "She is so mean, Joxer."

The guard chuckled at the girl's teasing words. "That's okay, Melpomene." He held down his hand to collect hers. Although before he started walking, he bent down and cleverly stated, "At least I don't act like her and try to be tough when I'm really sweet on the inside."

Melpomene giggled at his words. "She really is mushy," she exclaimed.

"I heard that!" yelled Janice from ahead.

Joxer and Melpomene laughed together at Janice's reaction, which they fully intended to get from her. The pair hurriedly followed Janice and eventually caught up to her. When Joxer was close enough to Janice, he quietly inquired, "What'd you find in the cave?"

The stranger bit her lower lip and she debated how to answer because Melpomene was so near. Her glistened eyes met Joxer's and she softly answered, "The door to Tartarus."

The guard understood what Janice meant and he shook his head. "Nobody in the

faction knew of that cave."

"No, I suppose not." Janice smirked then her husky voice teased, "Instead a homeless child discovered it."

Joxer grunted and glimpsed at the girl in discussion. He slightly smiled then asked, "How did you befriend her?"

"The Conqueror's soldiers were going to haul her away for stealing flatbread."

Joxer's features darkened. "I hate the sentries in the city. They're as ruthless as the Conqueror."

"She makes them that way," summarized the disgusted archeologist.

The guard slowly nodded. "You are right, Janice."

The small party made it back onto the streets of Corinth and by that time it was mid afternoon. Joxer instructed them that they would need to hurry so they could make it to the meeting. Janice insisted her and Melpomene needed quick baths before going to the meeting. Joxer gave in even though he knew they'd be late but he knew that a long time ago when they first started this adventure.

They arrived at Cyrene's home yet the house was empty of anybody. Joxer knew the meeting was going to start soon, which meant Gabrielle and Cyrene were headed there. He directed Janice and Melpomene to the bathing room that was connected to Cyrene's room. He briefed Janice on how it worked then he left them alone.

It didn't take long for Janice and Melpomene to get cleaned up, dried, and into clean clothes except for Janice. She merely got back into her leathers that had a slight salty scent from her sea but she didn't mind it really. The salt and leather mix was slightly appealing and it mingled with her now not so appealing flowery scent. She really disliked flowery or feminine scents on her body but she couldn't overly complain. Finally she spotted little Melpomene coming out of the bathing room all cleaned up and into her new clothes.

Melpomene straightened out her skirt and gazed up with questioning features.

Janice chuckled at the child. "You're beautiful, Mel."

Melpomene smiled at this then her smile twitched into a grin. "I wasn't before?"

Janice laughed and stepped up to the girl. She bent forward with a grin. "You were but I can see it all better now that the dirt is gone."

Melpomene stuck her tongue out then teased back, "You don't smell like seaweed now."

Janice chuckled then quickly ruffled the girl's neat hair. She made a hasty retreat when Melpomene yelped in protest.

Melpomene growled while she fixed her hair. She marched out of Cyrene's room and glowered at the archeologist that stood by Joxer. "You're so mean."

Joxer was amused as he watched the stare down between the woman and the girl but to him Janice was the girl and Melpomene was the woman. He licked his lips and bit back his laughter then he innocently asked Janice, "Are you ready, kiddo?"

Janice's head whipped around and she reacted by punching him in the arm. "I'm ready, sissy boy." She tossed him a leering look before going to the door.

"Ow," complained Joxer and he rubbed his right arm where Janice had punched him.

Melpomene shook her head at their supposed guard. "You are being a sissy, Joxer." She stomped past him and went up to Janice, who was holding out her hand.

Joxer was clearly offended by the two females. He brushed it off though and approached the pair. "Women... I swear."

The archeologist had the front door open but she displayed a warning look at her new keeper. "Watch it, Joxer." She wagged her index finger at him then without another word, she pulled her hood over her face and slipped into the alleyway.

They entered into the now quieting streets as the merchants and customers were preparing to pack up for the day. Some people were already heading out for early dinners. But Janice, Melpomene, and Joxer had other plans, which led them five blocks away.

Joxer guided them safely through the streets. When he knew they were close, he slowed down and came to Janice's side. "We are almost there." He then picked out familiar faces that passed by him and he decided to mention it to Janice. "That man that just went by...." At Janice's nod he continued. "He's one of the faction guards."

The archeologist was stunned. "What was he doing?"

Joxer shifted in closer so he could speak quietly. "When there is a faction meeting, the guards patrol the nearby streets... make sure there isn't any trouble."

"Wouldn't they stay in the meeting room to protect them?"

"Only one does," answered Joxer, "but the fast way to avoid trouble is to see it in advance."

The strange appreciated that idea completely.

"Down here," instructed Joxer. He directed them to another wood door where he gave a specific type of knock. The door was opened by what Janice assumed to be one of the elite faction guards. The three of them slipped into the room, which wasn't very big beyond the large table in the center of the room with a handful of people at the table.

Janice spotted Gabrielle at the head of the one end of the table and Cyrene was at the other end. She almost went to remove her hood but stopped when she realized it was probably not the right time. Instead she listened to the chatter between the council members because they were in some heated discussion.

Joxer stepped to the right of the door while the other guard kept to the left.

Janice and Melpomene stepped closer to the arguing table but they kept away and silent.

"This is impossible, Gabrielle," shouted one man. "There is no way we can assassinate the Conqueror."

"Even with Rhode's abilities to get us into the Conqueror's fortress there is a high probability of death."

"What about Rhode's life?" challenged another councilor. "If the Conqueror discovers that one of her advisors is in the rebel faction she won't think twice about slitting his throat."

Rhodes slightly paled at the mental image but he shook it away because he didn't take on his position in the faction to lose courage now. "Gabrielle has a point that we must try."

The councilors settled down when the very man that was closest to the Conqueror spoke.

"Rhodes, this could mean your life," reminded a concerned member.

Rhodes sighed but he shook his head. "I wouldn't have volunteered to join the rebel faction if I'd originally been worried about my own life." He leaned forward and

captured all of the member's eyes. "This is dangerous for all of us... we could be exposed and the Conqueror will hunt each of us down. We didn't start this faction just to cower under the Conqueror when there is a solution in our grasp." His steely eyes turned to his right where Gabrielle sat next to him.

Gabrielle nodded in appreciation for the man's words.

"Why should we take this risk when it most likely will fail?" tried a council member. "We should wait it out until a more solid plan arises."

Rhodes opened his mouth to retaliate yet Gabrielle asked him to hold back.

Gabrielle grabbed her walking stick, which rested against her chair. She loudly slammed it on the table in front of her and that grabbed everybody's attention solely on her. "I started this rebel faction seasons ago so that one day I could stop the Conqueror. I started this rebel faction so that the people could have hope again." Her dark green eyes scanned the faces of her members. "I, Gabrielle of Potidaea, stood up before the Conqueror." She closed her eyes and willed all of her inner strength to her legs. She gradually rose up and the pain flashed up and down her legs.

Rhodes inhaled sharply and tried to move to help but Gabrielle waved him off.

Gabrielle clenched her teeth yet she continued to rise up, her back lifting up as her legs straightened up to her once forgotten height. Her brow was coated in sweat and her body throbbed with tearing pain. Her eyes slowly open as she proudly stood before her council and she demanded, "And now we will all stand as one against the Conqueror."

There was a brief, stunned silence in the room by the amazing display of the rebel leader. The leader remained poised before her followers with all of her faith and determination that held her up on her once shattered legs.

Cyrene, the Conqueror's mother, stood up from her chair. "I, Cyrene of Amphipolis, stand against the Conqueror."

Rhodes pushed his chair back then stood. "I, Rhodes of Corinth, stand against the Conqueror."

Another chair scrapped across the wood floor. "I, Argus of Athens, stand against the Conqueror."

"I, Althea of Tripolis, stand against the Conqueror."

The din of wood scraping against wood grew louder and the chorus of united rebellion

rang in the meeting room. Finally the entire council stood in unison and harmony for one purpose beyond any fears. The leader could no longer contain her smile of appreciation and she ordered, "Please be seated, everybody." She waited until each person was seated then she slowly and painfully returned to her own chair.

Rhodes brought up the question on every councilor's mind. "Who is the man to assassinate the Conqueror?"

Janice took her cue as she released Melpomene, stepped forward, and ripped her hood back. "I am the man."

There was heartbeat of silence then a loud commotion of questions, demands, and pure confusion engulfed the meeting room.

Gabrielle bowed her head as her ears were hit by all the mangled voices. When the silence finally returned she lifted her head and revealed a growing grin at her members' clear state of perplexity. If she pulled another surprise on them during this meeting she was almost convinced they'd all probably kick her out of the faction.

Janice was absolutely smug, arms over her chest, and a broad grin. She listened to her ancestor weave the tale about her seeming identical twin, which left every member breathless. She then sensed a small hand touched her right hand so she peered down at her young, innocent friend.

Melpomene offered a warm smile and she received back a wink from Janice.

The archeologist lifted her head though when the council started talking about the plan to assassinate the Conqueror. She carefully listened roughly worked out plans, which she was relieved to hear the council agreeing to mostly. She picked up on everybody's largest concern, which was how Janice was going to get into the Conqueror's undetected. Rhodes was the first to try a suggestion but it was too risky for him and Janice.

Janice took her opening when there was a mostly quietness. "I found a way into the Conqueror's."

The councilors went silent and some had to twist around to glimpse at Gabrielle's double.

Janice squeezed Melpomene's hand then guided her to Gabrielle. She stood next to Gabrielle so that everybody had a better view of her. "Actually, I didn't find it... it was my friend, Melpomene, here that discovered it."

The councilors peered down at the young girl, who suddenly became shy from the

attention. She tucked herself between Janice and Janice's cloak.

The archeologist cleared her throat then explained, "There is a hidden cave on the Aegean side that leads to the Conqueror's."

"How can you be sure?" inquired Gabrielle, her head twisted and studying her descendant.

The archeologist dazzled a smile. "I followed it today." She saw the narrowing of Gabrielle's eyes so Gabrielle now knew why Janice was fashionably late to the meeting. Janice ignored the look though and before she said anymore about what she found, she covered Melpomene's ears. "There was a locked door at the end of the cave's tunnel. When I peered through the keyhole I realized it was looking into a dungeon."

"It's an escape route," concluded Rhodes, "I never realized the Conqueror had such."

"Well she does," stated Janice, "and it's perfect route to get into her fortress." She finally removed her hands from covering Melpomene's ears but she rested her hands on the girl's shoulders. "I think it's the easiest way into there."

Rhodes thought this out then he perked up. "Some of the guards in the dungeon that we've bribed could help."

"Do you think you can find out who has a key to that door?" inquired the leader.

Rhodes leaned towards Gabrielle. "Of course, Gabrielle... I am the Conqueror's advisor of state."

Several people chuckled at the deceptive man.

The bard smirked. "Make it happen, Rhodes."

Rhodes dipped his head in agreement.

"What then?" urged Councilor Argus.

"We need to pull the Conqueror's attention away from the fortress," suggested Cyrene.

Gabrielle considered this idea. "Perhaps we need to stir up trouble in the city."

"We could start some minor riots," suggested a prominent councilor.

As Janice listened to them go on, she scanned over the various council members. She

was astonished to find such a mix among the members as they were males and females, wealthy and poor, artists to politicians, Greek to Gaelic, and old to young. The cruelest tyrant had managed to destroy social restrictions and bring together these people in one purpose.

The meeting started to wind down when the members all began agreeing on certain terms and plans. When the meeting was almost to a close, the main door flew open before the guards could react.

"There's trouble!" called a man as he rushed into the room.

Joxer slammed the door shut after resheathing his sword.

Janice turned her head to see Perdicus breathing heavily, probably from running.

"What's happened?" demanded Gabrielle.

"The Conqueror has discovered you're not dead, Gabrielle." Perdicus hurried over to the leader. "Alti called in for your cross and when... the Conqueror is furious."

Rhodes stood up. "What is she doing?"

Perdicus gulped for air then hastily answered, "The Conqueror has ordered her sentry squads to storm every building in the city until she finds Gabrielle. They're searching every place and asking everybody." His frantic features lowered to Gabrielle. "I have already executed the escape plans, Gabrielle. We must get you out of here."

The rebel leader was pale but her mind caught up with the reeling information. "I can't leave when the plans for the assassination are beginning."

"There will be no plans if you die," hotly reminded Perdicus.

"You must escape, Gabrielle," agreed Rhodes. "If she finds you...." He couldn't bring himself to finish his own words.

"I have survived her death once already," argued the frustrated bard.

Janice grasped her ancestor's shoulder. "You will not live this time if you do not leave, Gabrielle." Her eyes captured Gabrielle's and held her. "You must survive for this to work."

"What about you?" whispered the worried bard.

"I will be fine," promise the archeologist.

Joxer stepped away from the door to join in the conversation. "I will protect her, Gabrielle... with my sword and my life."

The archeologist was stunned by the gesture from the man she hadn't considered much of a friend back in her time. It warmed her to some degree.

Gabrielle turned her worried eyes to Cyrene.

Cyrene stood up and definitively stated, "We must go, Gabrielle before the Conqueror locks down the gates."

"The cart will be here any moment," interrupted Perdicus. He lifted his head to the council. "You all must hurry back to your homes before the sentries show."

"I need to get my ass to the Conqueror's fortress," hissed Rhodes and he started to move along with the rest of the council.

Gabrielle snatched up her stick and stood up.

Janice faced her ancestor. "Where will you go?"

"I don't know," confessed the bard, "but away from here. Perdicus and two other guards will go with us. We may return to Amphipolis until its safe again."

"No," cut in Janice, "you won't be safe there." At seeing Gabrielle's protest, she grabbed her ancestor's shoulders. "Trust me on this."

"Where should we go then?" tried Cyrene.

The archeologist's gaze flickered between Cyrene and Gabrielle then she answered, "To the Amazons."

"The Amazons?" echoed Perdicus. "They will not help us."

"Yes they will," fought back Janice, her burning eyes on the guard. She turned back to her ancestor. "Ask for Ephiny... tell her you met me and that I asked her to help you. If she doesn't believe you then tell her that..." She paused and faintly grinned despite things. "Tell her that Janny sent you."

Gabrielle's nose crinkled at the nickname but she dared not to ask.

Joxer had unknowingly left the meeting hunt when all the members had filtered out earlier. He returned and announced, "The cart is here, Gabrielle."

"Let's go," ordered Perdicus.

The group hurried out of the meeting room and into the alleyway. Janice was the last out because she had to scoop up the frightened Melpomene. Janice spied the cart at the end of the alleyway with two guards in it already and waiting for Cyrene and Gabrielle. Janice's emotions surged up as she realized what she had to do now.

"Gabrielle, you must take Melpomene with you."

Cyrene quickly moved over and grabbed the child's waist. When she tried to lift Melpomene from Janice's grasp it was impossible.

"No," cried Melpomene, who clung tightly to Janice. "I won't go!"

"Sssh, sssh." Janice shifted away from Cyrene, bent down, and lowered the girl to the ground. "Its okay, Mel."

Melpomene's eyes suddenly started to sting and her cheeks became wet. "I won't go... I won't leave you."

"Ooo god." Janice wiped the girl's tears away but she couldn't stop them. "You have to go, Mel. You could get hurt... or worse if you stay with me."

"No," rasped the emotional child. Her vise grip on Janice's two cloak sleeves weren't loosening. "I saw the Conqueror kill my first sister... she won't take you too!" She frantically shook her head. "I won't let her," she whispered then threw herself into Janice's body.

Janice enveloped the desperate, crying girl. "I have to do this, Mel.," she whispered. Her dammed emotions broke and her tears trickled down her hot cheeks. How could that ruler be so heartless and cold to kill this innocent child's sister? Janice's anger raged along side her passionate heart.

"No you don't," whimpered the girl, "you'll die if you do."

"No I won't," promised Janice, "you'll see me again."

Melpomene cried out, "No I won't!"

"Sssh, sssh it's okay." Janice pulled her head back and wiped the soaked bangs from the child's forehead. "If you stay, Mel I won't be able to do this right." She searched the girls terrified yet loving eyes. "I'll be too worried about you then I could be killed."

"No," sobbed the girl, "please, Janice."

Janice wiped the wet crystals still pouring down the child's face. "Listen, okay?" When Melpomene nodded her head she whispered, "I promise you, Mel that I will be fine and that I'll see you afterwards. I swear." She then freed her right hand and placed it over the Melpomene's chest. "Do you have faith?"

Melpomene was still crying but she wasn't shaking her head anymore. She freed her right hand too then placed it against Janice's chest, just over her heart. "I have faith." She felt the steady heartbeat under her small hand.

Janice scooped the girl back into her arms and placed a kiss to her cheek while standing back up. She stepped up to Cyrene and held out the girl.

Cyrene carefully pulled Melpomene into her arms.

Melpomene buried her face into Cyrene's neck so that her cries would be muffled.

Janice's hand trailed down Melpomene's back one last time then she stepped back. Her teeth were gritted against her emotions. "Now go before it's too late."

"Come on," whispered Perdicus, who was in agreement with Janice.

Cyrene turned and jogged down the alley with her precious bundle.

Perdicus stepped up to Gabrielle. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle but we have to move."

The bard grasped her guard's shoulder to make him pause. "Do not fail that little girl, Janice." Her feelings caved in finally and a few tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Keep her safe," rasped Janice.

"With my life," promised Gabrielle. "Please be safe."

"You too. Now please go." Janice stepped back until she was next to Joxer.

Perdicus bent then neatly picked up the rebel leader into his arms. He adjusted her for the heartbeat then after a brisk nod to Joxer, he hurried down the alleyway to the waiting cart.

The archeologist stood motionless except for the tears trickling down her red cheeks. Her chest was heaving against her emotions. All she could do was watch as Gabrielle, Cyrene, and Melpomene were hidden under heavy blankets to obscure their forms.

Perdicus gave a shout to the driver.

The cart lurched forward into the street.

Melpomene's head popped out from under the blankets. Her loving eyes held Janice's until finally the cart rounded a corner and was gone.

Janice closed her eyes and furiously wiped her tears away. She fought her feelings back down again in hopes she'd get some clarity. When it did come something else filled her ears and it was the sounds of yelling and screaming. She turned the opposite way and faced the screams that floated through the city.

Joxer swallowed and murmured, "It has begun... the hunt is on."

"Where will we go?" answered the archeologist.

"Back to the beach." The guard shifted closer then whispered, "I've made arrangements for supplies to be brought to us later. We must go now though." He checked his sword then ordered, "Listen to everything I tell you. Stay close. And don't look back."

Janice bit the inside of her mouth roughly but she nodded and pulled her hood over. When Joxer took off at a run her adrenaline broke free and pushed her forward with amazing speed. She reached into her deepest strength to help her survive this trial.

Chapter 7 - Welcome to Tartarus on Earth

Joxer rubbed his hands together then held them out over the fire. He glimpsed over at Janice, who was huddled by the fire too so she'd be warm against the biting sea breeze. He lowered his now warm hands to his lap. He then twisted his head around when he saw a dark outline of somebody coming towards them in the night. He quickly stood and unsheathed his sword in worry.

Janice also got up and her fingertips grazed her sword hilt at her back.

"Ho, Joxer," called a man.

Joxer relaxed and lowered his sword at hearing the familiar voice. "I thought you forgot us, Palaemon."

"Now would I really do that?" challenged the grinning man as he held out two leather

packs. When Joxer took them, he swung off a third from his back. "You should be happy to see me."

"I am," agreed Joxer. He then pointed to Janice on the other side of the fire. "Palaemon, this is Janice."

The archeologist's slow grin spread over her features when Palaemon stared at her in amazement.

"They weren't kidding," he remarked, "she looks just like Gabrielle."

Janice rolled her eyes at being discussed, yet again, in third person as if she wasn't here. She stepped up to the tall man and narrowed her eyes at him. "I also have a worse temper than Gabrielle."

Palaemon held up his hands in surrender. "I won't argue... Gabrielle's temper is scary enough."

Janice smirked and went over to Joxer to see what were in the packs. Her stomach had been growling all evening since they made it out of the city.

"Did they make it out of the city safely?" asked Janice. She straightened up with a skin in her left hand.

Palaemon folded his arms over his leather clad chest. "Yes, just in time too." He then tilted his head some. "I heard you'll have to do some diving to get into the Conqueror's so I brought a waterproof sack."

Joxer just found that pack and removed the oily feeling leather from the satchel. "That's perfect, Palaemon. Thank you for thinking of it."

Palaemon had a wide grin. "I'm always thinking ahead, you know."

Joxer chuckled and straightened up after laying out the items in the sand. "Do you need to get back?"

"Yes," sighed out Palaemon, "the councilors are high strung tonight about what's happened."

"Nobody was hurt?" persisted Janice.

Palaemon ran his tongue along the backside of his front teeth.

"Shit, what happened?" insisted the archeologist.

Palaemon shook his head as his arms slipped from his chest. "The people were frightened and the sentries were ruthless because the Conqueror was so angry. Some people's homes were wrecked others were jailed because they refused to answer a soldier's questions. It was chaos."

Janice dropped her head and tangled her fingers in her short, blond hair.

Palaemon saw the reaction and he quietly stated, "Trust me, Janice when I say the Conqueror in her warlord days she was much worse."

The archeologist dropped her hand down and peered up at the man. "You're telling me she's soft now?"

"In comparison, yes," admitted Palaemon sadly.

Janice bit her lower lip then stomped off in the heat of her anger.

Joxer neared his fellow guard and asked, "How many were imprisoned?"

Palaemon's lips tightened together. "At least a couple hundred... I'm not really sure."

"And I'm sure the Conqueror is even more furious that they didn't find Gabrielle," mentioned Janice as she came back to the pair. "She won't stop searching until she has Gabrielle."

"She won't... you're right," agreed Joxer.

"Most likely," started Palaemon, "she'll search the city for another six days then send out spies and bounty hunters to find Gabrielle."

Joxer put his arms over his chest and muttered, "There'll be a reward out on her head."

"Those damn Amazons better take her in," growled the archeologist.

Joxer shook his head and his sad eyes met Janice's. "They may not because she's high risk."

"They will," hotly stated the archeologist.

There was an awkward silence but Palaemon broke it when he realized something. "Tomorrow Rhodes promised somebody would open the door in the dungeon."

Janice perked up at this news. "He say what time?"

"He didn't have an exact time," confessed Palaemon, "but around Helios high."

This goddamn time thing again, mentally complained Janice. She considered Palaemon's words carefully and realized that he meant at noon. Her head started to bob now. "Alright, that works."

"After that, you're on your own," added Palaemon. "There's not much that Rhodes can do without being caught and jeopardizing everything."

Janice exhaled loudly. "Alright." She moved away from the pair and went to the spread out articles in the sand.

"I should go," mentioned Palaemon. "I'll see you later, Joxer." He then held up a hand to Janice in a goodbye gesture. "Good luck and be safe, Janice."

"Thanks, Palaemon." The archeologist flashed a smile then briefly watched him go.

Joxer neared Janice and squatted down beside her. "We should eat then get some rest... tomorrow will be a...."

"A day in hell," mumbled the archeologist.

The pair organized all of the supplies that Palaemon had brought them. They first positioned their bedrolls and furs by the fire then sat down to quietly eat their meal. The dinner consisted of dry beef, cheese, fruit, and diluted wine in the skins. The mild wine helped to warm the two's bodies against the cold wind that came off the sea. After eating, Joxer showed Janice how to use the water resistant satchel and explained that it could be tied to her waist while she swam so that she wouldn't have to hold it. Janice was grateful for the bag as it would keep her gun from rusting in the salt water along with her bullets.

Joxer then gave the archeologist a sheathed dagger that Palaemon had also included. He helped her wiggle the dagger into her boot so that she knew how to perfectly conceal it other than the small hilt. Janice was starting to feel like a walking war zone but then again if she was going to survive the Conqueror's Tartarus, she would need these items.

Finally by the middle of the night, they pair curled up in their furs and bedrolls to get some rest. Janice for her part couldn't find her dreams tonight because her mind was working so hard to figure out tomorrow. She didn't know what the inside of the Conqueror's fortress would look like or how to find the Conqueror. She only knew she'd have to hunt down the Conqueror then secretly setup in hiding so she could get a clear shot. All she needed were enough seconds to pull her revolver's hammer back,

take aim, and pull the trigger then it would be almost over.

The morning came all too fast but the pair quickly moved to get ready. Janice made sure her gun was loaded then she put it into the waterproof satchel along with her gun, spare pouch of bullets, the dagger, her boots, and finally her cloak.

"Are you ready for this?" Joxer walked along side the short blond to the stream just ahead.

"I'd like to think I am but I'm probably not," admitted the archeologist. "I'm as ready as I'm going to be." She stopped at the edge of the stream and faced Joxer. "What will you do?"

"I will stay here for a few days... wait for your return," answered the guard. "Don't be foolish with your life, Janice."

Janice grinned. "I think it's a little late for that."

The guard held out his arm.

Janice clasped it in a brisk shake. She then released him while saying, "Thank you, Joxer."

Joxer only dipped his head.

The archeologist turned to the stream, placed her waterproof satchel near the edge, and she jumped into the water.

The guard went to the edge and watched Janice tie the short rope to her waist then he handed the satchel to her. "Be safe, Janice."

"I'll try my best but no promises." Janice brushed her soaked bangs back. "Don't wait too long for me." She had the other end of the rope tied to the satchel and she let go of the satchel.

The satchel sunk down into the water but it didn't weigh all the way as it floated some in the water.

"Bye, Joxer." Janice flashed a confident grin then she dove under.

"Bye... Janice." Joxer stood up and watched the silhouette pulse through the water and disappear underneath the cavern wall that went into the water.

Janice just made it to the surface in the cavern pool just pass the cavern tunnel wall.

She quietly bobbed up to the top of the water but she didn't cross the pool when something caught her ear. She silently lowered her head deeper into the water just so the water was under her nose.

The first strange thing she noticed was that the torches were all lit in the tunnel. It made her skin crawl because that could only mean trouble. The noise down in the cavern tunnel was getting nearer and turned into distinct voices of men just idly talking.

Janice tried to ignore the cold in her body from the water. She finally saw the two loud men round the bend ahead and they were pushing a wood cart. She tried to figure out what in the world they had in the cart but they were too far for her to figure it out. She lifted her head some so that she could take some large gulps of air. Just as the two soldiers neared the pool, Janice had disappeared under the water to hide.

The archeologist tried to still her mind's fears of being found. She had her eyes closed for a second then she opened them when she heard a noise in the water. About fifty feet ahead she saw a dark cloud form in the water and the cloud expanded further out as the stream pulled it towards her. Then Janice covered her mouth with a clenched fist when she saw a human skull fall out of the bottom of the dark cloud and hit the floor of the pool. The skull came to a rolling stop on top of two other skulls that Janice hadn't seen earlier. Suddenly her eyes widened as she realized exactly what those two soldiers were dumping into the pool.

Janice couldn't take it and she didn't care if those soldiers were there or not. She broke the top of the water and gulped on fresh air. She was relieved to see the soldiers were already carting back down the tunnel. Her breathing wasn't slowing down when she saw the dark cloud was moving towards her. The thought of swimming in human ashes almost made Janice sick right there but she hurried to the closest edge of the pool and away from the expanding cloud.

Janice hauled herself up onto the edge, yanked her satchel out of the water, and curled up so she could calm down and warm her body back up. She sat there breathing heavily and watching the cloud become washed out by the flowing stream. She lowered her face into her hands and rasped, "Ooo my god." Her mind flashed with an image of the skull staring up at her before it landed on the others at the bottom. "Holy... shit." She'd seen plenty human remnants in her days as an archeologist but this was far different since these were from people recently alive and she was swimming in it.

Now Janice clearly understood the second use of this tunnel. They would cremate the dead bodies in the dungeons then dump their ashes in the stream so they would float out to the Aegean Sea. Her thought process was broken when there was a heavy slam at the end of the tunnel echoing down to her. She now knew the soldiers had gone

back into the dungeon, which made it safe for her.

The archeologist willed her body to move so she shifted around until she was partially in the tunnel way. She opened her satchel and took out her cloak first. She got it on and clasped it in place as her body started to warm again. She then got her boots tied on followed by her gun in its home then last her dagger tucked in her left boot. Janice climbed to her feet and rolled up the proofed satchel with its roped and tucked it behind some rocks incase she needed it later.

Janice then yanked her hood over her face before she trailed down the tunnel. She would meet the maker on the other side of the door to Tartarus. She wasn't sure how long she waited by the door, for it to open with either those two soldiers again or the bribed soldier that was going to let her through.

There was a clank then a click from the door and slowly it started to swing open.

Janice was instantly off the rock and unsheathing her sword just incase.

A soldier with beady eyes poked his head around the door and narrowed at Janice. "Rhodes sent you?"

The archeologist mutely nodded and lowered her sword to her side.

The soldier opened the door more then stepped aside at the mysterious figure floated by him. He slammed the door shut, locked it, and murmured, "There are three levels for the dungeon. You're on the third. The only way up is down that way." He pointed in a general direction then his ring of keys dangled at his side where he reattached them. He smirked at the stranger and stated, "Good luck, fella." Without another word, he turned to this right and marched down a torch lit hallway.

Janice scanned the room, which had cells against either side of the walls then in the middle were cages. She wasn't surprised at all by the number of people in all of them. Her stomach turned as she recognized the man that'd been whipped yesterday. He had his back to Janice but he was lying on the floor of his cage, slumped against it, and still slightly bleeding from yesterday.

Janice swallowed then adjusted her cloak around her body to conceal her better. She could see the prisoners were trying to figure her out, well the ones that were still somewhat alive. She glimpsed down the hall that the soldier had went down earlier and she detected the foul stench of burning bodies and the blazing heat of fire floating in the air. She now knew where the crematorium was located and it wasn't on her list of places to see.

Janice gathered her strength and began silently down the rows of cages. She kept her

eyes diverted from the cages and cells so that it wouldn't play with her mentally. She stepped through a doorway into a short hall where there was a wood door to her left. She grabbed the door handle and hesitated on whether to open it or not. After a steadying breath, she carefully drew the door open and discovered a set of winding, torch lit steps. She exhaled in relief then slipped in and closed the door silently.

Janice crept up the steps, against the wall, and listening for anybody that may be coming. It wound up for several cases and finally leveled to another door. Just as she reached the door it already started to open. Janice cursed under her breath and jumped behind the door as it opened up. She pressed her back as hard as she could against the cold stone and prayed they wouldn't detect her yet.

A sentry soldier marched onto the platform and before he descended the steps, he threw the door shut. He started to take his first step however he paused and turned his to the left.

"Hi," greeted Janice.

The sentry's eyes widened but before he could react he was suddenly slammed by a hard fist to the face.

Janice quickly moved behind him and executed a kick to his back legs.

The soldier yelped but lost his balance completely and went flying down the steps. He smashed his head into the stone wall, went unconscious, and slid down a few more steps.

Janice huffed, threw open the door, and slipped out into level two of the dungeon. Here she didn't really find cells exactly but instead there were people hanging from the ceiling in cages or dangling midair from rafters by their lashed hands. Some prisoners were even hanging upside down.

The archeologist's stomach pitched but she controlled her natural urge to be sick. She hurried across the large room and wondered where the next steps may be. She went to the opposite wall and observed another hallway but this one much longer. She pressed against the cold wall and her eyes briefly closed when a cry of pain echoed down the hallway.

Janice swallowed and slipped into the hallway but she unsheathed her sword to be safe. She stopped by the door where there was another raging cry and there was a small barred window in the door. Her curiosity got the best of her and she glimpsed through the tiny window.

In the room beyond the door there was a murky pool of water and in it was a woman,

who was locked in a cage. Along the four ledges of the pool were men and they each held long spears at the ready. The woman was trying to stay afloat in the feces infested water but each time she grabbed the bars of the cage the men would lunge at her hands. Her hands were already cut and her right top hand had a bleeding hole in it.

Janice turned and bent forward as she tried to remain in control of her body's reaction. Why did she have to look in there? She'd heard of the water torture before in Ancient China but she never imagined seeing it here in Greece. Suddenly her attention was grabbed when the door to her right was opening so she hunkered down with her sword up.

A sentry stepped out, his back to Janice, and he closed the door next to him. He then marched into the main room where the prisoners were hanging.

The archeologist wondered if that was the next steps so she waited a few seconds. Then when there was a scream from that woman in the room, Janice moved away quickly. She silently opened the heavy door and discovered another set of stairs. She hastily ascended them because she was nervous that second sentry would find the one she'd knocked out earlier.

Janice shoved the door open and stepped into a long hallway. On her left and right were doors after doors with bar windows, which she assumed were merely true prison cells. She spun her sword, bent forward, and quickly raced down the hallway but she came short when a sentry came around the sharp corner.

The sentry was stunned but he recovered quickly by unsheathing his sword. "Stop!" he yelled.

Janice growled and charged the man. This wasn't what she needed right now as it could sound an alarm. She acted quickly by ramming her sword against his, locking their swords between their bodies, and she shoved him against the wall to hold him down. Before he could push her off, she rammed her knee between his legs.

The sentry's eyes rolled up and he gasped in pain. He lowered his hand to his groin as he fell to his knees.

Janice lifted her sword and brought her hilt down on his head roughly. She quickly caught the soldier before his limp body could make a loud bang on the stone floor. She carefully lowered him down then she glimpsed to her left to a shorter hallway through two open, heavy wood doors. She spun her sword gracefully and hurried down that hall that was well lit by the windows. The windows were level with the ground and overlooking an empty courtyard.

Janice came to the end of the hall and bent down next to the corner. She peered

around the corner and looked into some sort of lobby room. She saw she could go right or left so she decided on the left hallway.

The archeologist swiftly moved through the vacant hallway and made another left when she came to a 'T'. She quickly floated down this next hall but she stopped when there was footfall coming from the other end. She was close to a door so she grabbed the ring, swung it open, and spun around into the room. She silently closed the door and listened to the person walk by without a care. She realized she'd found another set of staircase that went up one level. Janice shrugged and went up steps and found herself in another hallway.

Janice stood against the door and looked to her right at the empty hall then to her left where it was empty. She had no clue where she was or where she was going nor could she recall where to go to get back. It truly didn't matter to her so she went down to the right and she noted the various bronze plates on the doors. She couldn't read the Greek syntax at all but she could only guess.

A door at the end of the hall opened with two voices furiously arguing. Janice paused when the soldier kept yelling at someone in the room. She turned her head to the left and grabbed the door. She couldn't read the syntax on the door but she didn't care and could only pray. She slipped through the small opening and quietly shut the door.

Janice took in her new surroundings and detected the loud and unfamiliar voices talking down below. Her heart pounded against her chest suddenly as she had a suspicion about where she was now. In front of her was a railing, which overlooked something below so she slowly crept forward.

Janice's stiffened when her eyes went over the railing and down below at ground level sat a throne at the end of a court. Her view of the occupant of the throne was obscured but the pounding of heart told her who it had to be. Gradually her eyes wandered off to the right where there were a handful of people talking and debating about something or another.

Janice hunched over so that her body was hidden and with small steps she slinked down the balcony that wrapped around the courtroom below. She achieved some distance about halfway so she paused and carefully glimpsed over the rim of the railing to finally see the person at the throne.

There seated in the throne was the ruthless Conqueror adorning her battle ready black leathers and simple brass armor. Her black and purple cape flowed over her throne to her feet. Her midnight hair covered her broad shoulders and her magnificent blue eyes were visible even to Janice from so far.

"They are all fools," chewed out a husky voice.

The Conqueror held up her hand to the woman at the right of her throne.

Janice instantly recognized Alti's voice and her skin crawled at seeing the evil shaman beside the ruler.

"She can't hide forever," reminded the Conqueror, "She'll come to us... again." Her steel blue eyes wondered back over to the people before her and they settled on one man. "Commander, what is the status of the legions in Gaul?"

The commander stepped out from the crowd, first bowed, and straightened up. "They have reached the borders, my liege."

The ruler's eyes narrowed. "Are they prepared?"

The commander cleared his throat and put his hands behind his back. He puffed out his metal clad chest before stating, "Almost, my liege." He tensed when the ruler rose up from her throne with her cape flowing behind her.

The Conqueror took one step down. "I don't like almost." She took the second step down. "Either my legions are prepared or they are not." She took the final step off the dais and towered over the commander. "Are they prepared, Commander Maleager?"

The commander broke under the powerful ruler's will. "They await your word, my liege."

The ruler held his gaze then she smiled suddenly. "Excellent." She turned and ascended each step slowly. She hesitated when a soldier hurried into the courtroom. She neared him at the edge of her dais, listened carefully, and waved him off in annoyance.

The Conqueror's back was to them as she stated, "I want the Norselands under my flag in six months, commander." She turned around and stood in front of her throne.

"My liege, the winter has already set in up there. The legions could easily die in this weather that we're not prepared for."

"Then I suggest you hurry before the weather turns worse!" yelled the ruler. "If you fail me, commander I will have your head for this. I tire of waiting for the Norselands under my reign."

Janice heaved a breath at hearing the Conqueror's legions all the way up into the Netherlands now. She'd heard enough so she reached down to her gun. She unhooked it and slowly while biting her lower lip pulled the hammer back. By god she had to

have true aim more than ever if this was going to work. She held her gun next to her head, her eyes closed, and her lips silently moved with a prayer. She swallowed then gradually lifted her body with her knees.

Janice stretched out her revolver with both her hands clutching the handle. Her right index finger touched the trigger. She forced her mind and eyes to focus together as she took aim at the dark ruler that mirrored Melinda Pappas. She was breathing heavy, her brow showing perspiration, and her hands sweaty against the cold steel of her gun. Janice stole one last calming breath as her scope of view aligned to the Conqueror's chest perfectly. In that heartbeat, Janice's world stilled and her index finger made the slow journey pulling the trigger.

The Conqueror's head snapped up to the balcony when a metal item flashed light into her falcon eyes. She gave a piercing warcry as her right hand slipped to her side. She was so incredibly beautiful in her dangerous speed that freed her chakram.

First there was the eerie whistle of the chakram then a low explosion sounded from the balcony. Next was a wrenching scream from Janice's lips when the circular weapon sliced up her right arm. The last defining sound was the revolver's echoing clank when it hit the marble floor in the courtroom far below.

The Conqueror was momentarily hunched forward from an unknown, sharp pain in her left shoulder. She clenched her teeth and brought her right hand up to catch her chakram that returned. "Stop him!"

Janice had fallen behind the rail when her arm had been neatly sliced. She desperately tried to stop the bleeding but it was useless; it wasn't too deep. Her ears rang with the commotion of people scrambling and yelling. She lifted her head when she heard something just several feet away from her. To her amazement there knelt the Conqueror in all her fury, sword at the ready, and the chakram in her left hand.

Janice scrambled to her feet and brushed her shock away at how the ruler managed to get up here so easily. She unsheathed her sword but her body was shaking in fear. She knew it was impossible for her to defeat this powerful woman in sword to sword combat.

The Conqueror straightened up to her staggering height and flicked her wrist so her sword spun. She took a menacing step towards her hooded attacker.

Janice licked her lips and stepped back once. Her attention was briefly stolen away when the door behind her and the door behind the ruler were flung open. Suddenly Janice was surrounded by the soldiers pouring onto the balcony.

The soldiers were given a hidden signal from their ruler so they remained battle ready

with swords out.

The Conqueror bared her teeth at Janice and she moved so fast she almost seemed to vanish.

Janice yelled as she lifted her sword and stopped the slashing sword attack. She jumped away but she recalled the soldiers behind her. There was no way she could survive so she threw away all reason and lunged at the great ruler.

The Conqueror was remotely surprised but she parried the enemy's fruitless attacks. She used her chakram to catch her enemy's sword in it then she ripped the sword from his hands. She watched in complete satisfaction as the sword went airborne. For a brief heartbeat, the Conqueror saw the design of the sword hilt that she was all too familiar with from her past.

Janice backed away when the Conqueror's sword tip pointed at her throat. Her ears filled with the din of her Amazon sword clanking against the marble floor below and she inwardly cursed herself for losing her gun so easily. She was so angry that she'd done this that her rage made her act out. Janice suddenly ducked around the Conqueror's blade, leapt into the air, and beautifully maneuvered her dagger from her left boot.

The Conqueror growled as the small body slammed hard into hers. She crashed onto her back with her sword and chakram skidding out of her grasp. She sensed the cold steel against her throat but her powerful hands wrapped around her attacker's small wrists and she pressed away easily. After a dangerous hiss, she rolled the small body under hers and she reversed the dagger's direction until it was against her enemy's own throat.

For the first time, the Conqueror had a clear view of her attacker's features under the hood. She was astounded to see fiery green eyes cursing up at her and the soft features of a woman. She threw off her astonishment and pressed the dagger down hard until the blade began cutting the woman's neck.

Janice gritted her teeth then a cry escaped her lips.

The Conqueror lowered her head down close and whispered, "Almost is never good enough, is it?" She suddenly fisted her right hand that was free and she brought it down.

Janice's head snapped to the right and her body instantly went limp.

The Conqueror dropped the dagger next to the attacker's head. Then she ripped the hood away to reveal a beautiful blond she was very familiar with for a moon now. She

grounded her teeth at all the implications this meant and it made no sense either. She suddenly climbed up to her feet but her cape hid the woman's face.

"Who is it?" demanded Alti, who'd slipped between the soldiers.

The ruler grabbed the right side of her cape and threw it out of the way.

Alti tensed at seeing the face of the woman she'd kidnapped a moon ago from the future.

"Perhaps you could tell me, Alti," hissed the angry ruler.

The dark shaman lifted her eyes to the ruler then quietly remarked, "I will find out."

The Conqueror stepped up to the shaman and chewed out, "See that you do... then it'll be my turn." Her head snapped up from Alti and locked on the soldiers behind her. "Get this woman to a damn cell. Find out how the Hades she got into here." When her men hesitated because they too recognized the attacker as the rebel leader, she yelled, "Now!" She collected her weapons and put them in their homes. She went to the railing, bent her knees, and jumped.

Everybody in the court below watched as the ruler soared and landed neatly on the floor with bent knees then she rose up to her threatening height.

The Conqueror bent over the two weapons her attacker had utilized and she scraped them up. She tucked the gun away into some hiding spot within her cape, behind her back. She quickly examined the sword and it confirmed it was very much an Amazon sword. She would have her answers later but she gave a wild grin at her advisors in the court. "Where were we?"

The advisors hastily started talking like nothing happened.

Rhodes, the advisor of state, had slinked into the back of the group. He wiped his sweating brow and tried to calm his irrational thoughts about what just happened. He had to keep a cool head if he was going to outsmart any of this later.

Janice Covington's head rolled from left to right then fell back on cold stone. She tried to open her eyes but her left eye refused as it was swollen shut, the pain thumping. Janice managed her right eye open and she was staring up at a chiseled stone ceiling. She rolled to her left side, which caused her stomach to pitch at the movement. She swallowed down the swimming of her stomach before her contents came up. Her right hand touched her aching stomach and that's when her right arm screamed at her for moving.

Janice hissed at the fiery pain that flashed up and down her arm from her earlier fight with the Conqueror. She finally decided it was time to sit up so she slowly rose up but when her feet tried to move under her, there was a heavy weight around her ankles. She was not too surprised to find shackles around her ankles. She merely sat up and studied her new surroundings, which was a prison cell that consisted of three walls and a heavy wood door in front of her. She tensed when she realized there was a man's face in the small, barred window on the other side. She assumed he was a posted soldier.

The soldier gave a toothy grin but said nothing. He remained still there, watching her, and wondering about her.

Janice touched her throat where there was a slight sting. Her fingertips revealed blood from the cut on her neck. She then dared to touch her left eye but she hissed at the pain. "Goddamn," she growled. She then looked up when the guard shuffled out of the window. There a harsh command and the soldier opened the door.

The archeologist exhaled loudly when the dark shaman floated into the cell. "Great," she muttered.

Alti stood in front of the door that shut behind her and locked. She glided across the cell and stopped in the middle, her dark eyes locked on her small target. "Did you really think you had any chance?" She took two steps closer then knelt down so she was level with the small woman. "The Conqueror knew of the rebel faction's plans. You're a fool, Janice."

The archeologist was breathing heavy because of her mounting anger and hatred for this shaman. Yet she gave an amused grin and brazenly ordered, "You can call me Doctor Covington, doll."

Alti became enraged and her right hand shot out, wrapping around the woman's already injured throat. She snarled while standing up and lifting the archeologist up off the ground so that her boots dangled over the stone floor. "You are in no position to be stupid."

"Neither are you," rasped the archeologist, "I know... you're plans... too, Alti." Her head started to swim against the lack of oxygen but she fought it. "Wouldn't it be fun... to tell the Conqueror... about time travel?"

The shaman hissed then slammed the small body against the stone wall, the shackles clinging in protest. "If you tell her then I can guarantee that all that'll be left is a green powder. You'll never get home."

"Right now," whispered the gasping archeologist, "I don't really... care."

Alti gave a hard jerk so that the back of Janice's head slammed against the wall. She then opened her hand.

Janice fell to the floor in a heap with a blood stain trailing down the wall from her cracked head. She barely held her body up right with her hands.

The shaman bent back down then with both hands she lifted the archeologist's face to hers. She watched as one green eye focused then unfocused but she didn't care. She leaned in and murmured, "You're nothing, Janice... you always have been and always will be." She revealed a hungry grin. "Did your father ever tell you what really happened to your mother?" At Janice's silence Alti pressed her hands tighter against Janice's soft cheeks. "Let me show you," she hissed then laughed.

Janice inhaled sharply and straightened up as her mind was rushed by an intense vision. The vision plagued her of her mother, who was with her father on her last dig. She got into the broken down truck and drove from the dig into town for supplies. It was the last time Janice ever saw her mother. The vision sped up and showed Janice's mother having car trouble, the truck broken down on the side of the road halfway to town where there was nobody. Then as her mom gave in and decided to go back to the dig site, another truck showed up.

Janice unexpectedly screamed out no in pure rage as the vision showed her mother being raped by her mother's would be savior. Her mother begged for mercy for the man to stop, she even tried to fight him to no avail. Janice clawed at Alti's wrists to try and get her to release her of the vision but it was futile. The vision then sped up and showed her mother being beaten to death by the same man until she was dead on the side of the road. As quickly as the vision struck her it ended when Alti pulled her hands away. Janice fell to the floor and tried to get up while yelling, "You fuckin' bitch!"

The shaman laughed coldly and grabbed the archeologist by her hair. She jerked Janice's head back then hotly whispered, "If you so much as breathe to the Conqueror about our little secret I'll find your... friend, Melinda. Then I'll bring only her heart back to you." She threw Janice's head then rose up swiftly. Alti ignored the movement of the weak woman on the floor as she glided to the door. She ordered the guard to open it and she left.

Janice slumped to the floor in an emotional heap. Her anger and mental anguish ate away at her as she cried for her mother. The vision Alti showed her now burned in her memory for all her life. She would never rid of those images of her mother's last hours on Earth. She clawed at the stone floor as if to tear it apart but she could not. Janice suddenly dropped her head back and screamed out, "Nooooo!"

Janice's fury fueled her body with energy and she sat up quickly. She grabbed at the chains attached to her shackles and the floor. She pulled against them with both her hands and legs yet they simply gnawed at her ankles through her boots and skin, cutting through.

Janice's rage cooled down as her anguish coated her again. She release the manacles and stopped pulling then simply remained slumped there with tears freely flowing. For all those years she'd cursed her mother for leaving her and her father she could not take back. When all this time her mother had been sexual assaulted then murdered by some nameless man in Greece. She now tasted the bitterness of revenge in her mouth as she wanted to quench it badly with something or somebody. She would win this against Alti and she would kill Alti with her bare hands as soon as she had the chance. Janice would not allow that insane shaman to shift into her future and attack Melinda Pappas when Alti had already blackened Janice so deeply.

Chapter 8 - Faith

Janice jumped with a startle when her body detected another presence. She could only open her one eye even though it'd been almost a day since the incident. She found a pair of cold blue eyes staring at her and reading her like an open book. She fisted her hands at her side but she didn't bother climbing to her feet before this dark ruler.

The Conqueror greatly towered over the prisoner. "I see you've already had one visitor."

Janice's body involuntarily shivered at the frozen, husky voice of the ruler. "We were getting acquainted." She gave her best smug expression despite her distorted features. "I guess you didn't come down for a cup of tea with me?"

The ruler flashed a grin but her eyes didn't reveal any amusement at the joke. "I avoid these retched dungeons as much as I can."

"It's your own handy work," reminded the archeologist, "but I feel so honored."

The Conqueror's eyes finally did light up with amusement. "You have spirit, Janice Covington." She stepped closer then knelt down to become level with the bruised, beaten, and cut woman. She stretched out her right hand; her fingertips tilted the blonde's head to the right then to the left. "Now how does one come to look exactly like the rebel Gabrielle, hmmm?"

Janice huffed. "It's a long fuckin' ass story." She was amazed that such a ruthless ruler had a gentle touch.

The Conqueror relinquished her hold and studied the woman's features to memory. "I bet it is," she whispered. "I hear you've met the rebel faction members... the followers of Gabrielle."

The archeologist narrowed her eyes. "If you think I'll tell you anything fuckin' forget it."

The Conqueror's eyes lit up by the challenge thrown at her. "We will see, Janice Covington." She tilted her head to the side and her blue eyes flashed with mirth. "So how is Queen Cyane?"

Janice said nothing but her features deceived her with all her hatred.

The ruler's lips played with a feral grin. "She seems to weaken with each passing day, I've noticed. Her Nation is rotting away to nothing and I don't even have to lift a finger."

"At least Queen Cyane is a just ruler."

The Conqueror laughed in response. "Do not be fooled, Janice. Simply because she is just does not make her an excellent ruler."

"But it does make her a better one compared to you," challenged the archeologist.

"Perhaps," murmured the ruler. She then leaned in and quietly whispered, "It no longer concerns you though. Right now... you know some things that I wish to possess. Maybe we can trade."

"What's to trade?" questioned the archeologist.

The Conqueror brought out her best grin. "You give me the names of the faction followers and I'll make your death swift."

Janice's eyes darkened three shades and she hotly whispered, "Go to fuckin' hell, you sick son of a bitch." She never saw it coming when the ruler's swift hands leapt out. Janice's neck suddenly tightened at her last breath and she could only gasp for air. She grabbed at her throat but it was useless as her lungs couldn't fill with air any longer.

"Tell me the names and I'll release it." The Conqueror watched as the small woman's head dropped back, her eyes unfocused on the ceiling above. "You have twenty heartbeats left before you die."

"Thank... god then," rasped Janice. Her eyes swam in the lights darkened around her.

She lost control of her body and she slumped against the wall.

The Conqueror saw the maroon blood trail down Janice's upper lip. Then Janice collapsed completely and the Conqueror's hands quickly shot out to release the pinch. She growled as the small prisoner remained unconscious on the cold floor. She sprung up to her full height and yelled for the guard.

Janice awoke some time later by a splash of hot water hitting her upper body. She screamed against the heat of the water but she shook it off and focused on what was happening to her. Her good eye finally open and she realized why her wrists hurt so bad as she was being hung from the rafters above her. Her boots just skimmed the stone floor that had a thin coating of blood from a previous prisoner.

Janice knew she was on the second level of the dungeon since there were other prisoners hanging around her and across from her. She became frantic and tried to wriggle her wrists free from the rope high above. The restraining rope wouldn't give and merely chewed into her wrists for her resistance.

"Stop struggling," coldly ordered the ruler's voice from by the doorway. She strolled down to the archeologist with a familiar dagger in her right hand as she played with it in her nails. "This will go faster if you cooperate."

The archeologist was breathing heavily and clenching her fists. She never felt so helpless and desperate in her life but she would not give into this ruthless woman.

"Are you familiar with the torture known as Lǐngchí?" casually inquired the Conqueror. She stood in front of her enemy. "Well, it's one of my favorite methods of torture that I discovered in Chin." She showed her teeth to Janice in a hungry grin. "The word Lǐngchí translates to death by a thousand cuts." She lifted the dagger in salute.

Janice growled at what was coming towards her. She wrapped her fingers around the wrap that her hands were lashed to. She hysterically started moving and managed to swing her body using the rope.

The Conqueror jumped aside in surprise by the cleverness of the woman's attempt. She laughed in excitement at such spirit in her prisoner. "Guard, get the weights!" she snapped.

Janice's ankles were shackled but she had some range of motion so she tried her best to take a kick at the heartless ruler.

Again the Conqueror jumped back and laughed at the attempted assault. When she saw two guards returned with lead weights that had eyes at the top and ropes tied

through the eyes, she ordered them to get Janice under control.

The archeologist fought against her attackers but she had little strength left. She yelled and screamed yet the ruler, herself, lashed the lead weights to each of her ankles.

The guards stepped back when it was done.

The Conqueror was content at how Janice could no longer struggle. "Now...." She removed Janice's dagger from her side and gave it a spin between her fingers. "For every five cuts I make, you have a chance to tell me what I want to know." She brought the dagger up against the soft stomach in front of her and she let the tip travel up and down Janice's stomach. "And where should I begin? Any requests?"

Janice gritted her teeth and tried one last attempt to struggle but it was hopeless.

"No?" murmured the Conqueror. "Well... how about here?" She pressed the blade into Janice's skin just under her right rib.

Janice hissed hotly at the sting.

The Conqueror release the pressure then casually let the tip scrape across Janice's right side as she encircled her prisoner. She came to Janice's back side and suddenly she pushed the blade in deeper again.

Janice opened her mouth but contained her scream. Her head slumped forward some and she saw the cut on her stomach, the blood trickling down towards her waistband. She bit her lower lip and her eyes slammed shut when the searing sting flashed down across her upper back.

"You see, Janice," started the ruler's chilled voice, "it isn't that you just bleed to death from this torture." She made a neat design with the blade's tip but she didn't press it in... yet. "It's actually the fact that your wounds become infected." She came to Janice's left side now and pushed the dagger's side into Janice's.

Janice hissed and gave a small cry of pain.

"Then you become sick," continued the ruler. She now stood in front of her prisoner. "Maggot will eat away at your flesh." She brought the dagger near the first cut she made at Janice's stomach. "These wounds won't heal when you're sleeping in dirt with no food... no medical attention." She suddenly sliced the knife across her prisoner's stomach again so that the two cuts made an 'X' design. "Tell me, Janice... who are they?"

The archeologist opened her pain filled, unswollen eye and her angry voice whispered,

"Fuck you."

The Conqueror amusingly chuckled and replied, "That could be arranged but I don't lay with faction scum."

"Too much on your own level?" coldly shot back Janice.

The ruler had a wiry grin and she quickly cut the dagger across Janice's chest, just over her right breast. "You faction fools are all alike." She began circling her prey again. "Rid the world of the Conqueror and there will be peace." She slashed the dagger across Janice's back on a diagonal. "You rebels do not realize how many power hungry murders I hold at bay from taking control."

"And you are so merciless," sarcastically breathed the prisoner.

The Conqueror was slicing Janice's upper left thigh but on the side. "I rule with fear... I am feared and I am fear."

Janice was gritting her teeth from all the stinging over her body. Her skin could feel the slow trickle of warm blood. "You are a fuckin' bitch with no legacy and no future."

The ruler stopped in front of her prisoner and wildly grinned. "Were you talking about me... or you?" She suddenly lashed out with the dagger making a long cut completely across Janice's lower abdomen.

Janice instantly screamed against the pain. She hung her head down, her good eye closed, and she tried to pull her mind from her pained body. The Conqueror's voice would fade in and out as much as the stinging cuts over her body. She then sensed the weights released from her ankles some time later. Then her body was dropped roughly to the dirty floor and she tried to struggle as she was dragged back to her cell on the first floor. She was finally thrown into her cell and a soldier shackled her back to the floor, freed her hands of the rope but not without putting manacles on them too.

Finally Janice was left alone in her cell. She remained on her side as her breathing was heavy, her eyes closed. Her stomach was ravishing her insides for food, which gave her a pounding headache. Her blood oozed from her wounds and trickled into the cracks of the stone floor. She didn't care anymore. All she could think about was the people she loved so dearly that seemed so far from her. She began to realize that she'd failed each of those people she loved as she laid here slowly dying physically and mentally.

At some unknown point, Janice slipped into her dreams that only continued the Conqueror's torture. It wasn't until the prison door opened and slammed that she

stirred awake some. She opened her good eye while her other eye slightly broke open but her view was fuzzy in that eye. She took in the black boots in her view but she didn't bother to look up at her visitor.

"Guards, prepare her so she can hang from her ankles," commanded the cold voice of the Conqueror. "We still have unfinished business, Janice Covington."

The guards rushed into the cell and one unlocked her chains at her ankles then he grabbed her manacles at her ankles. The second sentry grabbed her wrist manacles then together the guards lifted the small body up from the floor.

The Conqueror watched with a feral smile as the prisoner was carried away. She peered down at the ground and assessed the amount of blood from the woman's body left on the floor. It'd been two days since she'd begun the Língchí torture but Janice's body seemed to handle the first fifty cuts fairly well. She would never admit to admiring the woman's strength to hold out but she had ever intent of breaking Janice Covington.

Janice's head spun as the blood rushed to her head while she hung upside down now. She would have been sick if there was anything left in her stomach besides acids. When the Conqueror stepped in front of her, images of throwing her shackles around the ruler's throat and choking her came to her. Yet Janice couldn't move her weak arms that were raw and red from several long dagger cuts.

"Tell me, Janice what I want to know," ordered the ruler. She produced the dagger from her side. When there was absolutely no response, she began her slow cutting dance around her prey. She reopened some old cuts and made fresh ones.

Janice never screamed, never spoke, and her mind was removed from her body. She could feel her body in pain but she was numb to it all. If she transcended into the afterlife now, then it would be so beautiful compared to this and her heart actually welcomed the idea.

The Conqueror grew angry when she completed her next step of the Língchí torture that gave her nothing. She knew exactly what'd happened to Janice having experienced it herself in the past. She would have to jar the archeologist back into reality and she had the perfect means to do just that.

The prisoner was brought down from her hanging position then hauled back up to the first level. She was dropped in the cell, chained, and left alone with nothing. Janice's head swam as she faded in and out of the world. Then she heard a lot of movement that awoke her from her nightmares. She was able to open both her eyes despite her left eye was barely focusing and things were cloudy. Janice good eye centered on a familiar face sitting across from her but then something occurred to her.

Janice's body had a brief charge of energy and she sat up. Her features were full of fear and terror as she stared at the marred face of Rhodes. "Holy... shit," she gasped and backed against the wall.

"Welcome back," offered the Conqueror, who stood off the side so that Janice could have a clear view of the dead advisor. "I see you haven't lost all your senses."

Janice was digging her nails into the floor and she turned her head away from Rhodes. "What did you fuckin' do to him?"

"I killed him," mildly answered the ruler. "But... after I punished him." She knelt down beside the dead body and pointed at his mouth that hung open. "I first cut his tongue out... for all his lies." She smiled at Janice as her hand pointing finger lifted to his eyes. "Then I cut out his eyes for seeing things he should have never saw in the rebels." Then she indicated the side of Rhode's head. "Last, I cut his ears off for listening to the rebels' cause."

The Conqueror stood up and now walked over to Janice. She touched the small woman's furthest cheek and forced her to look at her and Rhodes behind her. "I knew for many moons that he was a traitor. I let him live and I played with his deceit because he didn't realize my spies were watching his every move." She leaned in closer then whispered, "I know everything that goes on in my realm."

The ruler removed her lingering touch then leaned back again. "I know where Gabrielle is now, Janice."

The archeologist's eyes focused on the ruler. "No," she breathed in disbelief.

"She's with the weak Amazon Nation." The Conqueror softly laughed at Janice's doubting features. "I've already ordered two legions of Spartan hoplites to be mobilized. They wait for three orders from me. Do you know what those orders are, Janice?"

The prisoner swallowed because she knew but she dared not say it aloud.

"First, to wipe the Amazon Nation off this Earth. Second, bring me the head of Queen Cyane. Then third...." The Conqueror hungrily whispered, "Bring me the rebel leader Gabrielle."

Janice gritted her teeth and she shook her head. "No... you bitch."

"You see, Janice I will win this." The ruler shrugged and plainly stated, "If I cannot cut the snake's body from its head then I will cut the head from its body."

"You can't slaughter those people!" hotly yelled the prisoner.

"I'm not, I am punishing traitors of the realm. The Amazons have aided the rebel leader. They will pay." The Conqueror suddenly stood up and her dark cape flowed down behind her. "However I am willing to give you one last chance, Janice." When angry eyes met her steel blues, she explained her offer. "You have a choice, you can either tell me who the faction followers are and I will order my legions to demobilize or you cannot and I will give my final orders." She smiled at the prisoner and amusingly summarized, "This is your last, great deed, Janice before you die." She stepped away until she was standing next to Rhode's dead corpse. "I'll leave you to discuss it with your... friend here." She peered down at the bloody, mutilated body. "I think though your words will fall on dead ears." She chuckled and walked towards the open door.

"Aren't you even the least bit concerned about where I came from?" challenged Janice.

The ruler paused in the doorway and turned back to the prisoner. "Honestly, no." She started to pull away again.

"What if I tell you it has something to do with Alti?"

The Conqueror hesitated again but she leered at the archeologist. "Alti is a walking deceit but she's valuable. I know her movements better than she does."

"Not in this case," shot back Janice, "She's played you well this time."

The Conqueror turned her head to Janice finally. "Perhaps after you've made your decision about the fate of the rebels then we'll discuss the terms for your information on Alti." Then with that she swiftly vanished from the cell with the door slamming shut.

Janice's jaw clenched and unclenched as she was left with Rhode's corpse. She turned her head away but he kept staring at her with his empty eye sockets. She turned her body some, lifted her knees, and buried her face into her knees. Rhodes kept staring at Janice though and his decaying corpse started to permeate in the cell after so many hours.

The archeologist wanted to cry but she had no tears left. Her emotions so raw and the only thing solid was her anger. Somehow she managed to fall asleep again but her nightmares were of Rhodes and his defaced corpse chasing her and tempting her.

The smell of the rotting body finally got to Janice and she ended up being sick in one of the corners of the cell. Her throat burned from the heavy acids of her stomach but

she spit the last of it out. She then stumbled back and fell down then leaned against the wall. She tried to ignore the dead body but it was engrained in her head.

Janice slumped to the floor, her back to Rhode's corpse, and she curled up into a ball. She shifted into her nightmares for a long time and she never heard the guard come in to remove the corpse. The guard too tired of smelling the stench out in the prison hall as well as the circulating flies that ravished the body.

Janice awoke but she could not move as her body was too weak. She was weak from not eating and the wounds. Her body ached from the hard floor. Her skin stung all over from the aggravated cuts that were turning worse. The Conqueror had even been right about the maggots as two of them she found in the deep, red cut on her right thigh. She frantically clawed them out and got them out of her wound before they did anymore eating of her dead flesh around the wound. She then was alarmed when the guard unlocked the door from a barking command. She clenched her hands at her sides as the dark ruler strolled casually into the cell. Janice knew that the Conqueror wanted her answer to her choice. She knew as much as the Conqueror who Janice would choose but Janice wasn't sure if she could dare breathe it out. She would die by this heartless monster but her faith would not be broken by this raging hatred.

The Conqueror stepped through the door, her eyes flashing in feral power. Her cape circled her body in protection and her bronze armor shined her deadly beauty. The Conqueror twisted her head to the door and she snapped, "Go wait down the hall until I call for you."

Janice tried to sit up and managed to just as the dark ruler knelt down in front of her. Her good eye and hazy eye centered on the beautiful features of the dark ruler then she absorbed the soft blue eyes. Her heart stopped a beat at seeing such tenderness and she knew she must be crossing over with Melinda's beauty before her. She began to swoon and fall to her left yet strong hands captured her shoulders and held her up right.

"Janice," called a sweet voice. "Come on, Janice... don't do this to me... not now, please."

The archeologist's mind swam and she lifted her head as the dim light in the darkness filtered to her. She followed the light as fast as she could and slowly her eyes reopened to see the concerned features of the Conqueror.

"Come on, Janice," softly urged the Conqueror's soothing voice. "You're safe... everything is okay now."

Janice moaned when a tender hand touched her bruised cheek. She leaned into the touch when it felt so natural to her body. "Whaaat..."

"Janice, it's me."

The archeologist swallowed against her sandy throat as her ears detected the Conqueror's beautiful southern accent. The accent registered into her mind hastily and she lifted her head from the gentle touch. She was startled again and tried to back away from the Conqueror.

"No... no, it's okay." The Conqueror moved closer but was cautious with the scared woman. "It's me, Janice... It's Mel."

"No," growled Janice and she moved away. "You're playing with me... Alti told you about her." She grabbed at the hand on her cheek and tried to crush it with no avail.

"No, Janice it's really me." The Conqueror leaned in and murmured, "Would the Conqueror know your daddy is Doctor Harry Covington or that you have a disgusting habit with cigars?"

Janice still had a frightened expression but it faintly softened. "It's impossible... unless I'm dead."

The Conqueror swallowed the lump in her throat then murmured, "No but you... were dying," she whimpered with so many emotions behind her words. "You're safe now though."

"Mel?" gasped Janice, who started crying suddenly.

"Ooo god." Melinda Pappas, dressed as the ruthless Conqueror, reached for her friend and pulled her close to her body. "I'm so sorry, Janice."

The archeologist couldn't understand what'd happened but she didn't care in this instant. She buried her broken body into the familiar form of Melinda Pappas. She sobbed loudly and clenched onto the strong body.

Melinda held onto the fragile archeologist and started to rock their bodies in a rhythmic harmony. She could tell it was helping to soothe the shaking woman's senses as Janice came over her shock and fright. Melinda slightly drew away and wiped the tears away from the red, cut cheeks. "I promise you're safe, Janice."

Janice hands were tangled in the wire armor that wrapped around the black leathers that Melinda wore. "Mel, it's really you?"

Melinda subconsciously licked her lips then slowly nodded. "It's really me, Janice." She brushed back blond bangs on Janice's forehead and she tilted her head as she

realized something. "And what in God's name did you do to your hair, Janice Covington?"

Janice now laughed in pure relief and tears streamed from her eyes once more. "It's really you, Mel."

Melinda's features were soft and eyes full of worry. "It's me," she confirmed once and for all.

"How... what... I don't understand."

"I know," assured the translator. "It's a long story but we ain't gonna discuss it here or now." She swallowed against that hard lump in her throat that meant her emotions were on the surface. "We'll talk about it later, I promise. Right now we need to take care of ya."

The archeologist shook her head because she had no idea what to do or say at this point. She could barely grasp the concept of being tortured by the Conqueror earlier and now resting in Melinda's arms, who was dressed as the ruler.

"I'll get ya out of here, okay? We'll get your wounds taken care of then get ya fed."

Janice slowly nodded; she wasn't sure what to say.

The southerner carefully released her friend and placed her back on the floor. She then stood up.

The archeologist watched in awe as her best friend seemed to do some mental shift when her eyes closed then opened again. She slightly tensed thinking that Melinda wasn't really her and that it was her mind playing games.

Melinda went to the door and pounded on it roughly while calling, "Guard!" Her southern draw was completely gone.

The sentry scuffled down the hallway and opened the door. When the ruler didn't step out right away he had curious features.

"I want the prisoner taken to my slaves," coldly ordered the Conqueror. "See that you tell them to bathe her and feed her. Then tell my healer to take care of the wounds."

The stunned guard blinked at the ruler like she was Medusa.

The Conqueror snarled, jumped forward, and brought her hand around the man's neck. "Do we have a hearing probably?" She easily started lifting the guard from the ground.

"N-n-no, my liege!"

The dark ruler threw the man through the door way and pleasingly watch him hit the floor. "Then carry out my orders, now!" She then stepped out of the open cell, bent down in front of him, and softly threatened, "If she is harmed anymore then I'll hold you responsible for it. Are we communicating clearly?"

"Y-y-yes, my liege... she'll be taken care of right away."

"She better be," snapped the furious ruler, who stood up finally. She stole one last look at the prisoner in the cell.

Janice was holding her body up with her hands and she saw the comfort and hidden love in those familiar, blue eyes. She was assured again, which made her relax some.

The Conqueror suddenly turned and rushed down the hallway at a fast pace.

The guard climbed to his feet and was rubbing his aching back for a few heartbeats. He grunted at the prisoner and mildly joked, "Don't go anywhere." He slammed the heavy door shut then marched off to find another guard to help him.

Janice lowered her head against the wall and her thoughts were reeling faster than light. She couldn't comprehend how it was possible for Melinda Pappas to be here in this time too let alone role playing the Conqueror. She was bulked down by so many questions that wouldn't be answered until much later.

The archeologist softly moaned and touched her forehead that started to pound with a headache. She had to settle down or else she would simply go insane. There was too much to grasp and understand right now but first thing was first and that was getting cleaned up, thank god.

The sentry returned with another one and the pair did what they knew best. They freed Janice from the chains that attached to the floor then they merely lifted her by her arm and leg manacles. With easy, the frustrated sentries carried the dangling woman like meat on a skewer and took her through the dungeon and into the fortress.

Janice's vision swirled and spun in circles as everything passed her so quickly. She heard the boots scuffing on the floor, the ceiling passing over head, and the grunts of the guards. Then she was lowered onto a cool but soft stone floor and the guards roughly grabbed her shackles.

"The Conqueror wants her cleaned up... the healer will be over too," barked a guard to somebody. He stood up while throwing the manacles over his leather padded

shoulders. "Feed her too." He stepped away but paused to add, "I'll post two guards by the doors incase you have a problem with her." His brown eyes flickered to the beat up, cut up, and weaken prisoner then he chuckled while saying, "I doubt you will though." With that, he signaled his buddy to leave with him.

Janice was completely in a daze as two curious, female faces hovered above her and they were saying something. She couldn't understand them at all except for a few broken words that filtered through. She quietly groaned and closed her eyes. Then soft, small hands were under her shoulders and back thighs. Her body again was floating in the air but then soothing, warm water gradually embraced her. The beautiful scent of laurel and lilac filled her very senses.

The prisoner tried to open her eyes when there were strong arms around her waist and a silky body pressing into her back, holding her up carefully. She discovered the striking features of a young, tan face, who was smiling at her. The silky lips that the young woman possessed slowly moved but the words that escaped didn't register to Janice's jumbled mind.

Instead, the archeologist moaned at the sensual feelings invading her body that were so opposite of her earlier days. She relished it and it soothed her ravishing hatred that was very much a monster in her. She leaned her head back until there was a broad shoulder behind her that let her rest there. She closed her aching left eye and her good eye so that her body could simply soak in the beautiful tenderness all around her.

"Theresa, look?" murmured the slave standing in front of Janice, who held a soft sponge in her right hand.

Theresa, who was behind Janice and holding Janice upright, shifted her head and gazed down at the indicted water. Her eyes widened in horror at how the soapy water was tinted red by blood. "We must hasten to clean her, Nakia. The Conqueror will not be pleased if she dies here in our care."

The young slave quickly understood and tried to clean Janice as fast as she could but it was hard. She'd never seen so many cuts in her life on one's body yet her administrations were thought out and tender.

"Theresa, can you untie her top?"

"No, you will have to get it. She will fall if I release her."

Nakia lowered the sponge into the pool of warm, fragrant water. She came to the right side of the pair and worked between the prisoner and Theresa. She managed to undone the tie in the back. Next she went ahead and removed the leather skirt.

"Don't forget her boots," offered Theresa.

Nakia had taken several heartbeats to clean the leathers in the water. She tossed them onto the ledge nearby then she finally reached underwater to get the boots. She was able to unlace them each and one by one, she pulled them off of the prisoner's feet. Finally with the clothes out of the water and on the ledge, Nakia cleaned the prisoner's body one last time. She fully enjoyed the beautiful body this small prisoner had even though the cuts, deep gashes, and bruises disfigured her greatly.

"Is she clean, Nakia?"

"We need to do her hair," reminded the smaller slave.

Theresa nodded and did her best to shift around until the prisoner was facing her, leaning her small frame against her larger body. "I'll lower her down." Very carefully and gradually, Theresa lowered Janice deeper until the back of her head just touched the water.

Nakia was now able to work her soapy hands carefully through the stranger's golden hair. When she got to the back of the woman's head, she felt the hair matted and small clumps in her hands. She was shocked to find dried pieces of blood. She tended to the bloody hair and softly worked the dried blood out of the blond locks. Finally she finished up by washing out the soap and saying, "We're finished, Theresa."

The tall slave took her cue and cautiously lifted the moaning prisoner back up. "Go to the steps first."

Nakia easily pushed through the pool of water and turned after going up a few steps. When Theresa was close enough with the stranger, she helped lift her up into the air. She and Theresa carried the semi-conscious prisoner through the bathing room to the other left side where they'd already prepared a long bench with a towel spread out on it. They lowered her on the bench but adjusted her until her head rested on the two towels stacked up as a makeshift pillow.

Theresa then hurried off to get some towels for drying the stranger's body down.

Nakia bent over the prisoner and studied the woman. She couldn't imagine what this prisoner had gone through in the dungeons and she also didn't understand why the Conqueror would save anyone from the dungeons. She lifted her head when Theresa handed her a towel.

Together the pair toweled the stranger's raw skin but as they went their towels grew redder from the bleeding. The wounds had been reopened by the warm bath.

"Nakia, get our robes before the healer arrives. I'll dry her hair."

The small, dark slave didn't argue. She rushed off and left Theresa to finish up. When she returned, she already had her black robe on and was holding out Theresa's to her.

Theresa slipped hers on just as the healer entered the guarded bathing room.

The healer stopped just after entering the bathing room. He spotted what he suspected was his patient and he hurried over to the slaves with the slim form on the bench. He first hefted his bag of medical supplies then stepped up and fear waved over his features at seeing the woman's body on the bench. "By the gods... what's happened?"

Nakia's eyes flickered over to Theresa.

Theresa sighed and folded her arms over her chest. "She's from the dungeons."

The healer was scanning over the endless injuries but he waited a beat and studied Theresa as if to gauge her honesty. He believed her though because this stranger certainly displayed many forms of torture. He wondered how many wounds she had mentally from the tortures she suffered.

The healer quietly worked to stop the random bleeding from the freshly open wounds. He occasionally asked the slaves to help him but he mostly did everything. He used jewelweed balsam on her cuts and there were a few he actually wrapped because they were so deep. He then administered arnica over the bruises in hopes it'd help drive the blood out and settle it. The second to last thing he dealt with was her left swollen eye that was discharging a white puss and most likely was obscuring her vision. He only prayed he was here soon enough so that her vision wouldn't be permanently damaged. He removed a white lotion from his supplies then carefully rubbed it in over her eyelid then completely around her eye.

"She has a wound on the back of her head too," mentioned Nakia.

The healer sighed at this information but he peered up at Theresa. "Can you lift her up while I check?" When the slave did that, he inspected the back of her head and his fingers sensed the wound. From his more intense inspection, the stranger moaned and slightly stirred. He decided it was best to add some balsam to her head wound too so that it'd heal properly. He was relieved to find out that her skull wasn't cracked amazingly, the blood merely from the scalp being broken open.

The healer ordered the slave to lower her back down then he hunted through his medical supplies for something. He couldn't find what he wanted so he'd have to get it later and deliver it.

"Will she live?" murmured Nakia.

The healer was closing his bag up. "Surprisingly... yes." He studied the nude but mangled body of the prisoner. He'd seen this torture before done by the Conqueror. In past times, he was called in to confirm a prisoner's death but this was the first time he was called in to confirm a prisoner's life. He could not imagine what'd caused the Conqueror to change her mind. "She'll need bed rest."

Nakia folded her arms over her chest. "What of her wounds? Should we care for them?"

"I will take care of them," answered the healer. He stopped staring at the small woman and looked between the slaves. "One of you should get her more awake and keep her awake for a full day. She may have a concussion."

Theresa eyed the smaller slave.

Nakia understood and offered a smile to the healer. "I'll take care of her."

The healer faintly nodded then lifted his medical supplies off the bench. "Well... hopefully her sanity is still alive." With that, he headed off and would make a direct report to the Conqueror as she would expect of him.

"Let's get her to a room," suggested Theresa.

"Should I try to wake her?"

The tall slave carefully considered this then nodded. "You wake her, I'll find a room for her." She hurried off to the main door that the healer just left through.

Nakia first sought out a robe and came back with it. She let it hang from her left hand while she tried to stir the small woman. "You must wake up." She received a quiet groan.

Janice transcended from her half waken, half sleeping state. She'd felt all the caresses for the past half an hour or so but her skin felt chilled again. She tried to open her eyes. She was greeted by a dark, smiling face above her.

"Sit up, come on." Nakia tried to get the stranger to lift up, her small hands behind the prisoner's back. "That's it."

The archeologist let out a whimper when her muscles protested against the work of sitting up.

"Here." Nakia lifted the stranger's right arm and started the long process of getting the robe on her.

Janice truly tried to help by lifting her limbs yet it was wearing. Her head slumped forward some, her eyes half closed. However when hand patted her right cheek to stir her, she lifted her head.

"You cannot sleep. You must be awake." Nakia closed the robe around the small frame and tied the sash. She cupped her hands under the stranger's face and held her head up. She read the shallowness in both sets of eyes, which made her heart seize for a beat. "I am Nakia. What is your name?"

Janice slightly shook her head and for a long second, her eyes closed then opened slowly again. "Jan... Janice," she mumbled.

Nakia was surprised to get any response yet she smiled in hope. Her head straightened up sharply when Theresa arrived again. "Theresa, she cannot walk."

The taller slave didn't like this because otherwise the guards would haul the prisoner down to the room. She didn't like that idea since it could be held over her and Nakia's heads. She also felt for this prisoner. "If you get her right side, I'll get her left."

Nakia agreed and bent her knees. "Janice, put your arm around my neck and your left arm around Theresa's waist."

The archeologist needed an extra second to register the request. She slipped her right arm around across Nakia's shoulders then managed her arm across the taller woman's waist.

"On the count of three," offered Theresa. "One... two... three." All at once, they managed to get Janice somewhat on her feet.

Janice's body felt light like she was floating but her feet still touched the floor. She was helped through the beautiful, damp bathing room and taken to double doors.

Theresa knocked on it and a guard opened it for them.

The guards straightened up as the prisoner was helped out of the room. They figured they better follow so they could keep an eye on the prisoner but they knew she wouldn't go anywhere. Still, they didn't want to suffer under the Conqueror's wrath.

The slaves and Janice made it down the hall a ways then Theresa opened the chamber door. She and Nakia stopped in front of the bed. "Nakia, I'll help her up."

Nakia slipped Janice's arm from her shoulders and positioned Janice's hand on the bed instead.

Janice gathered what was next so she tried to help by hauling her frail body into the bed.

"Nakia, you stay and make sure she doesn't sleep. I'll get some food." With that, Theresa slipped out of the chambers and closed the door behind her.

Nakia climbed into the bed too but faced the stranger. She helped Janice get under the covers so that she'd be warm but she didn't let Janice lay down. Instead she took the three large pillows and positioned them so that Janice sat upright in bed. "You must remain awake, Janice." She patted the woman's slashed cheeks.

"I'm trying," murmured the prisoner. She rested her head against the headboard of the bed. "What's your name?"

The young slave smiled and sat cross legged next to the interesting woman. "My name is Nakia."

Janice offered her own smile but her lips ached from the cuts and dryness. "That's... Egyptian... right?"

Nakia was stunned, her smile brighter now. "I am from Egypt, yes. I was given to the Conqueror by Queen Cleopatra."

The archeologist huffed and tried to study the dark features of Nakia. "Do you miss home?"

"I was young when I was given to the Conqueror. I only have unpleasant memories of home."

"How old?" murmured Janice.

"I was sixteen winters old," answered Nakia, "but I'll be twenty-one winters soon." She now dared to ask her own question. "You said your name is Janice but are you not Gabrielle?"

Janice almost wanted to laugh but she couldn't quite. "No... I'm pretty sure I'm still just Janice."

Nakia chuckled at this response but she'd heard the rumors about the rebel leader and she'd even been so courageous to see the rebel when she spoke against the Conqueror so long ago. "You are brave, Janice and also lucky."

Janice didn't agree at all. She shook her head and stared down at her cut up hands.

The slave sensed her distraught so she covered the cut hands with her dark hands. "You are," she insisted, "they say nobody survives the Conqueror but you have."

The archeologist swallowed because she knew the truth about why she survived. There was only one reason why she survived when in fact she'd really failed.

"You and Gabrielle," thought aloud Nakia. "You two must have a trick." She received a faint grin from the stranger, which warmed her too. "Theresa will be back soon with food."

"I think I'm... thirsty," admitted the archeologist. She couldn't recall the last time she drank anything. Her body was suffering from dehydration by now and she would need the fluids soon.

"Theresa will bring some water too," promised the slave. Just as she finished speaking, Theresa returned with a tray of food.

Theresa deposited the tray between Janice and Nakia. "Take care of her, Nakia. I will... I will see to the Conqueror."

Nakia gave a sympathetic expression and called to Theresa by the door. "Thank you."

Theresa gave a minor smile then vanished once again.

Nakia continued her tending of the prisoner by helping her eat the food. The food itself was rather light such as a warm soup, a little bit of soft bread, and then a couple handfuls of grapes. Janice was relieved to have some soft food as her jaw was just as sore as everything else. She then sipped on a mug of warm tea that had an odd herb in it. She didn't question it as it maybe something to help her.

Janice held the warm mug between her aching hands, her head against the headboard again.

Nakia was placing the empty tray on the table near the door. As she came back, the stranger spoke to her.

"Nakia, tell me about Egypt. I haven't been there... yet."

The slave got onto the bed again and returned to her same position. "If you promise to stay awake....?"

"I will," murmured the worn archeologist.

Nakia slowly nodded while brushing back a long strand of her midnight hair. She began relaying her tales of her homeland and particularly about the famous Queen Cleopatra, who she served for some time. She made sure to thoughtfully watch for any signs of Janice falling asleep but Janice never slipped away.

Here and there Janice would ask questions but only so many than she normally would do. Her mind was mushy and she doubted her memory would recall half this conversation with Nakia. Still though the conversation kept her awake and her mind worked on something other than her current situation.

Janice stole a quick look out of the window nearby and estimated it must be somewhere near seven o'clock as the sun's setting rays poured into the room. She wished she could see the sunset since she hadn't seen the sun in so long while in the dungeon. She promised herself that as soon as she was able to move around that she would do just that.

Nakia stopped talking when a sentry opened the door. She straightened up when the powerful, dark Conqueror stepped in with a cold expression. "My liege," she respectfully greeted and bowed her head.

The Conqueror absorbed the scene of her slave sitting on the bed with the prisoner. "Theresa reported you and her have tended to the... prisoner."

Janice swallowed and silently watched and listened.

"Yes, my liege." Nakia's head was bowed, her dark tresses fallen around her face. "She has eaten too."

The ruler quickly crossed the distance from the doorway after signaling the sentries to close the door. She stretched out her right hand and brought her fingertips under Nakia's chin. When fearful brown eyes met hers, she narrowed her crystal blue eyes. "See that you continue with such care until the prisoner is well."

"Of course, my liege."

"Good." The Conqueror relinquished her touch and ordered, "Now see to my room with Theresa until a guard finds you."

Nakia quickly compiled and slipped out of the bed. She went to the door but also picked up the empty tray from earlier. She silently left the Conqueror and prisoner alone but her prayers were sent out to Janice.

The Conqueror's body released some unknown hold when the chamber door closed.
"How do ya feel, Janice?"

Janice settled her strangling clench of her mug and tried to relax when she saw that eerie shift in the woman before her. "A little better."

Melinda's features were no long hard like that of a ruler but incredibly soft and worried. "The healer said he cleaned your wounds. He will check regularly on ya."

Janice mutely nodded, her gaze lowered to her mug.

Melinda stepped closer then she gently brought her hand against Janice's cheek.

The archeologist flinched and involuntarily moved her head away.

Melinda's stomach turned at the reaction that her touch invoked. She should have expected much since she not only looked just as her descendant but was role playing the ruler that was just torturing Janice. "Janice, I am sorry this's happened."

Janice detected the emotional ache in the southerner's words. She closed her eyes for a second but lifted her head and captured Melinda's gaze. "I am too." Her eyes moistened yet she refused to cry anymore so she looked away quickly. "How did you get here, Mel? How... long now?"

The translator bit her lower lip. "I know you're confused, Janice and I want to tell ya everything but not right now. You've been through too much and need to rest."

The archeologist had no energy or words to argue, she simply nodded.

Melinda exhaled sadly at the lack of light and character in her friend; she knew it would take time. "The healer said ya may have a concussion."

Janice slowly nodded then murmured, "I'll stay awake."

"I'll come back later and check on ya," stated the worried southerner.

The archeologist shook her head, still staring in her mug. "Don't worry, Mel."

"It ain't an offer, Janice Covington." Melinda tilted her head to get a better view of the bowing head of her friend. "I'm worried."

"I know," muttered the archeologist. She swallowed then finally lifted her head. "This is... really hard for me." She signaled weakly with her left hand at Melinda's body. "You're even dressed just like... like her."

Melinda's jaw clenched then unclenched against her emotional thoughts. She now realized that Janice was making a mental association of her to the Conqueror, especially with this particular attire. She gave herself a mental note to root through the ruler's attire to find something different. At least it'd give her a different light in front of the shaken archeologist. "I know, Janice... give it some time."

All Janice could do was nod her answer.

Melinda wanted to touch her friend, to reassure her physically like she'd done in the cell however the earlier shock had worn off the archeologist. Now the ramification of the sinister ruler's torture was seeping deeply into Janice's conscious and heart. Melinda wasn't sure what else to say or do so she knew she could not recoil from Janice no matter how hard this was for her too. "I'll be back later."

Janice's head rose as her friend moved swiftly away and glided to the door. She saw how Melinda hesitated at the door and there were words on Janice's lips that she could not speak out but her heart wanted her to do it. All of her being refused to open her cleaned wounds and so she built up a protection for them.

Melinda cast one last look at her friend then she silently left the room.

Janice remained still in the bed, her head slumped, and her eyes closed. Her frame suddenly shook with silent sobs that stung her eyes but she contained her burning tears with tight eyelids. The one person she needed more than anybody else now reminded her of the person she most hated. Why her?

Chapter 9 - Face Me

Very slowly she moved her head to the right to stretch her neck then to the left yet she didn't open her eyes. When the back of her aching head touched the rough surface behind her, her hallow eyes started to reveal themselves. The first thing she took in were the six women standing before her, three on the right and three on the left. They all bore ready weapons, dressed in leathers, and over their faces were distinct and beautiful wood masks.

The Conqueror's upper lip curled at seeing the six Amazon guards and her head lowered to the weight she felt on her wrists and ankles. She swiftly brought up her arms to test the well engineered chains' tension and they sounded in minor protest against her great strength. This was absolutely impossible for her to be in an Amazon jail when just earlier she'd gone to sleep in her bed. That was her last memory or at

least she was fairly sure of it.

For a heartbeat she studied her simple attire, which was only her leathers that covered her upper body, torso, and turned into a skirt around her upper thighs. These were standard leathers for battle and typically armor fit snug against it all. The leather straps on her broad shoulders were slightly moved off but she ignored that for now.

The jail hut was rather small and made of wood, including the heavy wood door between the six Amazons, but every part was reinforced with metal. The door also had a small window with metal bars but that was the only source of natural light. There were a couple of lit torches hooked to the walls but those were far from her reach. The Conqueror was anchored to the wood beam on the floor and the beam was bolted to the floor quite precisely. She currently sat on a sturdy wood bench that had no back but the wall behind her.

The Conqueror was suddenly enraged and she gave a powerful struggle against her chains so that she stood up now.

The Amazon guards all reacted accordingly as the four with spears lifted them and took aim. The other two with swords each took a menacing step forward. No Amazon spoke as their stances and weapons said plenty to the dark ruler.

The Conqueror bared her teeth at them and growled, "Where is Queen Cyane?"

The Amazons did not answer but remained poised and ready to attack not that they were fearful of the Conqueror's threats.

When the Conqueror didn't receive any response, her eyes narrowed more and her tone grew deeper. "I want to talk to Queen Cyane... now!" For a beat she tried her chains again yet failed.

The six guards knew there was nothing the dark ruler could possibly do so one by one, they returned to their positions along the wall.

The Conqueror wasn't too thrilled with this, her expression furious but she too knew she held no control over these Amazons. With gritted teeth, she slowly sat down but her burning eyes scanned over each guard.

The Amazons had no fear of the ruler as they were specially selected for this particularly duty. Their masks even helped them to feel slightly distanced from the ruler's dangerous looks.

The Conqueror settled on the bench and as she waited for some form of communication, she ran through her memory. She didn't recall any of the required trip

it would have taken her to get to the Amazon Nation. She couldn't think of seeing any Amazon when she was last awake. She admitted, secretly, that these Amazons had outsmarted her for once and it would be only this once after she was free.

It wasn't for another candlemark, since the ruler woke up, that the heavy door opened by an outside guard. After the guard stepped aside, the Amazon Queen sauntered in with a stoic expression. Her face was hard and her eyes frozen at seeing her greatest enemy ever.

The Conqueror suddenly leered at seeing Queen Cyane before her. She quickly stood up and took a menacing step yet she was cut short right in front of the Amazon Queen.

"I see you've finally awake after two days," drew out the Amazon Queen.

If the Conqueror was dumbfounded by the amount of time she'd been unconscious, she certainly didn't show it. "It's been a long time, Queen Cyane." Her lips pulled into an amused grin.

"Not long enough though," charged back Cyane. She stood still, a breath away from the dangerous ruler, and her arms folded over her chest. "I'm informing you, Xena of Amphipolis, you will be put on trial for your crimes against the Amazon Nation. You will submit to Amazon justice for your crimes." With that, she started for the door with a rap on it.

The ruler sarcastically laughed. "Queen Cyane, I thought you more intelligent than that. I see the seasons have inflicted your intelligence."

The Amazon Queen waited a beat in the now open doorway but she smiled back at the ruler. "Conqueror, I believe it is your intelligence that has been... softened." She held out a hand to the ruler and amusingly stated, "It is you that is chained in the Amazon Nation." With a satisfying smirk on her face, she disappeared from the jail hut and a loud boom of the door followed her.

The Conqueror was grinding her teeth however that was the only indication of her irritation. She returned to sitting on the bench and went into deep thought about what could have happened, what is happening, and what will soon come to her. Eventually she found herself leaning back against the wall, her eyes closed, a grin on her face, and a content feeling washing over her.

It wasn't until the following morning she was awakened abruptly by freezing water in her face. Her eyes flew open and her anger vibrant before the idiot that did such to her.

The guard that'd carried out the duty was quite satisfied at doing it but nobody but her

knew that since her mask hid her face. She exited the open jail door with bucket in hand and nodded to somebody on the left.

The Conqueror had wiped the cold water from her face and pushed her bangs up. Just as she finished, her head lifted to meet the view of a small blond limping into the jail. She'd been waiting for the rebel leader to surface and it made her grin.

"Good morning, Conqueror," greeted the rebel leader.

The dark ruler imposed by standing up to her full height and her cold eyes down on the younger woman.

Gabrielle didn't crumble under the intimidation act but instead she tried to smile at the irony between them. "Sorry for the rude awakening but..." Her smile slipped into a fine grin. "Nobody is keen on shaking you awake."

The Conqueror grunted then stated, "Saying my title always works."

"True," allowed the rebel leader. She limped her way off to the right then stopped and faced the ruler again. The entire time she sensed those burning blue eyes of the ruler on her. "Your trial begins at Helios high today."

The Conqueror cocked her head to one side because she knew this wasn't just an information session from the young rebel, she had some other purpose too.

Gabrielle studied the curious eyes high up. "I'm here to explain to you how an Amazon trial works." She turned and limped to the other side of the jail.

"Especially since you're an expert... with being an Amazon and all," coldly joked the ruler.

The bard smirked up at the tall, dark woman before her. "I've done my homework... I know how things work." She then hesitated and cleared her throat. "The Amazon that is prosecuting for the Nation goes by the name of Velasca." Gabrielle noted how the ruler's eyelids were slitting at her.

"Which means I need somebody to defend me," logically concluded the ruler. She knew exactly where this conversation was going now.

"Yes," quietly agreed the rebel. "Nobody in the Nation wishes to defend you."

The Conqueror grunted and she was highly amused. "So you volunteered."

Gabrielle tilted her head then offered a grin. "I did." She turned and hobbled back

across the jail. "The Amazon Nation is prosecuting you for the deaths of Queen Cyane's elders in her original Nation and for assaulting Queen Cyane." She was staring at the floor but now peered up. "They're not prosecuting you for the wars or any deaths during the wars as those fall under the acts of warfare and diplomatics."

"And what exactly makes Queen Cyane think that my army will not be marching over the Amazon Nation in the near future?"

Gabrielle knew she would hear about this and she'd already thought out her answer ahead of time. "Let's say that nobody in Corinth will be missing you." She slightly adjusted her weight on her walking stick. "You are here for the duration, Conqueror."

The Conqueror's jaw was set as her mind worked out how any of this was possible. She knew she'd get the pieces of the puzzle together soon enough.

"So," started Gabrielle, "I've heard everybody else's version of what happened that day you attacked the queen and her elders." She stepped closer but not too close. "I want to hear your version."

The Conqueror slowly let a joking smirk form then she laughed. "Don't bother, rebel." She waved her off then sat down on the bench. "I believe you've claimed enough reputation off of my name and history."

A surge of anger rushed the bard's body and she quickly limped up to the dangerous ruler.

The Amazon guards were not prepared for it as they quickly stepped forward with spears and swords at the ready.

Gabrielle ignored them as she had enough courage to override her fears. She met those steel blue eyes with her own furious ones. "Listen to me, you are not the Conqueror here... you are just another human here and you will be tried then you will be sentenced and last... you will carry out that sentence. There is no army here and there is no army coming." She stopped for a beat so that it'd soak into the ruler's mind. Then quietly and slowly she stated, "I am your only hope at beating this."

The Conqueror seemed unmoved and her eyes a dead blue.

The rebel leader kept her surge of confidence so she ordered, "Now tell me what happened that day."

The ruler straightened her back out and signaled the bench while offering, "Have a seat."

The guards exchanged looks as the rebel leader took a grateful seat beside the dark ruler.

"I could easily kill you," mentioned the Conqueror, who watched the rebel take a spot beside her.

"You already tried that," remarked Gabrielle, "and it didn't work." She was rewarded by an amused grin from the ruler.

"My next chance I will be sure to execute you myself."

The bard was chilled by the Conqueror's idle remarks but she never showed it. She wouldn't give into this mind game. "If you get another chance," reminded the leader.

The Conqueror leaned in towards her enemy and murmured, "Ooo I will."

Gabrielle held her gaze and didn't falter. "You're detouring from the topic at hand."

The tyrannical ruler exhaled loudly then leaned back into her original position. "It won't do you any good."

The bard shrugged. "Let me judge that. Go on."

The Conqueror again sighed yet it almost seemed to have a touch of sadness behind it. She glanced away from the rebel then back at her. "I'd just returned from Chin."

Gabrielle dipped her head in acknowledgement; she was carefully listening and images formed before her imaginative mind. She tried not to flinch when the ruler told her the gory details of it but she'd asked.

Eventually the Amazon guards returned to their posts in the jail. They decided the ruler wasn't any danger to the rebel even though that seemed so far fetched. They were baffled by the ease at which the two enemies spoke as if the events from a moon ago never happened.

"So," interrupted Gabrielle, "by then you and Alti were... close, right?"

The Conqueror's features returned some frustrations. "Yes."

The bard licked her lips while she was in consideration of the past events. "Was Alti powerful then?"

The Conqueror tilted back some so that she had a better view of the smaller woman. "Compared to now, no but she certainly had powers then." She could almost see the

rebel's mind calculating something.

"Hmmm," mumbled the bard. "And she wanted Cyane and the elders dead so she could have their blood?"

"Yes," simply answered the ruler.

The bard's head was dipped down, her lips neatly pressed together, and her brow tight. She suddenly stood up with her walking stick balancing her on her weak legs. "I need to see to something." She started to walk off but the rattling of the chains made her stop and peer over her shoulder.

"You won't find the answer you want," stated the Conqueror, "it was... my hands."

Gabrielle shrugged, said nothing, and tapped on the door. When she left the jail cell, she started across the village and made a beeline for the temple. She made the slow journey up the steps then into the temple, which at first seemed empty. Eventually she was greeted by the shaman of the temple.

"Welcome, Gabrielle." Yakut bowed her head in respect then smiled when she lifted her head. "What brings you here?"

The rebel diverted her attention from the beautiful painting of Artemis and smiled at Yakut. "Do you have some free time?"

"Of course, let's go to my office so we can sit." The shaman escorted the outsider through the side of the temple and into her office. She let Gabrielle sit then she took her chair behind her desk. "I can tell you're puzzled by something."

"I am," agreed the bard. "Its about the Conqueror and Alti."

Yakut suspected as much and she leaned back in her chair.

"I was curious if there's any possibility for Alti to..." Gabrielle couldn't quite phrase it right but she tried, "For her to control the Conqueror at all?"

The shaman truly considered the question and ran through her shamanism teachings. "Alti cannot control the Conqueror's karma when it is her own."

"That's not exactly what I'm asking." Gabrielle sighed as she tried to rework her words. "What I mean is can Alti influence the Conqueror at all? Either on a spiritual or mental level."

Yakut now realized what the rebel was trying to construct. "It is possible that Alti

greatly influences the Conqueror on a spiritual level so that she acts a certain way."

"Do you think it's intentional on Alti's part?" tried the bard.

Yakut shook her head. "No shaman has control over another human's spirit when they are alive." She leaned forward then stated, "However what is possible is that since Alti and the Conqueror have karmas on similar paths that they feed off each other."

Gabrielle digested this information and it was rather encouraging. "Is this common?"

"Very much so," answered the shaman. "A shaman can easily influence a person's karma in a certain direction."

The rebel narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "How soon can that influence begin?"

"As soon as they meet," replied the shaman. "It is instantaneous and is almost permanent especially over time."

"Do you think Alti could have built some link between her and the Conqueror?"

The shaman sighed and leaned back into her chair. "It is possible but I can't be sure."

"Is there a way to find out?" challenged the rebel.

Yakut slowly nodded.

"If there is a link," charged on the bard, "can it be broken?"

The shaman quickly realized what Gabrielle was trying for and she exhaled. "It is possible," she relented, "but there's no guarantees." She tilted her head at the outsider. "I am not as powerful as Alti, Gabrielle."

The rebel suddenly had determined features. "There has to be something you can do, Yakut."

The shaman was jarred by the similar words she'd heard not so long ago. Her head fell forward, her eyes closed with many thoughts in mind.

"Yakut, please try."

Yakut slowly lifted her head and saw the mirror of Janice Covington asking for help. She'd already refused Janice the first time and now Gabrielle's very descendant was left brutalized by the dark ruler. She suddenly stood up and stated, "I will see what I can do, Gabrielle." She stepped around her desk as Gabrielle rose up.

"When will you try?" The rebel limped along side the shaman.

Yakut knew she would require the queen's authorization but she also knew the queen's response ahead of time. "I will try now."

The bard brightened at this news. "Thank you so much, Yakut."

Yakut only dipped her head and prayed to Artemis that this was the right thing to do. She followed Gabrielle out of the temple, down the steps, and through the village to the jail hut. When she came upon the jail hut, the two Amazons at the door stepped in her path before the door.

"You are not authorized to see the prisoner," informed guard on the right.

The shaman was slightly taken aback.

"You must speak to Queen Cyane," further added the Amazon.

"She's with me," argued the bard.

The Amazon switched her attention to Gabrielle. "And you are not the queen."

This wasn't exactly something Yakut felt like taking up with the queen. So instead she stepped closer to the Amazon and murmured, "Who guided her mother to the Amazon Lands, Karis?" She gave a challenging look. "Was it the queen?"

The guard swallowed and glanced at the other guard. She relented by stepping back to the jail door. After she opened the door, she stepped aside and let the pair pass.

Yakut hesitated and turned to the rebel. "Wait here... I must do this alone."

The bard wanted to argue, her mouth already half open, but she stopped herself. She nodded then backed away from the door.

The Conqueror knew exactly what this new visitor was by the way she dressed. The headdress particularly gave the Amazon away more than anything else. She was amused by how these shamans seemed to attract to her like bees to honey.

Yakut stood before the ruler and for the first time had truly absorbed her striking power. "I am Yakut, I'm the sh-

"Shaman," finished the ruler. "And you're not here for a social call, are you?"

The Amazon shaman swallowed as she gathered her internal strength.

"This has to do with Alti," tried the Conqueror.

Yakut didn't reply and stepped forward with her hands slightly lifting.

The Conqueror sensed a threat so she stood up quickly, her chains sounding out. "Try coming closer."

The guards were prepared already having detected the tension when the shaman first entered.

Yakut ignored the warning and came closer to the ruler, she found herself in the ruler's moving space.

It happened too fast for anybody to really recall what'd happened but somehow the Conqueror had ended up on her knees. Her head thrown back, mouth open in a silent scream, and Yakut's hands pressed against her temples. Yakut stood like a statue, her eyes closed, and her features twisted tightly.

The Conqueror was numb to her body and paralyzed all over. Her mind was swarmed by things she couldn't understand and it was overwhelming. Her heartbeat was going fast like a lightning bolt strike then suddenly her heart ceased for an instant. Then sensations struck her hard again and she could breathe once more.

Yakut's hands were removed.

The Conqueror's right hand shot up and caught the shaman by the neck. She was growling while standing up and lifting the shaman up.

Yakut gasped and struggled against the solid hand on her neck that were crushing her wind pipes.

The guards were already in action. The guard that was the fastest had given a thrust with her spear, which inflicted the Conqueror's right shoulder.

The Conqueror's hold on Yakut wasn't broken for a few heartbeats then her world quickly spun.

Yakut suck in her last small breath yet she watched in amazement as the powerful ruler lost control and collapsed to her knees again. Her feet touched the floor and she stumbled back when she was released.

The guards pressed forward quickly and separated the shaman and ruler.

The Conqueror dizzily watched the guards then everything went black as there was a sharp pain up her right side.

Yakut was bent forward and gasping for air. She lifted her head but still was bent over and she stared at the Conqueror passed out on the floor.

Five of the guards worked together to lift the unconscious ruler and throw her onto the bench. The sixth guard rushed to Yakut's side while shoving her mask back. It was the same guard that'd used her spear to subdue the ruler, the blood on the tip of her spear.

"Are you okay, Yakut?"

Yakut offered a confident smile to her savior. "I am now. Thank you, Solari."

Solari sadly smiled and touched the shaman's shoulder. "What happened?"

The shaman straightened out her headdress then inhaled happily. "Alti had established a connection between her and the Conqueror over time. I broke it."

Solari glanced at the ruler then at Yakut again. "Isn't that risky? I mean, won't Alti detect it's been broken?"

"It's possible," slowly agreed Yakut, "but I doubt it especially since Melinda is there."

"I hope you're right," murmured the Amazon. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Solari." The shaman gave an appreciative smile. "Now I do believe the rumors about you being swift."

Solari had a gloating grin. "They were never rumors."

Yakut softly laughed then touched Solari's arm for a heartbeat. "I should go. Thank you again, Solari."

"You are welcome." Solari tapped on the heavy door.

The shaman gave a polite nod to Solari then left the jail. She was instantly greeted by the concerned rebel.

"What happened?" urged Gabrielle. She hesitated for a beat as she took in the red mark around the shaman's neck. "Are you okay, Yakut?"

Yakut heard the jail door close behind her. She finally nodded. "I'm fine." She came closer to the rebel. "The Conqueror and I didn't... see eye to eye."

The bard snorted while shaking her head. "Well don't feel left out."

Yakut faintly smiled then she lost it. "I managed to break the connection."

Gabrielle was thrilled, her face lit up. "So there was one?" At the shaman's nod, she pressed forward. "And it was a strong one?"

"Yes but it is gone." Yakut clasped the bard's left arm and signaled her to walk with her. "There is a catch though."

"What is that?"

The shaman peered over at the rebel then turned away. "Atli will reestablish it easily when they meet again."

"Can't it be stopped?"

Yakut stopped walking and faced the outsider. "There is only one way to do that in this lifetime."

Gabrielle read the shaman's disheartened features and it dawned on her. "Alti has to be dead." She swallowed hard when Yakut gave a brief nod. "And the Conqueror isn't exactly keen on getting rid of her best asset."

"Remember Gabrielle," started the shaman, "Alti is also the Conqueror's greatest enemy." She exhaled deeply then changed the topic. "I should go as I have much to do at the temple."

"I understand." Gabrielle offered a warm smile. "Thank you, Yakut."

The shaman reflected the smile at the outsider. "You're welcome." She took one step but gazed back at the rebel. "I will see you at the trial this afternoon... I look forward to your stance, Gabrielle." Then with that, she continued back to the temple.

The bard was taken aback by the shaman's words having expected every Amazon against the Conqueror. She shrugged it off then decided she would go first see how Cyrene and Melpomene were doing. Plus, she wanted to update Cyrene on what was happening with the Conqueror or rather her daughter.

Cyrene lifted her head and smiled when Gabrielle entered the guest hut. She saw the worn expression on the younger woman's face and knew exactly why too. "The trial

hasn't even begun, Gabrielle."

The bard sighed and mutually agreed. She took a seat at the desk before asking, "Where's Melpomene?"

Cyrene had her back to Gabrielle now as she busied with making the bed. "Taking a quick bath."

"Ah." The rebel now picked up the faint sounds of splashing from the washroom. "The trial starts at Helios high... will you be there?"

Cyrene paused when she came to the foot of the bed but she faced the bard. "I don't think so." She continued finishing up with the bed however she spoke as she went along. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that, Gabrielle."

The rebel leader clearly understood how Cyrene felt. "I know," she murmured, her gaze to the floor. "How is Melpomene doing?"

"She asks often about Janice," gently responded the older woman. "You haven't heard word from Melinda yet?"

Gabrielle exhaled deeply and shook her head. "I'd expect to hear something any day now."

"I hope so," agreed Cyrene, "I hope she made it in time too."

"I'm sure she did," stated the confident bard.

Cyrene eyed the young woman just as she finished with the bed. She then came over and knelt down in front of Gabrielle. She carefully collected the bard's hands into her own. "I know this is hard for you, Gabrielle."

The rebel snorted and stared down at her laced hands with the Conqueror's mother. "I don't know why I'm doing this, Cyrene." She finally met the grey-blue eyes that studied her. "She crucified me and here I am trying to save her from getting crucified."

"Maybe what Janice told you has some merit in your heart then," suggested Cyrene.

"Reforming the Conqueror?" Gabrielle sarcastically laughed. "Could she really do that, Cyrene? You know her better than anybody else."

"I thought I did," sadly admitted the mother, "but my daughter is truly the stranger."

"I wish it is only that," murmured Gabrielle, "and that she's not a monster." Her

emotions surfaced. "I asked the shaman, Yakut, to break a connection that the Conqueror had with Alti."

Cyrene was puzzled by this information. "What kind of a connection?"

"I'm not exactly sure but I think to some degree it's influenced her to act as she does."

"It's not an excuse," reminded Cyrene.

"I know," relented the bard. "I think though its part of the explanation... we'll see." She didn't want to voice her hopes about what the broken link between Alti and the Conqueror may or may not do. She simply had to wait it out and see if there was any noticeable shift in the dark ruler or not.

Cyrene patted the young woman's hand, the young woman that'd very much filled some of the gap in her heart when Xena left her so long ago. She rose up and turned her head just as Melpomene came out wrapped up in a towel. "Feel better, dear?"

Melpomene had a bright smile yet it wasn't quite as magnificent as both Gabrielle and Cyrene had seen it in the past. "A lot better."

"Here are your things." Cyrene picked up the clothes from the top of the dresser and handed them to the child.

"Thank you." The girl happily took them then disappeared back into the washroom to get changed.

Gabrielle brushed her hair back some then quietly asked, "Do you think you'll see the Conqueror, Cyrene?"

The mother faced the rebel yet she didn't answer right away. "I have to... at some point but I'm not ready yet."

The bard remained silent despite she understood.

"I will though," promised Cyrene. "She and I have been putting it off far too long."

"She'll be furious when she finds out that you've sided with me," reminded the concerned bard.

"And she can thank herself for that," remarked the annoyed mother.

Gabrielle sadly smiled but lost it slowly. "I should get ready." She stood up on her weak legs with her cane to help her. "What will you do today?"

"I'll spend some time with Melpomene... I think she could use it." Cyrene ended the conversation there as the child came back into the room. "You ready?"

The girl nodded a few times as she approached the women. "Are you coming with us, Gabrielle?"

"No, sweetie." The bard neared the child, a smile revealing itself. "I have other engagements."

"You mean with the Conqueror," clarified the sharp child.

Gabrielle quietly sighed but nodded her head. "Yes... with the Conqueror."

"I heard the Amazons talking... saying that the Conqueror will be hung."

Gabrielle exchanged looks with Cyrene but returned her focus to the child. "It's too early to tell yet, Melpomene."

"You're going to stop it," stated the girl.

The bard bent forward and heavily leaned on her walking stick. "I'm going to try, yes."

"Why?" argued Melpomene, "Why would you? She hurt you a moon and a half ago."

"She did," slowly agreed the bard. She wasn't sure how to explain it to herself much less to young Melpomene.

"Did you forgive her?" inquired the curious girl.

Gabrielle exhaled deeply then answered, "Almost, Melpomene... almost."

"Why? She took my sister from me... I won't ever forgive her for that."

"I know, Melpomene but you have to see beyond that." Gabrielle bent forward more even though it hurt her legs greatly. "If I didn't forgive her, Melpomene then I will become consumed with anger and hatred."

"Like the Conqueror," summarized the thoughtful girl. "I don't want to be like the Conqueror either."

"Then you must learn to forgive her, Melpomene but it takes time so don't push yourself."

Melpomene nodded her head and watched as the rebel leader straightened up as much as her body would allow her.

Cyrene held her hand out to the young child. "Come on, Melpomene."

The girl smiled at the older woman that was becoming very much like a grandparent to her. She laced her hand through Cyrene's, took a step, stopped, and quietly said to Gabrielle, "I hope they don't hang her." Without another word, she left the hut with Cyrene in tow.

Gabrielle watched the door closed and she muttered to nobody, "I hope they don't either." She shook her melancholy away and decided it was best that she see to the guards at the jail before the trial. She made the slow journey through the village and approached the jail just as the door was being opened. She was surprised to see the guards flowing out of the jail with the Conqueror between them. She then became shocked to see how woozy acting the dark ruler was acting. She stepped up to the group but an outside guard stopped her quickly.

"You're not allowed any closer."

The rebel's expression was cold, hard but her focus on the disoriented ruler. "What's wrong with her?"

The guard sighed but explained, "She's been drugged so that she won't cause any problems."

"What?" exclaimed the furious bard. "I can't have her half out of it at the trial."

The guard held up her hands. "I'm sorry... it was the queen's orders." She lowered her hands again. "You'll have to take it up with her."

"Just great," snapped Gabrielle. "Can we just get her there?"

The Amazon nodded then signaled the escort to take the Conqueror to the center where the trial was being held outside.

The bard let out an aggravated huff however she followed them there as fast as she could go. She would certainly take this up with Queen Cyane later on as soon as she had a chance. She needed the Conqueror to be there mentally if any of this would work out at all. Just maybe she could take this to her advantage though.

When the group found themselves in the square where the trial would unfold, Gabrielle wasn't surprised to see the crowd of onlookers. She absorbed how everything was setup with a table in front that was lined with elder Amazons, who

were the council members. She and the Conqueror stood off to the left while Velasca and the queen were to the right. The jail guards were lined up behind the Conqueror and the rebel, prepared for any attacks or threats. Behind them, there was a sea of Amazon heads, who came to listen.

While the council members were preparing themselves, Gabrielle had a moment to determine just how drugged the ruler was by talking to her. "How do you feel?" She murmured up to the ruler. When hazy yet chipped blue eyes lowered to her, she shivered. "That good huh?"

The Conqueror's hands were tightly bound by short chains and her ankles manacled with short chains. She slightly swayed while softly replying, "They used rauwolfia on me."

Well the Conqueror wasn't complete out of it, concluded the bard.

"It's ironic don't you think?" murmured the ruler.

Gabrielle peered up with a perplexed face and she didn't like that smirk on the ruler.

"You're defending me from death when I want to kill you."

The rebel leader cleared her throat and her quick wits didn't fail her. "Next thing you know you'll start giggling, Conqueror."

The tranquilized Conqueror held her loose tongue especially because her enemy was called away.

The bard and Velasca stepped up to the table where the council members were sitting. Gabrielle tried to remain calm even though she was growing nervous about this trial. She didn't have exact plans set out on how to defend the dark ruler especially when the odds were so against her but she was going to try.

The head councilor explained the procedures of the trial to Gabrielle and Velasca then she asked if there were any questions. When neither woman asked, the head councilor ordered them to return to their charges who they were representing.

The Conqueror peered down at her representative. "So have a game plan?"

Gabrielle sighed at the amused tone the ruler had with her. "No," she confessed.

The Conqueror snorted and was beyond amused at this point not that the tranquilizer helped her state.

"You know, I'd hate to admit this," started Gabrielle, "but you're more bearable when you're high."

"And to think you're going to argue to Queen Cyane why I shouldn't be."

Gabrielle's head quickly whipped up when she realized the Conqueror had overheard her and the Amazon guard's earlier argument. Before she could say anything the head council member stood up and spoke out to everybody.

"We are here to begin the trial for Xena of Amphipolis," she announced to the large crowd that was going silent.

The Conqueror bent towards Gabrielle and muttered, "Not that Amphipolis likes to lay claims to me."

Gabrielle blinked and stared up at the suddenly chatty ruler. "Having you tranquilized is a bad idea." She realized she was talking while the trial was starting and she needed to be focused.

"Xena of Amphipolis, you have been charged with the slaying of the following Amazons...." The councilor paused and lifted an unrolled scroll then recited eleven names one by one. She lowered the scroll and loudly added, "You are also charged with assaulting Queen Cyane." She cleared her throat when there was only silence echoing back to her. "We will begin this trial with a recant of the events that day and what led up to it." She held her hand out to the queen, who stood by Velasca. "My queen, since you are the only survive and witness of the events, you have the floor."

The Conqueror let out an audible exhale.

Gabrielle controlled her urge to roll her eyes at the ruler's reluctance to take the trial seriously. She chalked it up to the tranquilizer too.

The Amazon Queen stepped up before her Nation, council, the rebel leader, and her long time enemy. She held her position strong as she retold the tale of Xena the warlord that rode in fresh from Chin. Her story held every detail about Xena, Alti, and herself that led up to the events on that horrific day.

When the queen was finished, the Conqueror bent over and muttered, "She missed one detail."

The bard curiously peered up at the dark ruler. "Which was?"

"I didn't kill that young Amazon," answered the ruler. "I only killed the ten council members."

Yes, only ten mentally chided the bard. Gabrielle was going to ask more but figured it could be saved for later. She had her suspicions about what'd happened in the past. She could only wonder why the Conqueror never told her in the first place earlier today.

The queen bowed to the council members then returned to Velasca's side.

"Now," started the head councilor, "we will begin the questioning process of the trial. First we'll begin-"

"Wait," interrupted the rebel hastily. She limped forward some but not too far.

"What is it, Gabrielle?" inquired the patient councilor.

The bard mentally prepared her argument but it was still on a whim. "I would like to hold off on this part of the trial."

"What?" barked Velasca, who stepped up to the bard. "You haven't prepped the Conqueror enough?" Her cold stare bore into the rebel that was standing up for the ruthless ruler.

"I actually can't," shot back Gabrielle but her attention went to the council. "As you can see," she called out and held her left hand out to the ruler. "My charge is drugged."

"That's to keep her sedate," shot back Velasca. "She's a threat to everybody."

The Conqueror's eyes were narrowing at Velasca and despite she was drugged she still sensed something out of place.

"Incase you haven't noticed," retorted the bard, "she's manacled, weaponless, and has six guards on her heels. There's not much she's going to do."

"So you say," barked back Velasca, "but she's dangerous with or without weapons."

Gabrielle now faced the frustrating Amazon. "Well then we should make this even." At Velasca's challenging look she gave her sly reply. "Queen Cyane should be just as drugged."

The crowd of Amazons cried out against such demand from the outsider.

The rebel expected such so she faced the masses and pointed at the ruler. "Look at her, will you!" She dropped her arm and said, "If this is truly such a fair trial as I've been

told then the Conqueror should not be drugged so that she can properly defend herself." The crowd settled down finally, which let Gabrielle turn back around. She examined the councilors, who were whispering amongst themselves.

"You can't seriously be considering this," urged Velasca hotly. "The Conqueror is dangerous when she isn't sedate."

The head councilor held up her hand for silence. She then calmly stated, "Gabrielle is correct when she said this is a fair trial and as such, we cannot allow in good judgment for the Conqueror to be in such a state while the trial is proceeding." She sighed then nodded at Gabrielle. "You will speak to your charge and explain to her the situation. If she at all endangers anybody during the trial then we will have to take other measures. Is this clear, Gabrielle?"

"Perfectly," answered the bard. She then tilted her head and cautiously asked, "Can I request that we continue the trial tomorrow? By then the drug should work its way out of her system."

The head councilor leaned to her right some and studied the drugged, swaying ruler in the background.

"This is ridiculous," snapped Velasca, "you're endangering Amazons' lives if you don't drug her!"

The councilor's head shot up at the angry Amazon. "Do you lack confidence in the guards performing their duties, Velasca?"

The Amazon's temper quickly deflated at the turn of the table.

The head councilor called out, "Who is the head guard for the Conqueror?"

The guard in question stepped out of the line and made herself known.

"Approach the table," ordered the councilor.

The head guard bowed her head then marched up to the council's table. When she was close, she reached up and pulled her mask back to display her striking features and amber eyes.

"Ephiny," warmly greeted the head councilor.

"Councilors." The Amazon bowed her head then straightened up again.

"Velasca is questioning your capabilities of handling the Conqueror should she get out

of line." The councilor leaned back in her chair as she knew she was going to enjoy this conversation. "Do you believe you and your guards are competent enough to handle any situation that may arise?"

Ephiny held her back straight, her expression strong, and pride flowed from her. "I am highly confident, councilor." Her infuriated eyes darted to Velasca then back to the councilors. "I have the best Amazons at my side."

"And I have every confidence in your leadership, Ephiny." The councilor nodded and stated, "I am satisfied then. Thank you, Ephiny."

"My pleasure, councilors." Ephiny bowed, pulled her mask back down and returned to her post behind the ruler.

"There you have it, Velasca." The elder Amazon leaned forward again then forced smiled. "Are there anymore... concerns?"

Velasca exhaled and placed her hands on her hips. "No, councilor."

"Fine." The councilor gave her agreement to Gabrielle's idea. "Tomorrow we will begin at Helios high again when the Conqueror is no longer sedate." She tilted her head at the outsider. "See that she is ready, Gabrielle as I won't have anymore patience to show."

"Of course, councilor," gave in the bard but she had a hidden grin at her success.

Velasca was grinding her teeth at the loss for today.

"We will convene from here," the elder loudly ordered, "beginning tomorrow at Helios high. The trial is dismissed for the day." With that, she stood as did the other members.

Velasca faced her rival and chewed out, "Don't count on being so lucky later, rebel." She spun on her boots and marched off to meet the queen.

The bard was shaken by the idle threat as she knew it certainly was one. She let out a small, held breath then went back to her own charge.

The Conqueror stared at the small, hunched woman before her. "I'm amazed... your tongue helped me for once."

Gabrielle smirked and shook her head but she turned to the guards. "You will see to her?"

The head guard, Ephiny, stepped forward and dipped her head in acknowledgement.

"Don't care to join me in the cell?" taunted the evil ruler.

The rebel returned to her smirking features. "I think I've seen too much of you as it is."

"Do stop by later," offered the Conqueror as if she were a very bored soul.

Gabrielle half grinned then limped off in the opposite direction.

"Let's go, Conqueror," ordered Ephiny from behind her mask.

The tall, dark woman gauged her guards but she'd have later to play with them when she was more up to par.

Gabrielle was away from the crowd of Amazons and making her way back to her guest hut that she shared with Cyrene and Melpomene. She needed some rest plus some time to clear her head out. As she went, she turned over Velasca's threat and wondered if it warranted any merit. Gabrielle figured she had to be over analyzing Velasca and instead was getting too pumped up about the future of the trial. At least the Conqueror's drug state gave her an advantage of more time to prepare.

For the afternoon, Gabrielle lay in her bed and simply stared at the ceiling or the back of her eyelids. She never really slept since her mind was vigorously working out the trial. Some questions surfaced in the middle of it all so that eventually led her to leave the hut and show up at the jail by late afternoon.

The jail guard almost sighed at seeing the rebel. She'd expected much so she had the door open by the time Gabrielle was close enough.

Gabrielle pleasantly smiled at the two Amazons then entered the jail a few paces.

The Conqueror had her eyes closed yet they slowly revealed at the presence before her. "Missed me already?"

"Like the cross you tied me to," remarked the rebel.

The Conqueror ran her tongue along the back of her teeth; she suddenly leered at the younger woman. "I saved your cross... for later."

Gabrielle tried to ignore her enemy's head game so she shrugged. "Well I guess you and Caesar have something in common." She slightly jumped when the dark ruler sprung up to her feet in an angry fury.

"Do not compare me to him!" hotly yelled the furious ruler.

The guards in the cell tensed as the ruler fought against her chains. They stepped forward once so that they made some point.

Gabrielle was holding her breath, her body chilled by the cold blue eyes digging into her.

The Conqueror's chest heaved up and down as her body suppressed the earlier drug due to her rage. It wasn't so much that the rebel compared her to the dead Julius Caesar but that she was reminded of her time on the cross. Her rage surged in defense more than offense that such a young woman that didn't know her history could poke her so easily and so perfectly.

Gabrielle swallowed, her gaze faltered for a heartbeat but she lifted it again. "I apologize." She actually felt guilty about her earlier comment, which was an incredibly odd feeling considering things. She sensed too that it wasn't so much the comparison but something much deeper than that.

The Conqueror had been hunched over but now she straightened her back out. She regarded the honestly apologetic rebel and was inwardly grateful for the apology but she'd never admit that. Finally she took two steps back then sat down.

The guards pulled back with their weapons relaxed.

The bard exhaled then a quiet tremble rippled through her body. She didn't dare take another step just yet. "I came to talk about the trial."

"What do you want to know?" coldly replied the ruler.

Gabrielle brushed some her hair back then answered, "You mentioned that the queen was wrong about a detail."

"Yes." The Conqueror leaned back against the wall. "I never killed the young girl that fell from the tree."

The bard's eyes narrowed. "But she said-"

"What I told her," cut in the ruler. "When they found the dead Amazon, I told Cyane that I killed her that doesn't mean I really did."

"Okay then how did she die?"

"It's not about how... its who." The Conqueror folded her arms over her chest. "Alti

killed her to cause the distraction because Alti knew I wouldn't be able to get that close to any Amazons without them being cautious."

Gabrielle processed the new information then shook her head. "And I'm sure Alti will show up for the trial and claim that she did it." She heard a low snort from the ruler's direction. "I will have to think on that one." Her glazed features centered back on the ruler. "Do you mind if I ask you about some things?"

The dark ruler tilted her head to the side as she noted the fine sheen of perspiration on the rebel's forehead. She concluded it must be from standing on her weak legs but it was the exact opening that she wanted too. "Sure, I'm not going anywhere." She scooted down on the bench some. "Sit."

The bard hesitated for a beat then decided it couldn't be too risky. As she neared the ruler slowly she heard the guards close in too. She sighed heavily when she connected with the bench, it was a relief. Once she was situated, she started the conversation with open ended questions.

The Conqueror gave brief answers and wouldn't provide details unless Gabrielle started probing her. She could tell what the rebel's idea was for the trial and it was an interesting perspective however it didn't change the facts. After some length of time, she could tell that the leader rebel was well spent from all her thinking plus the standing at the trial today.

Gabrielle was silent for several heartbeats because she'd taken in so much information today. Her head bobbed a few times then she quietly stated, "I think that's a start for me." She focused on her counterpart. "I believe Queen Cyane starts tomorrow."

"Again?" retorted the aggravated ruler.

"This is different." Gabrielle toyed with her walking stick. "Velasca and I question her back and forth."

"I see," murmured the ruler.

The bard tried to relax now that she had a better game plan for the trial. She didn't feel so much at a loss as earlier before so her shoulders weren't as tense and her nervous calmer. "I should go... dinner will be soon." When she glimpsed out the small window in the door, she saw the setting rays of the sun.

"Don't care to join me for my dinner?" taunted the ruler.

Gabrielle shot a smirk at the Conqueror. "You'd be left starving then." She chuckled more to herself than anybody else then she climbed up to her feet. She took a limping

step away.

"You shouldn't turn your back on me, rebel."

Before the Conqueror's menacing words could register into Gabrielle's mind, she suddenly felt cold metal wrap around her throat then her body was thrown back against the heated body of the powerful Conqueror.

The Amazons reacted in fluent motion together as they quickly pushed forward with weapons at the ready. They couldn't act though with the rebel caught in the Conqueror's dangerous grasp.

Gabrielle heaved for air as the chain tightened across her throat. She instinctively wrapped her fingers around the chain to stop its crushing. Her walking stick fell to the floor, which meant her legs lost their extra support so they started to give way. Now her body pressed harder against the chain because of her weight.

"Learn to be more careful," hotly whispered the Conqueror to the delicate ear below.

"Let her go!" ordered the head guard, who stepped forward.

The Conqueror met the Amazon's masked gaze. "Let's try something else, shall we? You open that jail door or this chain gets a little tighter."

Ephiny wasn't sure what to do, her eyes lowered to Gabrielle.

"Don't do it, Ephiny," rasped Gabrielle. She quickly choked when the Conqueror yanked the chain hard. "If you kill me now, Conqueror then you won't have any insurance to get out of here."

The ruler chuckled, her body shaking the smaller one against hers. "I didn't conquer half the known-world because I'm stupid."

"Exactly," whispered the gasping bard, "so are you going to keep running from your past?"

The Conqueror's temper fired up at the challenge set in front of her. "My past has made me stronger."

"So has mine," rasped the bard, "but I also take responsibility for it too." She tried to pull the chain away from her throat some but with no success. "Why do you think I stood up in front of you?"

"As I recall correctly, you also escaped your punishment."

The bard closed her eyes and tried to calm her raging heartbeat. "An unfair punishment for representing the people... that was a punishment for... a... murderer."

"A crime according to my laws," hissed the ruler.

"Why is it a crime?" challenged the gasping bard, "Because... because the truth is that you've become the very thing you tried to... to stop." She heaved for air but her throat was caving in slowly.

"You know nothing," growled the Conqueror. She started to tighten the chains to stop the rebel's cutting words.

Ephiny stepped forward as the situation was spiraling downward.

Gabrielle shook her head at the Amazon. She would win this battle with the ruler no matter the costs. "I do know... know one thing." Her eyes opened for a second then closed against the pain. "When I was young... this warlord destroyed my village... my parents dead and sister enslaved. I escaped my father's... burning barn just as she and her army left." She stopped for a beat to suck in some air, her body now shaking but she wouldn't give up. "I wandered the countryside... for days until I entered a small village called... called Amphipolis."

The Conqueror's rage was slowly draining at hearing the story that she was captured by so deeply. Her eyes were glazed by the mental images of the young girl's childhood.

Gabrielle's air increase from the light withdraw of the chain. "I was starving by that time... I went to the market in town and came upon a food merchant." She opened her eyes as the dark spots in her vision were finally gone. "I stole a loaf of flatbread but the merchant caught me." She paused for an intake of needed air. "Just as he was about to take me to the constable a woman stopped him and paid him for the bread."

The Conqueror's manacle chains loosened more around the rebel's throat.

"She owned a local tavern so she took me in, fed me... clothed me... and her oldest son also became my brother." Gabrielle swallowed her surfacing emotions. "I had a family again." She touched the loose chain around her neck. "Do you know who took me in, Conqueror?"

The ruler's heart was pounding in her ears at the realization. She was overwhelmed and all she could do was whisper, "My mother."

The bard licked her lips then softly added, "You see, we're not that much different

expect for one glaring fact." She now wrapped her fingers around the loose chain. "I have faith, Conqueror while you had yours but you lost it the day that Caesar shattered it. You never shattered mine and you never will."

The Conqueror snapped out of her reverie and swiftly tightened the chain again but not as strongly. "You want me to take responsibility for my actions here with the Amazons? Then we'll make a deal."

Gabrielle's eye stung from not just the pain on her throat but her legs as her feet scuffed the wood floor. She was barely able to hold up her body's weight with her weak legs. "What's... the deal?"

"If you win this trial then you return to Corinth with me to take responsibility for your rebel faction." The dark ruler's lips were near the rebel's as she breathed out her defining offer. "If you lose and I'm sentence to death then you must die too." Her lips curled into a grin as she teased, "A little incentive to encourage you to try harder."

"What if... you're sentenced but not to... death?"

The Conqueror's grin spread wider. "Then I will uphold the sentence, you will remain here until it's complete, and then you will return with me for yours." Her head came a bit lower so that her warm breath moved over the rebel's ear. "I will take into consideration your work with the trial."

Gabrielle's eyes started to roll back up into her head, her legs finally giving out from her. "I agree... you have... my word."

"Excellent." The Conqueror gave a rough jerk of the chain then taunted, "And you have mine." She suddenly lifted her shackled hands with her chains rattling in protest.

Gabrielle coughed for air as she collapsed onto the floor. She was on her knees that flashed hot pain up her body so she slumped onto her side and her hands balanced her as best as they could.

The Conqueror stared down at the fallen rebel. "Nasty having broken legs, isn't it?" She kicked at the boots that were apart of the mangled legs.

Gabrielle yelped when the Conqueror's kick caused pain to flash up her legs.

Ephiny was shaking with fury at the display and treatment to the outsider but especially at the fact she couldn't do anything. "Gabrielle?" She signaled her guards to engage the Conqueror as she rushed to the rebel.

Gabrielle coughed and shook her head at the Amazon. "I'm fine." At hearing the

Conqueror's laugh from above, she tried to stand up but it was slow progress.

The guards closed in on the dark ruler and one of them tried to get the ruler with a spear.

The Conqueror ducked quickly but her hands were even faster. She caught the spear between her hands without so much as a scratch. She snapped the poisoned spearhead off from the shaft and snarled at the Amazons. "Try again." She dropped the spearhead so she could prepare for a second attack.

Gabrielle wasn't so happy with the events so she hurried her pained body to move faster. Ephiny's hands were touching her shoulder and elbow but she was only hindering her. She climbed up onto her raging legs and took a step back in front the ruler much to every Amazons' surprise. "Stop," she hotly ordered.

"Get out of the way, Gabrielle," commanded the head guard.

"No," argued the rebel.

The Conqueror was still despite her hands were up.

"She's not an animal," reminded the disgusted bard. "Don't treat her this way."

Ephiny's eyes widened and she yelled, "She just tried to strangle you, Gabrielle!"

"I know this," barked back the bard, who was wheezing on her shaky legs. "She gave her word to stay."

The Conqueror was carefully listening to this interesting turn of events between her makeshift protector and the heated Amazon.

"And her word is nothing here," yelled Ephiny, her eyes flashing like fire. "Move out of the way."

"No," snapped back Gabrielle. Sweat was starting to roll down her neck and onto her back then over her temples from the pain she was enduring. "If her word is not good enough then trust me, Ephiny."

Ephiny was grinding her teeth as she needed to teach the prisoner a lesson for such actions. Yet she knew there was no way around Gabrielle either without causing some harm.

"Please, Ephiny... don't step down to her level."

Ephiny could almost strangle her sword hilt but she swiftly waved the guards off, who hesitated to back off at first. "Then you have my word, Gabrielle as long as the Conqueror doesn't cause anymore harm to anybody."

Gabrielle shut her eyes as she swooned from the pain. "Thank... you." Then she lost her surge of strength and started to crumble to the floor.

Ephiny hastily acted yet came up short within a long stride. She watched in absolute wonderment at the scene before her.

Gabrielle leaned heavily against the Conqueror's strong hands at her waist that kept her from hitting the floor again.

The Conqueror had acted so involuntarily and caught the small rebel with complete ease. She guided the rebel back onto her feet then she slightly hunched over so that her long arm could scrape up the walking stick.

The bard gratefully received her stick then leaned heavily on it when the hand on her right hip slipped. She gained some balance then twisted her head up to the Conqueror and her thankful eyes met the ruler's.

The Conqueror was captivated by the rebel's caring gaze and all she could do was give a brief nod before she backed away.

Gabrielle broke the trance too then limped away into Ephiny's waiting presence.

The head guard was awestruck yet she directed the rebel leader out of the jail before anything else went nutso. She'd had enough for one day and she wasn't ready to see the Conqueror become anymore gentler than she had in that unexpected moment.

When Gabrielle was out of the jail with Ephiny at her side, she paused and whispered, "Thank you again."

Ephiny reached up and pushed her mask back. "You shouldn't have risked your life that way, Gabrielle."

The bard shook her head then softly murmured, "If she wanted me dead she would have done it this morning." She noticed that Ephiny refused to question what'd happened towards the end, which she was glad about too. "Plus now that she knows Cyrene is here... she'll have a lot to think about."

"I think so," gently agreed the Amazon. "She didn't know that her mother took you in, did she?"

Gabrielle licked her lips and peered up at the Amazon that was glowing from the setting sun. "No, I don't think so. She seemed fairly shock by the information."

"I'd say," relented the Amazon. She reached over to touch the bard's irritated neck. "You should see Eilis, the healer."

Gabrielle shook her head. "I'll be okay."

The Amazon grunted then teased, "I see where Janice gets her stubborn attribute."

The rebel leader rolled her eyes at the Amazon. "Be careful what you say... Eph." She quickly tried to get away before the Amazon could threaten her back.

Ephiny stood still, a smirk on her face, and her eyes bright. "Next time... Gabby," she murmured then she turned to order the door guard to open the jail. Just before the cell door open, she pulled her mask back over to hide her chiseled features.

Gabrielle made it back to her hut even though it was dinner time. She was happy to find nobody in the hut so she just made it to the foot of her bed and she sat roughly down on it. She threw her walking stick onto the bed then broke down crying with her face in her hands. All her hatred for the Conqueror broke loose and exploded to the top in a hungry rage that racked her heart. The hatred pooled in her eyes over and over then smeared her cheeks and coated her hands with salty, acid tears. And by the gods, Gabrielle finally found a sense of peace when her shattering sobs healed old, bleeding wounds.

Chapter 10 - Southern Comfort

Janice Covington slightly shivered against the chill flowing from the open window in front of her. She ignored it though as she was enjoying the sunrise too much. She'd gotten up early just for this occasion even though she was known for being the worst morning person.

The archeologist donned her Amazon cloak that'd been returned to her a couple of days ago. It was keeping her fairly warm but most importantly it hid her scabbed wounds all over her body. She hated to be reminded of her time in the cell and the Conqueror's torture. Yet her wounds were healing rather well so far, especially according to the pleased healer. The healer checked on her daily and always applied balsam to her wounds plus she was required to drink this odd tea that he said would help her left eye. And he was actually right; Janice's previously swollen eye was no longer swollen but merely red and bruised. Her vision was quickly returning in her left

eye too, which was a relief.

Janice jumped from her thoughts when her chamber door creaked open so she turned around to see a familiar face.

Nakia smiled at the solemn woman by the window. "I didn't expect you up so early." She ducked into the room with a tray full of food. "I was coming to drop this off."

"Thank you, Nakia." Janice offered a smile that broke her hardened features. "How are things?"

"They are fine." Nakia closed the door behind her so that the guards wouldn't listen in on their conversation. "The Conqueror has the court here today."

"The court?" inquired the curious prisoner.

"Yes, all her advisors come to discuss politics and such." The Egyptian slave shrugged. "It is the Conqueror's least favorite."

The archeologist hid her grin because it made her think of Melinda. She also understood that was the exact location she'd attacked the Conqueror so many days back. "When does it begin?"

"Always at Helios high," informed the slave.

Janice processed that and decided that it would give her plenty of time to talk to her friend. She nodded then asked, "Will the healer be here later?"

"I believe he'll be here some time after Helios high." Nakia brushed a dark strand of her hair away from her face. "You have plenty of time to relax, Janice. If you need me then I'll be in the Conqueror's chambers. Theresa is in the kitchen today."

Janice nodded her head. "Thank you, Nakia."

The slave smiled then whispered goodbye before she vanished out of the chambers.

Janice faced the window again and watched the last of the sunrise, which seemed to fill her. She didn't realize how wonderful it felt to watch the sunrise again as she'd seen many during her digs but this was different. The sunrise gave her a sense of peace and calmness that'd eluded her for a month now.

She hadn't truly spoken to Melinda in these past three days since she was rescued from the cell. She was spending much of her time in the bed chamber as her body was too weak to allow her any movement. Today was the first day she was able to get out of

bed and she had plans for a warm bath before doing anything else. Then she would talk to Melinda about everything that'd happened and what the future plans were.

Janice felt some sense of loss because she didn't know what'd happened and she had no control earlier. Now she watched her best friend impersonate the woman she hated so deeply. It was hard to swallow yet it was something she had to come to terms with since it saved her life, most likely.

Finally, Janice started her day by eating first and the food was becoming heavier and brought her body to life again. That meant her mind was working clearer too, which she was very grateful. After she cleared the tray of any food, she went into the bathroom that was half the size of the large bedroom. She was excited to find a tub there that worked very much like a modern bath at home, minus the showerhead. She gave the Conqueror some credit for mimicking the Roman's piping system for water.

After Janice felt cleaned and ready, she put on her cloak last by the door. She opened the door and the two guards straightened up in surprise by the blonde's arrival. Melinda had informed her that she was allowed to move about in the fortress but the guards would be her constant shadows. At first Janice almost put up a fight but then Melinda explained it wasn't just to hold up the impression that Janice was a prisoner but to protect her too, from Alti.

The guards at the door eyed the small prisoner that drifted out of the room.

Janice walked by them a few feet to test them. They didn't stop her so she went a few yards then grinned as her shadows marched behind her. She suppressed a chuckle then continued down the hallway that seemed almost never ending. Then it occurred to her that she really had no clue where to look for Melinda. She stopped and turned to her guards.

The two guards exchanged looks then peered down at the prisoner.

"Do you fellas know where the Conqueror is?"

Again, the sentries exchanged glances but they weren't sure what to say since they didn't expect to be fraternizing with the prisoner.

Janice sighed, her hands on her hips now. "Come on, I don't know this damn place." She was wondering if she shouldn't have asked Nakia for help instead of these moving statues.

"She's probably in her office," offered the sentry to the right.

The other sentry regarded his partner for speaking out.

"Oookay," started Janice, "Where's that?"

The speaking guard shifted in place then stepped around the small prisoner while saying, "Follow me."

And that guard is named Bingo, inwardly joked the archeologist as she happily followed him. She was directed down the hall, down a flight of step, made a right into another hall, and stopped at a door that read: ? ?ata?t?t??. "This is it?"

The sentry that'd talked merely nodded his head now.

"Hmmm." Janice couldn't read the syntax but she figured that the guards wouldn't want her to get in trouble since it'd be their hides too. She decided she better not barge in so she respectfully knocked. She heard the order to come in and as she pushed the door, her stomach clenched. Janice stepped into what was a very big office but off to the right sat a dark woman behind a desk, her head down and scribing something.

The guards also filed in behind Janice.

The Conqueror finished doing something on the parchment, stopped, and stood up with her cold gaze on the party in her office. She'd expected Janice to show up today but not quite this early. Her steel features focused on the guards. "Wait outside until we're finished."

The guards quickly nodded then hastily left the office with the door closing behind them.

Janice watched them go for a second then looked to her friend.

Melinda came around the oak desk and approached the small archeologist. "How do you feel today?"

"Its getting better every day," answered Janice, her hands now folded over her chest in a protective manner. She soaked in the attire that Melinda wore, which consisted of black leathers and the very bronze armor always described in Gabrielle's scrolls. She caught sight of the sparkling chakram on Melinda's right hip and the sword hilt poking over her shoulder but there was no cape. Janice realized that Melinda was more Xena than the Conqueror in this outfit and it subconsciously eased her.

"I hope so," murmured the translator as she towered over her friend. Her eyes were glazed with concern and her hands clenched at her sides because she wanted desperately to touch Janice.

Janice freed her right hand and toyed with her short hair for a second. "Mel, what's going on?" Her hand fell to her side.

Melinda exhaled sadly and nodded her head. "I've been putting this off, I reckon." She signaled to the couch nearby and offered, "Sit down with me."

Janice followed her friend to the sofa that was a royal shade of purple. She got comfortable beside Melinda but was slightly twisted so she could face her too. "When Alti took me, you were hurt on the dig site," she started.

"I was," agreed the southerner. She laced her hands together in her lap. "Just after you disappeared with Alti, Jack showed up 'cause he was returnin' the scrolls he took."

Janice perked up at this information but it didn't matter right now.

"Jack realized something had happened so he rushed me to the hospital in Corinth." Melinda leaned against the back of the sofa so that she was more comfortable. "I couldn't tell him what happened... I was upset as it was about it. He stayed in Corinth until I healed up, which didn't take long."

"Mel, your legs were shattered... weren't they?"

"Close enough," agreed the southerner, "but...." She signaled her perfectly fine legs and stated, "I'm a fast healing patient plus I had the best doctor money could buy. I left within a few weeks."

"Then what?" urged the curious archeologist.

Melinda's memories of her days after Janice's kidnapping surfaced higher up. "I got in touch with one of daddy's old friends that I knew. He works at the Archeological Museum of Corinth... he's the curator. I had a hunch about that green stone on that scepter so I told him about it."

"He knew of it, didn't he?" encouraged the archeologist.

"Yes, and surprisingly enough he had it there in the museum."

Janice was astounded and hastily asked, "What is the stone?"

"Its called the Cronos Stone and he ain't sure about the history behind it." Melinda sighed then shifted some on the sofa. "I didn't tell him what I thought it could do but I asked him if I could see it."

Janice slightly grinned as she knew what Melinda was going to tell her next.

Melinda mirrored her friend's grin then continued into her story about what happened next and how she arrived all the way here. It was an amazing story of determination and faith, much like Janice's and Janice's eyes lit up with the story right before her....

Melinda Pappas clenched her teeth as she shrunk to the soft grass, on her hands and knees. She lost contact with the Cronos Stone as it pulsed green between her hands, almost blending with the grass. Just as Melinda prepared to pick it up with her right hand it vanished without a trace. "Ooo my," murmured the translator, "that's not what I expected."

Melinda shook off the shock to her body from the time traveling then she quickly climbed to her feet. Just as she adjusted her black glasses on the bridge of her nose for better focus, she discovered three scanty, leather clad women with swords staring at her. "Ooo... myyy."

"Who are you?" demanded the Amazon in the middle, her mask covering her face like the other two.

Melinda tried to remain calm or else this would go horribly wrong. "The name's Melinda Pappas."

The three Amazons gazed at one another but the one in the center took a step closer.

Melinda wasn't too frightened after having just faced that oddly robed woman that took Janice and then Ares before that. "I'm lookin' for a friend of mine... ya might have seen her."

The Amazon that'd been speaking the entire time took a second step closer. She was trying to decipher the odd dialect the woman held but she couldn't make heads or tails of it but she inwardly admitted that it was attracting. "Who's the friend? And why are you in Amazon territory?"

"Well I'm here because I'm lookin' for my friend." Melinda swallowed then added, "Maybe ya know her... her name is Janice and she's a bit of a pain." She hoped the joke would pay off on some level.

The speaking Amazon reached up and pushed her mask away from her face. "I know Janice Covington." She lifted her sword and neared the odd stranger, her sword tip pointed just at Melinda's throat. "Isn't it funny how you resemble the Conqueror perfectly?"

Melinda hastily held up her hands in defense. "I swear I ain't the Conqueror." Her stomach turned at the title that they were matching her up to and she didn't like it at

all.

"We know," stated the Amazon, who had wild brown eyes and bright blond hair that was almost white. "Because she wouldn't dare show here without her legions and...." She waved her sword up and down Melinda's length. "Dressed like that."

The translator quickly had an offended expression, which made the Amazon smirk at her. She was simply dressed in button up blouse, khaki pants, and her dig site boots while her hair was twisted into her usual bun. When the sword was lowered from her throat, she also lowered her hands by her side.

"I'm Callisto," introduced the Amazon. "This is Velasca." She held her right hand out to the Amazon behind her, who removed their mask. "And this is Karis."

The two Amazons that'd stayed back now joined the pair.

Velasca scanned over Melinda with very judgmental eyes.

Melinda almost shuddered by the Amazon's stare but she stayed focused on Callisto. She knew exactly who Callisto was from Gabrielle's scrolls she'd read while in the hospital. This obviously wasn't correct in history if Callisto was an Amazon so she had to play along. "Can ya help me find Janice?"

Callisto lifted an eyebrow some. "I think you're a little late, deary buuut... we'll take you to the queen." She turned on her heels and ordered, "Follow us."

Melinda was uneasy but she didn't have much choice so she fell into step behind Callisto. The other two quiet Amazons were behind her and they hadn't sheathed their swords at all. Melinda found the walk to be a good fifteen minutes but it seemed to drag on longer since nobody was talking. She was fine with that because it gave her time to consider what she knew of history, what Gabrielle's scrolls told her, and what was right here before her. She could only guess what else rested ahead of her.

When the group arrived in the village, Melinda realized she was a sudden attraction to all. She tried to ignore the staring and gaping Amazons but it was increasingly hard. They finally stopped in front of a hut and Callisto rapped on the door a few times. When they were called in, Callisto went first then Melinda and the other two Amazons.

Queen Cyane peered up at her visitors but she hastily jumped from her seat at seeing her enemy.

"My queen," intervened Callisto, "this is Melinda Pappas," she hastily explained, "and she's looking for Janice."

Queen Cyane gripped the edge of her desk and stared with a mix of surprise and anger at the stranger in her office. She calmed her rapid heartbeat then calmly asked, "Melinda Pappas?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered the translator in her most proper southern draw.

The queen forcefully relaxed because she needed a clear head for this one. She inhaled sharply then informed, "I'm afraid Janice Covington has come and gone."

Melinda slowly nodded then asked, "Where might she have gone?"

"We escorted her to Corinth a few days ago." Queen Cyane straightened up from bending over her desk. "She was planning to engage the Conqueror and Alti so that she could get home."

Melinda took a hesitant step closer and carefully inquired, "If ya don't mind me askin', who is the Conqueror?"

Cyane folded her arms over her chest then made a big assumption as she stated, "She's Xena... your descendant."

Melinda slightly swooned and touched her forehead at this news. "Ooo my... I reckon I'm in deep here."

The queen was prepared to speak again but the door to her office hut was suddenly shoved open by a small blond.

Gabrielle came in, head down, eyes on a scroll, and as she lifted her head she said, "Queen Cyane, I just received... word..." She stopped then proceeded to gape at the tall, dark haired woman standing next to her. "By the gods," she breathed in astonishment.

Melinda Pappas's eyes were wide behind her black glasses at seeing Janice's ancestor before her.

Gabrielle's grip on her scroll slipped suddenly.

Melinda reacted quickly by bending then snatched up the falling parchment just above the floor. She held out the scroll to the bard along with a pleasant smile. "Good afternoon, Gabrielle."

The rebel closed her slack jaw as she received her scroll back.

"Next time try knocking, Gabrielle," instructed the irritated queen.

The bard's head quickly turned to the Amazon Queen. "I'm sorry," she offered, "I was just surprised about the news I received."

Queen Cyane interrupted the bard's hasty explanation as not so good. She decided to set that aside at the moment so instead she signaled to the tall stranger. "This is Melinda Pappas, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle's focus returned to the tall woman before her and she tucked the scroll under her left arm since that hand was busy with her walking stick. "It's nice to finally meet you, Melinda." She held out her right hand.

The translator clasped the small hand into hers and briskly shook. "It's a pleasure, Gabrielle." Her brilliant blue eyes sparkled at the immediate draw she felt towards Gabrielle much like she had with Janice.

"You're looking for Janice," stated the bard. At Melinda's solemn nod she explained, "She's in Corinth now and I actually just...." Her gaze flickered over to the queen.

"What is it, Gabrielle?" queried the concerned queen.

Gabrielle's lips shaped a frown and she removed the scroll from under her left arm. "I received word from my faction that Janice has been captured by the Conqueror." She heard a soft moan filter from Melinda and it made Gabrielle ache inside. She was just as fearful too when she'd read the news. "She's in a lot of danger... I was afraid of this."

"Why did you let her do this?" coldly questioned Melinda, her eyes only on the bard. Something in her flared up that she couldn't understand but it was powerful.

Gabrielle noticed that the woman's earlier accent was gone and the tone mirrored that of the Conqueror's. "I couldn't have stopped her if I tried, Melinda. I did everything I could to ensure she had less odds against her. I am sorry."

Melinda touched her forehead that was starting to pound. "I know." She lowered her hand then asked, "What will happen to her?"

Gabrielle's gaze faltered as she quietly answered, "The Conqueror is after me so she'll use Janice to get to me."

Queen Cyane cut back into the conversation at that point. "Melinda, how did you get here?"

"I used the same stone that Alti had to travel here."

"Where is this stone then?" questioned Gabrielle.

The translator exhaled with a frown on her face. "It vanished when I let go of it." She shook her head then tried to explain it aloud. "I reckon the stone can't coexist with itself."

"Then Alti would have lost the scepter when she kidnapped Janice from the future," argued Queen Cyane.

"I know...." Melinda considered it more then added, "Maybe as long as it's in the hands of the owner it won't vanish... I ain't sure." She finally joked, "Not that time travel is exactly explainable either."

Gabrielle slightly grinned at the remark but she lost her amusement. "What now?"

"I have to get to Janice," stated the determined translator.

"Wait," cut in the queen, "before there's anymore gun blazing harebrain schemes, this needs to be worked out."

Melinda arched a curious eyebrow at the gun blazing part of the queen's speech. She knew that to be a Janice Covington concept more than anything. Her quick mind also already had an idea but she wasn't about to discuss it here with all these Amazons. She needed to talk to one person and the person was next to her.

Gabrielle detected something so she spoke first. "Queen Cyane, let Melinda stay here and we'll report a plan to you."

The Amazon Queen audibly sighed as her hands came to her hips. "I'm already harboring three fugitives... why not the Conqueror's decedent too?"

Melinda's eyes narrowed at hearing three fugitives.

"You're welcome to stay, Melinda."

"Thank you," politely agreed the southerner.

The queen looked to Callisto. "Show her to a guest hut."

"Right away, my queen." Callisto bowed her head then shifted around to the door between the outsider and the stranger.

"See that you do come to me before doing anything, Gabrielle." Queen Cyane held the rebel's gaze very seriously. "Enough lives have been endangered as is."

"I understand," agreed the bard. She then filed out of the hut with the Amazons and Melinda.

Callisto told her fellow Amazons to return to patrol duty and promised she'd return shortly. She escorted Melinda across the village and took her to an empty guest hut. "Here's the hut and I'm sure Gabrielle will care for you." Her wild brown eyes switched to Gabrielle for that confirmation.

"Not to worry," agreed the bard. She smiled at the Amazon and warmly stated, "Thanks, Callisto."

"Thank you too," agreed the translator.

Callisto bowed her head at the pair, took a step back, and stated, "I will see you both soon, I'm sure." With that, she was gone and heading towards the gates.

As soon as Callisto was out of ear shot, Gabrielle met Melinda's gaze and asked, "You have a plan, don't you?"

"I think so," replied Melinda. Her attention though was over Gabrielle's head as she saw the passerby's watching them. "Let's go inside."

The pair entered the hut and was relieved to be out of the village's scrutiny. Melinda offered the weary bard a seat then she took one too from the table.

"First, I need to know some things." Melinda kept her back straight in the chair but her focus centered on the rebel.

"Okay, what's that?"

The translator had to confirm her suspicions that'd been nagging at her. She questioned Gabrielle on several topics and was either pleased or displeased by the results however the information was helpful. Melinda soon realized she really wasn't just in the past but in another world or reality. Her questions were narrowing it down quickly as Gabrielle's scrolls had provided her with much insight about Xena's history prior to her meeting Gabrielle just outside of Potidaea.

"So the Conqueror began her campaign after Alti joined her?"

"Yes," replied Gabrielle, "the Conqueror killed her partner and took his half of the army. After that, she and Alti marched across Greece like a plague."

Melinda didn't read anything about Alti in the scrolls but that didn't mean much. What she did know was how Xena changed paths thanks to Gabrielle's scroll about Prometheus, which went into Xena's recent past. She reached up and removed her glasses as she asked, "Do you know Hercules?"

"Hercules?" tried the bard then shook her head. "No... never heard of him."

The translator was rubbing the bridge of her nose but stopped. She settled her glasses into her lap. "Ooo my... ya never heard of him?"

"Not at all," promised the bard. "Why?"

Melinda dropped her head forehead with her fingertips rubbing her temples against the growing headache. "In my world, he stopped Xena from becomin' a warlord."

The rebel was in disbelief of such a possibility. She also noticed Melinda's pain and she touched the nearby knee of the stranger. "Do you need something for your head?"

The translator lowered her hands from her temples. "No, I'll be fine... thank you though." She put her glasses on again.

Gabrielle removed her touch as she smiled at the politeness of this woman, who was so opposite of the dark ruler she knew. "I see now why Janice was so reluctant to assassinate the Conqueror."

Melinda had a bittersweet smile at the rebel's words.

"Wait, you said in your world... when you were referring to this Hercules."

Melinda faintly nodded then explained, "Janice and I are from an alternate reality or world... Xena is nothin' like this in our history. She was a warlord for some time but she became a hero later."

Gabrielle had an abstract expression at such a concept. "Are you sure you're right? I mean how can you be sure?"

The translator had a wide grin that revealed her teeth. "I know because I read your scrolls about your adventures with her."

The bard held her breath and stared at Melinda then she suddenly shook her head. "That's impossible."

"I know how it sounds," agreed the southerner, "but you and Xena were famous in

Ancient Greece. You inspired her to fight her darkness while she helped you discover all your strengths and abilities."

Gabrielle was shaken by this news as she stared at the space between her and Melinda. "Her and I were... partners?"

Melinda nodded and wasn't about to inform Gabrielle of her other suspicions that Gabrielle and Xena may have been lovers too.

"Gods," whispered the bard. "That must be another world." She shook her head at her imagination's vision. "I've hated the Conqueror since she destroyed my life."

"What happened?" urged the concerned translator.

Gabrielle went into a quick story about her history and how her life worked out so far. She watched the various emotions flicker across Melinda's face and in her eyes. She was just as captivated but by Melinda and how their chemistry flowed so well together. It was incredibly eerie yet so intoxicating at the same time. Gabrielle really wasn't sure what to make of it.

Melinda couldn't believe everything she'd been told. She was astounded that Gabrielle had survived so well and adapted but she contributed that to the Conqueror's mother helping too. She felt a lot of respect build up in her for this younger woman. She stretched out her legs some then tucked them back under her. "I don't understand why Janice thought she could stop the Conqueror when we're from another world."

"I don't think Janice knew," reflected the bard. "I think she believed she was in the past."

"That was her second biggest mistake," murmured Melinda, sadly.

"What was her first?"

Melinda lifted her saddened eyes to Gabrielle. "Thinkin' that she could really kill the Conqueror." She shook her head. "She can't kill."

"She would have done it, Melinda." Gabrielle's eyebrows pressed together neatly. "She was determined to do it."

"Well she's not going to," Melinda coldly stated as her accent disappeared. She stood up and walked away from the bard then started to pace.

Gabrielle could see Melinda's mind formulating a plan very quickly. She was dazed by the sheer beauty behind it and it was alluring too. "What are you thinking?"

Melinda Pappas stopped pacing and faced the rebel leader. "Meet the new Conqueror," her cool voice thundered as she removed her glasses.

Gabrielle stood up with her stick for help. She approached the tall, dark woman that loomed above her. "How are you...."

Melinda very slowly revealed a wild grin that felt too comforting. "Its time Alti had a taste of her own medicine."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to ask but she snapped it shut then murmured, "You can't.... It's impossible."

Melinda darkly chuckled as she neatly folded up her glasses and tucked them into her right pocket. "I can and I will." She closed in the space between her and the rebel then tipped Gabrielle's head back with her fingertips. "I can't let anything happen to Janice, Gabrielle." At the thought of any harm coming to Janice flared up her darkest strength from some hidden place that was only recently shown to her by Xena's soul.

"I know," whispered Gabrielle, who laced her hand through Melinda's. "I will do everything I can to help."

Melinda showed her classic smile and her southern accent returned. "Thank you."

The pair quickly worked together to iron out a solid plan that they knew Queen Cyane could not refuse. By the time they were finished, Gabrielle's head was pounding too and more from hunger. Melinda apologized for it then they thought it best to eat before it got any later. Gabrielle took Melinda to the food hut and when they got there, she was greeted by a worried Cyrene and Melpomene. Cyrene and Melpomene then realized they were standing in front of the Conqueror's descendant and Janice's best friend. Together the group joined in for a dinner at one table in the dining hut.

Melinda became more and more informed about the recent events and Janice's plans to stop the Conqueror and Alti. It truly worried her when she heard how ruthless the Conqueror was in this world. She knew, without a doubt, that right now Janice was most likely in grave danger. It harbored very dark emotions in Melinda that she tried desperately to clamp down on.

Just as they were finishing up, two curious Amazons stopped over because of the floating rumors. Melinda was quickly introduced to the legendary Ephiny that she'd read often about in Gabrielle's scroll. She then met Solari, who she instantly took to also. Ephiny and Solari joined the group with a round of diluted wine, minus one for little Melpomene, and the two Amazons told Melinda about Janice's time in the Nation. Melinda was left dumbstruck when she heard that Janice had been taught the

sword and was rather skilled with it. She also made a mental note to have a little chitchat with this shaman, Yakut, who seemed to have some fair ideas about Alti.

"So," started Solari, "you want some sword lessons too, Melinda?"

The southerner's eyes darkened a shade but she was grinning. "I reckon I can hold my own, thank you."

"Really?" challenged Solari, "You don't look it."

Ephiny snorted and poked her friend's side. "She's only the descendant of Xena."

"Still," argued Solari, "after how many generations though?"

Melinda removed her glasses and set them down on the table. "Trust me," her accent gone and voice chilled, "I can handle myself fine."

Solari had a mouthful of wine in her mouth and she gulped it down. "Wow." She blinked at Ephiny.

Ephiny smirked and patted Solari's back roughly. "Told yah, Solar."

"Watch it, Eph," shot back the Amazon.

Gabrielle curiously watched as Melinda put her glasses back on and there was an inward shift in the stranger. She wanted to know what that continuing shift was in the woman as she could even feel it from her spot across the table. She figured she sensed it more than anybody else at the table.

"So what's the game plan now?" Solari glanced between Gabrielle and Melinda.

"You're going to help Janice, right?" piped up Melpomene.

Melinda smiled at the child sitting next to Cyrene. "Yes, I'm going to help her." Her instincts told her that the girl had a deep affection for Janice and also a lot of admiration for Janice too.

"The Conqueror will hurt her," sadly pointed out Melpomene. Her face was full of fear and worry.

Melinda kept her calm stature despite her swirling feelings deep inside that the child's words stirred in her. "I won't let anything happen to Janice, Melpomene."

The girl took that as an enduring promise and her face softened.

Cyrene clasped Melpomene's hand into hers. "We should get some rest, sweetie. Its getting late for us."

Melpomene's lower lip quivered up at Cyrene. "I want to stay and listen too."

Cyrene stifled a yawn but before she could put up an argument, Gabrielle jumped into it.

"We won't be long," promised Gabrielle. "And you need your rest, Melpomene."

The child slowly relented then nodded at Cyrene.

"Come on." Cyrene scooted out of her seat then smiled at everybody. "Goodnight, ladies."

Everybody chimed in with a goodnight to Cyrene and Melpomene then watched the pair leave the large hut. Cyrene was a bit relieved to get away as it was haunting to be near Melinda, who was the spitting imagine of her daughter.

Melinda sighed and lowered her gaze to Gabrielle after Melpomene and Cyrene left. "She was uneasy."

"I know," murmured the bard. "It's hard for her."

"I can imagine." Melinda toyed with her empty mug for a second.

"So do you two have a plan?" brought up Ephiny.

Gabrielle suddenly had a sly grin. "Ooo yeah and its all Melinda's idea."

Melinda quickly had three pairs of inquisitive eyes on her so she proceeded to explain her plans. Ephiny was speechless and Solari broke out with, "That will be perfect!"

"It's impossible!" roared back Ephiny, who glowered at her best friend. "Who in the known-world could-"

"She can do it, Ephiny," shot back Solari. She held her hand out to the stranger. "Look at Melinda, she's an exact copy of the Conqueror."

"No," hotly argued Ephiny, "She doesn't know anything about the Conqueror or how she acts or... any of that."

"Ya know, it's impolite to talk about somebody in third person when they're here,"

informed the prim southerner.

Ephiny was in mid argument when she faltered and blinked at Melinda.

Solari quietly laughed because she remembered those similar words from Janice Covington.

"And this will work," clarified the translator.

Ephiny was shaking her curly locks with her jaw set to her stubborn attitude.

"Wait," piped up Gabrielle, "can't Yakut help?"

"What you mean?" asked Solari.

"Well can't Yakut... show Melinda everything about the Conqueror?" Gabrielle's gazed went between the two Amazons.

Solari and Ephiny stared at one another for the answer.

"Yes."

Solari, Ephiny, and Gabrielle turned their attention to Melinda, who answered the question.

"A shaman can do astral projection and Yakut should be able to translate it to me."

"To you or into you?" tried the bard.

Melinda faintly grinned before answering, "Into me."

"That's perfect." Gabrielle was smiling brightly at the rising hopes.

Ephiny sighed before she rained on the parade again. "This is incredibly dangerous and somebody could get killed... namely Janice."

"Janice is going to get killed if we don't do something," debated the rebel.

Melinda was tensed up at the bard's words then her unusual icy tone appeared again. "Janice... will... not... die."

Gabrielle swallowed at seeing the ferocity just flowing from Melinda. It was a chilling reminder of the Conqueror and in an odd way it comforted her because it meant this plan would succeed.

"Tomorrow we will talk to the queen," stated Melinda to Gabrielle.

The bard nodded her agreement.

Ephiny finally caved in and offered, "Solari and I will help too."

Solari suddenly grinned when Ephiny agreed. "This'll be great." She then chuckled at the wild images of the plan that rested ahead.

And if anybody was the most skeptical about the plans it was the queen herself. She tried to argue and debate and fight the stranger and rebel's plans that they'd so perfectly mapped out. Yet she too found it was impossible to say no anymore because despite the risks it was very solid. Even Queen Cyane saw the possibilities working out and she had hope for the first time.

By that afternoon, the plans were already being executed as Amazons rushed to prepare. Gabrielle helped as much as she could with it and by mid afternoon she introduced Melinda to Yakut. Yakut was rocked by Melinda's forwardness and demands that she perform a projection of the Conqueror's life and transfer it to Melinda. Yakut hotly argued against it saying it was dangerous to Melinda but Melinda did not care, she was determined.

The shaman eventually found herself and Melinda in the temple alone and in a deep ritual. Yakut had transcended the axis mundi then projected the Conqueror's life into Melinda through her hands and eyes. Melinda had never experienced such a thing in her life and at first it scared her but she moved beyond it. Eventually Melinda actually felt as if she was living the Conqueror's very life and it reached deep into her hidden, dark chasm. By the time Yakut had completed the transfer Melinda was well spent with a headache and she also felt extremely split between two lives.

Yakut was fearful of such a result happening and warned Melinda to be leery of this split. She explained that such a split could wreak havoc on her mind and later cause detrimental problems. Melinda accepted the dangers because it was her only option to saving Janice. She would just have to deal with it when that bridge showed up if it did.

When the evening came, Melinda was done with Yakut and checking on the status of the preparations for the plans. She was satisfied that it was all working out well so she went for a break in her hut. She truly needed it and rested on her bed for awhile, her hands over her face.

Yet as she tried to relax, her mind would suddenly flash with images of the Conqueror's life. She'd see disturbing images of the Conqueror running her sword

through enemies then the image would shift and it was Melinda killing somebody. Melinda's hands would be coated in blood and odd feelings of a hungry rush would sweep through her body. Melinda tried to shake them away but they never quieted completely until there was a knock at her door.

Melinda climbed out of bed while calling, "Come in." She was grateful to see Gabrielle coming into the hut.

"How are you doing?" Gabrielle closed the door and took an offered chair from Melinda.

"A little tired," admitted Melinda. She went back to sitting on the foot of her bed. "We're almost ready."

"Yes, we are," agreed the bard. "But are you ready?"

Melinda sighed then nodded her head. "Yakut showed me everything."

"Everything?" Gabrielle's eyes narrowed. "You've seen all of the Conqueror's life?"

"Yes." Melinda pulled off her glasses then placed them on the bed next to her. "I understand now why she is the way she is."

"Why?" Gabrielle had to understand too.

"She was trying to protect Amphipolis from getting attacked by raiders and warlords. That's how it started."

Gabrielle slowly nodded. "I know... Cortese attacked Amphipolis then she lost her brother not long after."

Melinda faintly moved her head in agreement. "When Caesar betrayed her and set out to kill her, that was the changing point. She lost all hope and became full of anger... she's been on an endless quest for revenge."

"But she's killed Caesar," reminded the bard.

"Yes," agreed the translator, "but when ever did killing your tormenter quench your thirst for revenge?"

"Never," muttered the rebel. It struck Gabrielle blindly and she understood what was at the core of the Conqueror's drive. As dark as it truly was it also explained every piece and gave her so much insight to the past. She store that away for later thought and came back to the present. "Are you sure you're ready for this, Melinda?"

The translator peered down at her hands in her lap, her hands that had old calluses from handling a sword over a month ago in Ares's tomb. "I have to save her, Gabrielle."

"But what is it going to cost you?"

"What will it cost me if I don't save her?" Melinda met her friend's steady gaze. "I can't expect you to understand, Gabrielle but Janice is...."

"No." Gabrielle's voice was calm and assuring. "I understand, Melinda." She detected though that there was something else on Melinda's mind.

Melinda licked her lips then peered up at her friend. "A part of me is worried about whether I can do this." She clenched her hands in her lap. "Its not that I can't because I will but what if... what if it's too much then I get lost." Her blurry eyes held Gabrielle captivated. "What if it ends up costing Janice?"

Gabrielle sighed and stood up with her cane. She limped over then climbed up on the bed next to her friend. "I noticed you become... different at some points like... something else takes control."

"Yes." Melinda stared down at her hands. "Anytime I think about Janice being in danger or hurt... anything like that I just feel this shift in me." She turned her head to Gabrielle. "I didn't tell you this but when I met Janice, she was on a dig and discovered a tomb."

Gabrielle nodded but said nothing so that Melinda would go on.

"Janice and I plus a few others went into the tomb where we found some things."

"Like what?"

"Well Janice found your scrolls...." Melinda shook her head, "Well the other Gabrielle's scrolls. Then I found Xena's chakram but only half of it. This gentleman, Smythe, who came too found the other half of the chakram. The two pieces attracted to each other instantly and when they touched... something happened to me."

"What?" murmured the bard, who was entranced by the story.

"Xena's soul possessed me," gently answered Melinda, "and the tomb... it belonged to Ares."

"By the gods," rasped the shocked rebel.

Melinda bit her lower lip then told the rest of the story. "Ares was asleep but we woke him up by entering the tomb. He wanted to be set free from the tomb that'd trapped him. He was going to kill Janice and that's when... I became Xena or she became me. I ain't sure but it felt so real."

"What happened after that?"

"Janice and I stopped him then we escaped the tomb. Janice blew it up so nobody would find it again." Melinda lowered her gaze again to her hands. "As soon as I realized Janice was safe again, I was back in control."

"Xena's soul left your body?" questioned the young woman.

"I don't reckon so because when Alti showed up, it happened again."

"And now whenever you think or hear about Janice being threatened you react the same way, right?"

"Yes." Melinda's shoulder slightly slumped. "I reckon Xena's soul never left me after Ares's tomb."

"What if it wasn't ever her soul to begin with?" probed the bard. "What if the connection of the broken chakram symbolized you becoming united with your karma? Maybe it's been there all along and you just didn't know it. And when Janice is endangered that's the trigger."

"It's possible," quietly granted the southerner.

"I can see you make that shift, Melinda... it's pretty obvious to me... I can't speak for anybody else." But Gabrielle could tell her friend was very uneasy about this revelation so she gathered up Melinda's larger hands into hers. "Melinda, you can use it to your advantage. If you don't accept it then it could hamper you more than help you and we both know that Janice needs you."

"I know." The translator shook her head and studied Gabrielle's features that painfully reminded her of Janice. "It did happen for a reason, I agree but what if I get into a dangerous position? What if it costs Janice her life?"

"Would you really let that happen?" tried Gabrielle. "I don't think you would and that's even the cause for it to come out."

Melinda knew from what she read that Xena would move heaven and hell to protect Gabrielle. She knew that their karmas were more than linked but were a balance. It

was that balance that Gabrielle and Xena craved so greatly and moved them past many trials. If that was the fate of their karmas then it was very much the fate of hers and Janice's, which meant she would follow Xena's path to defy anything for Janice.

Gabrielle squeezed the hands in hers and confidently whispered, "You can do this, Melinda... and you know it too."

Melinda gazed into the most assertive green eyes she'd seen in a long time. Her acceptance of her possible fate clicked into place as she realized that nothing would stop her from saving and protecting Janice.

"Christ, Mel... you did it?" Janice Covington stared her friend in disbelief.

Melinda revealed a smug feature as she broke away from her story. "Yes of course, Janice Covington... I wasn't going to leave you here to have all the fun."

The archeologist grunted and leaned her side against the sofa. "You really kidnapped the Conqueror... Xena the Warrior Princess?"

"The Destroyer of Nations," added the grinning translator.

"Christ," muttered the still shocked archeologist. "I would have loved to see that... and the look on her face." She snickered at her mental image. "Goddamn."

Melinda was pleased to see her best friend calmer than earlier when this conversation first started.

"Sooo...." Janice shook her head and asked, "We're in an alternate reality?"

"Yes, I reckon Yakut was wrong about her assessment of Alti's plans."

Janice's eyes narrowed as she tried to figure out Alti's real plans. "Do you think she was trying to gain extra powers by transversing worlds?"

"I reckon so," accepted the translator. "I reckon she saw a chance to double her power. If she controlled Gabrielle's karma in this world and in another, it was like gettin' a double cheeseburger."

Janice suddenly laughed at the joke. "Mel."

The grinning translator shrugged but she knew her friend would enjoy the lightheartedness, which was a success too.

"I bet there are other worlds too," theorized the archeologist. "She'll try to cross those

too."

"Possibly but I reckon the Conqueror would get a bit suspicious with all these look alikes coming out of the woodworks."

Janice's nose crinkled up as she didn't consider that. "True."

"Alti most likely selected you 'cause she believed that the stage of your karma wouldn't mix so well with the Conqueror's."

The archeologist huffed and gave a dower look. "I think she was right on that one."

"If she'd kidnapped your real ancestor, Gabrielle, I reckon that both her and this Gabrielle would have been able to stop the Conqueror."

Janice smirked and teased, "That'd been the bacon on the burger then."

Melinda rolled her eyes at the smart remark.

"You started it," reminded the archeologist. Her very playful features appeared, her eyes lighter. "I could go for a double cheeseburger with bacon and tomatoes and-"

"Janice," cut off the groaning translator. Despite she was enjoying the good humor it was driving her nuts but deep inside she knew she adored it.

Janice cleared her throat and tried to be more serious. "So what now, Mel?"

Melinda coolly arched her right eyebrow. "Now we play with Alti while we try to find the scepter."

"How long will the Conqueror's trial take?"

Melinda shrugged then casually replied, "Could be a week or so."

"Then what?"

"I ain't got that far yet," admitted Melinda. "I'm in contact with Gabrielle to see how things are. She showed me her coding system."

"Really?" Janice eyed her best friend. "You figured it out before you left her?"

"Yes," nonchalantly answered the translator. "Here, I'll show you something interesting." She stood up gracefully then directed Janice behind the Conqueror's desk.

The archeologist curiously peered into the bottom desk drawer that Melinda opened on the left side.

"Open one," offered Melinda.

Janice picked up one from the top in the deep drawer and unrolled the scroll. She was amazed to see her ancestor's hand writing clearly there in Greek syntax. "Are all those....?" She stared down in the filled drawer.

"Yes." The translator folded her arms over her armored chest. "The Conqueror has an extensive collection. She's kept every one of Gabrielle's scrolls."

"Goddamn," mumbled the archeologist. She rolled it up and placed it back in its home.

"Interesting part though," started Melinda, who opened another deep drawer on the other side. "She keeps Gabrielle's stories about her childhood separate from the rest."

"Why?"

Melinda tapped the open draw with her boot.

Janice stared at the heavy pile of what she assumed were countless stories about the ruler's childhood. She was amazed by how prolific her ancestor truly was.

"She keeps 'em separate 'cause her childhood memories are her only happy memories." Melinda shoved the drawer shut with her boot. "She reads 'em often, actually."

"How do you know all this, Mel?" Janice had befuddled features.

Melinda tapped her own head on the side. "Yakut showed me everything, Janice."

"She showed you... everything?" the archeologist emphasized.

The translator moved closer to her friend then gently answered, "Yes from her birth to the day I arrived."

"Then you know what happened in the...." Janice couldn't bring herself to say it even in a mere whisper. Her head slightly fell as her memories of the dungeon filtered back to her. She started to recoil yet she stopped when a warm touch came to her chin and lifted her head.

"Yes," murmured Melinda, "I know most of what she's done to you or planned to."

She let out a sad sigh and let her hand trail onto Janice's cheek. "I want to help ya, Janice... please."

The archeologist collected Melinda's callused hand into her own and squeezed it. "You already did, Mel."

"I only stopped the pain." Melinda laced her hand through Janice's. "I ain't healed 'em."

"I know," gently relented Janice. "Give me some time."

The translator slowly nodded her head in understanding. She wanted to move in closer and hold Janice in her arms but she wasn't sure if Janice would allow her. Just as she was prepared to say something her head snapped up from something.

Janice tensed because she saw that instant transformation in her best friend. It was so alarming and made Janice's heart pause in a beat.

"Go around my desk... now," quickly ordered Melinda.

Janice didn't make a point of the fact that her friend considered the desk hers. She knew something was wrong so she reluctantly broke away from Melinda and stepped around the desk just as a loud knock came to the door.

Melinda touched the back of the desk chair with her hand then ordered, "Come in." She her hands deathly gripped the chair's back as she saw the dark shaman stroll into her office.

Janice paled because she hadn't seen the shaman since she visited her in the dungeon that first day. Her stomach pitched down and her knees slightly weakened from her fears.

Melinda detected her friend's uneasiness so she came around the desk while saying, "What is it, Alti? I am busy."

The dark shaman narrowed her cold gaze at Janice. "So I see, my liege."

"What do you want?" snapped the ruler.

Alti tore her gaze away from the prisoner and narrowed her eyes at the Conqueror. "Have you forgotten your meeting with the court?" She smirked at Janice while her husky voice tormented, "Perhaps you were slightly... distracted."

The Conqueror hastily reacted by stalking up to the shaman.

Alti slightly recoiled from her leering posture.

"Remember, Alti that I will cut your supply short." The Conqueror lowered her head closer to the shaman then darkly whispered, "Very quickly." She raised her head back up and hotly stated, "I'm not in the mood today."

"Lucky for the court then," chided Alti huskily. "I will keep them busy until your... arrival."

"See that you do," clipped the ruler then she waved off the shaman in disrespect.

Alti seethed at the ruler but it wasn't anything new, the games. She turned on her heels and glided out of the office, the door slamming behind her.

The Conqueror's eyes flickered to Janice then to the door. "Guards!" She fiercely ordered.

Janice clenched her hands at her side as her guards now entered the office next. She was curious what her friend was prepared to do to these sentries.

"Why did Alti come into my office?" barked the ruler, who was circling her men with burning blue eyes.

The guards were tense and their eyes occasionally following the ruler that circled them. "Because she wanted to see you," offered a logical guard.

"Really, Plato?" The Conqueror got into the guard's face. "What were your orders?" Her stare went between the two men. "I asked a question."

"We are to guard the prisoner," answered the same guard.

The Conqueror's cold eyes switched the silent guard. "And what else?"

The sentry fumbled some and racked his mind to think of what the other order was.

The Conqueror lost her patience and grabbed a hidden dagger from her breast. She suddenly rammed it into the sentry's gut. "Answer me correctly before I put this into your chest next."

The guard held his breath as the warm blade withdrew from his gut. His right hand now covered his bleeding wound. "Protect the prisoner... from Alti."

The ruler revealed a pleased yet dark smile. "Very good." She wiped her dagger clean

of the blood on the sentry's leather clad chest. His blood made a perfect 'X' design too. The ruler took a step away while putting her dagger away.

Janice was stunned by her friend's actions but if it showed on her face it wasn't affecting Melinda at all.

The Conqueror spun back around to face her soldiers. "Now, again I ask why did Alti come into my office?"

The injured guard was weakening but he refused to fall less it meant his life. "Because we disobeyed your orders."

The Conqueror put her hands on her hips. "Exactly."

"We will endeavor to improve, my liege," promise the uninjured sentry.

"Do that or consider your life forfeited," casually stated the cold voice of the ruler. "Now get the Hades out of here and take care of your wound before I change my mind."

"Yes, my liege."

The sentries bowed and clapped their fists across their chests.

The injured soldier hesitated at the door and asked, "What of the prisoner, my liege?"

The Conqueror smiled at the soldier's sudden spark of intelligence. "I will return her to her chambers. See that you return to your posts there."

"Yes, my liege." The injured guard left with his partner and was relieved to be alive still.

Janice watched her guards go then when the heavy door closed, she debated what to do or say next.

Melinda kept her back to Janice, her shoulders ridged as her back. She didn't want to face her friend because of how she'd acted but it was how the Conqueror would have responded to the situation.

Janice swallowed when her feelings powered over her. She could see that her friend was struggling deeply with everything and she hadn't seen that earlier. This was just as hard for Melinda as it was for her and she'd been blind to that before now. She realized that Melinda truly needed her support and acceptance with these circumstances.

Melinda shuddered when a warm, small hand touched her mid back in a comforting contact.

"It's okay, Mel." Janice peered up when Melinda twisted her head around to her as she stood next to the tall southerner. Some part of her expected to see those monstrous blue eyes of the Conqueror but instead she saw nothing but worried, shattered sapphire eyes.

Janice broke apart in that instant and she hastily gathered up Melinda into a warm embrace.

Melinda pulled the small woman completely into her arms and lowered her head down close to Janice's. She soaked in the comfort and support from her friend that she knew meant everything to her. She was coming to understand Xena's resolve to always protect Gabrielle because Gabrielle provided her with everything that she was missing.

Janice held tightly to Melinda and her world felt at ease again despite their situation. Her faith in finding a way home suddenly shaped into Melinda and she knew home had found her instead. She settled her emotions down and lifted her head from Melinda's chest after some time. "Mel?"

"Yeah?" whispered the quaking voice.

"We're going to be okay."

Melinda faintly smiled then murmured, "Yes." Her sweet southern accent filled Janice's ears. "I promise."

Janice rubbed her right hand up and down Melinda's arm, her hand passing over the cool, bronze arm bracer.

"I should go," gently reminded the translator.

"I wouldn't mind seeing you toy with the court." Janice enjoyed the shake of Melinda's body from a silent laugh.

"Janice Covington, ya have an evil streak."

Janice flashed a grin. "Sometimes... a lot of the times," she finally admitted.

"As much as I'd love to amuse you with the court I reckon Alti is already havin' a field day with my saving you from the dungeons."

Janice let out a huge, deep sigh. "I bet."

"Come on." The tall southerner separated from her friend and headed for the door. "I'll come by when I'm done with the court."

"Promise?" pressed the archeologist, who was trailing out of the office with her friend.

"Definitely." Melinda offered a smile then guided her friend through the fortress to her bedchambers on the third level. After she said goodbye, she made her fashionably late arrival to the court where her mood would quickly take a downward spiral.

Chapter 11 - Try Me

Melinda pulled her hood neatly over her face to obscure her dark features. The only thing that showed were her glowing blue eyes from the torchlight flickering from the torches lining the street walls in Corinth. She nodded at the six women beside her then started forward but a hand caught her wrist.

"Wait, Melinda."

The translator turned back to study the Amazon, Ephiny.

"This is silly but..." Ephiny untied a small pouch from her side then held it out to the stranger. "Give this to Janice."

The southerner peered into the pouch and the items inside made her smile.

"She left them with me but..." Ephiny hesitated then shrugged.

"Thank you," murmured Melinda, "This'll mean a lot to her." She tied the small pouch to her leather clad hip.

"You better go," ordered Ephiny, "we'll be watching for your signal."

The translator nodded then turned once again as she broke off into a jog.

Callisto leaned towards Ephiny and muttered, "Is this really going to work?"

"Yes," stated Ephiny. She then turned her head to her fellow Amazons. "Let's split up and keep an eye out... be careful."

Melinda was only a block away from the Conqueror's fortress. Just ahead she spotted a squad of soldiers so she ducked behind a building in an alley. She hunkered down and watched them pass by without a care. As she rose back up, she assessed the wall that went around the fortress and the fortress itself was built into the cliff side of a massive hill that was shy of being a mountain.

Melinda carefully scanned the wall and observed the gates where there were several guards and in the two keeps. As she followed the length of the wall she picked out a guard for about every fifty yards. There were two corners where there were two keeps again then the wall connected to the cliff on either side of the fortress. It was quite the impressive complex really.

After a few steady breathes, Melinda checked all of her items on hand, which were a sword on her back, a dagger in her right boot, a climbing rope across her chest, and finally her special gift for the Conqueror. Melinda already knew the fortress's ins and outs thanks to Yakut's projection so she knew how to execute her plans perfectly. She just hoped it would be as simple as she wished it to be.

Finally, Melinda peeled off of the building and hurried for the right side wall of the fortress. She hastily ducked into the shadows that the wall created for her and she dropped her head back while her hands worked on freeing her climbing rope.

The sentry on the wall strolled past and continued his repetitive duty.

The translator licked her lips as the sentry came back towards her direction. She now had her climbing rope free and the hook at the end slightly swaying at her side. She was just waiting for her opening that she required.

The sentry spun around and walked down the wall to the keep at the corner. When he got to the keep, he stopped and studied the flickering city of Corinth. After a huff, he turned and marched down the wall for his constant distance. He came to the end then turned and slowly marched back towards the keep but then he thought he heard something. The soldier paused then scanned the area for the odd noise yet he couldn't come up with anything. After a shrug, he started to move yet when he lifted his left leg he was stuck by a mysterious, firm grip on his ankle. Before he could say or do anything, his feet came out from under him and he was jerked over the wall's side. He almost gave a cry but was too late when his head slammed against the wall and knocked him unconscious.

Melinda bared her teeth as she dangled from her climbing rope by her left arm while her right arm held onto the soldier's ankle. She stared at the unconscious sentry that swayed upside down below her. She then carefully wrapped her left leg around the rope then neatly slid down the rope until she was halfway down the wall. She released

the soldier and watched him fall to the ground into a heap. She then raced back up the rope and popped up onto the wall.

The translator hastily pulled up her climbing rope then sprinted down the wall and into the torch lit keep that merely had a window for archers and steps in the floor. She went to the spiraling steps and raced down them silently until she came to the closed door at the bottom.

Melinda stopped and rested her climbing rope on the steps behind her then proceeded to unhook her cloak. She tossed the Amazon cloak onto the step then grabbed the climbing rope. She easily put the coiled rope across her chest and finally put her cloak back on to conceal it. This time, Melinda didn't put her hood over her head and neared the closed door.

Melinda's fingers slipped around the ring door handle yet she wavered from opening it. She closed her eyes then with several calming breathes, her winter blue eyes flew open and her body suddenly tensed with a dark strength. She shoved the door open and sauntered out into the square that was in front of the entrance to the fortress. She strolled across the square where many soldiers were patrolling here and there but they paid her no mind.

When Melinda approached the bottom of the steps to the entrance, she grinned at the sentries on guard duty. There were two sentries on every step, one to the right and one to the left with spears at their sides.

The guards quickly came to attention when the tall, dark woman was near enough for them to recognize her features. They each bowed their heads as the powerful woman ascended the steps very slowly.

The two guards at the door bowed deeper than the rest but one lifted his head. "Good evening, my liege."

Melinda nodded her head then coldly stated, "It's good to see some men awake."

The speaking sentry felt for whatever soldier was foolish enough to fall asleep on duty while the Conqueror was prowling about the grounds. He'd heard stories about the ruler's surprise checks on the guards late at night to test them. "Of course, my liege." He grabbed the door handle closes to him and pulled it open.

Melinda strolled through and entered the dimly lit courtroom where many of the Conqueror's political meetings took place along with some sentencing judgments. Her head twisted up to the left at a particular stretch of the balcony high above and it made her anger grow because it was the spot Janice had tried her assassination attempt. She was suddenly swarmed with memories of a gunshot then a sharp pain on her shoulder

before she leapt up onto the balcony to capture her attacker.

Melinda shook away the Conqueror's memories then knew she needed to move quickly. She hastily went across the empty court, passed the throne dais, and opened a side door to a long hallway. She weaved through the low lit fortress and made her way up to the third level where her target should be located by now. When she came up onto the third floor, she slowed down because there would be guards close to the Conqueror's room.

As the southerner glided into the hallway, she was greeted by four guards on the floor that were quietly talking but they stopped. She gradually approached them as a dark grin pulled over her face.

"My liege," greeted a sentry. He wasn't sure how she was out here in the hallway when she never left her room. Or so he thought at least.

Melinda stopped in front of the four guards then studied each of their bowing heads. She detected they were shocked by her presents so she grunted at them then ordered, "I'm going back to bed. See that I'm not disturbed."

"Of course, my liege," replied the same guard.

Melinda swept by them and went down the hallway for another hundred feet until she came to the end where there were two large double doors. Just as she approached the doors, she reached into her cloak and a black bag formed in her hand. She neatly opened it then her right hand curled around the golden ring to one of the doors. She silently entered the dark chambers.

Melinda's head turned to the left as she stood in front of the closed doors to the bedchambers. About fifty feet away or so was a large bed with a still form resting in the middle. Her right hand slipped into the black bag and she removed something that flashed silver for a second in the softly lit room. She ghosted over to the bed and she leered at the ridged, sleeping features of the Conqueror on her back.

The Conqueror's eyes suddenly flew open when she sensed the presence above her. She bared her teeth and her right hand swept up towards her attacker, a dagger in hand.

Melinda tilted to the left and the blade narrowly missed her face. She growled and promptly her hands shot down at the moving ruler.

The Conqueror inhaled a last sharp breath when the stings came to either side of her throat. Her body was completely paralyzed and her right hand involuntarily released her dagger. She was offered a perfect view of her attacker's face as the attacker bowed

over her menacingly. Her anger shined in her eyes but her eyes widened in disbelief as she saw her reflection. "Who are... you?" she rasped while trying to move her hands up to her choking neck.

Melinda ruthlessly smiled then lifted the black bag. "I'm your replacement, Conqueror." She swiftly shoved the black bag over the ruler's face then her right hand slammed into the ruler's side.

A sharp pain riveted through the strong body of the Conqueror. Something entered through her skin, into her blood, and raced through her body and up to her head. The Conqueror was charged by desperation but suddenly her world went completely black and she lost control.

Melinda watched the dark ruler slump into the bed, utterly powerless and it filled Melinda's hunger to see it. Quickly she released the pinch from the ruler's neck and saw the Conqueror's chest rise and fall rhythmically. She needed to rush lest the Amazons thought she may have failed her quest. She trailed across the dark room and threw open a closet door where there were so many articles of clothing of a wide variety. She removed a pair of leather pants that were hidden deep then she grabbed a plain white top to use along with a hanging cloak. Last, she grabbed a pair of worn boots from the floor in the closet.

The southerner returned to the bed and she took a hot second to toss her metallic weapon onto the nightstand by the bed. She then hastily worked to get the nude Conqueror dressed in the clothes she'd selected. Finally she double checked to make sure the black bag was tied so it wouldn't come off but not tight to strangle the ruler.

Melinda was satisfied then she briskly walked up to a long, heavy curtain that blocked the entrance to the small balcony. She slipped through the slit in the curtains and reached for her sword on her back. She gave it a spin as she neared the railing of the balcony. She then lifted her sword horizontally and the full moon started to reflect from it but she angled it a precise way. She slowly lowered her blade when she saw the same reflection twinkle back to her from in the city.

Melinda went back into the chambers and grabbed the unconscious ruler by her arms. She dragged the ruler out of the bed, dropped her to the floor, and hauled her across the floor. She then knelt down and buttoned the cloak up so that it wouldn't reveal the Conqueror's feminine attributes. She shifted her right foot some then removed her dagger, which she put the blade against her left wrist underneath the cloak.

Melinda closed her eyes, her jaw set as she ran the blade across her wrist then she smeared the blade in her blood to coat it. "Guards!" she called out. She pulled the dagger out from under her cloak just as the guards broke into the chambers.

"My liege!" A sentry raced over with his three comrades. "What happened?"

"What does it look like, fool?" Melinda, now the new Conqueror, slowly stood up while holding out her bloody dagger. "How did he get past you four?" Her eyes were slits at them.

The sentries exchanged fearful glances and the earlier speaking guard said, "We don't know, my liege. We didn't see or hear anything."

The Conqueror's right hand shot out and grabbed the guard by his leather clad chest. She yanked him towards her so that he hovered over the unconscious form on the floor. "I want him taken to the fields."

"T-t-tonight, my liege?"

"Right... now," hotly whispered the ruler. "I want him crucified."

"Yes, my liege." The guard was thrown back into his original position but he stumbled back.

The Conqueror spun her dagger between her fingers then pointed it at her attacker. "See that you don't remove the bag over his head... less you prefer to see his mutilated face."

One sentry actually swallowed at the mental image he received. The talking guard signaled the men to gather up the attacker and it took every bit of their strength to haul him through the room towards the doors.

"See that only two of you go," called the Conqueror, who was making her way to the washroom. "And be sure to forget tonight's events."

The sentries each paused at the door, clapped their fists across their chest, and in unison said, "Aye, my liege." They made a hasty exit while carrying the unconscious captive. They rushed the captive down the hallway and down three levels then one more into the first level of the dungeon. They dragged the captive to a side door of the dark dungeon where one soldier opened the wood door.

All together, the sentries were able to toss the heavy weight of the attacker into a wagon. Two sentries went back to the Conqueror's room to stand guard as told while one sentry went to get a horse for the wagon. The fourth sentry stood guard by the wagon and unconscious man in it.

It wasn't long before the wagon was lashed onto a workhorse and the two sentries marched across the fortress's grounds, to the gates, and the gates were opened for

them. They then started the long trek out of the city towards the crucifixion fields that were certainly downwind of Corinth; the stench hovering over the fields like an invisible cloud.

As the two sentries were out of the city and halfway to the fields, they spotted a lonely figure walking down the worn, dirt path. At first they thought it was another soldier coming off duty from the fields then it struck them that they were far too thin to be a soldier. The sentries stopped the wagon and drew their swords as the stranger approached them.

"Who goes there?" called a soldier.

The cloaked figure lifted her head and her bright blond hair reflected the full moon. She glowed in mercury like a goddess then her laughing voice filled the air. "It's a nice night for a blood bath, isn't it, boys?" She gave a screeching battle cry and her sword scraped out of her sheath from her back.

The sentries withdrew their swords and quickly engaged the enemy. Then they found themselves very outnumbered when a swarm of warrior women collided into the battle. They soon found themselves on a different road that guided them to the underworld and their bodies cold with death.

Solari grabbed the edge of the wagon with one hand and with her right hand she grabbed the black bag over the head. She ripped it off and her wild grin formed. "Sweet Artemis... she did it." There she stood and staring at the distinct, beautiful features of the dark ruler of half the known-world.

Ephiny neared her best friend and studied the unconscious ruler. "We need to move before word spreads." She turned and looked at the four other Amazons. "Everybody get into the wagon, I'll ride the horse. Make sure she stays asleep."

The five Amazons nodded then climbed into the wagon with ease. Ephiny though vaulted up onto the workhorses's bare back and urged him into a fast trot off of the road. It wasn't long before they'd gone up a hill that went around the great capital and the wagon came to jerking stop beside another wagon where three other Amazons waited. Ephiny ordered everybody to work together as they got the Conqueror into the secondary wagon, which actually had metal bars and a metal roof on it. Once the Conqueror was in it, Ephiny had Callisto shackle up the Conqueror's ankles and wrists then she ordered three other Amazons to cover their trail.

It was within a half of candlemark that the Amazon party was marching down the empty road with their valuable cargo in the wagon. They didn't fear any soldiers being on the road since it was so late at night and by the time there would be more activity they'd be long gone towards the Amazon Nation. Every Amazon in the kidnapping

party was filled with adrenalin since they had the most feared ruler completely unconscious and yet so close.

About halfway through the long trip, Ephiny ordered the party to take a break and everybody did except for one Amazon. Ephiny watched the Amazon that stood beside the wagon cage and was studying the Conqueror through the metal bars. She sighed then slowly approached the Amazon.

"How goes things, Callisto?"

The blond Amazon let go of the bars she was touching but she kept staring at the ruthless ruler. "I figured somebody had to stay and watch her."

Ephiny grunted and folded her arms against her chest. "She's not going to get up anytime soon."

Callisto grinned in amusement at that idea. She turned and faced the leader of the group. "What will happen to her?"

"At the trial?" questioned Ephiny. At Callisto's nod, she shrugged. "Its hard to say... but I doubt she'll be freed."

Callisto bit the side of her mouth then murmured, "She has many crimes to pay for besides those against the Amazons."

Ephiny touched the Amazon's nearby shoulder. "She does but those she'll pay for in Tartarus."

Callisto huffed as the Amazon's touch left her skin.

Ephiny eyed the younger woman then quietly asked, "Are you sure you can do this, Callisto?" She watched as cold amber eyes met her gaze.

"If I don't do this then I'll always hate her." Callisto turned again and glared at the dark woman in the cage. "Protecting her will be the hardest thing in my life."

"It will be the most rewarding too," pointed out Ephiny.

Callisto faced her superior then slowly nodded her head. "It will." Her sidelong gaze turned to the Conqueror. "If it wasn't for the Amazons... I'd still be a worthless slave."

Ephiny exhaled quietly then confidently stated, "You were meant for this, Callisto." She touched the Amazon's mid back while saying, "See to her." Her amber eyes flashed to the ruler, who was groaning.

Callisto smiled smugly while reaching to her belt for something. "With absolute pleasure, Ephiny." She extracted her medical tool that was very much a weapon now then she reached into the cage between the bars.

Ephiny silently moved away to leave Callisto to her duties.

The Conqueror groaned as she felt a warm touch on her right wrist. Then there was a sudden sharp pain on the bottom of her wrist and her black dreamscape claimed her again but not without her sensitive ears picking out a hated voice.

"Pleasant nightmares, Conqueror."

The Conqueror abruptly jolted awake by the tail end of her dream or maybe her memories that were trying to come back to her. She focused on the six Amazons that stood in the jail with her and faithful stood watch. The small window in the jail door showered with the morning sun's light but that didn't concern her at the moment. Instead she peered down at the top of her right wrist then she turned it over. There on the bottom of her wrist were small puncture marks and somewhere around half a dozen or so. She ran her thumb over them as she realized exactly what they were since she was so familiar with the healer's tools of the trade.

When she lifted her head, she examined each of the guards then she honed in on one Amazon that held a sword out besides the head guard. The Amazon had shocking blond hair flowing out from under her mask and coming from the sockets of the mask, the Conqueror detected deep, old loathing. Some part of the ruler thoroughly enjoyed this and fully absorbed it like a leech yet that was only a small piece of her that gained any satisfaction.

The Conqueror now heard some voices chatting outside the jail then the door opened to reveal the rebel leader. She released an audible sigh at seeing her enemy and only acquaintance here in the Amazon Nation.

"Its morning, its breakfast time," mentioned the bard, who had a tray of food.

Ephiny was in disbelief, as were several other guards minus Solari, who was snickering behind her mask.

The dark ruler curiously watched as the bard took a seat beside her on the bench.

"Gabrielle," started Ephiny and she stepped forward.

The rebel shook her head. "Its fine, Ephiny."

The head guard just decided to give up before starting because she couldn't seem to win any arguments anymore.

The bard tried to maneuver her walking stick against the bench while balancing the tray in her lap. She was slightly unsuccessful as the tray tried to make an escape for the floor.

The Conqueror reacted by catching the edge of the tray and pushing it back into the small lap.

"Thanks," murmured the bard, her small hands now on the tray. "The grapes are pretty good here."

The Conqueror still hadn't spoken but she took the cluster of grapes first.

Gabrielle didn't mind the silence as she easily filled it with chitchat about her plans for the trial.

The Conqueror seemed as if she wasn't listening but she was and she ate the well picked out meal. She'd been getting meals regularly yet they were never filling, not like this platter that Gabrielle had brought her. Just as she finished up so did Gabrielle's long monologue that included only a few grunts and nods from the ruler.

The bard placed the empty tray on the last bit of bench to her right.

"Ask Yakut about her shamanism," mentioned the ruler.

Gabrielle blinked and twisted back to the ruler after she set the tray down. "What do you mean?"

The Conqueror slightly lifted an eyebrow. "Get Yakut to talk about her shamanism powers and relate it back to Alti." She laced her hands in her lap then leaned against the wall. "Yakut's powers are more or less at the same stage as Alti's were when I met her."

"Really," mumbled the thinking bard. "I think... I see what you're... getting at." She suddenly grinned. "Thanks."

The ruler grunted then closed her eyes.

Well...." The rebel scooted off the bench with her cane and picked up the tray. "I'll see you at the trial."

The Conqueror opened one eye and briefly watched her enemy head of the jail. When

the door closed, her lips were teased by a grin but it slowly slipped away.

Gabrielle returned the tray to the dining hut first then she went to her hut that she shared. When she arrived in the hut, she found Cyrene there and just coming out of the washroom. "Good morning, Cyrene."

The older woman softly smiled then put her index finger against her lips and pointed to her bed.

The bard glimpsed over and saw the small head of Melpomene sticking out from the mangled blankets. The scene made a soft smile take over.

Cyrene silently neared the younger woman and quietly mentioned, "I wanted her to sleep in some. I think she could use it."

"I'm sure," agreed the rebel. She shifted on her stick some.

"I think...."

Gabrielle pulled her attention away from the child and turned to Cyrene with knitted eyebrows.

Cyrene sighed then pushed herself to say it. "I'm going to see Xena this morning."

The bard was clearly shocked as it took her a few heartbeats to recover. "Are you sure, Cyrene?"

"Yes." The Conqueror's mother studied the sleeping Melpomene then murmured, "Its time her and I face each other... after so long."

Slowly Gabrielle nodded then asked, "Do you want me to go with you?"

"I need to do this alone." Cyrene's washed out blue eyes met Gabrielle. "Stay here with Melpomene... she'll be hungry when she gets up."

Gabrielle nodded her understanding then moved in for a warm hug.

Cyrene truly needed the hug from the young woman she considered her second daughter. She placed a kiss to Gabrielle's temple then pulled away to leave the hut.

The rebel sighed then went to the desk where she had a few scrolls that the Amazons had provided to her. She was working on the continuation of her journal as her days in the Amazon Nation stepped forward. These were unusual days that she had to write about, not wanting to miss one detail.

Cyrene was before the jailhouse in no time at all but her hands sweated with nervousness. She'd seen her daughter from a distance many times over but they had not spoken since the day Xena returned Lyceus's lifeless body to Amphipolis. When she stepped up to the guards at the door, they questioned nothing since they knew who she was and they'd been waiting for her arrival.

The Conqueror's eyelids gradually lifted as she half expected the rebel back in the cell. When her gaze filled with the form of an older woman whose salt and pepper brought out her striking blue eyes, the Conqueror trembled but stood up.

Cyrene slowly walked past the six guards. Her small steps brought her across the threshold and she stopped in front of her daughter, her head tilted back.

The Conqueror's heart was furiously beating and her body tense with anxiety. She could practically count the wrinkles and creases in her mother's face that had aged her since she last saw her. The blue in her mother's eyes were worn out in rather dim compared to her childhood days.

Cyrene was amazed by the gentle features of her daughter, the high cheekbones, and the full lips that'd spoken for so many atrocities. Cyrene knew too that so long ago she'd sinned. "Hello, Xena... it's been a long time."

The Conqueror remains unmoving, her face still then finally her emotionless voice murmured, "Too long, mother." She now rested her hands on her hips. "This is slightly... awkward... you here in the Amazon Nation... me chained up."

Cyrene looked up and down her daughter's length then returned her head dropping back some. "It's uncanny."

Slowly the Conqueror folded her chained arms across her chest in a protective format. "I hear you're apart of the rebel faction."

Cyrene tilted her head to the side. "I am a member."

"How convenient," hollowly muttered the ruler, "but I suppose that explains all the cute childhood stories about me that are in circulation."

"Yes... seems like another lifetime ago." Cyrene's eyes went to slits. "You've done some changing since then."

"It seems you have too," mentioned the ruler.

The mother huffed then stated, "Not as much as some."

The Conqueror grinned at the backhand remark.

Cyrene proceeded to wipe that grin away by saying, "I'm sure your little brother is so proud."

The Conqueror's grin did fall and very slowly as her eyes flashed her defenses. "Leave him out of this, mother."

"Why?" argued Cyrene, "Every gods-be-damned day you dishonor his memory. Forget Toris and even my face but Lyceaus... he would have never wanted any of this."

"This has nothing to do with him," hissed the dark ruler.

Cyrene took a step closer, not at all fearful of her daughter's darkness. "Then explain to me what yours and Lyceaus's mission were after Cortese?" She studied the glazed facial features high above her and she could see her child was far off in the past. "Tell me you never deviated from it, Xena?"

The Conqueror jolted back to the present and her face darkened threateningly. "It's all gone, mother... this is now." She lowered her head down and menacingly whispered, "Now you're with the faction and-"

"No," cut through Cyrene. She took a step forward, which forced her daughter to step back and almost hit the bench. "You listen to me...." Her dark look far surpassed anything the Conqueror could accomplish. "Never try me, Xena... some things may change while others do not. I have lost a son and I will not lose another daughter... not to you... not again."

The ruler straightened her back out as the implications her mother made to her.

"I have carried you in my heart all my life," emotionally whispered Cyrene, "and I keep hoping my daughter will return to me... some day." She bitterly laughed then muttered, "The Fates let it be before the day I die." She read the emotions swirling deeply in her daughter and it was her intent to grab them then pull them up to the surface with her last words. "Just remember, Xena...." Cyrene leaned in then in her gentlest voice she promised, "No matter what you do or say, your mother will always love you."

The Conqueror helplessly watched the burning tears roll down her mother's cheeks from her reddening eyes. She couldn't say anything so she turned her head away, her eyes slipping shut and her arms tightened over her chest.

Cyrene dipped her head, turned, and made her way to the door.

Ephiny ordered the door open for the mother then she escorted her out with her mask going back. After she kicked the door shut behind her, she circled around to face Cyrene. "Are you okay?"

Cyrene smiled through her tears. "Yes, thank you, Ephiny."

The Amazon sadly smiled then cupped the older woman's cheeks. "She's lucky to have you, you know."

"No," murmured the mother, "I made her what she is today."

Ephiny frowned at this then freed her left hand, she pointed at the shut jail door. "That woman in there... she is who she is because she chose her path. Nobody," whispered Ephiny, "Nobody forced her to walk the road that she has been on." She tilted her head and now rested her hands on Cyrene's shoulders. "And maybe she'll realize that before it's too late."

"By the gods," rasped Cyrene, "I've always had faith that she would... but...."

Ephiny shook her head then slowly smiled. "Never give up on her, Cyrene... when everybody else has."

The Conqueror's mother quickly understood the wise words of Ephiny and she broke into tears.

The Amazon pulled the woman into her arms and held her securely. She'd seen so many things in this moon and half but for the first time, what stunned her the most, was that she actually saw some light in this dark world.

Gabrielle jostled from her chair when the hut door opened. There in the doorway she saw a worn, emotional Cyrene, which made her jump up quickly. "Cyrene, are you okay?"

Cyrene went to Gabrielle as Gabrielle came to her.

Gabrielle dropped her walking stick when close enough and she enveloped Cyrene into a powerful hug.

Cyrene held tightly to Gabrielle, her face in soft blond hair. Her red eyes filled again with tears.

Gabrielle's neck soon became moist from the tears and she began to silently cry along with Cyrene. Her heart washed over with a deep burn for the woman that was her

mother. She stroked Cyrene's long hair and quietly whispered, "I love you, Cyrene."

Cyrene lifted her head some, kissed Gabrielle's temple, and murmured, "I love you, Gabrielle. Thank you for everything." She slightly pulled back but her embrace helped to support the bard. "I may have rescued you moons back but in reality you have rescued me from a lifetime of grief and hopelessness." She pressed her right hand against Gabrielle's pounding heart. "You have been the light in my life when I lost mine the day I betrayed Xena."

Gabrielle's cheeks burned against her acidic tears. "You never betrayed her, Cyrene." When Cyrene started to shake her head, she pressed the topic. "Xena had a path to follow, Cyrene... she would have no matter what you did or said."

Cyrene swallowed against the rocky lump in her throat. "I could have stopped her, Gabrielle... none of us would be here today then."

"But we are here," refused the bard, "and we must face that now. Maybe not tomorrow or the next day will you be able to give back to her what she lost but maybe soon you can." She dipped her head down, her glowing eyes held Cyrene still. "We have to have faith because if we don't... then neither will she."

Cyrene didn't argue but her agreement showed as she drew Gabrielle in again. She held onto her adopted daughter for a long time until finally her gentle sobs broke into soft sniffles and her emotions calmed again. She then slipped an arm around Gabrielle's waist to support her as they made the few steps to the desk chair. After Gabrielle sat, she went to get the cane and returned it.

Gabrielle and Cyrene spoke for awhile. Gabrielle mentioned that little Melpomene had headed off with the other Amazon children. Cyrene had noticed that Melpomene was becoming close with the other girls in the village, which had brought a smile to both Cyrene and Gabrielle. They then spoke about what Cyrene and Xena had said back and forth. Even though they were only a few words, Gabrielle saw the depth behind them. These next days at the trial would be harder than she ever expected.

And the trial's next piece soon came and together, the mother and adopted daughter, walked to the village center. Cyrene took a position among the masses but front row.

Gabrielle stepped up to her spot before the council with Velasca and Queen Cyane to her right. She picked up the clanking and rattling of the approaching ruler with her guard escort.

The Conqueror held her head high, her eyes bright, and her features set stoically. She wordlessly stood beside her representative, her gaze fixed on the council.

Gabrielle didn't speak to her, already picking up the wave of new distance between her and the ruler.

"Today," spoke the head councilor, "we will go through an interview with Queen Cyane." She gave a signal to the queen then she sat down in her chair.

Queen Cyane removed herself from Velasca's side. She stepped up beside the council then turned to face her Nation. She stood proud, her hands behind her back, and body ridged.

"Velasca, you may begin," offered the head councilor.

Velasca dipped her head in thanks then approached the queen some. She cleared her throat, then loudly question, "Queen Cyane, you are the only remain survive of Xena's attack, correct?"

"That is correct," agreed the queen.

Velasca paced away then turned to the queen. "When you first met Xena, what was she like?"

Queen Cyane's gaze flickered to the Conqueror then back to Velasca. "Xena was a lost soul, so to speak. She'd just returned from a lousy campaign in Chin. She was partnered with another warlord, Borias, and they had a small army."

"Would you consider Xena volatile at that time?"

"Very much so," responded the queen but before she could say more, Velasca cut her short.

"Did she show any signs of being hostile against the Amazon at the start?"

Queen Cyane shifted on her feet then answered, "I was leery of her, yes. It wasn't exactly comforting that she showed up with an army."

"But was she hostile against the Nation from the start?" tried Velasca again.

The Amazon Queen locked her gaze with the Amazon. "Not at the start, no."

Velasca rocked on her boots some before charging forward. "From my investigation, I've heard she'd made idle threats against your Nation at the time... personal ones. Do you deny this, my queen?"

The rebel leader stepped forward. "She's badgering the queen, council."

Velasca turned on the heels of her boots. "I am merely trying to point out Xena's intent with the Nation from the start."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed at the Amazon. "You're trying to get the queen in a corner."

The head councilor held up her hand for silence before it got out of hand. "Velasca, move along, please."

The Amazon sighed greatly but returned her focus to the queen. "My queen, when Xena and Borias's army were there... what was Borias's intent?"

"He wished to setup a treaty with us... he was a man of his word."

"Did Xena agree with his plans?"

Queen Cyane chewed on the inside of her mouth. "Yes and no." At Velasca's signal to explain, she continued. "Xena wanted to learn fighting techniques from us but didn't see much more use for us."

"Expect to leave the elders hanging by their stomachs," remarked Velasca.

"Velasca," warned a councilor.

"My apologies." Velasca turned to Gabrielle, smiled forcefully, and stepped away from the queen.

The bard slowly neared the queen with her head down, her thoughts working through her head. She smiled at the queen, and she was surprised the queen returned one to her. "Queen Cyane, you said you saw Xena as a lost soul. Can you please elaborate on that further?"

"Of course." Cyane waited a beat so her thoughts could form. "When I first met Xena, I could tell she'd had a long, dark history and her heart was full of hatred. I believe at that point in her life she was swaying between doing what was right and what was wrong."

Gabrielle faintly nodded then tilted her head. "Is it true that you invited Xena to join the Nation?"

"Yes," answered Cyane, "I believed she would make an excellent Amazon."

The bard slightly smiled at this image but she lost it with the Conqueror's current image in mind. "If Xena was as hostile and volatile as believed, then why would you

risk bringing such a woman into your Nation?"

Queen Cyane contained her grin at the line of questioning. She recalled those days when she first met Xena, before the Conqueror and before the Destroyer of Nations, and she knew why she'd offered a place to Xena. "Yes she was a threat but I believed she could be saved... I'd hoped that I could help her move beyond the darkness and bring out all that was good in her."

"Good you say?" Gabrielle's head bobbed at these words. She took a few steps off to her right then rotated back. "Was Xena any different after she met Alti?"

"What does this have to do with anything?" argued Velasca from behind. "Alti is not here on trial."

Gabrielle whipped her head around to Velasca. "No she is not but I do have a point to prove." Her gaze now went to the council, a hidden plea on her face.

"See that you make it quickly, Gabrielle," stated the head councilor. She then signaled for the queen to answer.

Cyane licked her lips then slowly nodded her head. "Yes, Xena was much different after she met Alti." Her features unknowingly softened at the bard because she pieced together what Gabrielle was intending for this trial. She truly admired the young rebel for standing up for the Conqueror when nobody else would do it. Even more, she respected Gabrielle because the Conqueror was as much as Cyane's enemy as she was Gabrielle's. It was an incredibly beautiful feat to watch the rebel leader stand beside the dark Conqueror.

Gabrielle's lips were slightly puckered then she stepped closer as she asked, "In your best opinion, Queen Cyane would it be safe to say that Alti influenced the Conqueror on some unknown level?"

Queen Cyane studied the straining faces of the Nation, who were awaiting her definite answer. "Yes," she breathed then her eyes closed when the Nation cried out.

"This is insane!" roared Velasca as she stomped up beside Gabrielle. "That monster," she pointed at the Conqueror, "doesn't require anybody to influence her to carry out her darkest desires!"

"Quiet!" yelled the head councilor to everybody.

"Silence!" hotly commanded another councilor.

The Nation's out cry subsided then the council focused on the two representatives.

"This is absolute nonsense," argued Velasca, "Gabrielle is trying to sabotage the entire trial by saying the Conqueror was somehow... controlled by Alti to do what she did!"

"Velasca, hold your tongue." The head councilor sighed because she didn't like this outlandish idea either but yet there was some loop here that must be observed.

"Gabrielle, what is your intent?"

"I have a theory," spoke up the rebel, "that the Conqueror didn't act completely on her own will." Just as Velasca was about to blast ahead, she stepped forward. "I'm not saying the Conqueror didn't commit her crimes... because she did but I believe to some extent, if under different circumstances, she may have not done them."

The councils started murmuring amongst themselves then the head councilor inquired, "And do you have some way to prove this, Gabrielle? As you can see, Alti is not here to question."

The bard huffed then shot back, "Even if she was, would she answer honestly?" She shook her head then informed, "I may not have Alti here but I have somebody that can help prove or disprove my theory."

"Who is that?" prompted a councilor.

Gabrielle tapped her walking stick against the ground uneasily then answered, "The shaman Yakut."

Velasca exploded into a fury voice. "Yakut and Alti are completely different shamans."

"But shamans nonetheless," debated the bard, "and they're both from the same stock. This isn't apples and carrots here."

"Gabrielle has a point," spoke up a council member. "Alti and Yakut are both been taught in the ways of shamanism. This may hold some merit after all."

"I believe you're right." Another councilor nodded her head.

"Fine," spoke up the head member, "We will allow you to pursue this road, Gabrielle however be warned that this cannot and will not be any excuse. The Conqueror chose to perform these crimes."

The bard slowly nodded her head but refrained from smiling at her small win.

Velasca stormed away from the frustrating council.

"Let us continue," suggested the council.

Gabrielle cleared her throat before turning back to the Amazon Queen. "Queen Cyane, just before Xena attacked you and the elders you repeated that Xena said she'd killed the young girl?"

"Yes," replied the queen, "Xena stated she'd pushed the young Amazon, Ellie, off from a tree branch."

The bard walked over to the right and then asked, "Are you a hundred percent certain that Xena killed Ellie?"

Queen Cyane's eyebrows knitted together neatly.

"Did you find any proof that she did this?"

The queen shook her head then argued back, "I can't see why she would lie otherwise."

Gabrielle shrugged while turning to the queen. "Well is it possible that Ellie was say... killed by Alti and Xena bluffed, just to provoke you to attack her?"

Queen Cyane opened her mouth to refute the idea yet no words escaped her.

"I ask again, did you find unquestionable proof, besides Xena's words, that Ellie was killed by her?"

The Amazon Queen sighed then slowly shook her head. "We never investigated further who killed Ellie or how she died... we simply took Xena's word."

Gabrielle solemnly nodded then stepped back as Velasca took her opening.

"Refresh my memory," offered Velasca, "who attacked who first? Did Xena attack or you and the elders?"

The Amazon Queen lifted her chest with a deep breath. "After Xena stated that she killed Ellie for sport, she said she was going to show us how she can out-Amazon the Amazons. Then she proceeded to attack us first."

"So Xena didn't really need to use Ellie's death to provoke you in fact. She had every intent to attack you and the elders. Thank you, my queen." Velasca smiled, bowed her head, and stepped back.

The head councilor's eyes roamed over to the rebel leader. "Anything else, Gabrielle?"

The bard had her head down, her lips pressed, and wrinkles in her brow.

The Conqueror cleared her throat for some attention.

The rebel looked between the council and the ruler so she held up an index finger to the council. She neared the ruler and her questioning features lifted to the ruler.

The Conqueror gradually bent down until her lips were close to the bard's right ear. She murmured a few words of suggestion then when she pulled back, she saw a glow on the bard's face.

Gabrielle spun on her heels and rushed, as fast as she could, back to the queen. "Queen Cyane, please refresh my memory now too. How many elders were there in the grove with you?"

"There were ten," replied the queen.

"Ten," repeated the rebel, her eyes aglow. "So that means there were a total of eleven Amazon warriors against the Conqueror?"

Very slowly the queen nodded her head. "Yes."

"Would you say, in your opinion, that Xena was a better fighter than you at that time?"

The Amazon Queen arched an eyebrow then drew out, "No. She was a competent warrior at the time... but she still lacked much training. She was rather brutal in her method and lacked the composure and grace of many warriors."

"Yet she managed to kill ten Amazons and wound you terribly, Queen Cyane." Gabrielle shook her head and then rhetorically asked, "How is this possible with such odds against her?"

Queen Cyane let out a long sigh then quietly replied, "I am not honestly sure."

Gabrielle's head was bobbing as she muttered, "Very interesting." She walked away however she hesitated and pivoted back. "Queen Cyane, one last question."

Queen Cyane straightened up as she waited.

"It is said you were still alive on the branch you hung from...?" Gabrielle saw the queen's slow nod and she absorbed the haunted look washing over the queen at the

memories. "Do you recall, after Xena left, what happened?"

Cyane's jaw was locked tight but she willed her emotions under an iron fist. "Alti showed... I watched her... cut each elder's throat."

"Why did she do this?" murmured the rebel. She knew this was incredibly hard for the queen yet it was so crucial to her point.

"She wanted their blood... to drink so that she'd own their souls."

Gabrielle came closer to the Amazon Queen and softly asked, "Did she take yours too?"

Tears held at the edge of Cyane's eyes as she whispered, "Yes."

Gabrielle wanted to touch the queen, to offer comfort but she knew she could not. "If Alti was the last person you saw before you were saved then is it possible that maybe Alti was nearby during the entire attack?"

Queen Cyane reined over her feelings finally as her memories filtered away. "It is possible, yes."

"Is it possible too, that during the fight against Xena, that Alti somehow helped Xena fight you and the elders?"

The queen didn't answer but after several heartbeats she shook her head. "I do not know... I am unqualified to answer that question as I am not a shaman. I do not know whether she had such powers."

Gabrielle cocked her head, a faint smile on her face. "Thank you, my queen." She slowly limped away.

The head councilor thoughtfully looked at Velasca. "Any thing else, Velasca?"

The Amazon folded her arms across her chest. "Nothing else, council."

"Very well then." The head councilor relieved the queen from her spot in front of everybody then she stood up. "I believe we've covered enough for today. We will resume the trial tomorrow at Helios high again. We are dismissed!"

The Conqueror twisted on the heels of her boots so that she had a perfect view of the rebel. "I'm surprised."

The bard revealed a grin. "For once, you like my mouth huh?"

Ever so slowly, the Conqueror's dark eyebrow lifted higher and higher.

Gabrielle's eyes widened when she realized how her words sounded, her blush appeared on her cheeks then crept north and south from there. She made a clearing nose with her throat then hastily stated, "You like my words, I meant."

The ruler grunted but she was stopped dead from any remark by the head guard.

"Time to go, Conqueror." Ephiny signaled her to march, a gesture of her sword.

The Conqueror wavered for a beat, her eyes fixed on her small, short enemy then she swept past without a word.

Gabrielle let out an exasperated sigh when the space the Conqueror had filled was suddenly empty. A chill rippled up and down her back but settled when Cyrene came up to her. "What'd you think?"

Cyrene put her hands on her hips. "I think you're giving her a better chance." Her eyes wondered off into the distance to her daughter's receding back. She stiffened when the Conqueror unexpectedly stopped and returned her gaze from over her shoulder.

The Conqueror studied her mother and the rebel side by side. She memorized the uneasy scene then she turned away before the head guard snapped at her.

Cyrene's chest fell and her attention was back on her adopted daughter. "What will happen tomorrow?"

"I think Yakut will be questioned." Gabrielle wanted to add more yet didn't when the Amazon Queen approached them.

"Gabrielle, you're bringing up an interesting angle from the attack."

The rebel was taken back by the queen's sincere, gentle words. She hadn't expected Cyane to show any support for her theory. "Well... I think maybe there's more to this than anybody thought."

"I believe only Alti truly knows that answer," refuted the queen, "however there is more light on things now." She stepped closer then lowered her head closer to the bard. "Thank you," she simply whispered then strolled off.

Gabrielle blinked as she leaned heavily on her walking stick.

Cyrene touched the young woman's shoulder. "You should rest, Gabrielle. I know

you're legs are hurting you by now."

The bard relented because she couldn't argue Cyrene's observations. She limped along side Cyrene back towards their shared hut but it was a silent trip since there was much on her mind. Tomorrow would prove to be very interesting as the Conqueror's trial would narrow closer to the end.

Chapter 12 - The Future Meets the East

The Conqueror had her legs stretched out from the throne chair, her posture slumped, her right elbow on the chair arm, and her face in her hand. She had her chakram out and she spun it on her left finger like a toy. Her forehead was pounding as the idle chitchat of the court muddled up her head.

The court was rather chatty today after discovering that Rhodes, the advisor of state, had been unemployed recently. The advisors were trying desperately not to be next on the Conqueror's list.

"Commander Meleager," called out the ruler, who neatly caught her chakram in her left hand. Her head lifted from her hand when the commander appeared from the masses.

"My liege." The commander bowed his head respectfully then stood his ground.

"What's the status of the legions on the Norselands' borders?"

Meleager steadied himself for this report that the Conqueror expected of him since the last court meeting. "They are almost prepared to attack the Norselands. They await your orders, my liege."

The Conqueror tossed the chakram high up, stood, and caught the whistling weapon with ease. "Belay my previous orders," she casually remarked then took one step down.

The commander narrowed his eyes. "My liege, the campaign is about to begin."

"And I say it isn't going to," snapped back the ruler. She took the next step down. "It is much too late in the season for this."

Commander Meleager was dumbfounded by the switch of orders. "My liege, we are-"

"Going to what?"

The commander tensed when the dark ruler was instantly in his face, her eyes glowing with warning.

The Conqueror leaned into the large man and placed the blade of her chakram under his chin to tilt his eyes up to hers. "You were saying?"

Commander Meleager weakened under the predator features of the ruler. "The legions will bunker down for the winter season and prepare for battle at first budding." He swallowed when the Conqueror bared her teeth in a wicked grin.

"Excellent, commander."

The commander's shoulders slightly slumped when the ruler suddenly whipped away.

The Conqueror ascended the dais again then faced her court of advisors. "What of the Corinth Canal? I haven't heard much on it... must be bad news." She scanned her advisor's faces and waited to see who dared to speak up.

"My liege," started an advisor, "the canal's progress has slowed."

The Conqueror's right eyebrow gradually arched. "What's the problem?"

"Dieses... many of the workers are falling ill, my liege." The advisor stepped through the sea of the court. "The healers can't seem to keep up. We have the supply of herbs just not the help."

"I see." The ruler hooked her chakram back into its home. "See that you speak to me in the next day or two, Cyd. We'll figure out how to improve their situation." She took her seat while saying, "No use in letting good resources go to the afterlife."

Cyd bowed his head, very pleased by the results from the Conqueror. He backed up into the masses of people.

Just as the Conqueror was prepared to question the court again, her assistant stepped up the dais and bowed his head down to the ruler. He whispered something hastily then waited for an answer.

The Conqueror slightly straightened up at the news but she didn't give herself away either. "Escort her in here," she ordered then waved her trusted assistant away.

The assistant, Galen, respectfully dipped his head then hurried off to carry out his orders.

"My liege," called out an advisor, who was pushing through the people. "I have been receiving news from Egypt."

The Conqueror's eyes lowered to the advisor of foreign affairs. "What of Egypt, Maximus?"

The advisor stood at the foot of the dais now. "Queen Cleopatra has requested your appearance in the next moon or so."

The Conqueror made an audible annoyed sound.

"She merely wishes a visit," clarified the advisor.

"And I need the Egyptian Navy," muttered the aggravated ruler. "Bring the invite to my office, Maximus so I can consider it."

"Of course, my liege." Maximus was about back away but he stopped when the courtroom's main doors were thrown open by the guards.

The advisors all turned their heads in oddity at who was interrupting the Conqueror's court. When many recognized who it was, they dropped their eyes in respect.

The Conqueror stole an evil smile as she rose up from her throne.

At the entrance of the courtroom stood a petite but exquisitely beautiful woman, who had midnight hair tied into a bun and a soft complexion. Her smooth face was gentle yet her dark eyes were vivid against her red silk robe that flowed down over her ankles and hands. She required no invitation here as she glided across the floor with ease and perfect mannerism. As she neared the court, the sea of advisors parted to the sides for her and she soon stood before the powerful ruler of half the known-world. She placed her arms over her stomach and bowed her head deeply.

The Conqueror still held her smile and she went down one step at a time until she was on the ground level. She reached out and cupped the woman's bowed chin then lifted her head up. "Corinth welcomes the House of Lao."

Lao Ma's beautiful ruby lips eased into a smile. "I am grateful, Conqueror."

The Conqueror relinquished her touch then slowly bowed her head in respect for the Chin ruler. "As am I after so many moons of support from the House of Lao."

Lao Ma bowed her head one last time then simultaneously the rulers straightened up.

The Conqueror turned to her masses and called out, "We will dismiss the court early today... if there are further concerns then see that you bring them directly to me." She waved them off then a loud din of chatting began but she ignored them all. "You are a long way from Chin, Lao Ma."

The Chinese ruler conceded with a faint nod then she quietly asked, "May we speak in private, Conqueror? Perhaps your office?"

The Conqueror placed her hands on her hips as she studied the ruler, who gave nothing away. She then held her left hand out to the door not far away. "This way then." She escorted Lao Ma out of the court while her thoughts quickly ran over why the ruler had unexpectedly dropped in Corinth. Her realm's affairs with Chin have been nothing but peaceful and for Lao Ma to show up unexpectedly was unknown of.

Lao Ma quietly floated along side the great ruler, who she'd known for some time. She hadn't seen the Conqueror in almost twelve moons since the Conqueror's last visit in Chin for certain political affairs. Yet she was uneasy despite nobody knew it but her.

The Conqueror cleared her throat then asked, "How was your journey here?"

"Peaceful," softly admitted the Chin ruler. "I had safe passage."

"How does Chin fair?"

Lao Ma smiled at the concerned ruler. "We prosper well."

The Conqueror returned the smile too. "Always under the House of Lao." She signaled to her office door ahead and opened it for her counterpart.

Lao Ma glided into the warm room and hid her hands into the sleeves of her robe. She turned as the darker ruler neared her after closing the door.

"I did not expect you, Ma," stated the Conqueror.

Lao Ma dipped her head when the Conqueror called her by her first name. She understood the subtle meaning behind it. Her chocolate eyes met those of the Conqueror's. "I apologize for not sending word... Xena."

The ruler noticed the wavering in the Chin ruler's tone at her name. It made her uneasy but she hid it well from her smaller counterpart. "It must be urgent then," she summarized aloud.

Lao Ma's eyes narrowed and she moved closer to the tall woman she knew so well. "It is most urgent, to me... and perhaps you as well."

"Go on," drew out the Conqueror.

The Chin ruler inhaled then carefully spoke, unsure how to present things but winging it really. "Over a moon ago, I sensed some shift in the balance... your balance and I grew increasingly concerned so I immediately left Chin."

The Conqueror folded her arms across her chest while taking a few beats to consider the ruler's words. "What was the shift, Ma?"

"It is unclear but it was strong enough for me to sense it." Lao Ma tilted her head then came even closer as if trying to determine something in particular. She stared up into the Conqueror's eyes for many heartbeats and then she murmured, "Now I understand what this is."

The Conqueror's eyes slotted quickly and her husky tone filled the small space between them. "What is it?"

Lao Ma stretched out her hand until it touched the Conqueror's right arm. Her touch was lightening to the Conqueror and her breathless words captured them both. "You are not Xena."

The Conqueror broke away as if burned by Lao Ma. She went several paces away then her stormy features centered on the Chin ruler. "What did you come here for, Lao Ma?"

Lao Ma slipped her hand back into her sleeves then softly stated, "To help you."

The Conqueror crossed her arms against her chest then coldly stated, "I do not require help, Lao Ma."

Lao Ma sadly smiled then closed in on the defensive ruler. "Your spirit is here but much older and wiser through the ages." Her right hand appeared again and this time against the Conqueror's cheek. "Your soul has grown more beautiful than I could ever hope for."

The Conqueror's eyes were closed and she leaned into the comforting touch of the woman she felt so linked to.

Lao Ma came closer and now had both hands against the woman's cheeks. She gently whispered, "Tell me what has happened and how I can help." She was amazed when the Conqueror's eyes fluttered open and it was as if another person was staring back at her. She never seen the Conqueror so tender and it made her heart still for a beat.

"I don't know where to begin," emotionally whispered the Conqueror.

Lao Ma brushed back the ruler's hair behind her ear as she smiled. "Sometimes it is best to start at the end then work back."

The Conqueror half heartily smiled and clasped her hands over Lao Ma's much smaller ones.

"Let us sit." Lao Ma released her hold then gestured to the sofa close by. She guided the taller ruler over and took a poised seat on the comfortable sofa next to the ruler. She soon learned of the mysterious yet amazing circumstances that'd come over the ruler since she'd sense the shift in the balance. She quickly realized that in fact she was not seated beside the dark ruler she'd tried to change moons back but instead the ruler's much aged karma placed many lifetimes ahead of now. She also finally figured out why she'd always steered clear of the Conqueror since that dark shaman, Alti, had taken residence next to the Conqueror.

Melinda finished her story and explanation of things that'd passed by since Alti's kidnapping of Janice. At the end of it, she felt a sense of relief at spilling out the truth to an unconditional ear and supporter. She was also very spent emotionally and sluggishly leaned against the sofa.

"I understand clearly now," gently spoke Lao Ma. "Thank you for telling me, Melinda."

Melinda dipped her head some.

"I can tell this has not been easy," stated the Chin ruler, "for you or your friend."

Melinda sighed heavily and licked her lips. "It has been harder on Janice than me."

"She struggles against things in her mind while you struggle against those in your soul." Lao Ma shook her head. "Neither is easier than the other but both taxing on the heart."

"I reckon so," murmured the translator. She let out a long sigh then confessed, "I am scared this could change me, Lao Ma." Her stricken features turned to the Chin ruler. "And I'm even more scared it could hurt Janice."

Lao Ma solemnly smiled as she collected Melinda's hands into her own. "Often what you fear is what will happen, Melinda however if you can let those fears go then they will not conquer you." She bent her head to peer up into hooded eyes. "You must not think so much about what is happening in you."

"How can't I?" debated Melinda. "Everyday I grow more fearful that I'll really wake up as the Conqueror instead of myself."

Lao Ma shook her head and squeezed the larger hands. "It is not the Conqueror inside of you but it is Xena." When Melinda was about to speak, she stopped her short. "You have told me that Xena was never the Conqueror in your world then it is merely Xena's karma you must follow... not the Conqueror's." She leaned in some. "As I have told the Conqueror in the past, I am blessed and cursed with the ability to see into people's souls."

Melinda digested this information and explanation to how Lao Ma figured her out so easily. "What do ya see in my soul?"

"Many things that the Conqueror is not and could not achieve for lifetimes to come. Your soul is at a changing point now, Melinda. You are a balance of the darkness and the light and you will grow into the light."

"How is that possible?" Melinda shook her head, confusion written on her face.

"It is the cycle," explained Lao Ma, "just as winter becomes spring and spring into summer then autumn and finally back to winter. A soul follows much the same cycles."

"So at some point my soul will be completely light?" tried Melinda.

"Yes." Lao Ma softly smiled then murmured, "Much like mine. I have reached my peak and soon I will cycle back to the Darkness."

Melinda shivered at the thought of the Darkness.

"Do not misunderstand this cycle, Melinda." Lao Ma's soft voice eased her fears. "For everything has a balance in life... for when there is fire there is water."

"My balance is Janice, isn't she?"

Lao Ma smiled at the woman's sharp perception. "Yes, she is your balance as you are hers and as you come to the Light then she will go to the Darkness."

Melinda stiffened at this news.

"Just have faith in the cycle and balance, Melinda." Lao Ma eased the translator to calm again. "You must accept your soul so that the balance is not broken."

"I reckon I understand." Melinda was calmer as the information slipped into the deep

recesses of her mind.

"Now the Conqueror faces a great change," informed the Chin ruler, "A change that could be disrupted by Alti."

"She has to be stopped," agreed Melinda.

"When it is time, yes." Lao Ma released her hands from Melinda's. "Until that time, I will remain here in Corinth to protect Janice from Alti."

The southerner softly chuckled at the declaration. "Boy, will Janice love this." Just then her head snapped up when there was a hard knock at the door. She instantly knew who it was so she got up from the sofa while her suddenly cold voice called, "Enter."

Lao Ma turned her head as a tall, shadowy woman filled the room with her mysterious powers. She gradually got up to meet this evil woman that she automatically knew without a name.

"Alti," greeted the Conqueror, who held her hand out to Lao Ma. "This is Lady Lao from the Kingdom of Chin."

The shaman knew the smaller ruler immediately as her senses were heightened. "Lady Lao." She was forced to bow her head in respect for the Chin ruler. When she lifted her head she was surprised to see Lao Ma was bowing her head in respect as well. "Welcome to Corinth."

Lao Ma brought out a pleasant smile. "Thank you, Alti. This is my first visit here."

"And an unexpected one," added the dark shaman.

"Yes, as I wished to surprise the Conqueror so I could skip many of the formalities."

The Conqueror kept her curling grin from showing at Lao Ma's ability to skirt around the truth. "Lady Lao is planning on an extended visit." She now showed her wild grin. "See that you take care during her stay here, Alti."

"Of course, my liege." Alti's dark gaze broke away from the Chin ruler and met the Conqueror. "I came to speak to you about the prisoner."

"Perhaps after Lady Lao and I have finished then I will find the time, Alti." The Conqueror placed her hands on her leather clad hips. "I'll come find you."

Alti's demeanor spoke of annoyance but she huskily agreed. "Very well, my liege."

She turned and exited the office without another word.

Lao Ma turned to the taller woman after the door closed. "Now I understand why the Conqueror has become lost."

Melinda folded her arms across her chest as she huffed. "I know... it ain't comforting either." Then it struck Melinda that she'd promised Janice that she'd come by after the meeting with the court and that was several hours ago. She let out an audible groan and before she was questioned there was a soft knock at the door. "Come in!"

The door shoved open enough to let a small form slide in easily. "Melll..." Janice's words fell short when she spotted the oriental woman in the office with her friend. "Mmmind if I come in, Conqueror?" She tried to recover.

The Conqueror grinned at the attempt but she waved the prisoner in while ordering to the guards, "Stay posted at the door."

Janice shut the door then carefully approached the pair but her interest was solely on Lao Ma.

"Janice, this is Lao Ma from the Kingdom of Chin."

Janice had knitted eyebrows at hearing Melinda's southern draw properly introduce the stranger. She switched from Melinda to Lao Ma then stood in front of her, eye to eye.

Lao Ma offered a warm smile then bowed her head. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Janice." She straightened up and her smile widened at Janice's still perplexed features.

Janice snapped out of it when Melinda cleared her throat. She hastily bowed in respect since she knew some of the Chinese culture and history too. She knew the concept about giving and taking face even though she didn't perfectly understand it. "Um...."

Melinda softly laughed at her friend's pure confusion so she finally stopped toying with her friend. "She knows, Janice."

"Oh." Janice blinked at the Chin ruler then shyly smiled at her. "I'm sorry... this hasn't been exactly the most normal thing."

Lao Ma still held her smile. "I understood."

"Lao Ma met the Conqueror many years back, Janice," explained Melinda, "and they parted ways for some time until the Conqueror had a lot of power."

"It has only been recent that the Kingdom of Chin and the Conqueror's realm has created treaties," explained Lao Ma.

The archeologist nodded at the news but asked, "How did you know... what happened?"

Melinda turned her head to the Chin ruler.

Lao Ma saw her position to answer the question. "Over a moon ago I detected a shift in the Conqueror's balance so I hastily came to see what'd happened."

"So you were able to figure out that Mel wasn't the Conqueror?" At Lao Ma's nod, the archeologist became incredibly concerned. "That's not so good... what if Alti can figure it out too?"

"She will not," answered Lao Ma, "as her abilities are different than mine. She cannot discern Melinda's soul from the Conqueror's but only identify that it is there and has the same powers."

Janice looked clearly relieved and the tension flowed out of her body. "Thank god then." Now she put her hands on her hips and glanced between the counterparts. "So where does this leave us?" And she didn't like the smirking expression on Melinda's face one bit. It wasn't long until she heard Lao Ma and Melinda's intentions until things were solved later down the road. Janice kept quiet the entire time, her hands gripping her hips, and her head cocked to the side.

Janice's annoyance flowed off and rippled over to Melinda, who became uneasy. Melinda finally offered to Lao Ma her room that she'd told her assistant to have prepared for her. With a verbal offer, Melinda and Janice escorted the Chin ruler through the fortress and Janice's guards tagged along side. Melinda morphed into her role as the Conqueror as she led the group.

The Conqueror pushed open the heavy door of the bedchambers then let Janice and Lao Ma enter. She turned her head to the guards and arched an eyebrow at them in warning. She slipped into the bedchambers next with the door shutting behind.

"Holy shit!" yelled Janice, who jumped back and stumbled into her friend.

Melinda turned her head to the right at what'd scared the archeologist. She held her breath as her gaze leveled to the predatory eyes.

Lao Ma smiled, her head dipped down, and her soft features regarding the sleek, muscular tiger that was waiting for her. She neared him and her small hand slipped out from her robe so she could pet his large head. "This is Hu."

Janice remained tense as she stared at the sitting Siberian tiger.

Melinda lifted her hands then rested them on Janice's shoulders to assure her.

"Hu is my most loyal friend," explained Lao Ma.

Hu responded by lifting his head and licking the Chin ruler's wrist. He started to purr happily.

Lao Ma returned her gaze to the women by the door. "In Chin culture, we believe that the tiger is most protective and filled with wisdom."

Melinda tilted her head then asked, "I reckon they bring good fortune and power."

Lao Ma bowed her head in agreement. "The tiger is the king of the earth while the dragon rules the skies." With curious eyes, she assessed that Janice was very frightened by the powerful animal so she sought to remedy the problem. She slipped around so that her back was to the women and she faced her feline friend.

Hu tilted his head back; he stared into swirling black eyes slightly above him.

Melinda was amazed at something seemed to pass between the Chin ruler and the tiger. Then when Lao Ma stepped aside, Hu stood up and leisurely neared her and Janice. Under her hands, Janice's muscles tightened and she unknowingly started a massage.

Hu took a new seat but now just at Janice's feet.

The archeologist inhaled quickly but she was transfixed by the handsome tiger below her. Emerald eyes slowly mixed with the tiger's fire eyes. Janice hypnotically lifted her hands and her fingers combed through the tiger's furry cheeks.

Hu's purr filled the silence again and grew louder as Janice's hands trailed up his head and behind his ears.

Melinda was fascinated and enjoyed the scene as much as Janice's small, warm body melting against hers.

Lao Ma silently glided up to her furry friend and Janice Covington. "A tiger and dog always make instant friends," mentioned the Chin ruler, "Forever loyal to one another."

The archeologist constricted face lifted to the oriental woman. "Dog?"

"Yes," murmured Lao Ma, "you were born under the dog."

"Chinese zodiac," elaborated the translator.

Lao Ma nodded then smiled at the tall, dark woman behind Janice. "Your karma has always been born under the tiger."

Janice twisted her head around to gaze up at her best friend. "You're a tiger?"

Melinda simply nodded her head.

"Hu will protect you, Janice."

Hu's agreement was a lick to Janice's closest hand, his sharp teeth flashing but he demeanor gentle.

"Hu?" softly called the Chin ruler.

The tiger glanced sidelong at his friend, his head somewhat tilted as if he were carefully listening.

Lao Ma closed in the distance between her and the tiger. She touched him just over the shoulder. "Stay with Janice."

"Lao Ma, I'll be-"

"Safe with Hu," finished the Chin ruler. "You cannot refuse him."

The archeologist sighed and stared back down at her new, furry friend. She really did admire his beautiful striped coat of orange and black, which each seem to come to life when Hu moved. "Thank you," she stated to Lao Ma.

Lao Ma had a soft smile. "Hu has offered, I did not make him."

Janice blinked then lowered her gaze to the powerful tiger, who stared back at her. She slightly grinned now as she ruffled his fur on his head just to toy with him.

Hu instantly shoved his cold, wet nose against the offending hand.

Janice couldn't stop her chuckle.

"We'll leave you alone, Ma." Melinda squeezed Janice's shoulders then removed her hands. "I know you would like to rest."

"Yes," agreed the ruler, "Thank you, Melinda."

Melinda breathed deeply as she stole a second before moving into her ruler role. She reversed out of the bedchambers.

The guards straightened up stiffly when the Conqueror exited followed by the prisoner and then they jumped at seeing the tiger. "My liege," started a guard.

The Conqueror held up a hand. "He's with the prisoner." She signaled the tiger.

Hu's fire eyes flickered between the two guards and his long tongue darted over his muzzle.

The sentries swallowed but simultaneously nodded, not sure what else to say.

The Conqueror gestured for Janice to follow her down the hall to her room. She opened one door by the gold ring then went in first followed by the rest of the small party.

The guards took posts on either side of the doors after they closed but they exchanged looks.

Janice was petting Hu, her head bent down.

The tip of Melinda's tongue touched her lips as she debated what to say first. She knew her friend's annoyance about earlier was still there. It was something she needed to settle or it would wedge them apart, which she wasn't interested in right now. "Janice," she tried, "I reckon Lao Ma's help will be important."

The archeologist retreated from her petting of Hu and looked at her friend. "Mel, I already have the guards... I have you... everything is fine." She indicated the tiger. "Now him?" She huffed and shook her head.

"Alti is dangerous," reminded the taller southerner.

Janice huffed then grunted out, "You don't have to remind me, Mel." She now put her arms over her chest in a defensive manner. "I don't think Lao Ma needs to trail behind me like a shadow."

"She won't be a shadow," defended the translator.

Janice quickly snapped and chewed out, "I can protect myself, Mel." Her forest green eyes swirled with anger.

Melinda's temper followed suit as she growled, "As if you were doing such a hot job earlier." Her southern accent forgotten and her tone cutting.

Janice was jarred by the statement, she sucked in her pain then turned away from Melinda.

Melinda's anger was instantly lost as she realized what'd transcended from her lips. Her regret swept through and she briefly watched her friend steer away, going across the large room.

Hu was sitting, his head turned, and eyes following Janice.

Janice remained quiet, her head hung low, and her arms still against her chest.

The translator's jaw was set as she pulled on her usual calmness to fix things. She quickly came up behind her friend and lowered her head down closer to Janice's right ear, without touching her at all. "I'm sorry, Janice. I didn't... I shouldn't have...." She lost her words, her hands in midair almost touching Janice, and they fell back to her side.

Janice sighed then shook her head. "This isn't easy... for either of us, Mel." Her voice quaked and she worked her hand through her short, golden hair.

Janice's pain transferred into Melinda deeply and she followed her instincts. She stepped forward so that she brushed up against Janice's back.

The archeologist's eyes shut when the warm, strong presence behind her came closer. She uncontrollably leaned back into her friend just as Melinda's strong arms slipped between her arms and side.

Melinda had her arms encircling the smaller woman and drawing her in tightly so that their bodies molded. Relief flowed through her at the silent agreement between them. She lowered her head back down until her chin was lightly on Janice's head.

Janice placed her hands on top of her friend's then rested her head against Melinda's chest. She remained that way for some time without every thinking about it or questioning it. It felt too amazing to wonder about it. She didn't break away from her peace until there was a nudge at their hands. Janice let out a chuckle and lifted her head.

Melinda discovered that Hu had decided to join them too.

The archeologist played with his soft coat as he sat at her feet again. "What we going

to do now, Mel?"

The translator lowered her head down closer to her friend's, her cheek almost against Janice's. "We wait... it's as much as we can do right now."

Janice sighed, her attention on the tiger at her feet. "What happens if the Conqueror is sentenced to death?"

Melinda released a long sigh because she had no real answer. "We'll face it when we get to that bridge... if we do."

"I don't know how we won't be, Mel... Christ." Janice shook her head, her lips sealed tightly.

Melinda tilted her head as she wondered what else was on her friend's mind.

"You were right," softly brought up Janice.

"About what?" Melinda instinctively tightened her arms.

"That I wasn't doing so well earlier." Janice bit her lower lip then shook her head with an aggravated huff. "I would be dead now if it wasn't for you."

"No," argued Melinda, "ya would be alive now too... with or without me."

Janice peered up at her friend, her eyes filled with doubt.

"The Conqueror wasn't planning to kill ya," gently told the translator. "She wasn't going to let Gabrielle die either." She watched the constricted, perplexed features on Janice's face. "She knew that Gabrielle had bribed some of her soldiers back when she was sentenced to the cross."

"So she... intentionally let her escape," concluded the archeologist. "Why?"

Melinda, who perfectly understood her ancestral counterpart, answered the question. "She's lonely... and bored."

"What? Wait..." Janice's right hand now touched Melinda's right shoulder as she slightly turned in her friend's embrace, her left hand rested on Hu's head. "You're telling me that Gabrielle is like... a toy to her? She's just playing with Gabrielle?"

"No." Melinda cocked her head to the side. "She's intrigued by her."

Janice grunted. "She has a funny way of showing it."

"I reckon so." When Janice leaned back into her again, Melinda continued to explain the mystery. "The Conqueror is realizing her realm is expanding but her world is shrinking."

"All she has to show is a kingdom."

"Nobody to share it with," added Melinda.

"And nobody close to her... no family... or friends." Janice sarcastically chuckled and muttered, "She controls the world but has...."

"Nothing," softly finished Melinda.

Janice had a bittersweet smile at this realization. "Life is always so damn ironic." Her head was bent down as she toyed with Hu's thick coat.

Hu dripped his head back some and his tongue snaked out, licking his new friend's hand.

"What about Alti?" murmured the archeologist.

"I will keep her busy," coolly stated the southerner.

"Mel?" Janice dropped her head against her friend's chest, her brilliant emerald eyes met Melinda's inquisitive ones. "I didn't say thank you."

Melinda had a tender smile and her eyes shaded like the skies. "Ya don't need to."

"Yes... yes, I do." Janice reached up and her right palm touched her friend's smooth cheek. "Thank you... for everything... I've never had anybody care... about me."

"Your daddy did," debated the translator.

Janice noted how Melinda didn't mention her mother, she lowered her hand back to her side. "So did my mother..." Her voice fell off as her emotions trickled to the surface. "Alti... showed me something while I was in the dungeon."

"What happened?" Melinda was concerned, her tone showed it.

"Alti showed me a vision." Janice now stared across the room, at the heavy curtains that led to the small balcony outside. "It was of my mother before she died." She swallowed as her eyes closed and the vision drowned her suddenly. "When I was ten, my parents were working on at a site in Greece. It was early evening and my mother

took my father's truck to go into town, to get some supplies. I never saw her after that evening."

Melinda inhaled and held her breath.

"The truck my father had was pretty old, beat up... we called it Bertha too." Janice had a distant smile then it slipped away. "The truck broke down halfway to town so my mom tried to fix it with what little she knew. She couldn't get it started so she walked back towards camp."

Melinda swallowed then lowered her head down. Her eyes shut as she whispered, "What happened?"

Janice shook her head. "She didn't make it back... a man in a truck pulled over, offering to help her." She squeezed her eyes closed tighter in hopes it'd cut off the memory from the vision but it didn't work. "He raped her then killed her, Mel." Her eyes flew open as the wet drops tracked down her hot cheeks.

"Ooo god," murmured the translator. "I'm sorry, Janice... I'm so sorry."

Janice moved in the embrace so that she faced her friend.

The tall southerner drew Janice in closer, as deep as she could then when Janice's moist face pressed into her neck, she began to cry too. Janice's body quaked against hers silently and Melinda's heart dropped further.

Janice clung to the warm, comforting woman that offered her safety as she broke down. Her mother's final hours slowly started to recede out and the tidal emotions gradually calmed again.

Hu sensed everything upsetting so he moved closer and nuzzled his face against Janice's side to comfort her too. He stopped after a bit and merely waited, his eyes closed, and face against Janice's torso.

The archeologist gained control again and withdrew some. She peered down at Hu to see a ferocious creature that was tenderly comforting her.

Hu opened his eyes when he felt the attention on him. His fire eyes spoke to Janice.

Janice's unknown resolve against the tiger gave way and she smiled at him gratefully. Her right hand threaded through his fur and held on for assurance.

Hu closed his eyes again and snuggled his face into the wool cloak the human wore.

The group remained this way for awhile, the time passing without notice. Then there was a demanding knock at the door, which broke the comfortable spell between them all.

Melinda was incredibly tense as power and darkness charged through her body without warning. "Janice, take Hu and wait out on the balcony for me. Stay quiet."

"Wha-"

"It's Alti," clipped the southerner. "Go. I will deal with her."

Janice's eyes wondered over to the door as second series of bangs came and her stomach knotted. Melinda suddenly pulled away, which caused Janice's emotions to recoil into a hidden area. She stayed quiet as she signaled for Hu to follow her. She made it to the curtains but looked over her shoulders at her best friend. She only saw the Conqueror instead leisurely approaching the main doors. Janice hurried through the curtains with her furry friend and found a spot off to the side of the balcony.

Hu knew something was amiss but he would not leave the small human's side. Yet he purred when a small, warm hand worked down his coat in a repeated session.

Janice chewed on her lower lip for a second but stopped as she tilted her head. She tried to focus on the low yet strong voices of Alti and Melinda.

"It doesn't concern you, Alti," warned the Conqueror.

Alti's black eyes flashed with anger. "Yet you required me to do a vision on her, Conqueror." She stepped closer to the ruler. "She's a threat to the realm... just like that rebel." She folded her arms over her robed chest. "Or do you plan to let this one loose too?"

The Conqueror growled deeply as she closed in the small distance between her and Alti. Her teeth bared in a furious display. "Do not question me, Alti."

Alti opened her mouth to start the argument. Her words were halted before they were breathed by the powerful hand around her neck.

The Conqueror kept her grip tight around the shaman's neck. "I do as I please." Her grip increased another notch. "She may be of more use than I planned... she's close to the Amazons." Her face leaned in closer to the shaman's. "And don't you want Cyane?"

Alti rasped as her right hand came up, her long fingers curling around the muscular arm of the Conqueror.

The ruler jerked her hand on Alti's neck to get a response. "Don't you, Alti?"

The shaman closed her eyes from the thinning air in her windpipes. "Y-e-s-s-s."

"Then she is a way in." The Conqueror abruptly threw Alti from her vice grasp then stared down at the crumbled shaman, who kneeled down gagging for air. "Do not compromise my plans, Alti."

The dark shaman heaved yet she forced her legs to lift her before the ruler.

"Do I make myself clear?" The Conqueror neared the shaman again with her flickering anger in her face.

Alti dipped her head then answered, "Yes, my liege... perfectly."

The Conqueror clenched her fists at her sides then walked away but over her shoulder she ordered, "Get out, Alti."

The shaman bowed her head then backed up a step before turning and exiting the large bedchambers of the ruler. When she was out of the room, she rubbed her sore neck, which increased her anger for the ruler's reaction. She noticed the two guards staring at her. "What is it, fools?" Her eyes narrowed at them. "Is there a problem?"

"Of course not, shaman." The speaking guard turned his head away and became a statue like his partner.

Alti wanted to strike against them but thought wiser so she swept past them in a rage.

Melinda needed a few minutes before she faced her friend again. She went in search of something she'd been holding for Janice for a few days now.

Janice was entranced by the beautiful city as the low western sun started for its descent off to her left on the horizon. Even from here, she could inhale the distinct salty smell of the mixing seas and it filled her. She first sensed Melinda coming out before seeing her then there was a large yet gentle hand on her midback.

"I've been meanin' to give ya this, Janice. Ephiny sent it."

The archeologist was bewildered as she accepted the small leather pouch from her friend. She undid the leather string and peered in for the articles. "Goddamn!" She brightened as she dug out a cigar in complete triumphant.

Melinda was grinning at the archeologist's happiness. Her nose slightly crinkled

though at the thought of the pungent odor of the cigars.

"I need one," concluded the small woman. She was excited to find her lighter too but she hesitated while looking at the end of the cigar that required cutting first.

Melinda smirked, plucked the cigar free while reaching into her cleavage, and she neatly cut the cigar then her dagger disappeared in a blur. She held out the prized cigar to her friend.

Janice blinked and then gaped. She received the cigar while asking, "What the hell else do you have in there, Mel?"

The southerner's lips puckered some as her eyes brightened with teasing. "I can't tell ya."

Janice was biting back an evil remark. She instead plugged her mouth shut with the cigar then pulled out her lighter. She flipped the top mechanically then followed it by a flick. Once she had the cigar going, she dropped the lighter into the bag and worked it closed while holding the burning cigar between her teeth.

Melinda then grabbed up the cigar bag so that Janice's hands were free.

The archeologist was grateful as she stepped up to the marble railing and leaned against it, her eyes scanning over the ancient city. "Isn't it amazing, Mel?" Her left hand dealt with the cigar while her right scratched Hu's closest ear.

Melinda had stepped back a bit so she wouldn't pick up the cigar smell. She wasn't opting to explain to people the new, strange odor. "It's beautiful," she murmured from her spot against the wall, her arms folded over her chest.

Janice shook her head as she took a long draw from her cigar. "I never thought I'd see something like this... Christ we shouldn't be seeing this."

The translator was grinning now. "It's uh little different from the movies."

Janice laughed and gazed over back at her friend. "It is that." As she turned her head back, a group of seagulls swooped past and dove into an arch towards the sea. "Can you believe that the Conqueror is building the Corinth Canal?"

"Mmmm... I reckon she'll succeed too," logically concluded the southerner.

Janice was considering this as she smoked her cigar. Her gaze lowered to the wall that protected the fortress. She watched the sentries patrol the walls and the grounds with set precision. "Mel?" She spun around and leaned back against the rail as her cigar

traded hands. "If we stayed here it wouldn't be too bad."

Melinda's right eyebrow hiked up her forehead at this idea. "I reckon we don't belong here, Janice."

"No," agreed the archeologist, "yet we could do so much here. Record the history so that the future will have it."

"But this ain't our world, Janice. God only knows if our counterparts exist in the 1940's."

Janice shrugged after just taking another drag. "Still... there will be archeologists researching this time period." She held out her hands in indication of everything before going back to petting Hu. "We could have it all here."

Melinda sighed deeply then dove into the debate finally. "This ain't our time or our world, Janice. We are tampering enough with it by being here."

"But think about what we can do to help these people, Mel. You're the Conqueror... you can change it all. We could do this together." She put the cigar in the side of her mouth while muttering, "And record it all to a 'T' and dotted 'i's, Mel."

The translator released a drawn out exhale because she sympathized with her friend's ideas. She still knew it would never work out right. "We can't, Janice."

Janice had taken her lost smoke of the cigar, snubbed it out, set it on the rail, and gradually let the smoke filter between her split lips. Her shoulders slightly slumped in defeat because she knew too. "There's just... so much we could do, Mel."

The translator pushed off the cold stone wall and came back to her friend. "There is but it ain't up to us." She stood in front of her friend with her head bent down to hold Janice's gaze. "We still have to prove Xena's existence in our world."

Janice now had a silly grin at how her friend reminded her of the partnership. "Yea... you're right, Mel." Again she turned back around to stand before the great city. Her left arm positioned on the rail while she went back to petting Hu at her right side.

Melinda glanced over at her friend; she saw how transfixed the archeologist was by the beautiful view of the ancient city. It was also beyond Melinda's imagination too as every morning since her arrival here she would watch the sunrises to start her day. She was trying to memorize the historical city by every detail.

"I remember when my father use to take me to the ancient ruins of Corinth... as a kid," mentioned the archeologist. "I use to try to imagine what it use to look like

before it was destroyed and forgotten." She waved her hand at the city before her eyes. "My imagination doesn't even compare to this."

Melinda had a solemnly smile as she carefully listened. "My daddy never took me to a dig site." She shook her head while brushing back her hair that'd moved from the breeze. "My mom was too afraid I'd get hurt."

Janice grunted. "A dig site is no place for a proper belle." Her teasing grin flickered at the translator.

Melinda sighed though then nodded her head. "But daddy always showed me all the photos... his notes, the artifacts, and he taught me syntax."

The archeologist peered over at her friend, her head dropped to one side. "Is ancient syntax the only language you know?"

"Ooo my no." Melinda chuckled as her playful eyes met Janice's curious features. "I'm fluent in several languages." At seeing Janice's interest perking at this news she further explained. "I am fluent in Latin, French, German, and Mandarin."

"Plus English and ancient Greek," reminded the archeologist.

Melinda nodded then softly added, "I recently learned Egyptian hieroglyphics."

"Christ," blurted out Janice, "you're more of a damn linguist than a translator, Mel."

Melinda had a soft grin at the backwards compliment from her friend. "I reckon so."

Janice moved her head in amazement at this revelation. She let out a long sigh then asked, "What did Alti want?"

"Mmmm... just your head on a pike," muttered the annoyed southerner.

Janice shrugged. "Easy request."

Melinda's face darkened a shade but she didn't look at her friend. "She's trying to figure out why I spared you from the dungeons."

"And why did you... Conqueror?" Janice saw the arched eyebrow coming in her direction. She gave back a challenging look to see what Melinda's intent was from the start.

"Because you're valuable to get to the Amazons." Melinda straightened up quickly as she turned to her smaller friend. "I plan to... seduce you to my side."

Janice suddenly looked as if she were a deer in headlights as she swore she misheard her friend. "Um... seduce?" Her mouth was cotton and her heart pounding plus Hu was forgotten.

Melinda nonchalantly neared her friend and smirked down at her. "The Conqueror always gets what she wants, Janice." She then lifted her right hand then shoved the cigar bag against the smaller woman's chest. She leaned down then sensually whispered, "Always." With that, she strolled back towards the set of curtains and disappeared through them.

Janice breathed sharply after Melinda left the space, the wake of power still struck Janice in the knees. "Wow," she whispered as her hand clenched her cigar bag. She peered down at her feline friend and asked, "Are all tigers like that, Hu?"

Hu seemed to understand as he flashed his teeth in a fine show then stood up, he walked away a few feet then glanced back at Janice.

The archeologist shook her head then followed Hu back into the bedchambers. And how does she plan to seduce me, mentally wondered Janice, who was smirking wildly.

Chapter 13 - Family Matters

Gabrielle's head popped up when there was a rap at her door. She turned in her chair then called, "Come in." She smiled when a familiar Amazon stepped into the hut, in her right hand was a sealed scroll.

"A message has arrived for you, Gabrielle." The Amazon already knew that for Gabrielle it would require a lot to get up and come to her. So she marched across the short distance and held out the scroll.

"Thank you for bringing it, Princess Terreis."

The fiery red head stood proud yet receptive to the outsider. "Whenever you're ready to send a reply then simply ask for me, Gabrielle."

The bard smiled up at the Amazon Princess as she placed the scroll on the desk. "Thank you again, princess. I appreciate everything you've done... everything your Nation has done."

The princess bowed as her bright hair fell forward around her face briefly. "It has been

a pleasure to the Nation."

Gabrielle tilted her head to one side then softly asked, "Has it really or...?" She wavered, shrugged and softly stated, "I just thought the queen wasn't so keen on having Cyrene, Melpomene, and I here."

The princess rested her hands on her hips, a habit she'd learned from her sister seasons back. "Queen Cyane has seen much in her time... these are trying times for her."

The bard sighed sadly then dared to ask the question on her mind. "Is she fearful of the Conqueror?"

"Who does not fear her?" countered the princess. "It is wise to have a healthy dose of fear for the ruler."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed then challenged, "I think Queen Cyane has had too many doses." She saw how the princess was tensing at the direction of the conversation. "It just seems to me, from what I've seen, that she hides the Amazon Nation in the shadows."

"It is the only way to survive in this world," declared the princess.

Gabrielle read Terreis's mannerism and something tipped her off. "And you don't believe that though."

Princess Terreis shifted uneasily as she didn't predict to be transparent to this outsider. "It is not easy, Gabrielle... you are not an Amazon."

"No... I'm not," softly conceded the bard, "but I've always been attacked by the Conqueror much like the Nation. I fear her too." She paused as she really considered that last declaration. Did she truly fear the Conqueror anymore? "I do understand the need to survive but if you think about it, princess... the Nation is already dead... you're just hanging onto... nothing." She shook her head. "I realized that at a young age and that's why I decided to stand up. To give the people a voice and to stop the Conqueror no matter if it meant my life. I am more alive than I ever was before." She tilted her head to the other side then gently asked, "Isn't that what the Amazon Nation is about? Strength and truth?"

"Yet we cower before the Conqueror," murmured the enlightened princess. She shook her head as her hands fell from her hips. "I understand your point of view, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle slowly nodded.

"You know the Amazon ways yet you're not one of us...." The baffled princess was

staring at the outsider in a new light.

The bard had a wide grin now then her light voice proudly declared, "Hey, don't judge a scroll by its paper."

Princess Terreis chuckled and agreed with movement of her head. She took a step back while saying, "I will leave you to your message. Please find me when you're ready."

"I will," promise the rebel.

Princess Terreis was at the door but she hesitated and glimpsed back at the outsider. "Perhaps we can speak more about this later....?"

Gabrielle smiled at the hanging question in the space between them. "I would enjoy that, princess."

The Amazon flashed a warm smile then exited the hut silently.

The bard adjusted in her seat at the desk and opened the message that she hoped was from Melinda. She smiled at the coded Greek on the scroll and carefully read over it. She let out a relieved breath when she heard that Janice was alive and healing now. When she was through the message, she hastily worked on a reply to tell Melinda what was happening with the trial along with her plans. She also expressed some of her concerns about the Conqueror and if Melinda had any suggestions since Melinda knew her best.

Just as Gabrielle finished her scroll, the door was shoved open some and Melpomene formed in the hut. Gabrielle smiled at the girl and set her quill down. She waved the girl over and picked her up.

Melpomene settled onto Gabrielle's lap.

"I heard from Melinda," mentioned Gabrielle carefully.

Melpomene peered up, wide eye at the news.

Gabrielle suddenly smiled and whispered, "Janice is just fine too."

The girl squealed and threw her arms around Gabrielle's neck happily. "Thank the gods... I was so worried."

"I know you were, sweetie." Gabrielle hugged the child back while mumbling, "So was I." She rocked their bodies as she closed her eyes and repeated, "So was I."

Melpomene drew back after a bit. "Melinda is okay too?"

Gabrielle knew things were not easy for Melinda but she wouldn't worry the child with it. "She's okay too, Melpomene." She poked the cute nose in front of her. "I think everything will work out okay."

Melpomene shook her head as she frowned. "The Conqueror won't change though, Gabrielle."

"Never say never," argued the rebel.

"I heard that Cyrene is the Conqueror's mother, is that true?" Melpomene had an awed expression as she held her breath in waiting.

Gabrielle could only wonder where Melpomene heard about this but she wasn't going to lie. "Yes, Melpomene... Cyrene is the Conqueror's mother."

"Wow," gasped the girl. "She's your mother too, right?"

At that moment, Cyrene had slipped into the hut silently and already heard the conversation transpiring. She remained spellbound by Gabrielle and Melpomene.

Gabrielle dipped her head then softly replied, "Yes, she's my mother too."

"So you and the Conqueror are sisters," logically concluded the girl.

The bard cocked her head then a grin appeared. "Not quite, Melpomene but she and I have a lot in common."

Melpomene crinkled up her nose then vigorously shook her head. "No you don't... you and the Conqueror are nothing alike."

Gabrielle softly laughed. "On the outside we're not but inside here." She freed a hand and touched her heart, "We're a lot alike... she just doesn't know it."

The child frowned then pointed out, "If she was then she wouldn't hurt so many people."

"Exactly." Gabrielle leaned in closer as she gently explained things. "The Conqueror has a beautiful heart... just like mine but she's... forgotten that she has it."

"Are you going to help her remember it?"

"I'm hoping so," agreed the bard, her smile back in place.

Melpomene's eyes lightened and her smile beamed again. "I think you're right. You know why?"

Gabrielle had a wry grin now as she went along with the child. "Why?"

"Because if the Conqueror and you have the same mother then the Conqueror must have a beautiful heart too... like you." Melpomene had a hopeful and confident expression. "I've never had a grandmother but Cyrene is like my grandmother... she loves me even though I'm not her child."

Cyrene covered her mouth with her hand to contain her cries from escaping and breaking the moment. Her feelings swept over her at the child's honest words.

"And you know what, Melpomene?" Gabrielle leaned in, her eyes burning from hidden tears at the thought of Cyrene's giving and loving heart. "Cyrene loves you as her granddaughter... don't ever believe otherwise. Okay?"

Melpomene grew very happy at this pledge from her friend. She was all smiles. "Okay, Gabrielle." She tilted her head then asked, "Does that make you my auntie?"

The rebel suddenly laughed in surprise as she reached up to wipe away her tears.

"Can you be my aunt?" anxiously asked the girl. "You'd make the best aunt... ever!"

Gabrielle laughed again at the excited girl.

"Yes, she would make the best aunt," agreed the soft voice from the door.

Gabrielle's head whipped around at hearing Cyrene.

Melpomene brightened at Cyrene's agreement so she tugged on Gabrielle's blue top to get her attention again. "Pleeease?"

The bard's soft eyes returned to the child. "If you want me to be," she gently agreed.

"Yes, yes," gushed Melpomene. "Please?"

A chuckle came from Gabrielle and she nodded her head. "Okay just don't go telling everybody about your rebel aunt."

Melpomene giggled and suddenly engulfed her new family member with an extra strong hug.

Gabrielle had the air squeezed out of her as she returned the amazing hug. She then helped the child slide off her lap then she watched as Melpomene went over to Cyrene. Her sea mist eyes rose up to meet Cyrene's gaze. "How long were you there for?"

"Long enough," murmured the mother. She then gestured at the scrolls on the table because she could tell one wasn't Gabrielle's. "Did you receive word?"

"Yes!" Gabrielle brightened at this and smiled. "Janice is fine and so is Melinda. Melinda said she demobilized the Spartan legions as soon as she took control."

Cyrene sighed in relief at this news. "Thank the gods." She then peered down when a small hand took hers. "Yes, dear?"

"Can we go eat?" Melpomene looked between her new family with a very serious look. "I'm hungry."

Cyrene bit her lower lip from laughing.

Gabrielle pointed a finger at her adopted mother. "I don't want to hear it, Cyrene."

"Well... you are the aunt," jested the older woman.

Gabrielle forced her legs to lift her and she limped over with her cane in hand. "Come on... grandma. The grandkid is hungry."

Cyrene's washed out blue eyes darkened in warning. "Watch it, Gabby." She turned to the door and opened it.

Gabrielle's jaw was slack but Melpomene grabbed her freehand to drag her along.

"Come on, Auntie Gabby... we don't want to miss dinner."

Gabrielle just kept her growl down but her clenched teeth showed between her lips. "Just you wait, Cyrene."

Cyrene was in the lead but her mocking laughter filtered back to the rebel.

The small family joined the Amazons for the dinner just as the sun finished its last candlemark. The meal that night was excellent and quite fulfilling too. Just as they were prepared to retire back at their hut, Gabrielle was stopped short by the princess requesting some time together. Gabrielle agreed and promised Melpomene and Cyrene that she would be in a little later. She then returned to an empty table while the princess collected two mugs of sweet wine for them.

Princess Terreis settled into the seat across from the outsider and gave her a mug. "I heard the trial is swaying in your favor, Gabrielle."

The bard shrugged then replied, "It really won't matter when it comes to the punishment."

"It will though," countered the princess, "because if you can show that she was influenced the sentence could be lighter."

Gabrielle grunted and showed disbelief. "What? Instead of burning her alive they'll only hang her?"

Princess Terreis shook her head at this sarcastic remark. "If you can prove that Alti influenced her to do these crimes then she may live."

"Princess, I'm sorry but she killed ten or eleven Amazons... there's no reason not to seek death."

"I understand," agreed the princess, "but you must realize if the Conqueror did not act on her own accord then she can't fully be held responsible."

"And you're okay with her living?" brought up the bard. "Wasn't your sister Queen Melosa?"

Princess Terreis hesitated as she took a sip of her wine then toyed with her mug. "Yes, Melosa was my sister... she died in the Last Great War against the Conqueror." Her eyes lifted to the outsider. "I'm not completely okay with the Conqueror living. What I am okay with is knowing true justice was served here. That the Conqueror carried out her punishment according to what she did or did not do." She shook her head. "This isn't about revenge... for the dead sisters or for those outside of the Nation that have died because of her."

"And you don't think when the council passes judgment that they won't be the slightest bit biased?"

"We're all human, Gabrielle." The princess studied the rebel leader then softly added, "Even the Conqueror."

Gabrielle sighed then she gradually nodded her head. "Yes... yes, she is."

"Earlier you said that... the Amazon Nation cowers in the shadows," brought up the Amazon. "Can you tell me more why you see this?"

Gabrielle was taken back by this forward princess that was naturally curious. "I can but... why do you want to hear it from me? I'm the outsider."

"Exactly." The Amazon Princess smiled then stated, "You see things different than we do. Another perception is always useful to finding the true problem at hand." She took a drink of her wine as she waited.

Gabrielle got over her initial shock then formulated her response carefully. "I believe I see it that way because after the Last Great War the Amazon Nation all but disappeared." She leaned against the table. "I remember as a kid hearing about stories about the great Amazon Nations... I always wanted to be an Amazon as a kid." A sad smile formed on her face as she went back to her childhood memories. "Some bards would come into the local tavern in my town. They'd always have a few stories about the gods and some fabled heroes but then there were the tales about the Amazons and their queens. I use to think they were just stories then one day I asked the bard how he came up with it."

Princess Terreis chuckled yet kept listening.

"He told me that he didn't... that it was true, all of it." Gabrielle chuckled and wrapped her hand around her mug. "I wouldn't believe him at first but then I did, I really did." She had a coy smile as she kept relaying her past to the princess. "I loved the stories about Queen Hippolyta... she sounded like a goddess more than a queen." Gabrielle's eyes were bright with the old stories in her mind. "I sometimes thought about running away from home to join an Amazon Nation but I knew I really couldn't since I was too young."

The princess leaned against the table and continued to take in the outsider's tale.

"I guess after everything that happened to me... when I lost my family and I met Cyrene, I stopped hearing about the stories for awhile." Gabrielle's expression fell now. "It wasn't for some time until I heard about the wars against the Conqueror and the Amazon Nation. I heard how she drove Queen Cyane through Greece and laying waste to the other Nations in her wake. I kept hoping that maybe Queen Cyane would defeat her. I tried to believe that Artemis, the patron goddess of the Amazons, would protect the Nations from the Conqueror but... it never happened."

Princess Terreis let out a sad sigh of agreement then took a drink of her wine.

"Then I heard about the Last Great War, when Queen Melosa and Queen Cyane joined forces to stop the Conqueror. That they hoped they could defeat her and I held my breath that they could do it. I wanted... I needed to hear of the Conqueror's defeat... but all I heard was of her success and the blood."

Princess Terreis's eyes fell as she murmured, "It was the worst battle in Amazonian history... ever. So many lives were lost in that war."

"So many lives have been lost since the creation of the Destroy of Nations."

"Yes," gently agreed the princess, "so many."

"After the defeat," continued Gabrielle, "I was at a loss; I'd really believed that the Amazons could stop her. That's when I realized nobody would stand up to her... there was nobody left. The Amazons were broken... splintered and nobody ever spoke about them since the Last Great War. Some people even said that the Conqueror completely wiped them out."

"That's why you started the faction, wasn't it?"

The rebel leader nodded. "I finally realized there was nobody left and not because there truly wasn't but because we believed there wasn't anybody. I took a stand in hopes that people would follow me and see that there is power in numbers. That if the Conqueror really believes fear does conqueror all then she is deathly wrong."

"It is a desirable quest," agreed the princess, "and a costly one too."

"It's been more rewarding than costly," rebuked the bard.

Princess Terreis cocked her head then asked, "You stopped believing in the Amazon Nation after our fall from the Last Great War?"

Gabrielle peered down into her half filled mug then lifted her gaze. "Yes," she admitted, "I did... like so many others."

"A pedestal can only hold so much weight," muttered the princess. She sighed then shook away her dismal idea about the Nations' defeats in the past. "In many ways, I believe we are responsible for the creation of the Conqueror."

Gabrielle's eyebrows were knitted together as she considered the princess's words. "Because of Alti?"

"Yes... we harbored Alti in our Nation then she met the Conqueror. If those two had never met then we may not be here today."

The rebel pressed her lips neatly together. "Do you think the queen holds that responsibility on her shoulders?"

"Yes, I do believe so," answered the princess. "I sometimes think it is that guilt that

has blinded her."

"Blinded her from...?"

"From challenging the Conqueror again," replied the princess. "Queen Cyane only met the Conqueror's sword in the Last Great War because of my sister. Melosa would not stand down while Queen Cyane was merely trying to keep her Nation alive. My sister pledged her life to the destruction of the Conqueror because it was the Amazon way. Queen Cyane's heart was not in the Last Great War and her guilt over Alti and even the elders' deaths has clouded her vision ever since."

"I hope this trial will bring her some peace then."

The princess was shaking her head as her soft green eyes met Gabrielle. "I believe it will bring some but not all that she requires. As long as Alti is free then she will always be plagued by the past."

"Alti is a symbol of her weakness," theorized the bard.

"In some ways, yes... she's a symbol of the Amazons' weakness. She was an Amazon and we failed to stop her before she paved the way for the Conqueror to become so powerful."

Gabrielle pushed her mug aside, a new fire in her eyes. "The Amazon Nation can't take on that weight, that responsibility. How can you be so sure that Alti is the key to the Conqueror's success?" She then smacked her palms on the table and argued, "Even if the Nation does take that responsibility, why don't you do anything to stop Alti instead of wallowing in your own guilt?"

Princess Terreis understood the outsider's point of view and she slowly started to nod. "Some of the Nation carries this weighted responsibility... mostly Queen Cyane's side of the Nation. The side of the Nation leftover from Melosa does not; they are prepared to correct the aged old mistake."

"But so long as Queen Cyane is in power then there's not much that can be done."

The princess was frowning but she knew it was true. "There is no simple solution, Gabrielle."

The bard relented some as her shoulders slump. "Well... maybe this trial is putting things in motion."

"I think they are," agreed the princess.

"Speaking of trial..." Gabrielle waved with a sigh as she eyed her new found friend. "I should speak to the Conqueror about it."

The Amazon smiled at the outsider's persistence to help her enemy despite all the history. "I admire you greatly for representing her, Gabrielle. There is nobody here in this Nation that giving to do such an act. You truly fulfill your own legend." She smiled at the flush developing in Gabrielle's cheeks.

"Thank you, princess."

Princess Terreis reached out and captured the bard's hand. "Please call me Terreis, Gabrielle."

This didn't seem to help the bard's flush as it deepened a shade.

The Amazon Princess release the small, warm hand then started to get up. "I will escort you to the jail."

"That'd be great." Gabrielle got up but much slower and she collected her mug after quickly finishing it off.

Together the new friends rid of their used mugs and strolled out of the hut into the cool evening. They were quiet at first but Gabrielle easily filled the void again.

"I take it that Velasca doesn't like me much," carefully mentioned the bard.

The princess had her hands behind her back as she strolled along side the limping woman. "Velasca is a dedicated Amazon... she believes in our destiny for greatness. She believes that the Conqueror threatens that greatness."

"Just as she always has," reminded the rebel. "I guess that makes me a threat too since I'm representing her?"

Terreis's features were falling at her friend's obvious concern. "Gabrielle, she will not do anything to harm you. I can guarantee that."

"What about the Conqueror's mother?" reminded the rebel. "She's a perfect target to get at between me and the Conqueror."

The princess considered this as she knew the outsider, Cyrene, was the Conqueror's mother and very close to Gabrielle too. She could see where Cyrene would be an excellent target but she couldn't imagine Velasca stepping over those lines. "Don't worry, Gabrielle... she likes to be intimidating but that's her show." She came to a slow stop when they were close to the torch lit jail. "Thank you for the talk tonight,

Gabrielle."

Gabrielle smiled up at the princess. "Thank you too, Terreis. It's nice to talk to somebody in the Nation."

Terreis now suddenly grinned and quietly offered, "Ephiny is rather impressed by you so that is what originally perked my interest."

Gabrielle laughed and asked, "Ephiny? The head guard Ephiny?"

"The same," answered the princess. She winked then took a few steps away. "People notice you, Gabrielle... more than you think." She gave a wave, said goodnight, and hurried off.

The rebel shook off her surprise as she neared the jail. The guards knew her so well that they opened it just as she was close enough. She stepped into the torch flickering jail and refrained from the unexpected smile at seeing the quiet ruler sitting on the bench. "Don't you ever get bored of sitting there?"

The Conqueror narrowed her eyes at the jibe. "They don't give me walks."

Gabrielle bit her lower lip as she refused to laugh here in front of these Amazon guards that most likely hated the ruler. She worked the laugh back down her throat then limped up to the Conqueror. "I think the trial is going well."

The Conqueror had seen the unexpected amusement in the rebel's eyes despite the low light in the jail. She hadn't expected her words to be taken as a joke however she could see why it sounded funny to the rebel. "Instead of death by fire I'll only be hung."

Gabrielle had been sitting down on the bench when she faltered and peered across at her enemy. "Well..." She sat down finally then finished what she was saying. "I thought that too but I think we're in luck." She stopped as her features wrinkled at how she'd said this was luck. Was the Conqueror living through this trial truly a good thing or not? Should she even be allowed to live, mentally wondered the bard.

The Conqueror could see that the bard was someplace else so she tilted her head. "You were saying?"

The rebel blinked from her reverie and focused on her enemy again. "I was...." She tried to recall what she was talking about anyway.

"You were telling me about my luck," refreshed the ruler.

"Right." Gabrielle cleared her throat then proceeded to relay some of her discussion that she had with the princess. After she was done telling her about it, the Conqueror merely huffed at her. "What?"

"You really think they'll let me live?" The Conqueror grinned and leaned into her counterpart. "Whether I murdered one Amazon or all of them they would hang me."

"You don't know that," argued the bard.

"Yes, I do." The Conqueror straightened up then coolly stated, "I know I wouldn't let me live if I were them."

Gabrielle grunted as she folded her arms across her chest. "Well thank the gods you're not them... that's the difference."

The Conqueror suddenly flashed an amused smirk. "Always the optimist aren't you, rebel?"

"Well somebody has to make up for your lack of it."

"Ooo I have optimism that I'll have you back on your cross by the time this is all over."

Gabrielle's jaw clenched then relaxed as she bent forward to the ruler. "Then you'll be unleashing Tartarus on earth, Conqueror." When the ruler cocked her head in misunderstanding, she threateningly whispered, "She's also known as your mother... there's no greater scorn than a mother's wrath."

The Conqueror straightened up as she digested the rebel's honest words. She put her arms over her chest and read the confident woman before her, more confident than she'd ever seen the rebel.

"I think," started the bard, "that you and I both understand Cyrene." She saw how defensive acting the ruler was but she still pressed forward anyway. "And if you do then you know, like I do, that she's very torn between protecting you and protecting me." She toyed with her cane in her lap for a heartbeat then softly finished. "I also know that it would hurt her to lose either of us... especially if it was to one another."

The Conqueror swallowed hard because she knew it was her mother that had unwantingly linked her to this rebel leader. Her mother had shunned her many moons back and she had rejected the existence of her mother ever since that fated day. Yet when her mother stood before her this morning, every bit real, she knew she could no longer deny her mother. She reconciled long ago that she'd hurt her mother by leading Lyceus to his death and that guilt suddenly swallowed her all over again this morning.

"I almost hurt her," confessed the bard, whose emotional eyes lifted from staring at her hands. She'd force Cyrene into following her in her plans to kill the Conqueror and as she sat here, she realized it was the worst move ever. She saw that the Conqueror was carefully listening so she whispered low enough so only the Conqueror could hear her. "I don't want to hurt Cyrene... ever."

The Conqueror was breathing heavily as she read between the lines of the rebel's offer. She knew what this meant if she agreed or disagreed and her body was wired by the hatred to strike out against her enemy, to destroy her enemy. The Conqueror could not allow this rebel to continue against her realm less everything be lost. And yet the Conqueror had lost so much in her moons as she took over the known-world piece by piece. Her only link to the past, to her family was sitting right here and she had a chance to reclaim her identity if she so decided. For the first time in her life, she was fearful that this second chance could slip through her fingers if she didn't take it.

Gabrielle watched in pure amazement as her silent offer was agreed to by a simple nod from the Conqueror. She could even translate the hidden agreement deep in the Conqueror's steel blue eyes. She was in disbelief and touched her forehead as the realization swept over her and she became woozy with relief. From that day forward, there were never anymore threats of a cross and any other forms of death promises.

The Conqueror broke the spell that was between them with her clipped tone. "What of the trial tomorrow?"

Gabrielle lowered her hand to her lap and returned her attention to the ruler. To the ruler, who she newly formed a silent pact of peace because of one woman they both held high in their lives. She had a faint smile as she rolled into her explanation of her plans for the trial tomorrow.

The Conqueror agreed to it all rather readily. She also had a few confessions she had yet to make but they could wait until later. At the end of the talk, she watched as the rebel leader painfully got to her feet and studied her.

"Get some sleep... it'll be a long day tomorrow."

The Conqueror's right eyebrow hiked up her brow some. "On what bed?"

Gabrielle bit her lower lip, her eyes flickering to the guards then back to the Conqueror. "You're use to sleeping without a bed." She stepped away a few paces then glanced back with a wide smirk. "Or have you gotten that soft since your campaign?"

The Conqueror knew it was a tease yet she narrowed her eyes in warning. She didn't need this brass rebel taking new liberties already but part of her conceded to it. She

easily jibed back, "That's easy to say when you've been pushing a quill all your life."

Gabrielle swallowed her laughter then teased back, "Don't forget moving my lips too." Her eyes sparkled at the new level of banter between her and her enemy. She continued her walk to the door but wavered when the ruler's monotone floated to her.

"How could I forget," murmured the ruler, who closed her eyes and slumped against the wall in a relaxed mode.

Gabrielle stole one last look, said nothing, and left the jail with a lighter heart than she could ever recall. She soon found her way back to the hut where she changed for bed and crawled into her cool sheets. She listened to the gentle slumber of her mother and newly adopted niece in the other bed. She put her hands under her head and stared at the thatched roof overhead, her thoughts floating off to her recent success over these days. Her dreamscape soon found her and she felt more prepared for the trial than the day before.

The trial began in excitement since the new disclosures that Gabrielle had brought to light before the Nation. The trial this day focused on the only other Greek shaman known, Yakut. The young shaman stood before her peers, her hands behind her back, and her formal, tribal dress on. Velasca had already questioned her once and now the outsider was stepping up to her.

"Yakut, how long have you been a shaman for now?" inquired the bard.

The shaman lifted her chin then proudly stated, "For twenty seasons now."

Gabrielle smiled at this then leaned heavily against her cane for support. "I'm just guessing but are you relatively close to the same level of power as Alti was when she was in Queen Cyane's Nation?"

The shaman tilted her head then replied, "I can't be sure since I never met her."

"Is there a way to gauge it, possibly? Maybe by the length of her being a shaman perhaps?"

"That's possible," agreed the shaman.

Gabrielle turned to the council. "Do we know for how long Alti was a shaman when she met the Conqueror?"

The head council leaned to her left and gazed over at the queen. "My queen?"

Queen Cyane stepped away from Velasca and answered, "When the Conqueror

arrived in my Nation, Alti had been a shaman for twenty-three seasons."

Gabrielle beamed at this new information so she returned her focus to the shaman. "Yakut, is it safe to say then that you and her are roughly the same then?"

"That is safe to say, yes." Yakut adjusted her stance then waited for the next question.

"From the questioning yesterday of Queen Cyane, I brought up the question about whether it was possible for Alti to help Xena fight the queen and the elders. As it seems so impossible that the Conqueror could have killed ten Amazons and wound the queen. Do you have any information to offer on this, Yakut?"

The shaman had picked her brain already and proceeded to answer the question rather confidently. "Yes, it is highly probable that Alti was able to help Xena do this."

"How is this possible?" inquired the curious rebel.

"My assumption would be she used a mix of things. A shaman works in the spirit world... that is all their power and at this particular stage a shaman cannot inflict any pain on a person." Yakut paused as she gathered her thoughts. "What a shaman can do is... emphasis a person's weaknesses or strengths that emulates from their karma."

"So then what you're saying is that Alti emphasized the Conqueror's natural abilities as a fighter?"

"Yes, exactly." Yakut's eyes followed the moving rebel as she continued to speak. "Alti would have to been near by for this to work. The one problem that Alti may have faced was the Conqueror's conscious mind."

Gabrielle stopped pacing and lifted her head to the shaman. "Conscious mind?"

"Yes, the Conqueror may have resisted the notion of killing the Amazons but Alti could severe that spiritual. She merely had to fuel the Conqueror's hunger for power by showing her the darkness that Alti was so familiar with. In turn, this would override the Conqueror's sense of right and wrong because she is pulled in by Alti."

Gabrielle's head was bobbing so she pulled away from her thoughts. "So Alti greatly influenced the Conqueror to act the way she did?"

"Yes," replied the shaman, "it many ways Alti controlled the Conqueror like a puppet on that day." She stopped then added, "Granted the Conqueror has final say in her actions but those actions were influenced by Alti and her shamanism."

Gabrielle nodded then said, "Thank you, Yakut." She stepped back as she heard

Velasca moving forward again.

Velasca had her head down but she lifted it and asked, "Yakut, can you be certain that Alti influenced the Conqueror's actions that day?"

The shaman sighed then shook her head. "Not without having been there first hand."

"So we really can't be sure whether Alti did or didn't influence the Conqueror's actions that day," she summarized to everybody. "Yakut, repeat to the council and the Nation what you told the council back on the day that Janice Covington requested the Nation to help her. It had to do with the Conqueror's destiny."

The shaman's memory quickly pinpointed what the Amazon was speaking about so she nodded. "When I look into the Conqueror's karma, I discovered that she was destined for this life... to be the ruler." She pressed her lips tightly together but forced herself to say the last piece of it. "It wouldn't have mattered whether she met Alti or not, she still would be the Conqueror today."

"Wait," jumped in Gabrielle, "The Conqueror is only on trial for her crimes against the Nation... nothing else."

The head councilor sighed and gave a warning look to Velasca.

"I am merely pointing out the fact that with or without Alti, the Conqueror will carry out her destiny... that includes Alti's unproven influence." Velasca grinned when the council members started to nod.

"She has a point, Gabrielle." The head councilor's attention flickered between the representatives. "Any other question, Velasca?" At Velasca's negative response, she turned to Gabrielle. "Gabrielle?"

The bard nodded then moved away from the silent ruler at her side. She approached Yakut again then asked, "So the Conqueror is destined to... be the Conqueror, correct?"

"Yes," answered the shaman.

Gabrielle cocked her head to the side. "Was the Conqueror destined to kill the elders?"

"That's a speculating question," argued Velasca from her spot.

"But it's a fair one," charged on the outsider, "since you opened that door."

"She has a point, Velasca," remarked the head councilor. "Go ahead, Yakut."

Yakut steadied herself for this response as she answered, "No."

The air was filled with a roar of chatter from the spectator Amazons from far behind.

"Silence!" ordered many of the councilors in booming voices. When the silence finally came, the head council allowed the trial to continue.

"The Conqueror wasn't destined to kill the elders," repeated the bard. "So you're saying she may have never killed the elders and attack Queen Cyane?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," agreed the shaman.

Gabrielle's head was bobbing repeatedly then she tapped her cane on the solid ground. "Yakut, when the Conqueror was first arrested and brought here to the Nation, I asked you about this influence that Alti may...." Her eyes switched over to Velasca as she finished with, "or may not have. Do you recall this conversation?"

Velasca ran her tongue along the back of her molars as she carefully listened to the outsider continue with the shaman.

"Yes, of course I do."

"You explained to me that it was plausible that Alti and the Conqueror may have a connection. Can you explain this connection as you explained it to me?"

The shaman nodded then cleared her throat. "This link or connection is something instantaneous when two karmas on similar paths meet. It actually can happen between anybody, regardless of shamanism or not, however a shaman can increase the strength of this connection and take advantage of it for good or bad. In the case of Alti and the Conqueror, these two emphasize the Darkness in one another... that is their link and over time it can become permanent too."

"Through this link can a shaman influence the other person?"

"Yes, greatly too."

Gabrielle licked her lips as she prepared for the next part that would be the breaker. "As we're all wondering, Yakut is there any proof this connection really exists between the Conqueror and Alti. Does this connection, right now, exist between the Conqueror and Alti?"

Yakut narrowed her eyes at how Gabrielle asked the question so she honestly

answered. "No, there is no connection... right now."

Velasca smirked as her point was perfectly proved.

The council members started to chatter as did many of the Amazons in the Nation.

Gabrielle stepped closer to the shaman then loudly asked, "Why is there no connection right now, Yakut?"

"There is no connection because I severed it."

The din of voice went silent and all that was heard was the faint rattle of the Conqueror's chains, which captured everybody's attention.

The rebel leader turned to Velasca and stated, "There's your proof." She faced the Amazon Nation while calling out, "There was an instantaneous link when the Conqueror and Alti first met." She had a hidden smile for Cyrene, who stood behind the Conqueror. Her eyes went back to the shaman. "Yakut, could you tell whether this connection between the Conqueror and Alti was strong when you severed it?"

The shaman bit the inside of her mouth then finally answered the question. "I was barely able to sever it... it was in the maturity stage of being permanent."

Gabrielle huffed and while shaking her head she declared, "Alti is very much a leech."

"That is a perfect analogy of Alti's shamanism, yes," agreed Yakut. Her expression was grim but her tone was very agreeing with the rebel.

"Thank you, Yakut." At the shaman's nod, she returned to the Conqueror's side.

"Anymore questions, Velasca?"

Velasca dropped her arms from her chest then shook her head. "No, council."

"Fine." The head council glanced at the other members, who were all in agreement. "We will convene for the day then continue tomorrow at Helios high again."

There was a roar of talking all at once as people broke up into different groups, discussing the tidal turn of the fascinating trial. Nobody had been betting on the outsider bringing up such a perspective.

Cyrene carefully approached Gabrielle and the Conqueror after getting around the six guards. "I think you're swaying them, Gabrielle."

The bard smiled at Cyrene, grateful for her presence. "I think so too." Her attention lifted to the ruler. "This might turn out okay after all."

The Conqueror merely nodded because she was wordless before her mother and the rebel leader. She felt too uneasy here so she started the pace walk to her jail but a warm hand grabbed her left arm to stop her. She peered down at soft, worn blue eyes that showed nothing but love.

"Have some faith, Xena." Cyrene squeezed her daughter's strong forearm while whispering, "Everything happens for a reason."

The Conqueror dipped her head down as she murmured, "Yes it does." She glanced at Gabrielle then broke away from them as she continued towards the jailhouse with her guards swarming around her. She heard Gabrielle and her mother still chatting in the background then it grew distant. She tilted her head to the right when an unexpected yet distinct sound grabbed at her honed warrior skills. She abruptly stopped and turned as she tried to pinpoint the noise.

"Conqueror, let's go," ordered Ephiny, her voice hostile. She tensed when the Conqueror's head snapped to the right and Ephiny raised her sword at the ready.

The Conqueror suddenly gave a vibrating battle cry and she easily sprung up into the air. She landed halfway between the guards and her mother with Gabrielle but she quickly broke out into blurry sprint.

Gabrielle saw the dark ruler coming at them, her body charged by fear about what was happening.

Cyrene grabbed onto Gabrielle's arm to hold her in place, she wasn't scared and she transferred that into her adopted daughter.

The Amazon guards all yelled at once as they chased after the freed ruler.

The Conqueror stole a heartbeat fast glimpse to the right as her target was coming closer.

Gabrielle looked in the same direction then she saw it, her mouth opening to release a yell of warning. She suddenly dropped her cane then shoved Cyrene as far as she could before her weak knees buckled under her weight.

The Conqueror launched her body into the air with her right hand stretching out as far as the manacles allowed her. Her warcry sounded again from her lips just as her fingers wrapped around the shaft of an arrow.

Gabrielle gasped as the arrowhead skimmed her view then disappeared in a blur from the Conqueror's perfect catch. She then collapsed to her aching knees in a wash of pain and relief.

The Conqueror tucked onto the ground, bounced up onto her feet, and tossed the arrow to the ground. She quickly acted again as the whistle of another arrow came, her left hand snapping out to catch the arrow coming at the rebel again. Her furious eyes honed in on the archer standing tall on one of the huts and stringing a third arrow.

"Stop him!" bellowed out the queen's powerful voice.

The assassin gave one last shot as his third arrow screamed directly towards the Conqueror.

The ruler growled and plucked the last arrow from mid air with ease. She snapped the two arrows in her hand and threw them to the ground with pure disgust. She watched in satisfaction as the Amazons hurried after the retreating archer, who was jumping from hut to hut with less than great stamina. A soft moan of pain captured her attention so she knelt down beside the rebel to help her. By this time the guards horded around her and the rest of the group.

Cyrene was back on her feet after watching the amazing display of the attack and her daughter's abilities. She gathered up Gabrielle's walking stick as she came over to help.

Gabrielle was breathing heavily as the Conqueror helped her get to her feet again.

"Are you okay, Gabrielle?" asked the head guard, her mask pushed away from her face.

The Conqueror, for the first time, saw the striking features of Ephiny but she returned her focus to getting Gabrielle on her feet again.

Gabrielle nodded her head to Ephiny's question. "Cyrene?"

"I'm just fine, Gabrielle." Cyrene held out the cane once the rebel was up again.

The bard gratefully took her cane then tried to regain control of her coursing fear after just being attacked. Her eyes met the Conqueror's unemotional ones but she could tell by the actions the Conqueror was just as concerned. "Thank you for saving me, Conqueror."

The Conqueror straightened up to her full height. A sharp remark came to mind but she bit it back since her mother was here and she knew the rebel was already shaken

enough. She now wondered if she was getting soft after all. Her dark eyes switched to Ephiny as she coolly requested, "When they get him, put him in the cell with me."

Ephiny blinked then realized it was less of a threat but a joke. She wasn't sure how to respond but Gabrielle took the opening.

"I think the Amazons can handle him," reminded the rebel.

The Conqueror huffed, folded her arms against her chest, and kept a smirking expression on her face.

Gabrielle shook her head, her nerves still badly shaken by the event. "Why did he..."

The Conqueror sighed at the bard being so naive and her hands fell from her chest. "Somebody wants you dead for representing me."

The rebel didn't like much being on the receiving end of an assassination attempt. "Who?"

The Conqueror had her ideas but she wasn't going to voice them here.

"Is everybody okay?" inquired a new voice.

Gabrielle lifted her head to see the queen outside of the circle of guards. "Yes, we're all fine, Queen Cyane. Thank you."

The ruler turned her head to the Amazon Queen.

Queen Cyane secretly nodded her approval to the Conqueror then focused back on the rest of the group. "Gabrielle, you and Cyrene should return to your hut. I will post two guards there for the time being until we apprehend this man. I had two Amazons find Melpomene and bring her to the hut."

"Thank you again." Gabrielle was in agreement to the queen's orders.

Cyane turned some then called out, "Princess and Eponin, escort Gabrielle and Cyrene back to their hut, please."

The two Amazons jogged up while they waited for the queen but now given new duties. The queen then hurried off to find out any news about the attacker.

Gabrielle glimpsed at the ruler once more then repeated, "Thank you again, Conqueror." When she saw the ruler wasn't going to say anything, a warm hand touched her back, it was Cyrene.

Cyrene signaled for Gabrielle to go ahead in the opening in the guard ring now. She didn't follow yet and bitter sweetly smiled at her daughter. "Thank you, Xena," her voice full of emotions.

The ruler's jaw flexed against her surfacing feelings for her mother but all she could do was nod her understanding. She then watched as the rebel leader and her mother were escorted through the Amazon Nation to their hut.

Ephiny pulled her mask back down then ordered, "Come on, Conqueror." This time her tone wasn't forceful but tinted with respect.

The unexpected commotion after the trial soon settled down when the assassin was actually apprehended just outside the Nation's walls. He'd kept them fairly busy as he escaped out of the village but his escape was short lived when he was shot in the leg by an arrow from a patrol Amazon. He then was dragged back into the Nation and thrown into his own jail, a meager jail compared to the Conqueror's but a locked up tight jail.

Around sunset, the outsiders were delivered their dinners along with news about the assassin's apprehension. The princess had delivered both the food and good news then further told them they were allowed out of the hut now. The guards were also dismissed from their duties since things were safe again.

After the dinner, Gabrielle excused herself and left to go see the Conqueror. She knew that the ruler probably had a fair idea about what was going on even though the princess refused to explain anything, yet. When she arrived at the jail the door was already opening, she was happy to see the Conqueror certainly awake and seeming to expect her.

The ruler watched as Gabrielle took a seat beside her.

Gabrielle exhaled deeply then asked, "You've been cooped up in here too long huh?"

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at her allied enemy, which was enough of an answer.

Gabrielle's eyes glowed with an idea so she slid off the bench then approached Ephiny, who was easy to pick out with her curly hair. "Ephiny, can the Conqueror take a walk with me?"

The head guard was gaping behind her mask but her definite tone answered, "Gabrielle, that is beyond out of the question."

"Ephiny, she just saved my life."

"I don't care if she saved Queen Cyane's life... the answer is still no."

Gabrielle stepped up closer to the head guard and poked her in the chest with her left index finger. "She's not going to run. She saved my life. And you and the guards can play tag along anyway." She lowered her hand then hotly commanded, "Unlock her now... she's not a goddamn caged animal."

"Gabrielle," seethed the frustrated Amazon.

The Conqueror was biting back every comment in the book and just controlling her smirking features. She remained statues.

Gabrielle tried her best impression of what maybe was the Conqueror's dangerous looks. "Unlock. Her. Now."

Ephiny clenched her left hand at her side then suddenly spun her sword and sheathed it behind her back. She stepped around the bard while hotly ranting, "This will cost me every one of my feathers."

"And then some," remarked a guard.

"I don't want to hear it, Solari." Ephiny was working the jail manacles off the Conqueror while the regular chains stayed on her.

"She saved Gabrielle," started another Amazon, "it's a fair trade."

Solari turned her head to Callisto and she was shocked by the Amazon's support.

Ephiny huffed as the chain clanked onto the floor. She rose up and backed away as the ruler stood up to her towering height. She unsheathed her sword however she kept it at her side. "I swear, if you make me regret this then no words of Gabrielle's will save you." She spun on her heels and stomped up to the door and banged heavily on it. "Open it, Karis."

Karis unlocked the door then pulled it open; she didn't understand why she was opening it.

Ephiny marched out first then another guard then a third followed by the Conqueror, Gabrielle, and the last three guards.

"Ephiny, what's going on?" demanded Karis.

Ephiny turned to the Amazon and replied, "We're going for a stroll." Her tone showed she was annoyed, frustrated, and plain testy about this. "I don't want a word of this to get to the queen." She stepped closer then hotly whispered, "Is that clear?"

Karis held up her hands. "You're the head guard, Ephiny." She grabbed the jail door and pushed it shut. "Good luck too."

"Thanks," chided the head guard, who signaled everybody to fall out. She guided them towards the edge of the village then followed the loop towards the sparring fields that weren't too far. She knew that would be the safest spot, away from the Nation's eyes and ears.

Gabrielle limped along side the ruler, who was very quiet. She glanced up to see how the Conqueror was looking at everything with precision despite the torch lights offered little. "I wish I could do more to thank you for saving my life... this is pretty bland in comparison."

"No," argued the Conqueror, her gaze falling to the rebel. "This is perfect." She enjoyed the cool, fresh air of the autumn evening. "I don't like to be... locked in one place too long."

Gabrielle huffed then nodded her head. "I can sympathize there."

"Cyrene is okay?" softly questioned the Conqueror and her words were only heard by the rebel.

Gabrielle noted how the ruler said Cyrene's name. She tilted her head back and replied, "Your mother is fine... she was pretty shaken up like me."

The ruler just nodded her head.

Gabrielle walked closer the Conqueror, almost brushing up against her. "Do you know who it was?" She pause then quietly added, "They won't tell me anything."

The Conqueror grunted at the comment. "They won't either." She scanned around at the village then peered down at the rebel. "I have my guesses... those arrows weren't Amazon."

Gabrielle smirked then remarked, "Well it was a male."

The ruler rolled her eyes then lifted her head again.

"So he was probably hired then," concluded the bard.

"Either he was hired or inspired."

Gabrielle smirked wildly then teased, "You're a poet and you didn't even know it, Conqueror." She giggled when the ruler shot her a dangerous glare for the joke.

"I must be seeing too much of you," jabbed back the ruler.

Although the jab was given too lightly as the bard was still grinning then she lost it as she went serious. "So if he's inspired then....?" She waited for the ruler to fill the void.

"Then word leaked out that I'm here and they want me." The Conqueror exhaled her frustration. "I have plenty of enemies."

"Hard to believe," dryly remarked the rebel leader.

Ephiny held up her hand at the group. "This is as far as we can go."

Gabrielle scanned over the sparring field then pointed to the wood bench at the edge. "Let's sit down."

The Conqueror smirked. "Ooo goody." She trailed behind the bard as she was taken to the bench.

The guards circled around the pair but it was going to be short lived.

"Ephiny, wait over there?" asked the rebel. "I want to talk to the Conqueror alone."

Ephiny was bugged eyed as she ripped her mask back. "Gabrielle-"

"Listen to her, Ephiny," challenged the Conqueror, her tone not at all threatening.

Gabrielle was smug at the head guard.

Ephiny pointed her sword at the guards and ordered, "Fan out about twenty paces from them."

Gabrielle watched in satisfaction as the guards fanned out from either side and behind them but not in front. That left them a perfect view of the field, the wall, the trees beyond the Nation, and finally the night sky that was lit by the waning moon. "So you don't know who it is exactly?"

"No," answered the ruler, "but scum always surfaces to the top... eventually."

The bard rested her cane in her lap as she peered up with hooded eyes at the ruler. "I'm not sure I like this."

The dark ruler flashed a grin at the rebel. "That's what happens to anybody that associates with me."

"That's real comforting," chided the rebel.

The Conqueror's grin slowly disappeared as her thoughts wondered off to a place besides the current problem at hand. She turned her gaze to the night sky as she quietly asked, "How is my brother... Toris?"

Gabrielle bit her lower lip as she debated how to answer this question. She knew she had to be honest or her growing understanding with the Conqueror could be damaged. "Cyrene and I haven't seen or heard from him in several moons."

The Conqueror's head snapped down. "What?"

The bard swallowed then mustered up her courage to explain the situation. "Toris just... disappeared. Cyrene and I tried to find out what happened but our resources are limited. He was in Amphipolis last... running the tavern. He would send money now and again to help Cyrene and I. Then we stopped hearing from him so Cyrene and I took a trip up to see what was going on." Her story fell off as she stared at her cane and hands in her lap. "Cyrene's tavern was closed up tight and his things were all there. Nobody in Amphipolis knew what happened to him."

"People just don't disappear," hotly declared the ruler.

"Well Toris did and we can't find out anything." Gabrielle's voice now cracked as she added, "Cyrene has been worried sick about him. She tries not to think about it but she scared he might be dead by now... since he hasn't shown up." She ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm scared she might be right." She peered up at the ruler. "Toris is my brother... if something has...." She shook her head then turned her head away. "What can't go wrong?"

The Conqueror leaned forward as she tried to process everything she was told. She realized that all along she had the easy, simple means at her fingertips to track down her brother but she the most important piece of that, knowing her brother was missing, she didn't know thanks to her ignorance. She shoved her internal anger away then looked sidelong at the emotional, small woman beside her. "Who is Janice Covington?"

The bard was jolted out of her thoughts by the question. Her eyes locked on the Conqueror's for a few heartbeats but she dropped her gaze to the ground. "She's my

descendant... sort of." When the ruler prompted to continue with an expression, she sighed first. "I guess you're still behind on that story, huh?"

The Conqueror sat up again then replied, "I have some pieces of it but I want to hear you tell me." She lifted her arms, which caused her chains to jingle. "It's not everyday the Conqueror is kidnapped." Her joke wasn't lost on the rebel.

"I guess not," agreed the bard, who watched the ruler lower her hands back to her lap. "Well it all starts and ends with Alti, I would say."

"I'm starting to figure this much out," remarked the aggravated ruler. "What did she do now?"

Gabrielle touched her neck and scratched there, preparing to tell the truth no matter the costs. She didn't like this but maybe it would work out alright, she had to hope for the best. "Alti... time traveled... sort of." She lowered her hands to lap the gripped her cane for some assurance.

"How did Alti time travel... sort of?"

"She used your scepter to do it."

The Conqueror's eyes filled with understanding suddenly as she realized she'd been missing her scepter for some time now. The last spot she'd seen it was in her trunk and not since then. "The stone transported her."

"Yes," replied the bard, "that stone is the Cronos Stone."

The Conqueror's memories flooded her from back when she took the stone from King Quallus so long ago. She recalled the king's words that it was "a rare jewel, unlike any other, possessing a strange power," whispered back the king's memory.

"What is it?" broke in the bard's voice.

The memories vanished from the Conqueror's mind as she focused back on the present. "The king, who I took it from, warned me about this." She clenched her hands in her lap. "Leave it to Alti to figure out what it does." She ran her tongue along the back of her teeth then theorized aloud, "So she kidnapped Janice so she could control your karma for a few lifetimes?"

"No," replied the rebel, "to control my karma over worlds."

"Worlds?"

"Alternate realities," explained Gabrielle, "Janice is my descendant but from another world."

The Conqueror smirked and murmured, "Only Alti would be stupid enough to try something like that." Her eyes narrowed as she asked, "Then the woman impersonating me is my descendant as well?"

"From that reality, yes," replied Gabrielle. "Her name is Melinda Pappas."

"Funny how Alti failed to mention that minor detail," growled the ruler.

Gabrielle shrugged then reminded, "Funny how she forgot to mention the minor detail about the Cronos Stone."

The ruler stared down at her clenched hands as she whispered, "Alti can't have that scepter. She's too dangerous with it."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that," murmured the rebel.

The Conqueror met the curious rebel's gaze. "Nobody should have that kind of power... not even me." She shook her head then stated, "Being able to alter time can throw everything off."

"But you could fix so many things too," murmured the rebel, her eyes filled with ideas.

"For every thing you think you fix," started the ruler, "another thing goes wrong." She turned her head away. "It's like a rippling effect... no good can come from it. Everything happens for a reason and that should not be tampered with."

Gabrielle sighed as she conceded to the ruler's wisdom. "It could be dangerous, you're right."

"It is dangerous that those two are in this world." The Conqueror lips curled into an angry smile. "Alti will have much to answer to."

"You know," brought up the bard, "everything does happen for a reason... maybe there's a reason why they came here... to this reality. I mean it throws the balance off sure but still it happened."

The Conqueror leaned forward again. "It doesn't matter because it has to be corrected."

Gabrielle leaned closer to the ruler then asked, "You wouldn't use the Cronos Stone?"

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at her counterpart. "Contrary to popular opinion, I happen to have a few brains and know that scepter is nothing but dangerous... especially in Alti's hands."

"Since when did you care about what Alti does?"

"Let me tell you a little secret about me, rebel." The Conqueror leaned over to the smaller woman now. "I keep my friends close but I keep my enemies closer."

The rebel leader glanced at how close they were, which made her coyly smile then she considered what the ruler explained to her. She lost her smile then tilted her head. "Gabrielle." At the ruler's twisted features she explained, "My name is Gabrielle."

"I know you're name," snapped the ruler.

"Yea well... try using it instead of rebel," mocked Gabrielle. "I'm more than just a rebel... some people consider me a bard... a daughter, a sister, a friend-"

"A pain in the ass too," remarked the ruler.

Gabrielle pointed a finger at the Conqueror. "Ha. You're real funny you know. Who would have thought?" She smirked at the glowering expression coming at her as she lowered her hand. "I'm sure you're more than just the Conqueror."

"Just?" repeated the irritated ruler. "Perhaps the Destroyer of Nations or the Warrior Princess although lately I've been favoring murderer and bitch."

Gabrielle shrugged but presented, "You're still Cyrene's daughter though. Doesn't that count for anything? How about Lyceus and Toris's sister?"

The Conqueror turned her head away and stared up at the moon now. "That was a long time ago."

"Well to be honest..." Gabrielle sadly smiled then finished what she started. "To be real honest that's something you can never escape... family is forever." She toyed with her cane then whispered, "That was something Cyrene taught me when she first took me in." She let it go there as she thought back on what the Conqueror said earlier. "So then Alti is your enemy?"

The Conqueror grinned then replied, "She's my play thing." She saw the instant shiver from the rebel, which thoroughly amused her. "She's nothing but a tool... if she dies tomorrow I could care less."

"And what do you think about this connection that she's always had with you?"

The Conqueror's grin slipped at this point. "I find it... interesting."

"Interesting to know she's been influencing you against your will all along huh?"

"Against my will?" The ruler shook her head then reminded, "More like influencing my will more than required."

"Still," debated Gabrielle, "she had some sense of power over you."

"True," granted the most feared woman. "It's a mutual agreement between her and I."

The young woman considered this thoughtfully then replied, "I don't think any agreement with that shaman can stay too safe for long." She pointed at the ruler. "She's already hiding the Cronos Stone from you." Her hand went back to her lap. "Next she'll stab you in bed so she can have your karma and kingdom."

The Conqueror's slotted her eyes at the perceptive rebel leader. She let out a long sigh and went back to the night sky that felt so good to see after so long. "Why did you let Janice Covington try to assassinate me? You knew she would fail the mission."

"No, I didn't let her go so she could assassinate you." The rebel saw the fascination in the ruler's eyes. "I sent her to warn you."

"Warn me?"

Gabrielle nodded her head. "About Alti." She shrugged then gently added, "I figured as soon as she told you about Alti's plans you would go off the deep end. I was hoping, if anything, Alti would be next on the cross. Then I had alternate plans to get Janice to safety... there was no way I could have stopped Janice from doing what she wanted to do." She waved her hand then gently added, "I just had to make sure she made it out alive."

"And if Janice hadn't told me about Alti?"

"Ooo she would have told you," answered the bard. "It was her leverage over you and she knew it." She smirked then softly added, "You wouldn't have killed her without knowing first how she came to be. You're too curious to know why she looks just like me."

The Conqueror tried to play off like she wasn't and it wasn't showing to Gabrielle. She sighed then muttered, "It's a bitch when my mother is siding with you."

Gabrielle quickly processed what the ruler's point was then she laughed at the joke. "Cyrene does understand you pretty well even if it's been a long time." She flashed a grin for a heartbeat.

"You've kept me busy," admitted the ruler. "I will give you that... you and your faction."

"Its kept me busy too," relented the bard.

The Conqueror suddenly stood up while saying, "By the way, I enjoyed your coding system." She turned around so she could enjoy the shocked features of the rebel leader.

"You... how did... you couldn't have...."

"Yes, Rhodes, and I did." The Conqueror crossed her arms against her chest.

"Rhodes?" repeated the bard, who jumped to her feet as much as she could. "What...." She shook her head while positioning her cane in front of her.

"Rhodes wasn't quite as good at retaining your coding system as you thought. He would translate your messages then merely throw them out in the trash."

"By the gods," rasped the dumbfounded rebel. "I can't believe... gods-be-damned." She ran her fingers through her hair then her angry features met the ruler's stare. "Then you knew... everything?"

"Almost." The ruler shrugged as she started walking along side the rebel. "I didn't know my mother was with you. I did know your movements, your briberies... your plans."

"You didn't know the faction members," challenged the rebel.

The Conqueror's face darkened in answer. "No... I don't know them all. You've been excellent about hiding that and your location."

Gabrielle noted how the guards were circling around them again as they went back towards the jail. "My faction is just a... game to you, isn't it? A game of cat and mouse." She wasn't sure she liked that assessment about her and the Conqueror but yet it was brutally honest.

"It was but...." The Conqueror displayed a curled grin. "I haven't had this type of a challenge in many moons."

"It's a relief to know I've kept you entertained," coldly remarked the rebel.

The Conqueror tilted her head then casually mentioned, "Don't berate yourself... I have few enemies I respect in my life... you're among the few."

Gabrielle blinked then suddenly stopped walking, which caused the Conqueror to stop too after a few paces.

The ruler turned her head to the rebel leader at the edge of the guard circle. She lifted a curved eyebrow.

"I still don't know whether to be flattered or insulted," murmured the bard, who shook her head and started walking again.

The Conqueror kept her small laugh internal. "It's easier to be flattered."

Gabrielle had no response as she silently returned to the jailhouse. When they came to the door that was opened by Karis and the other guard, she stopped and faced the ruler. "I guess tomorrow will be your big day."

The ruler rolled her eyes. "I'm absolutely ecstatic," she commented dryly.

Gabrielle unexpectedly grasped the Conqueror's strong arm then said, "Hey it might just work out."

The Conqueror faltered under the gentle, warm touch but she came back to herself. "I hope for my mother's sake it does."

Gabrielle released her hold after realizing what she was doing. "I hope so too," she murmured then watched as the Conqueror started for the open jail door.

The Conqueror paused in the doorway then turned to the rebel. "Thank you for the walk... Gabrielle." She then vanished into the flickering light of the jail as the guards rushed in at once.

Gabrielle released a long breath then to nobody she murmured, "You're welcome." She then lowered her head and made her way back to the hut. She was exhausted physically and mentally after today, her thoughts well wearing her out on many levels. Tomorrow would prove to be another trying day.

Chapter 14 - The Split

Melinda Pappas was abruptly jolted from her dreams when there was a loud pounding on the doors. She threw her bed sheets off and adjusted her white nightshift before throwing on a black silk robe that rested close by. When the second set of knocks came, she threw open the door. "What is it?"

The torchlight from the hallway flickered of the fearful features of Nakia. "My liege, I'm sorry to wake you but..." She glanced over her shoulder at the guard at the prisoner's bedchambers at the other end.

The Conqueror followed her gaze then hastily clipped, "What's happened?"

The Egyptian slave folded her arms over her stomach to keep her robe in place. "Janice woke up from a nightmare, she's hysterical... one of the guards woke Theresa and I but we can't get her to calm down." She saw the darkening features of the ruler so she poured out the rest, "She was saying some woman's name... Mel... Melinda or something then she demanded to see you. I sent one of the guards to get the healer to sedate her."

The Conqueror stepped out of the room then closed the door as she ordered, "I will take care of her. Tell the healer to belay the orders. Get the guard back here."

Nakia stepped back then bowed her head. She turned and ran down the hall with her robe flowing and her sandals echoing down the hall.

The Conqueror briskly walked down the long hallway as she tied off her robe. Her heart pounded as she shoved the door open to the bedchambers. Instantly her ears were filled by Janice's cracking, raw voice off to the left. She turned her head to see the archeologist curled up in a chair and Theresa kneeling down and trying to comfort her.

Theresa recognized the great ruler so she stood up, her worried eyes leveling with the Conqueror's. "I tried to... I'm sorry, my liege." She bowed her head.

"Leave us," clipped the ruler. "Take Nakia with you when she returns." She pivoted on her feet, her metallic eyes flashing as she watched the slave leave the room. When the door shut, she took Theresa vacant spot in front of the small, huddled archeologist. "Janice?" she called. She heard the quiet sobs despite Janice had her face buried in her knees and body.

At that moment, Hu appeared from the shadows and sat beside the chair. He rested his large head on the armchair as his reflecting eyes stared up at the huddled blond.

Melinda carefully extended her hand and lightly touched the archeologist's closets,

heavily scabbed up leg. "Come on, Janice... it's me." Finally she had a glimpse of Janice's face, which was bright red like her eyes and her face completely moist from crying. And the fear, Melinda had never seen such fear in all her life. "Ooo god," cracked Melinda's voice and she stood up but stayed hunch over. She snaked her arms between Janice and the chair and managed to heft the small woman into her arms.

Janice had never displayed any weakness towards her friend. She felt so lost as the nightmare still attacked her mind. She clung to the solid, strong body that carried her across the room.

Melinda easily got them onto Janice's disheveled bed and she sat down at the head. She worked Janice onto her lap as she sat Indian style. Janice's face was hidden under her chin then Janice's legs were wrapped around her waist. She tangled her fingers into Janice's short hair while her other arm was around Janice's back. She closed her eyes and whispered comforting words to her friend.

Hu had moved over too, he now sat at the side of the bed, and his head rested on the bed. He stared at the women holding one another.

Janice's body trembled and her hold on Melinda was almost life threatening. Her eyes were on fire and her throat ached from all her cries. She tried to suppress the nightmare and the memories that surfaced too. It was too real as the dagger cut her skin again, Rhodes's rotting carcass still filled her nostrils, and this time she thought she was undergoing the water torture instead of the woman she witnessed.

Melinda kissed the top of Janice's head. She soothingly ran her fingers up and down Janice's back. "Let it go, Janice... you're safe here." Her rapid heartbeat wasn't settling though, which she knew wouldn't until Janice was okay. "It's just you and me... ain't nobody else." Melinda's accent was warm and inviting. "Just let it out."

Janice's breathing was becoming slightly regular. Her chest slowing and her sobs fewer. After awhile, she withdrew her face from Melinda's neck and angrily wiped her tears away from her face.

Melinda leaned back some then used her right hand to tenderly wipe the tears away from her friend's face. She displayed a warm, tender smile despite her eyes were full of sadness. "Are ya okay?"

Janice couldn't talk but she nodded.

Melinda tried to neaten up some of Janice's messy hair. "Ya really get bad bedhead with this hairstyle."

Janice broke into a laugh then a few tears slipped past again.

Melinda sighed but she had a faint grin as she wiped the new tears away. "Ya really scared me."

"I'm sorry," came Janice's cracked voice.

"No," whispered Melinda, who leaned in to kiss her friend's cheek. "Nottin' to be sorry about."

There was a subtle whine next to them, which caused them both to turn their heads in the direction.

Janice slightly smiled at the tiger and she bent over so she could place a tender kiss to the tiger's head. She then ruffled his furry head up and in return he bumped his cold nose against her retreating cheek. When she straightened up again, her eye contact was lowered to the small space between her and Melinda. "Mel?"

"Yes?" The translator dipped her head so she could get some view of her friend's face.

"Thank you." The archeologist raised her head up as she smiled sadly. "You didn't have-" She was stopped by the finger against her lips.

"No, don't ya say it." The linguist lowered her hand until her fingertips were under Janice's chin, tilting her head up. "I wanted to, Janice Covington. Everybody can't be strong all the time."

"I know," murmured the archeologist. She slipped her right hand into Melinda's and their hands locked together in their laps. "Its just I was doing fine... no damn nightmares and now...." She shook her head.

"They're surfacing," concluded the southerner.

"I think so," agreed Janice.

Melinda bit the inside of her lip. "Just try not to think about any of it when you go back to sleep."

The archeologist recoiled as she shook her head. "I can't... I don't want to go back to sleep. I..." Her tears started to brim at her eyes and she was withdrawing from the resurfacing nightmares. "She continues to torture me in my dreams, Mel," she emotionally rasped.

Melinda became obviously upset as her friend started to break down again. "Janice, its okay... I swear."

"No... she'll... I don't want to die." Janice became another person when her memories engulfed her feverishly.

"Janice, you're okay... she's ain't here."

Janice grabbed Melinda's sides and frantically shook her head. "If you leave though she'll show up, Mel."

The translator was shocked by her friend's words. She grabbed Janice's hands into her own and promised, "I ain't going anywhere, Janice."

"Don't leave me alone, Mel... please."

Melinda cupped Janice's smaller hands easily into one of hers. She reached up with her freehand to wipe the fresh tears away. "I ain't leavin', Janice." She realized what was happening as the nightmare and memories still plagued her friend's safety. She then started to move and slipped out of the bed but Janice grabbed at her.

"Mel-"

"Sssh it's okay." Melinda reached out and pulled the small woman into her arms. She settled the archeologist against her body then sensed a small but strong arm locked around her chest and over her left shoulder. She glanced down at Hu and arched an eyebrow at him in question.

Hu stood up then strolled over to the door, his tail swooshing back and forth.

Melinda walked over to the door, closed her eyes, and when her eyes opened again her body and mind were consumed. "Guards, open the door."

A guard hastily shoved the door open for the ruler and he was stunned to see the prisoner in the ruler's arms. He stepped aside when the Conqueror came out with the tiger following behind.

"Follow me," she ordered the guards. She went down the hall until she reached her bedchambers at the other end of the hall. She commanded them to stay posted at her bedroom door then she kicked the door open. Hu entered first and she looked at the guards with a frozen stare. "See that you hold your tongues about tonight or else I'll cut them out myself."

"Yes, my liege," replied a guard.

After the Conqueror was in her bedroom, she kicked the door shut then hurried over

to her large bed.

Janice's quiet sobs were settling again as she released Melinda. She sunk into a cool but soft bed then the sheets were drawn over her.

Melinda took a quick second to disrobe then came around to the other side. She crawled into the bed under the sheets then shifted closer behind her friend.

Janice was trying to gain some sense of control again. She dried her face with her hands then turned on her back to see Melinda next to her. She now rolled onto her left side just as Melinda drew her in close.

The linguist kissed Janice's forehead then adjusted the sheets over them. She tightly wrapped Janice up against her body, in her arms, and legs. She sensed that Janice was finally coming back. "Ya going to be okay, Janice?"

The archeologist pressed her hand against Melinda's chest then whispered, "Yea... I'm sorry."

"I told ya, there ain't nottin' to worry about." The southerner soothingly rubbed her friend's back. "I'm just gonna have fun explainin' this later."

Janice grinned a little then lifted her head to meet Melinda's gaze in the dark room. "Is this apart of your... seduction plan, Mel?" She pleasantly watched as both eyebrows rose up on Melinda's face. She then thought it best to leave that one alone so she asked, "Where's Hu?"

Melinda sat up some then felt a new weight at the foot of the bed. She glanced down to see the large tiger stretching out across the foot of the bed.

Janice felt it too so she peered down and quietly laughed. "Typical cats."

Hu heard the remark so he flicked his tail at Janice's covered feet then snuggled his face into his paws.

"Come on, try to go to sleep," softly prompted the southerner.

Janice settled back into the warm, long body next to hers. She tried to remain calm and settled even though she was scared of her nightmares returning tonight.

"I'll be right here," promised Melinda.

"I know... thank you." Janice tried to return to her usual gruff attitude to help her. She closed her eyes and the emotional night was spent on her. She slowly passed over into

her dreams after half an hour.

Melinda though, her eyes closed, stayed awake for longer. She considered her friend's plausible nightmares and what could be done later down the road. The nightmares hadn't shown up at all in the past few days but now they were suddenly and it wasn't a good sign. She also would have to contend with the rumors that would arise tomorrow from Janice being in her bedchambers. The guards wouldn't talk but certainly Nakia and Theresa would especially once they come looking for Janice in the morning and she's not in her bedchambers. Well Melinda decided it would have to wait tomorrow because there wasn't much that could be done tonight.

In the early morning, Janice was aroused by the distant sound of the yelling and clanging noise. She woke up to an empty bed even minus Hu. She was startled at first but realized she was in the Conqueror's bedchambers. She climbed out of bed then immediately noticed the nightstand by the bed had her leathers folded there. She only had on a nightshift that Nakia had provided her with several days back.

Again the voices and noise filtered to Janice from a specific direction then something caught her eye. She suddenly grinned.

Hu had his head poked through the curtains that led to the balcony. He saw his human friend awake finally but he turned back out onto the balcony.

Janice was curious as that was the location of the sounds so she hastily put on her leathers but padded outside without her boots. She spotted Hu laying on the floor and warming his body in the morning sun. Janice though went to the marble rail and peered down at the fortress's grounds.

"Come on, attack!" commanded the Conqueror. Her sword was over her head and at the ready, a wild grin showing her enjoyment.

Suddenly the ten soldiers charged in after the ruler.

The Conqueror laughed then her battle cry filled the air as she spun her sword around to catch each soldier's blade with ease. She give one an abrupt kick his chest, sending him on his back then she slashed her sword at another soldier's stomach, just catching him. She then dodged a sword swipe meant for her face.

The Conqueror kept moving so fast, her laugh or warcry coming to life at certain attacks. She felt so alive as her body anticipated every move of the soldiers. Her ears pounded with the soldiers' frantic heartbeats and the ravish thrill to win the battle took her over.

Janice was entranced by the flawlessness of her friend's unknown abilities. She'd seen

Melinda fight Ares back in the tomb, which was stunning in itself but this was different. She wasn't a bard but she knew that Melinda was poetic with every calculated move she performed. It shook her to realize that Melinda hadn't learned any of this and this was natural for Melinda, like it was for Xena.

The Conqueror efficiently had all the soldiers disarmed, beaten, and on the ground with ragged breathing. She spun around and eyed the ten men with absolute disgust. "I've seen kids fight better than you." Her cold gaze leveled to the squad leader then she pointed her sword at him. "See that you better train them, dekarchos or next time I'll have your head."

The dekarchos, or squad leader, bowed his head then ordered his men to get up.

The dark ruler spun her sword as she saw the next squad coming for exercise.

Janice was amazed and she was curious to see this more up close and personal. She rushed back into the bedchambers and quickly got cleaned up and ready. "Hu, come on, boy." She called for him and was happy to see him loyally following her out of the bedchambers.

The two guards stiffened up when the prisoner came out of the Conqueror's quarters.

"Hey," started Janice, "can you fellas take me down to the grounds? Where the Conqueror is training the squads?"

The guards exchanged looks, shrugged, and started down the hallway. It wasn't long when the guards had the prisoner out of one of the side doors of the fortress and strolling onto the grounds towards the exercising ruler. Janice stopped several yards away and her hand instinctively ran up and down Hu's back when he sat beside her.

The Conqueror clipped another soldier's arm then kicked a third in the stomach. Her laugh rang loudly then she shot up into the air, flipped around, and landed neatly behind the soldiers. She slashed her sword at their unguarded backs, which effectively took some of them down. By then the five remaining guards weakly charged the Conqueror, who no sooner disarmed them and bruised them all over.

The Conqueror remained tall but her burning eyes fell on the squad leader. "Better," she commented, "but they require more training."

The dekarchos bowed his head in agreement yet he was relieved at the Conqueror's assessment. He then ordered his men to get up then got them out of the grounds and into the city.

The Conqueror watched them go momentarily then she spun her sword. She sheathed

it with the distinct scraping filling the silent grounds. She then turned her head to the prisoner.

Janice inhaled sharply as she became entranced by the Conqueror's slow walk towards her. Earlier Janice had become enthralled by precision and dangerous beauty behind her friend's abilities but now she was captured by the raw power flowing from her as she neared her.

The Conqueror loomed over the prisoner, her grin very ravishing. "Follow me to my office," she ordered.

All Janice could do was nod. She then fell into step behind her friend as they entered back into the fortress with Hu at her side and the guards behind her.

The Conqueror did not speak but led the way through the fortress. The energy in her was flowing from her body in every direction and her mind was lost of much thought. Her carnal instincts from the fighting were still controlling her purely. When Janice and the tiger were in the office, she ordered the guards to stay posted at the doors.

Janice tilted her head as she watched her friend go to the large window to the left of the office. The heavy curtains had been drawn back some time ago so the morning sun splashed brightly into the room and made the tall woman glow in gold. Janice was breathing heavier than expect but she quietly neared her friend. "That was really... amazing."

Hu followed Janice a few steps then stopped and sat down. He watched as his human friend closed in the distance to the much taller woman.

The archeologist stood next to her friend, her eyes peering up at the tense yet quiet woman. "You really... dominated them." She stiffened when her friend turned to her and blazing sapphires were clawing into her. She was suddenly afraid that maybe this wasn't Melinda after all.

The Conqueror vanished in a quick movement and she easily shoved the smaller woman back against the corner of the wall and window. She roughly pressed her body against Janice's and pinned her, she lowered her head and sneered, "I'll show you dominance."

Janice grabbed at the Conqueror's arm that was pressed tightly against her body. A strong hand at her bare stomach held her against the wall but before she could protest anything, her lips were forcefully taken by a carnal kiss that willed her to give in without a chance.

The Conqueror took away all of Janice's strength and she felt the small woman give

into her rein. She broke the violent kiss just as small hands held onto her hips for support. She leaned in again for another searing kiss that caused Janice to moan in partial protest and passion. "Don't... fight it," she growled between the kissing, her hand sliding up Janice's scabbed stomach.

Janice slightly broke away and she moved her head in objection. "No," she rasped. Her right hand shot up to grab the large wrist near her stomach, trying to desperately to halt the hand's movement up her stomach.

The Conqueror leered at the archeologist's resistance because it fueled her hungry. With her freehand, she turned Janice's face back to her then sensually whispered, "You want this, Janice." She lowered her head so that her burning lips glazed over Janice's, her tongue tentatively running over Janice's sealed lips. "You feel this power... this Darkness too." She now moved her lips across Janice's as she purred, "We both want this, Janice."

Janice's control was lost in another dominating kiss but her body trembled when the Conqueror's earlier freehand found its way to her inner thigh. This sparked resistance into her and she jerked out of the kiss as she angrily demanded, "No!"

The Conqueror deeply laughed then pressed her body harder so that Janice couldn't move anymore. She leaned in again while whispering, "You're resistance is only making it more wild." Her voice was husky as she hotly added, "Keep resisting... come on," she rumbled deeply.

Janice gritted her teeth as she knew those last words were true. She suddenly released the wrist she'd been pushing down on then she murmured, "I know you won't do this... Melinda." Just as she felt those perfect, full lips touch hers they were idle against hers. She had her eyes closed and waiting for the final surrender if it was demanded of her. The large hand on her stomach slipped away as did the one on her thigh. Janice twisted stomach now calmed and she warmly whispered, "Come on, Mel. Come back to me." Then suddenly that feral power that'd been pulsing from her friend had vanished. The heavy weight of her friend quickly slumped against her in some subtly defeat.

Absolutely relief washed through the archeologist and she hastily pulled her friend into an embrace that would be needed by now. "It's okay, Mel... everything is fine."

Melinda Pappas came back to her body in a matter of heartbeats. Her emotions flooded her as she realized what'd happened between her and Janice and what could have happened. It wasn't long before tears built up in her eyes and she hoarsely murmured, "I'm sorry, Janice."

"It's okay... it's okay, I swear." Janice tightly held onto her friend. "We're fine..."

nothing to get upset about."

Melinda locked her eyes tightly together as she tried to gain momentum of her raging emotions. Her face was buried into Janice's hair and she clung to the small woman- a complete contrast to earlier.

Janice inwardly sighed at how closed that had been. She waited for the southerner to gain some self control before saying anything again. She then lifted her head, which made linguist also raise her head up. "Mel, you want to sit down?"

Melinda only agreed by a nod. Her hand was laced through by Janice's and she was unknowingly guided across the floor to the center of the office where the couch, wood table, and couple of chairs rested. She was softly told to sit, which she did then her hollow eyes filled with Janice's concerned features.

"Mel, come on... its okay now. Nothing happened."

Melinda swallowed hard as she ran her longer fingers through her hair. "I... I could have... I would have hurt ya, Janice."

"You didn't though, Mel," urged the worried archeologist. She gathered Melinda's larger hands into her own. "What happened?"

The linguist's head was bent forward as her emotions kept raging through her. She slowly lifted her head, her eyes filled by worry and fear. "It's called battle lust."

Janice's face screwed up with confusion, her mouth slightly open as if she was going to speak but she had no words.

"I was in control," whispered Melinda, "but I ain't... its hard to explain, Janice."

"Is this apart of the split that Yakut was talking about?"

"Yes, it is," agreed Melinda. "At some points I don't know who I am. I... I was caught up... by the battle lust." Her breathing grew heavy by her fears.

"Mel, its okay," assured Janice and she squeezed her friend's hands harder. "We'll work you through this." She tilted her head then curiously asked, "What is battle lust?"

Melinda swallowed as she prepared to explain the consuming sensation. "It is an overwhelming feeling a warrior gets when they're fighting especially if the fight is close to death."

"It sounds a lot like an adrenaline rush," murmured the thoughtful archeologist.

"I reckon so." Melinda lifted her head some. "I'm sorry, Janice."

The small woman shook her head and squeezed her friend's warm, large hands tighter. "Mel, it's okay. You're under a lot of pressure here.... I'm sorry I didn't see it sooner." She frowned in disappointment at herself. "I need to be there for you more."

Melinda finally had her head up and she held her friend's eyes. "We need to be there for each other."

Janice softly smiled at this, her features lighter now. "You're right."

"If there's a next time, Janice... then say my name sooner."

The archeologist tilted her head to the right then gently asked, "It snapped you out of it huh?"

"Yes," came the still hoarse voice of the linguist.

"Mel?" Janice could tell though that her friend wouldn't meet her gaze, her focus distant and fuzzy. She squeezed Melinda's hands then gently called, "Melinda?"

Melinda Pappas returned to the present and sadly smiled at her friend.

Janice release one of Melinda's hand then placed her palm against Melinda's cheek. "I don't think you trust yourself with this... this split and battle lust but I do trust you." She leaned in and lightly kissed Melinda's forehead then murmured, "I trust you with my life, Melinda." She pulled back and observed the surfaced emotions on Melinda's face and in her eyes. Janice knew she'd calmed many of her friend's fears by those simple words. "Come on." She got up and hauled Melinda to her feet. "I know you have stuff to do."

"What will you do today?" inquired Melinda, her hands now freed.

The archeologist shrugged. "I'm feeling a bit cooped up now."

"I know." Melinda had been considering this for some time now. She was trying to work out a way to free Janice from this predicament without causing too much of a stir. "Lao Ma might be able to get you out of the fortress for a bit."

Janice had questioning features but she nodded. "Let me know... I think I'm gonna get my guards to give me a tour of the fortress." She casually walked over to Hu, her yawning protector. "Minus the dungeons," she muttered.

The southerner studied the tiger and a question came to mind but Janice was the one to say it.

"And why didn't you protect me, ooo lazy hairball?" teased the archeologist.

Hu was lying down on the cold floor and he flicked his tail at Janice. He blinked, looked at Melinda then tilted his head back up to Janice. He then got up and rubbed his large head against Janice's closest leg.

Janice huffed yet she smiled and ran her fingers through his coat. "I guess he trusts you too, Mel." She glanced over at her friend. "You're the only one that doesn't."

The linguist sighed because she knew her friend was right. She straightened out her shoulders as her next step towards Janice brought her into another mind set. "Guards?" She called out.

The guards pressed into the room after swinging a door open.

"Yes, my liege?" The speaking guard bowed his head followed suit by his comrade.

The Conqueror strolled past Janice and bee lined for the nervous guards. "Take the prisoner on a tour of the fortress. See that you bring her back here by Helios high."

"Aye, my liege," agreed the quiet guard.

Janice came over with Hu tailing behind her. "So where to first, fellas?" Her grin was broad and held amusement like her eyes.

The sentries exchanged glances, said nothing, and shuffled out of the office.

The Conqueror stepped aside as Janice passed her but her right hand shot out and caught Janice's left arm to stop her.

The archeologist wavered under the powerful touch and she questioningly peered up at her friend.

The Conqueror leaned down then her usually steel voice came out warm. "Thank you, Janice." She then released the prisoner as she straightened back up.

Janice didn't make a show of it so she only nodded then left the office with her furry protector. When the office door was closed, she exhaled in relief from finally getting some space from her friend. It wasn't so much how it'd happened between her and Melinda but that it happened and worse, Janice loved it. Oh it's only been more years

than you can count since you've been kissed like that, Janice, inwardly blamed the archeologist. The memory from only a few minutes ago flooded her and she shivered at the thought of Melinda's lips against hers again. She urged the feelings away then came back to the present with a silly grin on her face. "Well I know this damn fortress is big so where to first?"

The guards glanced at one another again then one stepped forward to take the initiative. "Follow us." He wasn't sure what to call her but he turned along with his partner and they led the way to the first level. The tour would begin outside with the grounds, small barrack, and wall.

The Conqueror returned to her desk and started her usual daily reports. She hated this aspect of rulership yet it was required and needed if her realm was to succeed. She didn't trust anybody else to do the work or to do it correctly. She started with the proposal from Cyd about the Corinth Canal and the healer aide that was required to help the workers. She'd need to get it finished and decided on by the midday when her advisor would show up for an answer.

Just as the Conqueror finished going over the proposal scroll, there was a gentle knock at her door. She dropped the scroll on the desk with a thunk then called out, "Enter."

Lao Ma soon glided through the entrance and closed the door behind her. Her smile at the ruler was gentle and her face showed no deception. "Good morning, Melinda."

Melinda rose up from her desk and approached the Chin ruler. "How are ya, Ma?"

Lao Ma bowed her head then lifted it again. "I am well. I see you continue the Conqueror's work...?"

Melinda glanced back at the covered desk then she nodded at the smaller, oriental woman. "Yes, unless I want people to wonder."

Lao Ma's lips tugged with a faint smile. "It is wise... perhaps you can correct much of what she's done."

"Very subtly, yes."

"I would like to request that I may have a tour of Corinth today and that Janice joins me."

Melinda now smiled for once. "I reckon Janice would like that."

"It would do her well to get out of the fortress."

Melinda nodded her head in agreement. "I will order an escort with you." She considered something then added, "I will have my assistant, Galen, lead you. He does well with the city's history." She then had a wide grin. "Then tonight we'll follow the Conqueror's tradition for a banquet."

Lao Ma bowed her head then lifted it again. "As you wish, Melinda."

Melinda chuckled but she kept her grin. "If I can't make use of all her powers and luxury then what is left?"

The Chin ruler followed the line of thought as she turned to the door. "Then there would be nothing else."

"Mmmm," agreed the linguist. "I will send Janice to your room when she returns. I reckon she'll finish her tour soon."

"That is fine." Lao Ma went through the door that Melinda had opened. "Thank you, Melinda."

Melinda nodded then watched the small yet powerful woman she'd recently befriended. She was relieved to have Lao Ma's support and understanding during all this chaos and mix up. She hadn't expected the help but it was very welcoming for both her and Janice. She finally closed the door then returned to her desk work.

By that late evening, the promised banquet had gone into full swing when Helios set in the low west sky. The great ruler of much of the known-world was seated at her throne, poised at perfection, and lavished in a beautiful red silk dress made from the finest in Chin. The pattern was very much oriental with gold stitching, her hair twisted up behind her head and pinned by decorative, gold chopsticks, and the gown was form fitting yet long enough to just cover her feet. On her showing chest she bore the finest sapphire known in her realm that reflected her eyes perfectly. She was truly the Conqueror of her lands.

At the floor of the court, which had been conveniently converted to a banquet hall with food, there stood the bowing ruler of Chin. She wore a matching outfit to the Conqueror's minus the significant necklace but she was very much the Conqueror's counterpart.

The Conqueror's hawk eyes scanned the faces of the masses at the various tables until she found the one she was looking for above all. Seated at the back was the prisoner, who looked anything but the role as a Chin style dress had been fashioned for her earlier today. Janice's dress was pure red silk with no sleeves, a small collar around her neck, a teardrop opening over her chest, and slits running down either sides

starting at her thighs. On the bottom portion of the dress, there was the beautiful design of the Chin phoenix from their famous tales. Even from her distant spot, Janice's red dress brought out her glittering sea green eyes and highlighted her new hairstyle.

The Conqueror finally rose up from her throne with her robed dress pouring out around her feet. She bowed her head to Lao Ma, who lifted her head in unison to the Conqueror's. She inhaled then loudly announced, "Tonight we celebrate the House of Lao in Corinth... in my realm." She observed all the advisors, wealthy, higher officers, and stationed guards. "Welcome Lady Lao as I have welcomed her."

Lao Ma respectfully dipped her head then remained still.

The Conqueror glided down the steps then on the final step, she stopped, and held out her hand.

Lao Ma kept her head bowed but she took the offered hand from the great ruler. As soon as the Conqueror's feet met the floor of the court, she rose her head up and gave a warm smile to the Conqueror.

The Conqueror mirrored the smile back then escorted her guest to the head table where many of her head advisors and officers awaited her arrival. Lao Ma took the chair to the right of where the Conqueror sat, who was at the head of the table. Once the Conqueror sat, the court suddenly exploded with chatter and the movement of the slaves to serve dinner.

The dinner was a lavish feast and the food was a meeting of the east and the west. Lao Ma found her usual dishes from home and absolutely new dishes that were traditional to Greece. She'd come to discover and enjoy an interesting cheese that the Conqueror explained was called feta. The Conqueror made a mental note of the Chin ruler's enjoyment and would later order some feta to be gifted to Lao Ma on her return trip home.

After the large meal, the desserts followed suit not long afterwards but the wine kept flowing through as a river. At some point, the Conqueror paused in her idly chatter and stole a view of the prisoner so far away. She could tell by Janice's body language that she was tense and uneasy so she would have to remedy that at first chance.

Janice Covington was relieved that Hu was lying near her feet, under the table. She would stop at some points and toss him hidden pieces of meat, which he was grateful for. She'd come accustomed to the people around her table despite they were mostly ignoring her except for one.

The aristocratic person at the table, who did not ignore Janice, sat across from the

table. It was one of the faction followers, Argus, and he tried not to overly talk to Janice as it would certainly tip somebody off but he kept a steady gaze on her.

"So, are you related to that rebel... Gabrielle?" inquired a woman from across the table. She sat next to Argus but her husband was to her left.

Janice lost her appetite when everybody's eyes switched to her. She pushed her plate away some so she'd have a second to think of a decent response. "I am but very distantly."

The woman assessed Janice's features and certainly took in the fact she had a lot of scabbed wounds and bruises. "I am surprised the Conqueror let you live much less let you dine with us." Her tone was edgy and held disgust, her eyes very judgmental.

Janice's temper flared up a notch but she was clamping her jaw tightly.

Hu detected the shift as his head came up from his paws, not that anybody could really see this but Janice felt him move around.

"The Conqueror and I have come to an understanding," drew out the archeologist.

"She means she provides services," emphasized a man at the table, "to the Conqueror." His statement was followed by some laughter.

"What confuses me," brought up that same woman again, "is why she would want such an unnatural's... services?" Her face was screwed up by repulsion. "Surely I thought she had better taste than... this." She pointed at the prisoner then leaned back as if sickened by the prisoner's very presence.

Janice Covington never backed away from any fight so she quickly stood up, her hands on the edge of the table, and she was bent over the table. Just as her mouth opened so that she could chew out this woman, strong hands clasped her shoulders then a dark, grounding voice filled the void.

"I do have better taste because if I did not, I would have chosen your services , Nysa."

Janice's anger mostly calmed but it wasn't gone yet, but she watched in complete satisfaction as that woman, Nysa, reacted as if she'd been slapped across the face.

"My liege," defensively spoke Nysa's husband, who rose up.

The Conqueror lifted her chin some as her cold eyes froze the aristocratic husband. "See that you teach your wife to play nicely, Jason." Slowly her hungry grin spread out over her face as her stare went to Nysa. She then purred out, "Unless she prefers to

experience... my services to correct her manners for treatment of my guests."

"It will not happen again," hastily relented Jason. "I apologize, my liege."

"I do not require your apology, Jason." The Conqueror released the prisoner's shoulders then held out her right hand to Janice's leaning profile. "Perhaps Nysa would be so kind to apologize to Janice."

Nysa swallowed but the ruler's threatening features told her it was best to act quickly. She rose up from her chair, bowed, and stated, "I apologize for my words... Janice."

The ruler pleasantly smiled now despite her eyes were still hard. "Very good, Nysa." Her smile quickly fell as she threateningly whispered, "See that this occurrence does not repeat."

"It will not," promised Jason. He quietly ordered his wife to sit and his mood showed that his wife would most likely hear a long lecture from him later. He too took his seat again.

The Conqueror reached for the back of Janice's chair and moved it aside, one of the chair's legs almost catching Hu's tail that'd flopped out of the way in time.

Janice turned to her friend and savior with appreciative features. She could also tell that the Conqueror had something else in mind by that glint in those deep cobalt eyes.

"Janice, I would be honored if you... serviced me to begin tonight's dancing." The Conqueror held out her right hand in offer.

The archeologist was hesitant at first but slowly she lifted her hand and clasped the warm hand into hers. "Yes... of course, Conqueror." Her stomach knotted when the Conqueror's cat like grin appeared instantly to her response.

Everybody at the table was goggling at the pair as they never imagined the Conqueror beginning a banquet's dancing with another woman much less a prisoner and enemy. They kept staring in astonishment as the Conqueror led the petite, finely dressed woman to the open dance floor before all the tables. This drew the crowds' complete interest and they never fathomed such a controversial scene.

The Conqueror signaled the musician to begin in any heartbeat as she turned to Janice with her right hand up.

Janice stepped up and slipped her hand into the Conqueror's then she sensed a strong arm slip around her small waist. She knew how dancing work even though she wasn't the best but she just prayed her friend would lead as she couldn't do this otherwise.

The Conqueror pulled Janice in closer just as the music began. "I couldn't think of a better way to stir up trouble."

Janice had a grin as her body started to move with the Conqueror's with such ease. "You did an excellent job, I think." She signaled, with her chin, at the crowd just memorizing them.

"Ah yes." The Conqueror stole a quick look then whispered, "I believe I have... how perfect." She suddenly pushed away from Janice and spun her with beauty. She then coiled Janice back against her body then lowered her head close. "You look absolutely amazing, Janice."

Janice chuckled then whispered back, "Do not get use to me in dresses." Her feet and hips followed the ruler's to perfection as it was almost too easy.

"But you make it look so exquisite," purred the Conqueror's sensual voice. She drew away from her dancing partner at the right beat then brought her back as they glided across the dance floor.

"Are we back to your plans to seduce me?" toyed the teasing voice of the archeologist.

The Conqueror gracefully spun Janice around then pulled her back in but surprisingly with Janice's back across her front side. Her left arm was wrapped around Janice's waist and she brought her lips down to Janice's delicate ear. "And do I really need to seduce you, Janice Covington?" She slowly pulled her wrapped hand away from Janice's stomach, her touch so lingering and smooth across Janice's stomach. "Or are you just enjoying the wait until I take you?" she suddenly slipped away but not without breaking her clasped hand with Janice's.

The daze archeologist came back to the dance as her and the Conqueror met halfway and continued the sensual dance that was displayed to all. Her mind slightly woke up from the sexual haze between her and her friend and she tried to figure out if this was Melinda or the Conqueror she was dancing with now. As she considered it deeper, this was really both of them but always in the end it was Melinda.

The Conqueror's body moved across the petite woman's and the music made her feel alive. The song's end was near so she twirled Janice away moved a few steps then brought Janice back to her. "For once you have nothing to say, Janice?" Her eyes were glowing brighter than the sapphire on her neck ever could.

Janice leaned in close as she breathed, "I think a tiger has my tongue." Her joke wasn't lost on her friend as the Conqueror's face came down closer to hers.

The Conqueror had a wild grin spreading over her face. "Not yet." Her head lowered more as the music was slowing down and so were they. "You do trust me, Janice?" she silken whisper went into Janice's left ear but she pulled back some to capture Janice's gaze.

Janice freed her right hand from the Conqueror's hip and touched it against her closest cheek. She knew she could easily break this spell by saying Melinda's name but she wouldn't risk it, not here. She also understood what was being asked of her in this very instant and her eyes showed her answer as her voiced response came out very precise. "I trust you with... everything... Conqueror."

The Conqueror sensed the closing of the song so she closed in the distance.

Janice's eyes slipped shut just before the Conqueror's full and silky lips met hers. She moaned softly between the kiss that was so shattering of all her senses. This kiss was far different than the ones they'd had in the office this morning and it was only tinted by hunger but covered in passion for each other. The hushed voices of the masses were blacked out by the intensity behind the Conqueror's searching tongue and warm lips.

The Conqueror held Janice tightly against her body then as she drew back from the kiss that brought Janice's tongue with hers. She ended the kiss with a gentle nip to Janice's lower lip then her feral grin showed between them. "I believe we have utterly aghast the people."

"Welcome to my life, Conqueror," lightly joked the long time controversial and infamous archeologist of the 1940's.

The Conqueror softly laughed at the reference then straightened up and Janice stood beside her but their hands still holding. "Let us finish the evening, together," she called out to the masses. She held out her hand to the musician to begin a variety of songs.

The court bustled with noise again, the people getting up to find dancing partners or standing aside to watch. And of course, all the whispered talk was about the Conqueror and the prisoner loafing together so casually amongst the people instead of at least behind doors.

Hu sat on the edge of the people, his back just brushing against the table that Janice had been seat at earlier. He lifted his head when a very familiar hand went through his coat. His fire eyes softened at his friend's face.

Lao Ma smiled at him then looked at the crowd of dancers and onlookers. "It is a strange custom, Hu."

Hu flicked his tail a few times.

"Perhaps there is something I can take back to Chin." Lao Ma tilted her head to the right. "Something of it at least could be useful." Her gaze wondered over the masses and the Conqueror with Janice stood out more than anybody else. Finally something else caught her gaze, it was the dark shaman off to the right standing outside the circle. Lao Ma could tell Alti was brooding and her hatred stare was centered on the center of attention in the dancing ring.

Hu too was staring at Alti as if he was debating whether to bite her now or later.

"We must watch her carefully, Hu," warned the Chin ruler. "She will be the downfall of the Conqueror if we do not."

The tiger sighed loudly then peered up questioningly at his friend.

"She is a yao mó, Hu. We must be careful of such a demon." Lao Ma continued rubbing the tiger's head while quietly stating, "She will be sent back to Di Yu... to the Chamber of Avici so that she may never be reborn."

Hu watched the dark shaman and his friend's whispered words made perfect sense to him. He truly knew that if anybody could send that evil human to Avici it was Lao Ma. That would then pull away the dark veil over the Conqueror and over the realm.

Chapter 15 - Echoes from the Past

Melpomene smiled warmly as she took her aunt's larger hand. "Do I get to put honey on them?"

The bard grinned at the child as she closed the guest hut's door. "If you behave today," she brought up.

The girl tilted her head as she walked along side the rebel, headed for the food hut. "When have I been bad, Aunt Gabby?"

The bard relented with a smile to her face. "So far so good." Gabrielle squeezed the girl's hand in hers.

"Where is Cyrene?" questioned Melpomene.

Gabrielle considered it then honestly answered, "Cyrene went to see the Conqueror."

Melpomene fell silent, her face also dower compared to earlier. She gazed off in the direction of the jail hut, they were coming past it. Her walk went slightly slower when

she saw the jail door opening and she could see the shadowy form of somebody composed inside of the jail. For a heartbeat, she peered up at her newly claimed aunt and saw she wasn't quite paying attention.

Suddenly Melpomene released Gabrielle's hands then broke off into a run for the jail hut.

Gabrielle was shocked and hollered, "Melpomene!" She growled because there was no way she could run to catch up or yell loud enough for the guards to hear her. She tried to walk as fast as she could, which caused her a great amount of pain. She kept trying to call out to the guards across the long distance but the blustery fall's wind washed her voice out.

Melpomene dodged into the jail and ducked out of Karis's quick grab.

Cyrene had been standing by the door, about ready to leave but then she saw the child dash around her. "Melpomene," she yelled and tried to scoop her up but missed.

Melpomene was fairly agile and jumped around the woman she considered her grandmother now. She then crossed the threshold and stopped dead before the standing, dark ruler of most the known-world. Her head tilted back until she met those icy blue eyes, which made Melpomene tremble in fear yet she proudly held her ground.

The Conqueror stood rooted as she took in this powerless but courageous child.

Cyrene quickly came up behind Melpomene in a protective manner.

The Conqueror's carnal eyes flashed to her mother then back down to the child. She slowly knelt down until her predatory eyes were level with the child's. She displayed a ruthless grin at the girl. "And who are you, little girl?"

Melpomene's quaking voice stated, "You don't remember me but I remember you."

The Conqueror arched a dark eyebrow. "I've heard that many times." A brief silence hung between her and the child and the Conqueror read through the simple girl.

Melpomene inhaled deeply then in not as shaky voice declared, "I'm Melpomene." She swallowed but when Cyrene's hands touched the sides of her shoulders she pressed forward. "You raided my town and... and killed my sister."

The Conqueror's previously intimidating demeanor faltered under the child's claims. She stared deep into the girl's emotional brown eyes and the Conqueror's lost childhood swept through her.

"I want to hate you," whispered Melpomene, "For who you are and what you did to me." Her eyes burned and slowly tears tracked down her soft cheeks. "But I was told if I do that then I'll turn into you," she hoarsely murmured, "and I don't want to be anything like you."

The Conqueror's throat tightened and her seasoned strength was nothing against this

girl's powerful words.

"I won't hurt my sister's memory by hating you," emotionally whispered Melpomene. She wiped her healing tears from her cheeks then with her tear stained hand, she pressed her palm against the Conqueror's bare chest. "I forgive you, Conqueror."

The Conqueror shut her eyes tightly and her face twisted sharply. Her childhood memories swarmed her and took her many seasons back to the last heartbeats of Lyceus, the last heartbeats for Lyceus.

"No... n-n-no, Lyceus... please. It'll be okay." Xena's sword was long forgotten beside her as she cradled her small brother in her lap while on the ground. She was already coated in blood, the blood of Cortese, who she'd easily and enjoyably slain for attacking her home village.

Lyceus suddenly grabbed his sister's hand, as tightly as he could. "Xena, everything is fine," he promised. His hand was coated by deep red blood, his blood. "We did it... Amphipolis is saved," he whispered, "We protected mother... from... him."

Xena began to cry, her tears so acidic against her bloody features. "Don't talk... we'll get you to a healer." It was a lie, she knew it because there were no healers left in Amphipolis that were close enough and Xena knew nothing about healing, only killing. She swallowed and glanced down at the large open, bleeding wound in her brother's stomach.

Lyceus smiled as his sister. "I'll be fine, Xena," he gently promised in his weakening voice.

Xena's heartbeat was frantic while her brother's was slowing down. "Lyceus," she rasped in fear. "Please."

Lyceus use the last of his strength to tighten his hand against his sister's. "Promise me something, Xena?"

Xena's tears rolled faster down her bloody cheeks, the tears slipping between her lips and filling her mouth with salt and blood. "Anything, Ly... gods anything."

"If you ever get lost-

"Ly," argued Xena.

"No," interrupted the dying brother, "Listen to me." He clenched Xena's hand harder. "If you get lost then remember this moment... remember me and us." Lyceus read the shattering pain in his sister's eyes. "I will always be with you, I will hear your thoughts but you will not hear mine... so you must remember, Xena." He lifted his free hand that wasn't bloody and pressed it against his sister's rapidly beating heart. "In here, Xena. Promise me?"

Xena lowered her head down to her brother's then painfully rasped, "I promise, Lyceus... I promise." Lyceus's grip on her hand was loosening and now her brother's hand on her chest fell. Xena's tears began more threatening and she curled her body

over her brother's and started to rock. "Please no, Ly... don't leave me alone." She kissed her brother's warm yet blood stained cheek and murmured, "I love you, Ly." Finally, Lyceus's grasp was limp in her left hand and Xena drew back some. She stared at her brother's lifeless blue eyes that stared ghostly up at her.

Xena threw her head back and a shattering cry for her brother erupted from her lips.

The Conqueror broke away from her last memory of Lyceus when Melpomene's hand left her chest finally.

Melpomene saw the phantom memories wash away from the Conqueror's features. The Conqueror's eyes, for the first time, were raw with emotions and in some strange way that truly scared Melpomene more than seeing the Conqueror high on her steed with a bloody sword as she did many moons back.

Cyrene drew Melpomene into her arms. She knew something transcended within her daughter but she was unsure of what it was exactly.

Gabrielle had made it to the jail some unknown time ago and leaned heavily against the doorway for support. She'd witnessed the entire scene and all the emotions riding through the dark ruler. Her heart rate was frantic and her nerves on the edge.

Cyrene pulled the child away from the Conqueror and silently guided her away.

The Amazon guards were captivated and their nerves calmer than earlier from when the girl first snuck inside the jail.

Gabrielle tightly took Melpomene's hand while Cyrene held Melpomene's other hand. Together, they silently left the jail hut and the Conqueror to her emotions.

The Conqueror fell to her knees just when Melpomene and Melpomene's new family stepped out of the jail doorway. She slumped forward then lifted her head as she watched the backside of the family recede from her vision then the jail's door started to close, cutting off her view completely. The Conqueror suddenly fought against her wrist chains that went taught in protest, the manacles biting at her wrists. The Conqueror inhaled until her chest hurt then she closed her eyes and opened her mouth with her head back.

Cyrene, Gabrielle, and Melpomene halted and the family turned their heads to the jail hut that exploded with a heart wrenching scream of pain.

Cyrene broke into tears and turned her head to Gabrielle, who was crying too.

The Conqueror's cry echoed through the Amazon Nation and every Amazon paused in their daily activities to listen to her.

Melpomene felt fresh tears too but not for her dead family but for the Conqueror. She squeezed her grandmother and aunt's hands tighter for support.

Cyrene bent down and hefted Melpomene into her arms. She straightened up then found Gabrielle pulling them all into a long, needed hug.

The family eventually retired to the guest hut to try and settle down. A couple of candlemarks before Helios high, Cyrene left the hut with Melpomene at her side as the child was truly hungry. That left Gabrielle alone to consider this morning's unexpected events. She also was tired on a mental level, which was taxing on her physically. She sat at her desk with slumped shoulders and a worn expression.

Gabrielle slightly jumped when there was a knock at the door. She called in the person and was greeted by the Amazon Princess. Terreis told her the new developments that'd happened recently.

The rebel leader, Gabrielle, straightened up after hearing the news. "No," she breathed, "it's impossible, Terreis."

"I am afraid so." The princess crossed the distance between her and Gabrielle in the quiet guest hut. "They are here for her. We must go to the meeting... the council has put the trial on hold until this is figured out."

Gabrielle collected her walking stick from the desk then climbed to her aching feet. "Where is the meeting held?"

"I will take you." Princess Terreis hurried to the door and held it open until the rebel was outside. She then guided her new friend through the village to the meeting hut where all the bustle and gossip was located. She opened the door and let the outsider go in first then she followed next.

The meeting hut was already full of clamor as the council was at their seats, the queen at the head, and officials lining the walls. Princess Terreis and Gabrielle stole a spot along the wall and carefully listened to the opening of the meeting.

Queen Cyane stood up so that she could begin the meeting. "I called this emergency meeting because as you all know, yesterday the rebel leader, Gabrielle, had an attempt on her life. The assassin was captured and is currently locked up in a small jail hut. He has refused to say who he is and why he was attempting to assassinate Gabrielle." She stopped to take a long breath then she continued speaking. "This morning our western patrol unit was confronted by a small band of warriors, who attacked first. Luckily there were no casualties however the patrol was given a message. I received this message and it was a demand... a threat." She picked up the said scroll and held it up as she spoke again. "The warlord, Darphus, is demanding that we turn the Conqueror over to him or else he will attack the Nation. We have less than twenty-four candlemarks to decide before he attacks." When she sat down, this opened the floor to everybody and anybody.

"How in the Hades did this warlord find out about the Conqueror?" hotly demanded an Amazon, who stepped away from the wall.

Queen Cyane released a sigh at Velasca's question. "We do not know but it is obvious enough that there was a leak. Somebody in the Nation spoke about it to an outsider."

"Maybe it was one of the outsiders here that tipped this warlord off," argued Velasca.

"And risk my life?" Gabrielle limped forward twice then steadied a cold stare at her counterpart. "I don't appreciate being inferred stupid, Velasca."

"Perhaps it was that homeless child that... accidentally spoke."

"That homeless child, Melpomene, happens to be my niece," shot back the now angry bard. "And please inform me where in between the time from running from the Conqueror's wrath and playing with the kids here did she tell somebody?"

Velasca growled at the outsider.

Gabrielle didn't flinch as she'd stood up to much worse in her days. "You know, I think you're the leak, Velasca."

Velasca quickly reached up for her sword.

Princess Terreis jumped forward, between the pair, and her sword out already.

"Velasca," hotly yelled the queen, "step back!" When the furious Amazon complied, she angrily added, "Now if you two are quite finished. Let's figure out this gods-be-damned mess."

"I say we give them what they want," offered Velasca, who sheathed her sword again.

"The Hades you will," yelled Gabrielle in a fury.

Velasca turned her head to the angry rebel and pointed a finger at her. The fire was alive in her eyes more than ever. "You brought this on us! You bring your faction lies to our Nation and now we are the ones attacked because we harbor the Conqueror for your means." Velasca turned her head to the Amazon Queen. "I say we hand her over and let them serve the Conqueror her justice!"

Gabrielle's anger grew heavier as she opened her mouth to fight.

"We will not hand her over," commanded a strong voice.

Velasca's head whipped around to settle on Prince Terreis, the legendary Queen Melosa's younger sister.

Queen Cyane's eyes were narrowed as she carefully watched the typically quiet princess take a stance against Velasca. It was utterly fascinating to her.

"We will not demoralize ourselves, Velasca," chewed out the princess. "The Amazons are true and strong, we always have been and we will not stray from that. We already cower before the Conqueror but now you tell us to cower before a mere warlord?" She stepped up beside Gabrielle then leveled the Amazon with cold stare. "That Amazons will stand up against this threat like all the others in the past."

Queen Cyane dipped her head at the princess's true words. She lifted her head then stated to Velasca. "If you have a problem with Princes Terreis's words, Velasca then I suggest you leave."

Velasca had been publicly defaced before the council and many of the officials. She backed away and returned to her earlier spot against the wall but her face showed she wasn't finished.

"We should take a stand against this warlord," started Princess Terreis. "This isn't about the Conqueror... this is about the Nation. We can no longer hide in the shadows."

"The Amazon Nation is already dying," announced the only outsider, "I know because I've watched it die just like everybody else." She held everybody's attention on her. "The Amazon Nation must breathe life into itself again or else there will be nothing left but the bards' tales about a mythological race."

Queen Cyane stood up after the rebel leader spoke. Her jaw was clenched then relaxed as she asked, "Why did it take an outsider to see this?"

The hut filled with a loud murmur then settled down again.

"Let us come together," announced Queen Cyane, "and take arms once again. We will not die, Amazons." Her old strength from seasons back filled her again when the hut filled with praise for her declaration.

Gabrielle smiled and peered up at the princess.

Princess Terreis mirrored the smile, leaned over, and gratefully whispered, "Thank you, Gabrielle."

The officials remained in the meeting hut and mapped out a strategy against the new threat. Gabrielle remained there to help some but there wasn't much she could offer in the ways of warfare. She knew little to nothing but at least she knew of the plans. Afterwards, she quietly filed out of the hut with the princess at her side.

Princess Terreis came to a stop once she was clear of the crowd. She turned to the rebel. "What will you do, Gabrielle?"

The rebel shook her head then replied, "Stay here, of course."

"It is dangerous," reminded the princess. "If we are defeated... this warlord will most likely kill you and Cyrene."

"Especially if he discovers Cyrene is the Conqueror's mother," murmured the bard thoughtfully. "Why does this warlord want the Conqueror?"

"I'm not completely sure," confessed the Amazon.

Gabrielle tilted her head to the right. "Don't you find it strange that there is a warlord in Greece?" She shook her head then reminded, "The Conqueror has killed them all... at least we all thought. She keeps the peace through all the lands."

Princess Terreis nodded her agreement as she too considered this carefully. "It is

strange." She'd never realized that Greece was a peaceful state now that the Conqueror had forcefully united it. There were never any foreign attacks, warlords, kingdoms, or ruthless raids. "Maybe speak to the Conqueror about it, Gabrielle." She stepped closer so that she could keep the conversation quiet. "She may know who this Darphus is." She shook her head with a confused look. "The name seems so familiar to me."

The rebel had already planned on this but she nodded her head. "I'll speak to her right now actually. I'm sure she'll know who Darphus is." She also considered whether or not the Conqueror could provide help too especially since Darphus was adamant about having the Conqueror.

The princess clasped the outsider's shoulder then smiled sadly. "Thank you, Gabrielle." She squeezed the smaller shoulder. "I know you wished to become an Amazon as a child... perhaps one day you will wish that again." Her smile grew warmer.

Gabrielle clasped the princess's wrist then returned the smile. "Thank you, Terreis."

The princess released Gabrielle then said, "I should go. The queen will need my help to prepare for the battle tomorrow."

The rebel nodded. "Be careful."

"I will catch up with you later," promised the already moving Amazon.

Gabrielle gave a brief wave then started on her slow journey to the jail hut. When she made it, Karis opened the door then closed it after Gabrielle entered it.

Ephiny turned her head to Gabrielle then acknowledged her with a nod.

The Conqueror was silent, eyes closed, and her back ridged against the wall as she sat on the bench. She heard somebody come in and knew by the footfall and cane that it was Gabrielle. She then sensed the warm presence of the rebel taking a seat on the bench beside her.

Gabrielle knew the ruler was awake. She was slightly nervous because of earlier this morning. She clenched her left hand that was somewhat sweaty. She leaned over to the ruler, into her space, and carefully whispered, "There's a warlord here...." She trailed off when there was no immediate reaction from the ruler. "His name is Darphus." Gabrielle now found the usually haunted eyes of the ruler on her solely. "He... he knows you're here and wants you."

The Conqueror turned her head away, resting it against the wall again, and her eyes closed. "Tell them to hand me over to him."

Gabrielle blinked, surprised by the ruler's response, she peered up at the calm ruler. "They don't plan on it... they're going to fight him."

"Stupid," muttered the Conqueror, "they shouldn't."

"No," argued Gabrielle, "No not really." She fiddled with her cane then added, "The

Amazons are tired of hiding... they didn't become a great race by hiding."

The Conqueror quietly agreed because she'd even known of the Amazon Nations as a child and admired them. It was those stories, from her childhood, that first drew her to them when she came back from Chin.

"You have to help, Conqueror," gently tried the bard.

"No," whispered the ruler, her eyes now showing again.

"These are your lands," reminded Gabrielle, "He's taking up arms in your realm." She was hoping her logic worked on the ruler.

"I have no army here," reminded the ruler, "I have no weapons." She clenched her hands in her lap.

This caught Gabrielle's attention and for the first time, she noticed the bleeding wrists of the ruler. She inhaled sharply as the ruler's voice floated down to her again.

"I have nothing," coldly stated the hollow Conqueror.

Gabrielle met the Conqueror's inhuman stare and she knew the Conqueror had lost something. An ache developed deep in Gabrielle's stomach and she wanted to comfort the ruler even though it was dangerous. "If... if that's what you consider your mother now." She saw how the Conqueror turned away.

"She has you now, Gabrielle," murmured the ruler, "You're who she's always needed. I can never give her what you give her."

"No," tried the bard, "but you can give her back what she lost so long ago." When hazy blue eyes turned back to her, she tilted her head to the left then gently added, "You're always going to be her daughter in her eyes. It's just whether or not you want to be." She bit her lower lip as she left that conversation there. "At least tell me who this Darphus is."

The Conqueror locked her hands together in her lap then finally answered. "He was my second in command for part of my campaign."

"Ooo gods," murmured the drained bard. "Of course he is and now he wants revenge for something huh?"

"Probably for a few things," admitted the ruler. "He was in my army for the Thessaly Campaign."

"When you took Thebes, Athens, and Corinth," summarized the bard.

"Yes," confirmed the Conqueror. "After I took Corinth, I found he'd raped and murdered a few women." She paused when she saw the rebel cringe. "I have a zero tolerance for rape and murder so I killed the half a dozen men that'd joined him."

"Obviously you didn't kill Darphus."

"No but I see I should have," hotly whispered the ruler. "I submitted him to a mini gauntlet figuring if he did live it then he'd be defaced from military forever."

"Well," started Gabrielle, "it looks like a few people don't mind his lack of honor."

"So it would seem."

The rebel leader was silent then inquired, "Does he have any weak spots?"

The Conqueror grunted then mildly joked, "Women." Then a faint glint returned in her eyes as she coldly stated, "And me."

Gabrielle let out a sigh then got up knowing that was all she was going to get out of the ruler.

"Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle stopped and faced the Conqueror.

"You, Cyrene,... and Melpomene should go back to Corinth."

Gabrielle understood the Conqueror's underlining meaning and she was remotely shocked by it too. She kept strong though and stated, "I know when to flee and I know when not to flee." She paused then defiantly stated, "This is a time not to flee." She turned and found the door already open for her so she left.

She finally made it back to the hut to find that Cyrene and Melpomene had returned too. Cyrene was resting in a chair with Melpomene on her lap, telling her some stories. She stopped though when Gabrielle entered and she immediately knew something was wrong. She'd heard that there was a warlord just outside the Nation's borders but that was all she'd overheard.

"What's happening, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle glanced at the silent girl in Cyrene's lap then back up to Cyrene. "A warlord is here... looking for the Conqueror."

Cyrene sighed then shook her head. "How did this happen?"

Gabrielle came over and sat in the chair across from the small table. "Nobody is sure but there was some leak... word got out that she's here."

"Well obviously it was some Amazon in the Nation that let it out."

The rebel nodded then stated, "Some think it was us."

Cyrene grunted. "We're not that stupid."

"That's what I said too," agreed the rebel. "The Amazons plan to fight him."

"Who is he?" asked the mother.

Gabrielle leaned back and settled her cane onto the table. "His name is Darphus... he was the Conqueror's second in command for the Thessaly Campaign."

"What happened?" spoke up Melpomene. "Why's he want the Conqueror?"

The bard bit the inside of her lip then answered the questions. "The Conqueror got rid of him for doing some things in her army. He wants her so he can have revenge."

Melpomene frowned then stated the obvious, "To kill her."

Cyrene pulled the girl closer against her body then she turned to Gabrielle. "Did you tell Xena?"

Gabrielle nodded. "She's..." She shook her head then stared down at her hands. "I don't know, Cyrene." She looked up at her mother again. "Do you want to return to Corinth? Janice and Melinda would keep you safe."

Cyrene's eyes narrowed. "What do you plan to do?"

"Stay here," answered the bard. "I have a trial to finish." Plus she wanted to keep eye on the Conqueror.

Cyrene felt a sense of fear about leaving Gabrielle and her daughter here. She'd backed away from so many fights before in her life and never supported any of them. She'd lost children over this in her past. She finally shook her head then stated, "I plan to stay." She then peered down at the girl in her arms. "You however," she said while squeezing Melpomene, "Are going back to Corinth."

"I am not," declared the defiant child. "I won't leave... not again." She slipped out of Cyrene's lap and stood to face her protective family. "I won't keep running... you can't make me go."

Cyrene glanced over at Gabrielle with a sad grin on her face.

Gabrielle huffed at the mocking expression on Cyrene's face. She remembered when she'd said very similar words as a kid too. She sighed then patted her lap. "Come here, Melpomene."

The girl came over and was lifted into her aunt's lap. "You won't make me go, right?"

"You can stay as long as you listen to whatever Cyrene or I tell you." Gabrielle curiously studied the girl's bright eyes. "If we have to run then we have to run, okay?"

Melpomene nodded her head several times. "Okay... I promise."

"Alright." Gabrielle hugged the child then relaxed back in the chair.

"Can't Melinda help?" tried Cyrene.

The bard sighed then answered, "I don't think I could get word to her soon enough. Darphus plans to attack tomorrow... at some time. He's given us twenty-four candlemark notice."

"Even if she heard today," murmured Cyrene, "it would take a legion at least twenty-four candlemarks to march this way."

Gabrielle sadly nodded.

"How big is Darphus's army?" probed the mother.

"I'm not sure," confessed the bard, "I think the Amazons are doing some reconnaissance to see." Just as she was about to add more there was a loud alarm in the village and yelling broke out.

Cyrene jumped up and raced to the door, throwing it open.

Gabrielle was just as frantic and once Melpomene was out of her lap, she tried to hurry over with her slow limp. "What is it?"

Cyrene shook her head, her eyes wide, and she watched as many Amazons raced around and formed a lump in one area. "I don't know."

"Stay here," ordered Gabrielle. She slipped out of the door and tried to hastily make her way to the problem. She saw the gates opening and the yelling increased rapidly as she grew closer. She was coming up to the gates when she saw the healer, Eilis, was racing across the grounds. "Oh gods," she whispered in fear.

"Hurry, hurry! We need to get her to the healer's hut."

Gabrielle picked up the distinct voice of Eponin. She came up to the crowd of Amazons then it broke open. Four Amazons were hastily carrying an unconscious, bleeding queen towards the healer's hut.

Eilis came through last and was yelling at the weapons master.

Eponin was at the front, carrying Queen Cyane's upper body weight. "We were surprised attacked in the forest!"

"Just the one wound?" called Eilis.

Eponin glanced back at the rushing healer. "Yes, in her shoulder."

Gabrielle stared wide eye at the arrow protruding from the raggedly breathing queen's left shoulder.

Eilis suddenly broke running again back to her healing hut to prepare things for the queen's arrival.

Gabrielle covered her mouth to hold back her gasp. She then ran her hand through her hair and just then an Amazon broke through the masses and came up to her side.

The bard looked up at the princess. "What happened?" she rasped.

"The queen, Eponin, and I were working on traps in the forest for battle. We were jumped and there was an archer in the trees." The princess swallowed hard then whispered, "That arrow was meant for me." She closed her eyes then carefully added, "Cyane pushed me out of the way... saved my life. Now she's going to die."

"You don't know that," came out the bard's convicting voice. "Let's go see to her." She grabbed the princess's hand and pulled her along.

Princess Terreis hastily hurried along as her fears for the queen's life were high. She and Gabrielle found themselves waiting inside the healer's hut. Gabrielle sat while she paced back and forth. The door to the room that Cyane and Eilis were located was closed tight. In the waiting area, Eponin also remained and she hadn't bothered to wash her hands yet that were still covered in the queen's dried blood.

It was a solid candlemark before Eilis emerged, her two assistance remained in the room with the queen. She approached the waiting and worried women then quietly stated, "She's still alive... barely."

The princess came closer to the healer as did Eponin. "Will she live?"

Eilis clenched her bloody hands then softly replied, "It is too early to tell yet." She sighed then honestly stated, "These next two days are important. She will remain here."

Gabrielle got up then came over while asking, "She's going to go through a fever?"

"Yes," answered the surprised healer. "These next days are crucial."

"If she can survive a gods-be-damned tree limb through her stomach she can handle a damn arrow," growled the weapons master.

"It is all in a human's will," reminded the healer. "You may go in to see her but please stay quiet."

"Thank you, Eilis," offered the princess.

"Don't thank me yet," argued the healer, who walked away to get cleaned up.

The two Amazons and outsider silently entered the room that was dimly lit by the various candles and the window having been covered by a matt.

The assistant healers were monitoring the queen. One would occasionally dip a cloth in cool water then put it against the queen's perspiring forehead.

The queen's skin was pale, her body still other than the reliable rise and fall of her chest. Her left shoulder was wrapped but the wrap was already tainted red. Her leather top had been removed so Eilis could work easier but now a light blanket cover her body mostly except for the wound.

Princess Terreis was feeling emotional at realizing it should be her on the pallet and not the queen.

Gabrielle detected the princess's distraught so she came closer. She grasped the princess's forearm and gave a reassuring squeeze.

Terreis sadly smiled at her friend for the comfort. She turned back to the wounded queen. She quickly realized that she was now in charge of the Amazon Nation while Cyane was in this state. The realization that she was now in command suddenly weakened her in the knees.

Gabrielle felt the princess falter so she now slipped her arm around the princess's waist rather discreetly.

Princess Terreis felt relief for this support not that she leaned on Gabrielle too much but that somebody cared. She knew there was a lot that rested ahead of her and Queen Cyane.

After the visit, they quietly filed out of the room and then out of the hut.

The weapons master turned to the princess. "Princess, you are now-"

"I know, Eponin," agreed the princess.

The bard's face flooded with realization now too. "You're in command," she whispered.

Princess Terreis sadly nodded.

Gabrielle showed a smile of assurance. "Terreis, you can do this."

"Gabrielle is right," broke in Eponin, "you have been well trained by the best two queens."

"I'm afraid I am not my sister, Eponin."

The weapons master shook her head then stepped closer. "Queen Melosa is gone; I acknowledge her memory every day." She clasped her hands onto the princess's shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "You are Terreis and you are an Amazon. I believe in your leadership, princess."

Princess Terreis nodded then smiled at the confident weapons master. She knew that was a lot coming from Eponin. "Thank you, Eponin."

"We must finish preparing." The Amazon released the princess.

"You're right," agreed the princess then she turned to Gabrielle. "I need to finish getting the Nation ready for the battle."

"I understand," agreed the bard. "Cyrene, Melpomene, and I plan to stay."

Princess Terreis was surprised by the resolve from the outsiders but she greatly admired it. "What of the Conqueror?"

Gabrielle noticed that the weapons master was carefully listening in on the conversation. "She won't help... she did tell me who Darphus is." At seeing the keen interest of the two Amazons, she explained the warlord's history with the Conqueror.

Eponin huffed then muttered, "That figures."

"It doesn't matter right now," broke in the princess, "as we need to get prepared."

Eponin consented readily.

"I will catch up with you this evening, Gabrielle." The princess then nodded at Eponin for her to follow.

Gabrielle watched the Amazons go then she let out a sad sigh as nothing seemed to be working out right. She pulled herself together and headed back for the hut to tell Cyrene the news. She remained in the hut most of remaining afternoon and worked up a message to be sent out to Melinda about the news. She could only pray it would reach Melinda at all. After she finished it she, Cyrene, and Melpomene went to have an early dinner. Gabrielle also made sure to get her message sent out, which she was happy to hear it could still be sent out.

The outsiders ate together quietly and near the end the princess showed up looking for the rebel leader. She requested that Gabrielle spend time with her, which Gabrielle easily agreed upon. Gabrielle said goodnight to Cyrene and her adopted niece then when they were gone, she focused on the princess.

Princess Terreis sat down since she saw not many Amazons were in the food hut anyway. She was relieved for that too. "Gabrielle, this will be a very bloody battle tomorrow." She steadied herself as a much defined number came to her lips. "Darphus has an army of five hundred."

Gabrielle was really surprised as she thought the Conqueror would have heard of such a decent size army composing in her realm. "The Nation is three hundred strong."

"Yes," agreed the princess, "but we are prepared so we stand a chance."

"How could he have created such an army so fast?"

"I don't know but I don't plan to ask until I have him." Princess Terreis sighed and laced her hands together on top of the table. "I want you to remain in the healer's hut... with the queen. There will be two guards that'll stay behind."

Gabrielle sighed but she relented with positive head agreement. "I understand."

"The Conqueror's guards will remain with her," further explained the princess, "as I am too afraid if she can escape that she will do so."

The bard's jaw clenched then relaxed. "Why not place her in the healer's hut with us?"

"I am not taking that risk with the queen mortally wounded. She may take a shot at the queen."

Gabrielle knew she couldn't sway the princess's decision so she slowly gave in.

"Alright." She sighed some then shook her head at the situation.

"The two guards that I have instructed to protect you at the healer's hut also have been given an escape plan." The princess leaned forward then quietly explained it to Gabrielle. "If it so happens we look like we're going to be defeated the guards will hear word. You, Cyrene, Melpomene, and the queen will be taken to safety. There will be a wagon with horses prepared to go and Eilis will be there too... she cannot leave the queen's side."

"What about the Conqueror?" argued the bard.

The princess grasped the bard's hand across the table. "There's no reason to save her, Gabrielle."

"The Hades there is," argued the bard, "if you let her die then there's no doubt that Darphus will put her head on a pike. Then he will march to Corinth and demand her throne."

Princess Terreis sighed then gently reminded, "And Melinda will be there to meet him head on. She will easily defeat him."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed as the plans were clearly mapped out in her mind, no matter the defeat or success of the Amazon Nation. "Terreis, you can't do this to Melinda and Janice. This is not their world... their home." She pointed in the general direction of Corinth. "That is not their lives."

The Amazon leaned forward. "But it can become their lives, Gabrielle. Melinda can finally make the Conqueror the greatest ruler known in human history." She grabbed both of the bard's hands into hers.

"No," refused the rebel, "you can't put them into that position."

"They already are," reminded the princess. "You know the costs of the Greater Good, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle hung her head and shook it as she whispered, "We can't do this to them."

"The Conqueror will not change, Gabrielle." Terreis released her friend's hands then dipped her head some to look up at the bard. "I know you think she will but you have to face the reality of things. If she was going to change she would have done it so long ago. That time has long expired for her." The princess saw the stricken features of the rebel and it upset her just as much. "Gabrielle, listen to me. She had a chance to redeem herself to the Nation and she threw it away... just today."

Gabrielle lifted her head, her face knotted by confused. "How?"

"The Conqueror knows more about Amazon law than ten Amazons put together." Princess Terreis saw the surprise written all over Gabrielle's face. "She's studied us inside and out. She could have easily defended herself at her trial because she knows everything." She paused as she compiled her next thoughts to share. "She also knows that if she fought beside us against Darphus that it would help her yet she refuses to do so."

"By the gods," whispered the stricken bard.

"How can you expect her to change when she won't even help herself?" logically questioned the princess. "If she'd agreed to help, I would have refused it but saw to her safety."

Gabrielle ran her fingers through her hair and stared at the table space between her and the princess. "She won't even fight to protect Cyrene," she murmured then leaned her forehead against her hand as the truth struck her in the stomach.

Terreis swallowed against the forming lump in her throat. "I know you don't want to give up on her but you can't help somebody that won't even help themselves, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle licked her dry lips and her burning eyes lifted to Terreis. "What should we do if the Nation is defeated?"

The princess understood the subtle agreement the rebel was making with her and it upset her even though it was what she'd wanted. "You are to return to Corinth. I am sure Melinda and Janice will care for you. My hope is that the queen will recover and she can rebuild the Nation." She then tilted her head then carefully added, "Maybe Melinda, as the Conqueror, can help the Nation be revived."

"You can't sacrifice the Nation like this," argued the bard.

"I'm not sacrificing the Nation." Princess Terreis inhaled until her chest was full then slowly explained things. "You were right about what you said about the Amazons. If we die, we will die with our honor and be remembered for our greatness otherwise we could never join our sisters in the Amazon Eternity. For us to cross into Eternity we must go through the gates in the Land of the Dead. Our holy word is Courage, Gabrielle... there is nothing stronger than courage."

The rebel leader completely understood the princess's determination and code as she'd follow much the same thing all her life. Before she could process everything, an unknown Amazon hurried up to the table.

"My princess, the queen is awake and has requested for you. You must come quickly."

Princess Terreis hastily jumped up.

"Go ahead," ordered Gabrielle, "I'll catch up."

The Amazon Princess nodded then hurried off with the Amazon. She made it to the healer's hut quickly after her sprint. She bounded up the steps but silently slipped into the candlelit room of the queen's.

"Terreis?" softly called the queen.

Princess Terreis hurried up to the side of the pallet as a healer Amazon moved out of the way for her. She collected the queen's hand and was relieved to see the queen looking up at her. "Cyane, I can't believe you're awake. How do you feel?"

"Like I got shot by an arrow," weakly joked the queen. She laced her hand through Terreis's and held tightly. "How does it look?"

"Like you got shot by an arrow," tried to joke the emotional princess.

The queen smiled at the princess's attempt at humor. She closed her eyes briefly when the healer on the other side put a cool, wet cloth to her forehead. The feeling was welcoming but she opened her eyes again to the princess. "Did you finish the traps?"

"Everything is ready," promise the princess. "The warriors are prepared."

"How big?" urged the weak queen.

"Five hundred, my queen."

Cyane's upper lip rolled up some then she relaxed. "We have skilled warriors."

"All of them," softly agreed Terreis, "We will not fail... no matter the outcome."

"You will not," agreed the queen, "I have confidence in you, Terreis."

The princess shook her head then whispered, "I do not have the same, Cyane."

"Listen to me, Terreis... and listen carefully." Cyane took a few deep, rapid breathes then brought on all her strength for her next words. "Since Melosa and my Nation have joined, I have looked to you as my sister... my sister I've always wanted but you are still Melosa's sister."

"I am not Melosa though," softly argued the princess, "I am not as great as her or even you, Cyane."

"I will tell you a little secret, Terreis. Greatness does not come from your skills or abilities it comes from here." She placed her left hand on her chest, over her heart, which caused her to wince in pain. "You fight with your heart, you lead with your heart... you are great then." She lowered her hand to her cover stomach again. "I can only lead from my heart... I can no longer fight from my heart but you can do both, Terreis."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I know because I've been watching you over these seasons, Terreis." Cyane saw how

the young princess was so captivated by her and was holding onto her words. "You are the Legacy of Melosa and it is your time, Princess Terreis."

"It's not my time," argued the princess, "it is still your time, Cyane."

Cyane's grip on Terreis's hand tightened greatly. "Even if I live through this my rein has come to an end, Terreis. I have kept the Nation safe all these seasons but it is time for the Nation to live again. I cannot do this but you can." She lifted their linked hands and pressed them against Terreis's chest. "Your time is now, Terreis and you must take it."

Princess Terreis closed her eyes as her surging emotions settled some then she nodded as her eyes opened. "I will, my queen." She held her grip strong to the queen's hand.

Cyane nodded then smiled at the proud princess. "Now go lead your Nation, princess. I will be waiting for your return."

Terreis lifted her and the queen's hands and placed a kiss to the queen's hand. She released Cyane's hand then quietly left so that Cyane could rest.

Cyane relaxed against into the pallet and her features softened considerably as she closed her eyes. All her strength was spent and her restless sleep easily claimed her.

Gabrielle climbed to her weak feet when Terreis came out of the room. "How is she?"

"Very weak," admitted the princess, "which is to be expected. She's resting now."

Gabrielle nodded her head then limped over to the Amazon Princess. "Are you ready for this, Terreis?"

The princess touched the bard's closest arm then confidently replied, "Yes."

Gabrielle now smiled at the new determination she saw in her friend. "We are twice armed if we fight with faith."

Terreis smiled softly now then murmured, "Plato."

"A wise Greek philosopher," agreed the bard. "I think he had something on that idea."

"I think so too," agreed the Amazon. "And I think we'll prove it tomorrow."

Gabrielle truly admired the Amazon Princess that held so much strength. It was refreshing and made her just as confident but some place in her was still hurting about the Conqueror. Princess Terreis was certainly right about one thing above all and that was that Gabrielle would not give up on the Conqueror.

Chapter 16 - A Little Alchemy

Janice Covington was still and fear coursed through her body, making her palm

sweaty and her sword almost slipping from her hand. Her breathing was heavy as she stared at her friend, who just twirled her sword. She couldn't believe when her guards had told her that the Conqueror requested her presence down on the fortress grounds.

The Conqueror was glowing in the sunrise light, her bronze armor brighter than normal. "Attack!" she hotly yelled at Janice.

Janice backed away with her sword lowering at her side. "No." She shook her head too. "There's no way." She glanced around to see that a patrol squad was watching with awareness about what was happening. The dekarchos of this particular squad was there as was another unknown but important soldier. That unknown soldier held the sheath to Janice's Amazon sword, he'd given it to her when she first arrived.

"If you will not fight then you will die," growled the Conqueror, who suddenly lunged at the archeologist.

Janice easily jumped out of the way but she knew that the Conqueror was toying with her. She backed away from her attacker as she tried to figure out why her friend was doing this.

The Conqueror growled and pointed her sword at the prisoner. "You want freedom, you have to fight for it, prisoner."

The archeologist straightened up at this information. She hadn't expected this and started to understand maybe what was going on here. "The hell I'll be alive let alone free if I fight you."

The Conqueror laughed then lowered her sword some as she stepped closer. "You will live," she promised, "but I will cut you down now if you do not fight. Show me you're worth your hide." She suddenly sprung forward after her opponent.

Janice braced her self with her sword coming up to meet the powerful blow. She was relieved to find her body absorbed the shock easily and she was on her toes, not flat footed as earlier. She was suddenly met by rapid attacks from the ruler that she parried away easily. She still couldn't quite understand how she went from sleeping in the same bed with Melinda last night to waking up to fighting her.

The Conqueror was making a slow effort but then she picked up the pace.

The archeologist stopped a threatening swipe at her stomach. She looked up to see a sly glint in the ruler's wild eyes then there was the battle cry. She knew it before it happened and she ducked then rolled away just as the ruler did a back flip.

The Conqueror grinned when she saw Janice had figured out her move. She spun her sword then bounced on the balls of her feet. "You remembered."

The archeologist was several paces away. She reached up with her freehand and undid the clip to her cloak. She tossed the cloak away to reveal her lean, scabbed, yet toned body. "I'm a quick study." She gracefully spun her sword then met her opponent's blade.

The squad watched the lethal dance between the enemies perform before their eyes. They were amazed that the prisoner had any skill let alone so much to be a decent opponent for the Conqueror. The unknown soldier, who held Janice's sheath, glanced over at the dekachos and secretly grinned. He wiped his grin away and returned to the watching the fight.

Janice ducked when the sword breezed of her head. She then tried her latest move, her right leg kicked up and just missing the Conqueror's moving sword hand.

The Conqueror laughed at the attempt and brought her sword at Janice.

The archeologist stopped the attack then brought her sword around to swipe at the Conqueror's stomach.

The Conqueror vertically caught her opponent's blade then gave a powerful thrust.

Janice just kept a hold of her blade that was thrown off. She then backed a step away when the Conqueror straightened up to her full height.

"Enough," hotly ordered the Conqueror, her lips were curled in a feral grin. She saw how Janice was warm and breathing quite heavily now. She turned her head to the left at the squad then pointed her sword at the dekachos. "Over here, dekachos."

The squad leader became uneasy but he compiled.

Janice was breathing heavy; her body hot but the cool fall breeze offered her relief. She glanced off to her left and saw that Hu was intently watching the show. She could tell he was on edge by how his teeth were baring and his fur up.

"You have one chance, dekachos," informed the ruler, "if you fail to defeat the prisoner then your life is forfeited."

Janice's attention snapped back at hearing this.

The Conqueror could see that Janice was about to verbally dispute this so she cut her off ahead. "Do not talk, prisoner just fight." She walked away and came to stand beside the soldier, who had more official standing than the dekachos.

Janice spun her Amazon sword as she tried to gain her wits. This was serious if her friend was relaying on her sword skills to defeat this dekachos. She'd already tried fighting a squad leader once before and failed at doing so.

The dekachos though had double incentive to defeat the prisoner since it was his position and life. He stalked up to his enemy with his sword unsheathed from his side. His blood pulsed heavily in his veins.

Janice swallowed as she saw those primal eyes of her opponent honed on her.

The Conqueror stood to the side, her gaze transfixed on Janice and the squad leader. Her hands rested on her leather clad hips and her right fingertips discreetly touched her chakram.

Suddenly the dekarchos attacked Janice and tried to come at her head.

Janice caught the blade then back peddled a few steps. She spun her sword as she tried to asses her opponent carefully. She tried to recall that state of mind that Ephiny had taught her that every good warrior used when fighting. She brought on her focus just as the squad leader attacked her again.

The dekarchos tested the woman's defenses and found no opening yet. He then suddenly lost strength when the small and unknowingly strong woman doubled her efforts and attacked him. He stumbled back several steps as he desperately fought off her attacks.

The Conqueror watched on with complete satisfaction but yet she didn't back her hand away from her chakram.

The ranking soldier beside the ruler, leaned over and whispered, "You were right, my liege. She is quite good."

"She has potential," agreed the ruler. "Fighting runs in her blood like fire... she just doesn't know it yet."

"If anybody can bring it out in her, my liege it is you," murmured the excited soldier.

The Conqueror softly laughed in amusement but she kept her full attention on the dekarchos and Janice.

There was a yelp of pain from the dekarchos when Janice's blade caught his left arm. He backed away with surprise all over his face and he glared at the woman. He became enraged then charged his opponent.

Janice braced herself as she took the blow that jarred her to her bones. She gave a quick kick to his stomach, which offered her a second to collect her focus again. She didn't have much of a chance as the dekarchos sprung up against her. Now Janice was hissing at the sharp pain on her right forearm that reopened some of the chakram cut from some time ago. She ignored the pain and the blood oozing out of her wound, her temper suddenly reared up.

The dekarchos was met by the fierce rage of the prisoner. He couldn't keep up with the rapid pace after so long then Janice's blade caught him in the side. He fell to his knees with this sword loosely clutched in his hands. His dazed eyes lifted to the angry woman standing before him.

"You fuckin' bastard," bit out Janice and she gave him a quick kick to his face.

The dekarchos's head snapped and blood flew from his mouth and nose. He then collapsed unconscious to the worn ground.

Janice turned to the Conqueror and held out her palms, sword still in hand. "Is that what the Hell you wanted?"

The Conqueror turned to the ranked soldier beside her. She held out her hand.

The soldier placed the sheath into the ruler's hand.

The Conqueror slowly walked up to the archeologist then threw the sheath at her. "Keep your sword, you'll need it now."

"The Hell I do," barked the angry archeologist, who snatched the sheath in mid air. Just as she caught it, she found the Conqueror's sword tip under her throat. She never saw her friend move so fast or so easily.

"I will make you an offer, Janice Covington so see that you listen well because I will not repeat myself." The Conqueror let her sword's tip touch the archeologist's skin. "You defeated my dekarchos, do you know what a dekarchos is?"

The archeologist knew what the title dekarchos meant in Greek. She wasn't a Greek translator but she knew enough history and enough words to get by. "Dekarchos translates to a leader of ten... a squad leader."

"Exactly," commended the grinning ruler. "You see, in my old traditional army... when we were more cut throat." She paused at seeing the archeologist lift an eyebrow at her. "Whenever the leader or somebody in command was challenged and defeated then that winner takes power." She stopped to shrug then went on. "Things are not quite that way anymore but sometimes I like to remember the good old days."

Janice's eyes narrowed as she began to figure out the Conqueror's intent.

"You pledge service to me, Janice as my dekarchos and I will free you." The Conqueror tilted her head as her cold eyes bore into the petite woman. "But if you so much as think of trying me, you will see the same cross that rebel found herself on."

"If I refuse this... gracious offer then what?"

The Conqueror's lips curled with her ruthless grin. "You can return to the dungeons and meet your cross soon." She now lowered her sword but didn't sheath it. She slowly walked up to her prey then proceeded to walk around Janice like she was powerless. "What will it be?" She stopped behind Janice and lowered her head closer to Janice's. "I can give you anything, Janice... but I need you at my side," she whispered.

Janice closed her eyes then they fluttered open as she made her decision. She sheathed her sword as the ruler walked around to face her. "I accept, Conqueror."

The squad soldiers all looked between each other because not only did they have a new leader but a female at that. They were unsure but by the fighting skills they saw they would not try her too much less they'd meet the Conqueror's sword. It was simple for anybody see that the ruler greatly favored this small woman.

"Come here, tetrarchès," order the Conqueror.

The unknown soldier marched up to the ruler and stood beside the pair. "My liege."

The small soldier bowed his head then lifted it again.

The Conqueror focused on Janice. "This is the tetrarchès."

Janice narrowed her eyes then translated, "The commander of four files."

The Conqueror grinned at the archeologist's unknown skills for Greek military units and officer titles. "The tetrarchès as been in my service for much of my campaign and I trust him highly. He is also the soomatophylax." At Janice's clear confusion she translated the meaning. "The soomatophylax basilikos are my royal guards... elite guards from Macedonia that are highly trained."

The archeologist now understood then nodded as her eyes rested on the man that was about her same height. She figured he was older and probably older than her or Melinda by the way his features seemed so weathered. His hair was blond much like Janice's and curly locks that were in a mess. In his left ear he wore a gold loop earring.

The tetrarchès held out his arm then said, "The name's Iolaus."

Janice clasped his arm then shook it. "Janice... Janice Covington."

"Welcome to the Conqueror's finest, Janice Covington." Iolaus grinned wildly at him then peered up at the ruler after releasing arms. "You will come to find being in the Conqueror's service an honor."

The ruler huffed and clapped the man's back. "Still a thief and a liar at heart, aren't you, Iolaus?"

The soldier folded his muscular arms across his heavily leather clad chest that had a design in it. "Only for your praises, my liege."

The Conqueror grunted now then beautifully sheathed her sword behind her back. She then removed a purple colored leather string that was tucked into her left gauntlet. She stepped up to Janice as she stretched out the leather thong.

Janice was unsure but then realized what was going on since Iolaus bore one on his right arm. She hesitantly lifted her arm as the Conqueror came close to her side.

The Conqueror slowly and casually tied the leather strap over Janice's bicep as she spoke. "You will spend much of the day with Iolaus and your squad. He will teach you about your duties, how to run the squad, and how to patrol Corinth accordingly." She finished tying the symbolic purple strap then stated, "After you are finished you are to report to me. Are we clear, dekarchos?"

The archeologist tasted the Greek military title given to her and she wasn't sure what to make of it exactly. She slowly nodded her head as she tried to get use to the leather thong tied to her arm. "Yes... my liege." She almost choked on the royal formalities but she spit it up.

Iolaus signaled with his chin the watchful tiger. "What of him, my liege?"

"He is to stay beside Janice," ordered the ruler, "he is very much her partner."

"As you wish, my liege." Iolaus bowed his head to the ruler then straightened up at Janice. "We will begin now then."

The Conqueror grasped Janice's shoulder then stated, "See to your wound before you go." She arched an eyebrow at the tetrarchès in warning then she peered down at the silent archeologist. "You will serve me well, won't you, Janice?"

The new dekarchos met her friend's gaze, the powerful ruler. "Unconditionally, my liege."

The ruler showed a wide grin at hearing how easily Janice called her title this time. She released Janice then walked away a few paces but stopped by the former dekarchos. She glanced over at the squad and barked, "Clean up this mess... kill your former dekarchos."

Janice stiffened at this order as she watched her new squad rush to carry out their orders.

Iolaus grabbed the woman's attention by claspng her arm. "We will go to the healer's first then meet your squad."

Janice stopped watching the two squad soldiers dragging the former dekarchos away. "Alright... let me get my cloak." She walked away while placing her sheathed sword over her back again. She remembered the comforting weight of the sword on her back. She grabbed up her cloak, hooked it on, and called Hu over to her side.

The Conqueror entered back into her fortress and knew she would require some time before she could settle down and do her office work. She hurried through the empty court and went in search of a certain somebody she wanted to cross today. It was easy to find Alti as she was in her large chambers that doubled as an office. She barged right in without knocking and yelled, "Alti!"

The shaman surfaced from another connecting room and glared at the demanding ruler. "What is it, my liege?"

"Something has come to light recently." The Conqueror stepped up to the shaman, her features cold and growing angry. "I seem to have... misplaced my scepter."

Alti sighed then jabbed, "It is a silly scepter." She waved off the ruler and started to walk away.

The Conqueror's hand shot out, grabbed Alti, and yanked her back close to her body. She leered at the shaman and hissed, "You know exactly how fond of that silly scepter I am, Alti."

Alti's eyes were level with the angry ruler's. She held her ground as she whispered, "I have not seen your scepter, my liege." She paused then poked, "Perhaps you should look in the place you last left it."

The ruler growled and jerked Alti against her burning body, her lips almost touching Alti's. "I want my scepter returned, Alti," she murmured, "So see that you... find it for me."

The shaman grounded out, "I am a shaman not your toy keeper."

The Conqueror's slow, predatory grin appeared on her face. "You are what I make you, Alti." She tilted her head then murmured, "Or would you prefer to be reminded of that?"

Alti's teeth clenched and bore in a furious show. "No... my... liege," she hotly whispered despite it pained her to admit it.

"Then do as I instruct," commanded the ruler. "Find my scepter... now." She suddenly threw the shaman away then walked a few paces to the open door but paused. She became smug as she peered over her shoulder at the furious shaman. "By the way, I thought you'd be interested to hear that Janice Covington has pledged her services to me." With that, she swept out of the room and soundlessly went down the long hall.

Alti clenched her hands at her side and closed her eyes as her fury consumed her. Her black eyes flew open and she angrily marched into her other room but she soon appeared back out with the scepter with the Cronos Stone. "You want your scepter, my liege... then you shall have it." She laughed, tucked the scepter between the folds of her robe and disappeared out of her room.

The shaman disappeared out of the fortress and into the city of Corinth. She went directly to her intended target, who was an old acquaintance known as Arien and Arien was also an alchemist formally trained in Egypt.

Arien's head shot up when the door of his store opened up. He slightly smiled at seeing the dark features of the Conqueror's shaman. "What do I owe your visit to, shaman?"

Alti floated across the floor and came up to the counter where the alchemist stood. "I need your help, Arien. I will pay you well for it too."

The alchemist's eyes brightened at this offer so he leaned over the counter. "What do you need made, Alti?"

"I need something... remade," offered the shaman. She reached into the folds of her robe then displayed the well-known scepter of the Conqueror.

Arien backed a step away as if burned by the mere sight of the scepter. "I will not touch her scepter, Alti. You have come to the wrong alchemist."

The shaman lifted her free hand, palm up, and her fingers closing into her palm, her eyes honed in on the alchemist. "Need I remind you of my shamanism, Arien." Her fingers closed into her palm.

The alchemist hissed against the unknown pain burning up his right arm. "Stop it, Alti."

Alti turned her fisted hand over, which caused the alchemist to moan in pain then fall to his knees. "Then you will do as I ask of you, Arien."

"Yes... yes... just take this off," begged Arien. He fell forward when the pain suddenly disappeared from his arm. He rasped heavily but lifted his head when the shaman glided behind his counter and knelt down beside him.

Alti put the scepter under the alchemist's chin to lift his head up higher. She then pulled the scepter away and put the green gem between their views. "See this gem, Arien?" At the man's nod, she continued speaking. "I want you to break its power down into its liquid form then split it." She leaned in then whispered, "Can you feel its power?"

An alchemist also worked in the spirit world but not similar to the way a shaman did, especially a shaman like Alti. "Yes, I can. What are its powers?"

The shaman grinned and leaned into the man as the scepter lowered. "That does not concern you. I need this gem's power split in half but will it lose its powers if that is done?"

The alchemist considered it then he carefully replied, "I don't think it will lose its strength if its power is split in half."

"Can you transfer its elixir into another gem or metal?"

Arien sighed as he sat back on his knees finally and stared at the now glowing gem. He reached out but the shaman pulled the scepter away from his grasp. He swallowed then met the shaman's gaze. "I can transfer it, yes."

Alti stood up then ordered, "Let's get started then."

The alchemist nodded, rose up, and went to his shop's door to lock it up. He then came back around while saying, "Follow me." As he led the shaman back into his workshop, he mentioned, "I believe I can transfer it into a metal if you... wish to make it more discreet."

The shaman reached into her cloak and produced a simple dagger. "Will this do?"

The alchemist plucked the dagger from the shaman's hand then smiled. "Yes." He held out his freehand and signaled the scepter.

Alti wearily handed it over but decided she need only stay close to the alchemist to watch him.

Arien grinned when he felt the power more closely from the gem. He stared into it and it pulsed brightly in his eyes. "Such power," he murmured.

"Get started, Arien," hissed the shaman, who was lifting her hand in warning.

Arien snapped back and hastily made his way to his workstation. He first had to work

the gem free from the scepter then once he accomplished this he hunted around for something on his shelves.

Alti stood over his shoulder the entire time to make sure he didn't pull any tricks.

Arien popped the clay vile's cork top and then carefully poured the clear liquid over the gem.

The Cronos Stone and vile's contents made a loud hissing noise.

The liquid poured over the green gem and onto the metal sheet covered work station. The liquid now glowed a bright green and pulsated much like the stone.

The Cronos Stone had faded into a dark green much like an emerald.

"Perfect," murmured the alchemist. He noticed the pool of green liquid was rather thick, which told him a lot. He got up quickly again and went back to his shelves, on the hunt for something else.

The shaman was entranced by the glowing pool of green as she was bent over it and stared at it.

Arien took this opening after glancing over his shoulder. He pulled out two viles this time but tucked one into his robe's pocket in the front. He came back to his workstation and sat down. He took Alti's dagger that sat nearby and carefully lowered it into the pool of green glow.

The pool instantly separated away from the dagger as if they were oil and water.

The alchemist uncorked his new vile then carefully poured the elixir over the dagger and green liquid. He inhaled the sharp smell of steel and fire mixing together. He calculated it carefully then suddenly stopped pouring the elixir. He set the half used vile into a tray nearby next to the earlier one.

"Did it work?" snapped the shaman.

Arien sighed but picked up the dagger from the now smaller pool. He held the dagger in his palm in display to the shaman.

Alti reached down and as she did so the dagger glowed the familiar green tone. She laughed as she picked it up by its handle. "Perfect." She then pointed the dagger at the dark gem. "Put the rest back in the stone."

The alchemist nodded then as he twisted back, his left elbow knocked the stone pretty hard.

The powerless Cronos Stone went airborne then headed for the ground.

"You fool!" Alti hurried over to the stone some paces away.

Arien hastily removed the silver band ring from his right hand. He dropped it into the

green pool as he brought out his second vile. He glanced at the bent over shaman as he let a few drops fall over his ring.

The ring soaked in as much of the green liquid as it possible could then it was snatched up. The ring was silently dropped into the alchemist's robe pocket then the vile followed it.

"Is it damaged?" asked the concerned alchemist.

"No." Alti came over and handed the stone to him. "Be more careful, fool. Now fix it."

Arien sighed then placed the dull gem on its base in the remaining pool. He picked up his vile on the workstation and poured it over the stone.

The Cronos Stone glowed once again and pulsed fairly brightly.

Alti laughed and clapped the man on the back. "Perfect, Arien."

"Not quite done," refused the alchemist. He'd put the empty vile aside then worked to get the stone back into the scepter. He eventually wiggled it back into its home on the top of the gold scepter. He held it up in triumphant display. "It is done, Alti."

The shaman smiled as she scooped up the scepter. "You are a true alchemist, Arien."

"One of the finest," agreed Arien.

Alti still kept her evil smile as she reached into her robe. She untied a hefty pouch from her side then threw it onto the alchemist's workstation. "We will meet again, Arien." She then disappeared out of the workshop then eventually the shop.

Arien disregarded the dinars on his table and instead pulled out his glowing green ring. He held the green ring between his fingers and grinned at it amusingly. "You're the fool, Alti." He slipped the ring onto his finger and felt the power course through his body. He didn't know what the power was but given some time he would figure it out then use it to his every means.

Arien decided it was then time to celebrate his success. He scooped up the bag of dinars and headed out of his shop. He went towards the port where some of the finer taverns were located.

The shaman though returned to the fortress and made her way directly to the Conqueror's bedchambers and stored the scepter away deep in the Conqueror's trunk. She then hastily escaped the room then returned down to hers on the second floor. Her grin was wide at the thought of her perfect deception that the Conqueror would never be any the wiser.

The Conqueror had spent much of her day working on her realm's affairs. Just as she was gratefully finishing up, her office doors flew open and she jumped to her feet in reaction.

"My liege," announced a strong voice.

The Conqueror came around her desk as Commander Meleager bounded into her office. "What is it?" she urged.

"There's a problem, my liege," hastily started the commander. "I just received word from the constable of Ambracia about a warlord uprising."

"What?" The Conqueror approached the commander then demanded, "How did this happen?"

"We're not sure, my liege I have people checking into it." The old commander rested his hand on his sword hilt. "It seems they are bearing for the Amazon Nation."

The Conqueror tried not to become too alarmed at this news. "Have you sent a dispatch to Tricca?"

"Yes, my liege," answered Commander Meleager. "He is on his way to order the small Tricca Equestrian to mobilize." He then stepped aside as the ruler started out of the office, shoving the doors open in a fury. "What of the legions, my liege?"

"I want the Legio V of Thebes mobilized." The Conqueror was heading for the steps to go down to ground level, the commander tailing her. "How big is this army? And who the Hades is this warlord?"

"I am afraid it is your old friend, my liege." Commander Meleager steadied himself as he finally answered, "It is Darphus."

The Conqueror stopped on a step and turned back to her commander. "How in the name of Ares did that son of bitch get an army?"

Commander Meleager sighed then shook his head. "Its not known yet, my liege."

"Well you better find out, commander," snapped the ruler. "How big his army?"

"I believe it is a mere five hundred, my liege." Meleager watched as the ruler continued down the steps quickly. "Will you accompany the legion?"

The ruler considered this and knew the dangers if she showed up in the Amazon Nation when the real Conqueror was already there. She sighed inwardly then replied, "No, I trust that the legatus can handle his post as the legion commander."

"He is excellent," reminded the commander.

The Conqueror grunted then remarked, "All those Roman pigs think they're something... that is why I am the Conqueror." She finally came to the last step then hurried down the hallway.

"What of the Amazon Nation, my liege?"

The Conqueror stopped then turned to Commander Meleager. "Leave them alone... I

want Darphus, I owe him a beheading."

The commander softly laughed then folded his muscular biceps over his silver plated chest. "Legio V of Thebes is four thousand strong, my liege. Do you wish their equestrian or ballista support to join them?"

"No," replied the Conqueror, "We're merely squashing a bug... not defeating an empire." She stepped through the open doorway into her court then ordered, "See to my orders, commander then report back to me."

"Of course, my liege." Commander Meleager left the ruler's side then hurried to carry those orders out.

The Conqueror marched out of the fortress then went directly to the small barrack that was attached to the walls. She was on the hunt for a certain dekarchos.

That particular dekarchos was on training duty with Iolaus out in the city of Corinth. Janice had learned quite a bit today from her superior and she was confident that her squad would follow her. Now Iolaus was showing the typical routes they marched through in the city to keep up on patrol.

Something caught Janice's ear and she stopped so she could pinpoint it. She sensed Hu stopped beside her.

"What is it?" inquired Iolaus.

"I'm not sure but...." Janice shook her head then said, "Let's back track for a minute."

The tetrarchès had twisted features. "A minute?"

Christ that damn time issue again, mentally complained the archeologist. "For a heartbeat." She was already moving but in a fast walk.

Iolaus shrugged then hurried along side the woman as he wondered what her hunch was all about.

The squad doubled back and soon figured out what Janice was hearing so well.

Iolaus unsheathed his sword then ordered, "Get these citizens settled down!"

The squad broke apart and hastily entered the chaos to figure out what was going on now.

Janice and Iolaus quickly jogged up to the mass of people and weeded through things.

"Alright back away," yelled Iolaus as he waved his sword at the people.

The people did easily back away as the Conqueror's soldiers formed a circle around the disturbance to block people.

Iolaus knelt down beside the lifeless body of a man.

Janice tilted her head as she studied the bruising on the man's neck. "He was strangled."

"It would seem so," agreed the tetrarchès. He tilted his head back to meet Janice's gaze. "But why?"

Janice scanned the faces of the people in the middle of the street with them. "Who knows what happened here?" she called out but nobody stepped forward.

Iolaus stood up then quietly stated, "They're not going to help you. Trust me."

"The Hell they will," muttered the archeologist. She narrowed her eyes at this man in the front of the crowd that was trying to slink away. "You!"

A squad soldier quickly reacted and caught the man then yanked him out of the people then threw him towards Janice and the tetrarchès.

Janice came around the body and stood before the taller man. "Did you see what happened here?"

"N-n-no, dekarchos," answered the scared young man.

The archeologist sighed then put her hands on her hips. "Listen, I'm not going to slap you in manacles and haul you off to the dungeon. If you do know something then I need to know too."

Iolaus was kneeling again beside the man as he finally concluded something. He got up and stated to Janice, "He's an alchemist."

"He was," corrected the archeologist, who returned to her attention to the young man. "Do you know him?"

The young man swallowed then stared down at the dead body.

Janice stepped into his view then asked, "What is your name?"

"L-Lysander," answered the man.

"Alright, Lysander tell me if you know this man?"

Lysander saw how calm the dekarchos features were and they were almost inviting. He'd never seen a dekarchos like that let alone a female dekarchos. "He... he is an alchemist. I've been to his shop a few times."

"Where's his shop?" inquired the dekarchos.

"It's on the west side of the city. I think his name is Arien."

Janice glanced at the dead alchemist then back at the frightened Lysander. "Do you know what happened?"

"He was jumped from behind," hollered a woman's voice.

Iolaus strained his neck then ordered, "Come forward."

The woman shoved through the crowd and broke through the squad circle. "I saw it happen." She was obviously a street vender, which was rare for women to do. "I sell baskets and weavings... things like that and my shop is right there." She pointed over the mass of people. "He was crossing the street and I noticed some guy tailing him." She stopped then shrugged. "I think he just wanted to rob the alchemist because he was flashing his dinars around... bought some expensive wine." The merchant glanced at the dead man then back at the dekarchos and tetrarchès as she further added, "The alchemist fought him but I guess the thief won."

Janice glanced at Iolaus, who was a former thief.

Iolaus shrugged then returned his attention to the merchant. "I take it he got the alchemist's money."

"Yes, and some odd ring he was wearing too," added the merchant. "It was pretty strange ring too."

"Why's that?" pressed the archeologist.

"It was a common silver ring but what was odd was it glowed green. I don't know why... I thought maybe I've been in the sun too much today." The merchant faltered then did her own shrug. "I know it was glowing green though."

Iolaus smiled pleasantly at the crazy woman. "Thank you for the help."

Lysander took that as his opening to go too.

The dekarchos quickly grabbed the escaping young men. "Not you though."

"You said-"

"I know what I said," reminded the archeologist, "and I am a woman of my word." Janice grinned at Lysander's still frightened features. "You're taking us to his shop."

The tetrarchès focused his attention on the squad soldiers. "I want two of you to see to the alchemist. The rest of you follow us."

"Come on, Lysander." Janice hauled the young man off towards the western side of the city.

Lysander's sandals scrapped along as he tried to keep up.

Hu however made his presence known again as he took up Janice's other side. He yawned some but faithful followed along. As he followed, he found himself going through busy streets, quieter ones, and then finally they were stopped.

"This is his shop," informed Lysander. He was at the bottom of the steps and pointed up at the door.

Janice clasped the man's shoulder then nodded at him. "Thank you, Lysander. You're free to go." She could tell the boy was relieved and he quickly left. Janice though climbed the steps then tried the door but it was definitely locked. "Iolaus, can you pick the lock or something?"

The ex-thief smirked, stomped up the steps, and brushed his hands together. "This is my greatest secret, Janice. Watch, okay?"

The archeologist stepped back to give him room on the platform, her hands on her hips and a curious look.

Iolaus faced the door, stepped back once, inhaled, and gave a sharp cry as he kicked at the door.

The door flew open and slammed into a wall on the inside.

Iolaus held out his hands to the open doorway now. "Thief extraordinaire at your service."

The squad soldiers all laughed together at the tetrarchès's great joke but they all went dead silent when their dekarchos glared at them.

Janice Covington huffed then walked past him to go in first. She stopped inside the shop after a few paces as it was dark some. "Where's the damn light switch?" she complained under her breath.

The tetrarchès entered next and removed the matt on the front window, which helped to shine some sun on the subject. As he tossed the matt aside, he scanned the contents of the shop. "Definitely an alchemist."

The archeologist had minimal knowledge about alchemy and the history behind it. She understood it was a crude version of chemistry that was more or less based on finding eternal life and transforming metals into gold. She started to explore the shop then eventually ended up behind the counter. She spotted the entrance into another room so she wondered into there next.

Iolaus soon followed behind and started mingling through the alchemist's things. "So you suffered the Conqueror's Língchí?"

Janice wavered in between picking up an empty clay test tube. "Yes."

Iolaus glanced over at her then mentioned, "I did too when I first met her. I still have a few scars left too." He wondered off to the left where there was some shelving.

Janice lifted the tube up to her nose and carefully smelled it. She quickly regretted the decision as it was a putrid odor. She put the empty vile back down then glanced over at Iolaus. "Why did you suffer the Língchí?"

Iolaus was opening a tube and peering in to make out the contents. "I dressed up as one of her soldiers." He corked it and put it back then turned his head to Janice. "I tried to steal her riches and needless to say she caught me." He neared Janice. "The Conqueror is quite intelligent... many of her best officers were once her enemies."

The archeologist grunted but made no comment as the tetrarchès walked past her. She heard him go back into the shop and she was about to follow but something stopped her. Janice leaned over the workstation more and with her right hand, her fingertips drifted over the teardrop size green liquid. When her fingertips hovered over the green liquid, it pulsed a bright green in reaction to her. "Holy shit," she muttered, "it can't be." She pulled her hand away and the liquid dimmed to an emerald shade. "Damn," she hotly growled then hurried out of the workshop.

"Dekarchos," called a squad soldier. He was one of the soldiers that had taken the alchemist's body to the state healer's morgue.

Janice stood beside Iolaus but her attention rested on the soldier. "What is it, Gilles?"

"When Biton and I took the body to the healer's we were informed to tell you that the Conqueror requests your presence right away," replied the squad soldier, Gilles.

The archeologist stepped up to him and asked, "You hear why?"

"No, I'm afraid not, dekarchos."

Janice nodded then turned her head to Iolaus.

"I will finish with them," offered Iolaus. "It is wise to respond to the Conqueror."

"Thanks, Iolaus." Janice headed for the door but paused then glanced back at her superior. "I think we better leave somebody here to guard this place."

Iolaus had twisted features but he decided to go along since Janice's hunch earlier was good. "Alright, leave one of your soldiers here."

Janice nodded then ducked out of the store and Hu waited for her at the bottom. She ran her fingers through his coat in enjoyment, a smile touched her lips. She lifted her head then ordered, "The tetrarchès will be finishing up with you. I need somebody to stay posted here for a few...." She decided not to state hours or candlemarks since she'd had previous bad luck with time.

A file soldier stepped up. "I will take first post, dekarchos."

"Thanks, Biton. I'll be sure to have somebody relieve you soon enough."

Biton nodded his agreement and he hid his surprise well about the dekarchos's outward appreciation. He actually enjoyed it as he proudly took his post by the store front.

Janice then signaled Hu to follow her and she was quickly heading back the fortress. It took her a good ten minutes to make it north of the city where the fortress jutted out

from the hill side. She entered through the open gates then hurried up the main opening of the fortress. The four guards at the door pulled the doors open for her when she made it to the last step.

"The Conqueror is in her office, dekarchos," offered a sentry.

Janice nodded then stepped through the entranceway into the empty, quiet court. Her boots and Hu's claws were the only sound in the marble court as they went to the door for the hallway. When she finally arrived at the office, she was called to enter and she spotted her friend behind her desk like always. "You can't seem to get around that desk."

The Conqueror lifted an eyebrow as a grin played with her lips. "It would seem so." She signaled the three chairs in front of her desk. "You'll need to sit for this, Janice."

"That bad huh?" muttered the archeologist. She wondered over and after she sat, Hu laid down at her feet. "What's wrong?"

The ruler leaned back into her chair then stretched her long legs. "There's a small warlord uprising just east of Ambracia. The big problem is that this warlord is headed to the Amazon Nation... most likely he's there."

"Christ," murmured the shocked archeologist. "When did this happen?"

"I only found out an hour ago." The Conqueror sighed then peered down at her finally thinning scroll work. "I've sent orders for the Tricca Calvary to engage them. A Roman legion in Thebes will be mobilizing by tomorrow and headed up there."

Janice carefully considered this, her eyes washed out by thoughts.

"The warlord was the Conqueror's second in command during her Thessaly Campaign," informed the ruler.

The archeologist's face tightened together and her eyes focused on her friend again. "He knows the Conqueror is there."

The ruler slowly moved her head in agreement. "That's my suspicion too." She straightened up some then quietly added, "Which means that somebody in the Amazon Nation let word out about her kidnapping."

"Yeah but wouldn't they find it a little odd that the Conqueror is in Corinth and in the Amazon Nation?" Janice shook her head as she thought it out then she exhaled audibly. "Damn it. Let me go up there, Mel."

Melinda's eyes narrowed then she stated, "No." She saw her friend was about to argue her hotly but she stopped her first. "I'm not going to risk your life, Janice... recklessly."

"Mel, we have to help them."

"We are helping them," reminded Melinda, "I have a band of cavalry and a legion

headed up there." She tilted her head then carefully said, "It will do them no good, Janice if you or I get hurt. Besides that if I go there's the possibility of somebody noticing two Conquerors."

The archeologist grinded her teeth as she tried to settle down her emotions.

"Janice?" gently called the linguist. When irritated green eyes met her gaze, she continued speaking. "I really need ya here with me. Please?"

Janice finally detected Melinda's usual, gentle tone of voice and pure southern accent. Her annoyance was broken and she slowly nodded her head. "Alright, Mel." Then as she mulled over it more so she knew it was best that she stayed after finding out about this alchemist.

"What is it?" Melinda knew something else was on her friend's mind.

Janice shook her head, her eyes directed towards Hu but she lifted her head up again. "I think we have a slight problem." Her confusion was clear as she began to explain what'd happen this afternoon. "Iolaus was training me and we were patrolling through the port. I heard this commotion so we doubled back then came up to this crowd."

"What'd happened?" urged the concerned southerner.

"An alchemist was murdered... supposedly by a thief." Janice clenched her hands in her lap. "It wasn't so much that, that was odd but one of the witnesses said the alchemist had a glowing green ring."

Melinda stiffened at this news and her stomach knotted. "Ooo my." She sighed then leaned forward some as she asked, "What else?"

"Well we went to his shop and looked around. In his... I guess workshop or somethin' he had this metal covered desk." Janice lifted her hands to demonstrate how big it was then her hands went back to her lap. "On the damn work desk there was this green glowing liquid."

Melinda softly groaned then slumped back into her chair as she absorbed this new information. This could not be good by any measure. "Alchemists are known for about four things, Janice."

"Metals into gold," ticked off Janice.

"The search for the Philosophers Stone," added the translator.

"An elixir for immortality," further recalled the archeologist.

Melinda sighed then finished it off with, "And transmutation... mainly of humans and metals."

"What a damn combination," muttered the archeologist. "You think this alchemist transmuted the Cronos Stone's powers?" She then huffed then brought up, "How the Hell would he have gotten the stone?"

"That... might be my fault," admitted Melinda. "I talked to Alti this morning telling her I was missing the scepter and that I wanted it found."

Janice quietly groaned then let out a long sigh. "Shit," she grumbled then stared down at the resting tiger at her feet. "This green glowing ring thing is missing too, Mel." She lifted her gaze to Melinda. "This thief swiped it off the alchemist."

"It is never a dull moment around ya, Doctor Janice Covington," informed the translator.

Janice became playful as she winked and teased, "I don't want you to get bored, sweetheart."

Melinda had a crooked grin at the archeologist then she slowly lost it as she considered the new predicament. "Janice, you'll have to figure out who stole that ring."

The archeologist sobered some then stared down at the tiger, her thoughts wondering off to what she'd seen today. "You really think it's possible that there's now a... Cronos Ring?"

The linguist tilted her head at her friend and gave her a dubious look.

Janice laughed at the look then held up her hands while saying, "Forget I asked."

Suddenly Melinda stood up then said, "Come with me. I just had a thought." Her sweet southern accent floated back to the still sitting archeologist.

Janice popped up to her feet with her cloak falling around her easily. She trailed behind her friend and Hu tailed behind her. She finally came along side Melinda as they strolled down the endless torch lit and sunlit hallway. "You have a hunch?"

Melinda only nodded but kept silent as she didn't want anybody to overhear anything. She came upon her bedchambers and shoved the heavy door open by the golden ring.

Janice shut the door then stepped into the center of the room while Melinda was digging in some trunk.

Melinda paused and the clattering noise she'd been making quickly stopped. "Ooo my." She straightened up, turned around, and held up the prized possession to her friend.

"Sweet Jesus, Mel!" Janice had saucer eyes as she quickly came over and touched the familiar scepter that she'd come to both love and hate. "That's it, isn't it?"

"I reckon so." The translator's freehand passed over the stone.

The Cronos Stone hummed a bright green at Melinda's spirit then faded once her hand was away.

Janice was puzzled so she passed her hand across the side of the stone, which reacted to her too. "That's definitely it." Her hands rested on her hips as she stared very confusingly up at her tall friend. "Mel, didn't you check that trunk when you first got here?"

"Yes," answered the linguist. "And it wasn't there before."

Janice's lips puckered and her eyes narrowed from her thoughts. "That stupid shaman."

Melinda grunted as the scepter lowered to her side.

Janice's head dipped down in careful consideration. "This still doesn't explain this ring or what I saw in the alchemist's shop." She focused back on the southerner. "I know what I saw in there, Mel."

Melinda nodded then finally said, "Ya know I trust ya, Janice." She stepped a little closer to her friend.

The Cronos Stone reacted quickly by glowing brightly from the two strange beings from another world.

"Ya need to figure out what's going on, Janice."

The archeologist agreed with a bob of her head. "I will," she promised. "Something is going on... and I don't mean just with Alti."

"I reckon you're right," softly agreed the southerner.

Janice peered down at the scepter that was in Melinda's right hand. She saw how it was quite lively with them so near. "Mel... we could..."

The translator lifted the scepter and stared deep into the pulsating, magical stone.

Janice lifted her hand, her fingertips almost touching the stone but she knew what could possibly happen if she touched it. Her eyes flickered up and locked on Melinda's soft blue eyes.

Melinda let out a low sigh then softly stated, "It is tempting." She watched as Janice's hand lowered slowly.

"We can't... not yet," relented the saddened archeologist. "As much as I'd like to go home and just forget all this."

"I reckon we won't ever forget this, Janice." Finally, Melinda broke away from staring into the stone by lowering it back to her side. "I will try to find out what Alti is up to. Can ya deal with this murder and ring?"

"Sure thing, sweetheart," teased the archeologist. She enjoyed the gentle smile that caressed her friend's lips from the banter.

Melinda released her smile then lowered her head closer to Janice's. "I'm sorry about this morning, Janice." She shook her head then spoke again. "I've been trying to think of a way to get ya out of the fortress without arousing suspicions. I reckon I get some of my better ideas when I'm fighting." At that thought, she shook her head because she knew when she was sparring or fighting her mind was in extra acceleration and the calculations were so fast.

"I admit I didn't understand what was going on at first but... I caught on," relented the archeologist. "I'm just glad you didn't kick my ass."

The translator chuckled but honestly mentioned, "You're a good fighter, Janice."

Janice shrugged then coolly remarked, "Runs in the bloodline."

"Somethin' like that," agreed the linguist. She returned to the open trunk and tucked the scepter away for safe keeping. She then closed it, knelt down, and worked to lock the padlock for the first time in many, many moons.

The padlock protested at first then snapped shut, the key popping out in protest. The key fell into a large hand and disappeared from sight.

Melinda rose back up and neatly tucked the key down between her cleavage.

Janice bit her lower lip but she just couldn't stop the comment. "So what else you got in there, Mel?"

Melinda Pappas merely arched an eyebrow as her expression became chilled much like the Conqueror. The look broke quickly as Melinda seemed to become subconscious of it. "Can we talk about somethin', Janice?"

The archeologist steadied herself because she knew it was serious. "Come on... we'll sit down." As she padded across the room to the long sofa against the wall, she noticed that Hu occupied one end of it. "Cats... I swear," she complained under her breath.

Hu heard it though and he lifted his head, his ears perked forward. He settled his head back down on his paws when the humans sat on the sofa near him. He sighed though because they were certainly going to ignore him as they were turned to each other.

Melinda had her hands locked in her lap, slightly bent forward and her eyes glued to her lap.

Janice could tell this was something very hard for her friend so she covered her right hand over Melinda's.

The translator slightly flinched at seeing the scabs on Janice's hands from the Conqueror's torture.

"What is it, Mel?" tried the archeologist.

Melinda inhaled deeply then raised her eyes to meet Janice's concerned gaze. "What

are we doing, Janice?" Her voice held worry and her eyes showed she was lost.

Janice squeezed the larger hands under hers. She tried to prepare for this discussion that they'd been setting aside for a couple of days now. "Just so I understand, you mean between you and I?" At her friend's nod, she lightly bit the inside of her mouth as she composed her response carefully. "I'm not completely sure, Mel." She was uneasy about confessing her thoughts without knowing what Melinda thought first. Yet she knew if there wasn't some give from one of them then it may get sticky. "I'm not... going to complain about any of it though." She hoped that was enough but not too much at the same time.

Melinda studied her friend for a few silent moments and debated whether to read between the lines or not. She swallowed then quietly confessed, "I think a lot about the kisses."

Janice sensed her nerves growing tighter as she edged closer to her feelings. Her left hand, in her lap, slightly clenched up but her other hand didn't move away from Melinda's. "I... I do too," she softly admitted. Her gaze faltered though and she stared at her hand over top of Melinda's much larger ones.

"I'm just confused," whispered Melinda, "I ain't sure if it's me that wants to kiss ya or because of this... Conqueror persona." She shook her head at the mounting turmoil she'd been fighting for days.

Janice clearly understood what her friend was feeling. The kisses they'd share had always been when Melinda was shielded behind the Conqueror role and not completely herself. Yet Janice realized too that those urges most likely derived from somewhere deep in Melinda and the Conqueror persona merely gave her the charge to act on them. "Mel?"

Melinda had been lost in her thoughts too. She now focused on the archeologist after hearing her calling voice.

"We'll figure it out now then." Janice Covington had faint grin then her right hand freed from Melinda's. Her hand glided up then lightly touched Melinda's left cheek in a sweet caress. Janice slowly leaned into Melinda.

Melinda's heart thundered loudly against her chest and her stomach jumped then fell again. She stiffened just as Janice's lips just brushed against hers. Her eyes drifted shut then her body slowly gave into the feelings.

Janice could feel Melinda let going of her initial shock but she held still. This kiss was so shy and opposite of the previous ones. Then she moaned softly when Melinda pressed their lips tighter together. She melted into the growing kiss that warmed her skin and burned her lips.

Melinda opened her mouth as her tongue met against Janice's. This time her moan filled the quiet room. She truly felt her passion come to life because of Janice and nothing else. Her cravings were for Janice and because of Janice, which was something so new to her.

Janice slightly receded from the kiss to breathe in some air but Melinda quickly caught her lips again. She groaned at the linguist's amazingly talented tongue that made her feel so alive and desire so much. Janice knew Melinda had gained much more confidence as this second kiss was more heated.

Melinda tried to slow down the fever of kissing but it took another two kisses to calm herself. She completely withdrew and she grinned at hearing Janice's moan of pleasure and protest. She opened her eyes to be met by burning green eyes that were locked on her.

The archeologist cleared her throat then softly asked, "Did that help, Mel?"

"I reckon so," came the southerner's husky voice.

Janice gave a lopsided grin. "What's your decision?"

"It requires more confirming," toyed the translator. She leaned in for another long kiss.

Janice had no problem with helping to make the confirmation. She could tell these kisses were quite different from those she'd received from the previous days. These were sweet much like Melinda's accent. They drove to her heart as much as to her lower abdomen. The previous kisses had been soaked in pure passion. Neither kisses were better than the other but merely brought out different sensations in the archeologist.

Finally Melinda pulled back but leaned her forehead against Janice's, her eyes still closed. "Janice?" she murmured.

"Mmmm?" whispered the heavy breathing archeologist.

"As much as I enjoy those... I am scared."

The archeologist withdrew some but gathered Melinda's hands into hers. "What is it, Mel?" She tilted her head then tried, "Because of the split?"

"It ain't just that." The linguist glanced over at the room then back at her friend. "It's just... I'm old southern and religion. I... I don't..." She stopped and shook her head at the attacking thoughts.

The archeologist lit up with understanding at her friend's thought process. "A good ole Methodist southern proper belle." She sighed at the social barriers setup in her friend.

"In a nutshell," softly agreed the translator.

"And I'm sure you can guess what I think about all that horseshit?"

Melinda had a grin but it went sadder as she nodded solemnly. "I know its trash to you... but it is who I am."

Janice's shoulders slumped at this gentle declaration because she really hadn't

considered that aspect. Way to call her entire life horseshit, inwardly berated the sighing archeologist. "I'm sorry, Mel. I didn't mean it that way." She shook her head then muttered, "I'm just a moral less thief without a sense of background." Her gaze was downcast. "And an inconsider-"

"Janice," cut in the translator, "its okay." She squeezed the small hands in hers. "We're just from opposite backgrounds."

Janice blew out a deep breath in frustration. "That's the truth, sweetheart." She shook her head then studied her friend. "What do you want to do, Mel?"

"Take a page out of your book," honestly answered the translator. At Janice's bewildered face, Melinda slightly smiled then clarified her words. "I ain't going to lose this." She made an indication by squeezing their hands. "Just because I have certain values grounded into my head."

"Mel," argued Janice, "you can't just throw your identity all away for this... for me."

"I ain't throwing my identity away." Melinda arched a challenging eyebrow at her friend. "I know who I am. I also know whatever this is between us it is bigger than either of us understand right now."

"I guess you didn't transcend time and worlds just for shits and giggles huh?"

Melinda slowly nodded then leaned in closer to her friend. "I reckon it'll be harder for me when... when we get back home. You'll have to be patient with me then." She freed a hand and tilted Janice's head back so that they were looking into each other's eyes. "I just got ya back, I ain't gonna lose ya now, Janice."

"Mel, I just... I'm worried about you. What if... I don't...." Janice trailed off then she became distraught at seeing Melinda's now smirking features. "What?" she asked slightly defensively.

Melinda leaned in closer then teasingly whispered, "Just shut up and put up, Doctor Covington."

"Melinda Pappas!" gasped the horrified archeologist. "Only I can cuss-" She was instantly shut up by a feverish kiss, which she moaned from happily.

Hu lifted his head at all the ruckus but he huffed at the again kissing women. He lowered his head and distantly wished he was in Lao Ma's room because at least she didn't do those oddly human things like this pair. He yawned, closed his eyes, and tried to ignore the soft moans of pleasure so nearby.

Melinda ended the kiss then straightened up some but mentioned, "By the way, I need ya to talk to the faction members."

Janice blinked out her passions then muttered, "What faction members?"

"Gabrielle's faction," offered the smirking translator.

"Oh." The archeologist's muddled head cleared up and she sheepishly smiled up at her friend. "Right. Gabrielle's fraction... faction I mean." She shook her head to clear out. She shrugged then muttered, "Fraction... faction... I'm good at any f word though."

Melinda chuckled then patted the smaller woman's closest knee. "Ya need to talk to somebody from the faction to update them. I reckon they don't know too much."

"Should I tell them about you?"

"If ya want to try but I reckon they ain't gonna believe ya." The linguist sighed then leaned back against the sofa. "I reckon Gabrielle hasn't touched based with 'em and hopefully they'll listen to ya." She tilted her head when it became clear that Janice wasn't completely listening to her, a wistful look on the archeologist's face. "Janice?"

The archeologist blinked out of her reverie and a faint blush painted her cheeks. She faked cough to steal a second as she gathered her wits again. "Talk to the faction, check. Gabrielle hasn't talked to them, check. And they'll listen to me, another check." She smiled and stated, "I'm on it, sweetheart." Her eyes then went wider than the sun when Melinda suddenly leaned forward.

Melinda's hand shot out, grabbed Janice in between her leather top at her cleavage, and yanked her down.

Janice was hauled onto Melinda's lap so that she now straddled Melinda's lap. She quietly yelped but was subdued with a fierce kiss to her lips. She pressed her body against Melinda's when strong hands came around to her back, under the cloak, and ran up her burning back.

Hu lifted his head then yawned loudly at the active women.

Janice drew back at hearing this and started to laugh. She turned his head to him. "I guess we're boring to some."

Melinda was grinning at the tiger, who flicked his tail at the pair. "That's alright... at least he won't bother us then."

The tiger exhaled extremely loud as if in response then he hung his head over the sofa's edge in utter boredom.

Janice shook her head amusingly at the sight. "We'll go see Lao Ma, boy. Promise."

This gave Melinda an idea and she drew Janice's attention back by touching her cheek. "Why don't ya take Lao Ma to the market this afternoon? Take your squad for her protection."

"Alright," agreed the archeologist. She leaned in for a soft kiss then regretfully scooted off of Melinda and stood up.

The translator easily stood up and towered over her friend. "Find me when ya get back."

"I'm sure you'll be in the office," casually remarked the archeologist, who was wondering over to the two doors.

Melinda watched the tiger flop off the sofa and follow after Janice. She peered back up at the archeologist then came over to her. "Just be careful out there. We don't know who this murderer, thief is and I don't like it."

"That makes two of us, Mel."

Melinda considered this more then mentioned, "I'll have Iolaus order the squads to patrol more heavily until it is figured out." She then focused back on her friend after this thought. "How do ya like Iolaus?"

"He's pleasant enough... he mentioned that the Conqueror once submitted him to Línghí."

The linguist nodded her confirmation then replied, "Do you know who Iolaus is?"

Janice Covington narrowed her eyes, her lips sealed tightly together reflecting that she was thinking this over. "I know who Iolaus is from mythology... yes. They say he was Hercule's nephew and that he helped Hercules with his second labor... then later married Hercule's wife."

"They did know each other," agreed Melinda, "but from what I read in Gabrielle's scroll... he and Hercules were close friends. They weren't nephew and uncle."

"Really?" The archeologist's interest perked up instantly. "So wait... is this the same Iolaus that you read about?" Janice's confirmation was Melinda's evil grin then finally a nod. "Holy shit... you're joking, Mel?"

"Janice Covington, when have I lied to ya?"

The archeologist grinned at this truth then ran Iolaus and Hercules through his head. "So... Iolaus does exist here but Hercules doesn't." She was puzzled and staring up at her friend. "Wasn't Alceme his mother and then Zeus was the father."

"Maybe he wasn't born for some reason," suggested Melinda. "I ain't sure but Iolaus still exists here with or without him... just in a different light."

"It would seem so," agreed the archeologist. "Huh... this keeps getting more and more interesting."

Melinda started to open the door but stopped then bent over to her friend. "Also Iolaus... he had a thing for Gabrielle." With no other words, she drifted out of the room with door left open for Janice.

The archeologist crinkled up her nose at the concept but she shiver in dislike too. She grinned as she quickly left, closed the door after Hu, and chased after Melinda. Once she was close enough, she thoroughly teased, "I'll be sure to see if he has any... services to offer."

"You better not, Janice Covington," growled the translator and her accent lost.

Janice shivered yet again but for a completely different reason. She had a silly grin but she whispered, "Or else what?"

Melinda suddenly stopped.

Janice instantly stiffened up at seeing the familiar fire behind Melinda's eye that she was growing use to seeing. She stepped back once as she faced her friend now. "Now, Mel I was just kidding."

Melinda's eyes went into a chilled glacier shade.

Janice jumped back when Melinda stalked forward, after her. "Hu, stop her."

The tiger actually reacted and stepped between the pair, his head back and teeth baring up at Melinda.

The archeologist hadn't quite expected him to do that and she shyly smiled up at Melinda. "Um."

Melinda's eyes lowered to the tiger and she hotly whispered, "Back off, Hu before I make a nice rug out of you."

The tiger's low growl started to sound between them.

Melinda's eyes slotted at the tiger and she furthered added, "And a set of mittens."

Hu's fur rose up on his back as his tail flickered dangerously.

Janice was stunned by this as she wasn't sure what to do between the pair. "Hu?" She tried to call.

Melinda stared down the tiger and held her ground well. Her eyes locked on the tiger's.

Hu suddenly closed his mouth then walked away quickly then sat to watch the pair.

Janice's mouth hung open in absolute amazement at how Melinda stopped him without doing anything, as far as she could figure. She then suddenly realized her friend was looming over her. "Hi," she greeted but she shot a dark look at her supposed protector. "Thanks, Hu."

Melinda lifted her hands but her hands stopped in mid air and something else caught her attention. Her head snapped to the right.

Janice now heard the boot steps too. She glanced up to Melinda to see she'd backed away.

"Later," lowly promised the woman that now became the ruler of the largest realm.

The archeologist shivered at the promise then she watched as the nearing body was forming into a person.

"Commander," greeted the Conqueror.

"My liege." Commander Meleager bowed his head then his worn brown eyes fell onto Janice Covington. "The prisoner is not under guard, my liege...?"

"The prisoner is now the dekarchos of Dekania V, commander."

The commander just contained his surprise but this wasn't something complete unheard of either with the Conqueror. He now noticed the former prisoner had a sword and one that had usual markings. "Congratulations, Janice," he offered.

Janice nodded and also surprised that he knew her name. Then again he was the commander so he had to know all the business.

"I'm bringing you news about dispatch, my liege. Perhaps we can talk in your office?"

The Conqueror relented with a faint nod but turned to Janice. "See to what we discuss, Janice."

The archeologist tried to fall into her role as she bowed her head then replied, "Of course, my liege and I'll report back to you." She signaled for Hu to follow her then she made her way down the hall. She needed to find Lao Ma before the afternoon became any later.

The Conqueror briefly watched Janice go then she focused back on the commander. "Is there anymore news?"

"There is some," agreed Commander Meleager then he turned.

The ruler followed along side as they silently returned to the office. His news about Darphus would prove to not only enlighten the Conqueror but also irritate her to no end.

Chapter 17 - The Conquered

"Gabrielle, it's time," ordered the Amazon Princess. She stood in the open doorway of the guest hut, her eyes watching the hastily moving outsiders.

"We'll head over there right away," agreed the bard. She was gathering up her scroll satchel that she'd packed earlier this morning.

"Your guards will take you there." Princess Terreis glanced at the two guards on either side of her that were waiting for the outsiders to go. "Please be safe and stay in the healer's hut with the queen and Eilis."

The rebel leader limped up to the princess. "Thank you, Terreis." She moved in and gave a one-armed hug.

Princess Terreis warmly received her friend yet drew back some. "I should go."

"Be careful out there... please, Terreis," murmured the very worried bard.

The Amazon Princess nodded then softly gave a reply. "We don't plan to fail, Gabrielle."

"I know but... just come out of this alive," urged the bard, "some things just aren't worth more than your life."

Princess Terreis lowered her head closer to Gabrielle's, her proud green eyes meeting the rebel's own set. "And some things are worth more than my life... this happens to be one of them." She squeezed her friend's shoulder then she reached to her hip. She revealed an Amazon dagger and whispered, "Take this, Gabrielle. I know you don't..." She sighed then held out the sheathed dagger in her palm. "Keep it for protection but I hope it doesn't come to that."

Gabrielle hesitated as she stared at the blade because never once had she'd used a blade beyond a kitchen knife. She knew little of weapons except her sharp words. Yet looking into the Amazon's eyes she saw the hidden plea and she sadly took the weapon. She worked the weapon between her belt and skin then hid it with her blue top. "Thank you," she whispered.

Princess Terreis only nodded, squeezed the bard's shoulder, and turned as she marched off to join her Nation.

"Be safe, my friend," murmured the watching bard. She sighed then gazed sidelong over her shoulder. "You ready, Cyrene... Melpomene?"

Melpomene came out and took her aunt's hand. "I'm ready."

Cyrene strolled out last, closed up the door, and hefted the satchel at her side. "We're ready." She said it mainly to the guards.

"Follow us," ordered a guard. She and her partner escorted the outsiders across the village and to the healer's hut. They remained outside the hut at their posts by the steps that led into the hut.

The outsider family hurried up into the hut and was welcomed by Eilis.

"How is the queen today?" questioned the bard.

The healer sat behind her desk and replied while she watched the outsiders get situated. "She is stable."

Gabrielle tried not to flinch at the healer's response because she knew that could mean anything. She'd settled her satchel on the long table off in the right corner. "Mind if I see to her?"

"Of course," answered the healer.

"Thank you." The rebel leader glanced at her mother and her niece, who were resting in the chairs that surrounded the table. "I'll be back." She limped across the hut and slipped into the dark room. She came over to the queen's bedside and found her asleep soundly. She picked up a cloth that was sitting in a cool bowl of water. She rung it free of the water then placed the moist cloth over the queen's forehead.

The queen softly moaned and her eyes slotted open.

Gabrielle held her tongue because she wasn't sure if the queen was completely awake or not. She gently patted the queen's cheeks and down to her neck.

"Gabrielle," murmured the hoarse voice of the queen.

"Sssh," softly ordered the rebel. "You need to sleep, my queen." A lump formed in her throat at seeing the wound in the queen's shoulder. She truly admired Queen Cyane for all her strength and determination to keep her Nation together against the Conqueror.

The queen's left hand slowly came up and lightly her fingers curled around the bard's wrists.

The rebel stopped her administrations as she saw Cyane's golden eyes upon her. "You must rest, Queen Cyane."

"I've been resting for too long," cursed the wounded queen.

"And you still need to rest some more," argued the rebel leader. She placed the cloth back into the bowl, which broke the contact between her and the queen.

"Sit down, Gabrielle."

The bard studied the queen's worn features but she could tell the queen would not let her leave. She slowly nodded then turned and found a chair nearby. With her freehand, she managed to drag it to the bedside then she took a grateful seat. Her legs released the pain they always felt from any amount of standing. She tilted her head at the waken queen yet all she heard was the queen's heavy breathes.

Finally after a long silence, Queen Cyane began to speak but yet her voice was so distant. "The Conqueror has suffered much in her lifetime, Gabrielle." She turned her head and studied the rebel leader. "Do you realize this?"

Gabrielle lowered her gaze to the small floor space between her and the bed yet her head lifted again.

Queen Cyane licked her lips then whispered, "I really don't hate her, Gabrielle." She rolled her head away then continued to speak again. "I am willing to admit I am afraid of her though. Ever since the day she killed the ten elders... I can still hear the screams... and feel myself hanging by my stomach." She blinked away her forming memories. "It's not something you ever forget, Gabrielle." She rolled her head back then whispered, "I think you understand this too."

Gabrielle's memories of her days on the cross instantly surfaced and her eyes squeezed tightly together. "I do," she murmured then her pain filled eyes met the queen's.

"You and I, Gabrielle... we've followed much the same path. We've both have withstood the Conqueror, survived her, and are made stronger." Cyane stopped as she swallowed against her parched throat. "But since this trial... since meeting you, I've come to realize something that separates you from me."

Gabrielle tilted her head then softly asked, "What's that, Queen Cyane?"

Cyane softly smiled at the outsider. "You don't fear the Conqueror like I do... that was my mistake."

"But I do fear her," challenged the bard.

Cyane inhaled slowly then debated back. "If you truly were, Gabrielle you would have ran... just like me but you haven't. If I hadn't ran from her then maybe none of us would be here today."

Gabrielle bit her inside mouth as she was seeing a common theme from everybody anymore. Could it be true that the Conqueror was alone ever since Lyceus's death? Cyrene first rejected Xena then not long after Caesar betrayed her and she could recall hearing stories about some Chin ruler also sending Xena away. Then there was Cyane later. The only person to ever welcome the Conqueror was Alti but Alti was obviously there for her own motives. The Conqueror hadn't seen trust or love since her long dead brother.

"Gabrielle," broke in the queen's voice, "I tried to help her but I feared her and because I kept her at arms length, Alti was able to seize her." She turned her head away from Gabrielle. "It is truly Alti that I hate."

"My queen, everything happens for a reason," gently reminded the bard.

"Yes, it does, Gabrielle." Cyane's hazy brown eyes turned back to the rebel. "There is a reason why you do not fear her... why you're the only one."

Gabrielle's head fell forward and shaking. "I don't know, my queen. She's so set in her ways."

"No one is set in their ways in the face of love," rebuked the queen. "Not even the powerful Conqueror... especially her." Queen Cyane let out a long sigh. "You will come to see this." She'd closed her eyes earlier but now opened it and turned her head back to the rebel. "You would make a fine Amazon, Gabrielle."

The bard huffed then held out her hand to her knees. "Minus my crippled legs huh?"

"Not every Amazon has to be a warrior," argued the queen.

The rebel leader leaned back into her chair as she settled her walking stick into her lap. "Maybe some day, Queen Cyane... just not today."

"When it is time," softly spoke the queen. Cyane turned her head away and closed her eyes. Her breathing calmed but her eyes were flickering fast under her eyelids.

Gabrielle carefully watched her as the silence lengthened. She was almost sure that Queen Cyane had drifted back to sleep again.

Queen Cyane's eyes flew open then she sharply stated, "It has begun."

Princess Terreis cupped her hands over her mouth as she knelt stealthy in the trees. Just below her several enemy warriors passed so she gave the call for battle. After she gave it, she heard her call echo through the forest at a rapid rate. She silently withdrew her sword then quietly moved through the trees and gave signals to nearby Amazons to fan out. She was grateful that Artemis had blessed them with a lengthier summer as the tree leaves had only slightly turned in recent days.

Darphus's men were thickening as the line of foot warriors were coming through the woods. Off in the distance the sound of horse's huffing rang out along with the distinct smell of them floating on the breeze.

Princess Terreis knew it was time to begin the attack as the enemy line came close to the ground traps. She suddenly lunged down and started the attack. Her sisters all dropped from the trees or appeared from behind trees with thrusting swords and vibrant masks.

The line of warriors broke out in a yell and attacked the Amazons. The meeting of swords rang out in the woods heavily along with wrenching cries as enemies were taken out. Occasionally, a warrior would suddenly disappear by an Amazon, who was hiding in the ground traps.

Princess Terreis spun around, twirled her sword, and rammed it up into an enemy's gut. She jerked it hard then yanked her bloody sword free as her target fell to the ground in a moan of death. She lunged off to her right as another of Darphus's warriors engaged her. She sensed a second coming at her left side so she gave a cry then jump just as her first opponent's sword came at her stomach.

The first warrior's swing clearly missed but he managed to skewer his comrade. He growled at his stupid comrade, kicked him off his blade, and dropped his head back to see the Amazon holding onto a tree branch with her left hand. He grinned up at her and unsheathed a dagger from his hip.

Princess Terreis laughed, tossed her sword up some, caught the handle with the reverse of her hand, and gave it a hard throw.

The warrior's dagger throw was completely off as the Amazon's sword plunged into his chest. As he grabbed at the hilt, he suddenly was rammed into his back from the Amazon's powerful landing.

Princess Terreis stood on top of her opponent's chest and she yanked her blade free from the dead warrior's chest. She glanced about her surroundings and saw that they were evenly matched right now. Then something in the uproar of battle caught her attention so her head jerked up and to the right. Over her shoulder, she saw a long line

of cavalry riders begin to form in the woods.

The Amazon Princess clenched her teeth as her ears focused on the sharp breathing of the warhorses that were scraping their hoofs on the soft ground. She cupped her hands over mouth and gave the warning bird call to her Nation.

A man in the center of the cavalry line gave a cry, raised his sword, and pointed it at the battle. His laughter then filled the air as the small cavalry raced through the woods and plunged into the battle.

Princess Terreis watched in horror as Darphus's cavalry swept into the battle and ripped over Amazons with simple ease. She then learned to breathe again when the whistle of Amazon arrows flew down from the trees and began picking off the riders. She doubled her efforts and hurried to help an overwhelmed sister only so many paces away. Her prayers were as much with her Nation as they were with the guarded queen and outsiders hidden in the village.

Gabrielle had left the sleeping queen only recently. She'd spent over half a candlemark with the queen not that it was all talk. When she came outside into the main portion of the hut, she found her family and the healer organizing herbs and bandaging for later. It made her sigh sadly. "Can I help, Eilis?"

Cyrene turned her head to the young rebel. "Sit down, Gabrielle. I think we all have it."

The bard nodded then walked over to the table. She sat but it did her little good as her worries and thoughts wandered to the battle just outside the gates. She was breathing heavy from raging thoughts and desire to help despite there was little to nothing that she could do. She hated feeling this helpless especially due to her legs. When she slightly slumped forward, her stomach was poked by the dagger's hilt, which was an abrupt reminder.

Gabrielle glanced over at Cyrene and Melpomene's backsides as the women helped the healer organize certain amounts. Her stomach knotted up at the prospect of dying and wounded Amazons coming back to the hut either in heartbeats or candlemarks. A chill worked its way down her back as she knew the awful odds facing the Amazon Nation. Then as she dropped her head forward, she heard the soft voices of the guards outside from the window as they talked back and forth.

"I hear there were over a hundred on horseback."

"It could be a slaughter... we only have so many archers to pick off the cavalry."

Gabrielle tensed at this news having heard it for the first time. The princess had never mentioned anything about Darphus having a small cavalry and she could only imagine why. Maybe the princess was trying to still her fears from defeat and death. She suddenly stood up when all this soaked into her conscious.

Cyrene heard the bard move so she slightly turned. "What is it, Gabrielle?"

"I have... I have to see the Conqueror," answered the suddenly shaken bard.

Cyrene completely turned then hurried over to the rebel's side. "Gabrielle, there's-"

"Cyrene," cut off the bard, "they have a small cavalry," she whispered hotly but her eyes were lit up in fear.

The mother hadn't known like Gabrielle so she felt her breath still. "How...."

"I just heard the guards... outside," murmured Gabrielle. "I have to try and talk to her again, Cyrene. I know she's not going to listen but this time she had to."

"Let me come with you," started Cyrene.

"No," argued the bard, "I need to do this alone. Plus Eilis could use your help to prepare."

The mother glanced at Eilis and Melpomene but her worried features returned to Gabrielle. "Be careful, Gabrielle. Don't endanger your life, please. I can't lose anybody else."

The bard clasped her mother's arm then gently promised, "You won't, Cyrene." She then slipped out of the healer's hut before anybody would notice her gone. However the guards at the base of the steps noticed her coming down and they blocked her path.

"You are not to leave, Gabrielle," ordered the left guard.

"Listen, I need to talk to the Conqueror."

"No," ordered the same guard, "Princess Terreis mentioned you may try this. You are to stay here and we are allowed to use any means necessary to carry out those orders."

"Does that include my dead body?" snapped the outsider. "I am going and there is nothing either of you two can do about that." She came off the last stop and faced the pair. She wasn't fearful of them having stood up to the Conqueror on many occasions so her skills were toned anymore.

The left guard stepped in front of her directly as she would not back down easily. "Returned to the hut. Now."

"Listen, I'm not an Amazon and I don't take anybody's orders." The rebel leader's features were growing very cold as her fire reared up. "Now get the Hades out of my way."

The Amazon could tell that the rebel would not back down. She also wasn't sure if it was worth trying the rebel despite she was crippled but something about those fire green eyes told her not to underestimate. She stepped aside then clipped, "You are reckless, Gabrielle."

"Yea save it for somebody that'll listen," snapped the bard, who started walking away. She paused then glanced back at the pair. "Watch after my family... they're more important than I am." She said nothing else then moved as fast as her mangled legs

allowed her.

The Amazons exchanged glances then the left one let out a frustrated sigh.

Gabrielle's breathing was ragged by the time she made it to the jail hut. She saw that the two guards that usually stood outside were no longer there. She figured they were most likely in the battle. She came up to the small window then called, "Ephiny?"

The Conqueror opened her eyes then saw the soft featured rebel in the barred window.

"By the gods, Gabrielle!" Ephiny came to the door and she was furious. "What in the name of Hades are you doing here! Get back to the healer's hut."

"Open the damn door," barked Gabrielle as she banged on it with her left hand.

"No," hotly shot back the Amazon. "Nobody is allowed in here and you need to be in the healer's hut."

"I'm not leaving until I can speak to the Conqueror," challenged the defiant rebel.

"Well I figured that much," hissed the frustrated head guard.

Gabrielle grabbed a bar with her freehand. "So let me in then I'll go back sooner, Ephiny."

Ephiny clenched her teeth then she grabbed the key at her side. She worked it into the lock then pulled the door open. "Why in the Hades do I put up with you, Gabrielle?"

"You have a soft spot for irritating blonds," joked the rebel as she limped into the jail.

Ephiny softened at the joke about her favorite two blonds and one she missed even if she didn't care to admit it. She closed the door up but didn't bother to lock it as she hoped the rebel would be leaving soon. She did remain in front of it and carefully watched the bard.

Gabrielle neared the slumped Conqueror and carefully started the conversation with a question. "How are you feeling?"

The Conqueror raised her head up, her ghostly features locking on her young enemy. "I am not fighting, rebel."

The bard sighed at hearing the old monotone and her title coming from the cold lips of the ruler. "I thought we were beyond that point, Conqueror."

"Leave," ordered the harsh voice of the ruler.

Gabrielle ignored the command of course and instead she slowly knelt down. Her knees touched the rough, cold wood floor and it pained her but it gave her a better view of the slouched ruler's face. She'd never once seen the Conqueror in such an unbecoming manner. "You know I'm not going to." Her back went ridged when hollow eyes locked on her.

"I should kill you now," growled the ruler, "because soon none of this will matter."

Ephiny stepped forward, which caused the other guards to follow suit.

Gabrielle waved them off with her right hand in hopes they'd back away. This was between her and the ruler. "Is that the answer huh?" Her right hand slipped under her shirt then she revealed a dagger.

"Gabrielle, no!" yelled Ephiny but she was too late as she watched in horror.

The Conqueror had the hilt in her hand, the tip pressed into the rebel's throat, and her face pressed close to the rebel's.

"We had a pact," whispered the fearless bard. Her chin lifted but her eyes only on the Conqueror. "I can keep my part of the bargain."

The Conqueror pressed the tip in more and she watched the skin break open, a droplet of blood formed just under the blade. "In a few moons, you will be forgotten and your dreams... they'll be crushed." She tilted her head. "Alti will take your soul... you'll never know your next life."

Gabrielle kept her eyes open despite she wanted to shut them against the ruler's darkening features and the cutting words. "She may be able to control my soul, Conqueror but she'll never own it." She licked her dry lips then whispered, "Just like you will never conquer me."

The Conqueror's heavy breathing matched the rebel's for several heartbeats. Her teeth clenched together as her racing mind kept her shaking hand still from moving the dagger forward. Her arm muscles taut and flexing under her skin.

Gabrielle then quietly promised, "And my fears of you cannot conquer me."

The Conqueror's lips pulled into a snarl as a low growl echoed from deep in her throat. She suddenly yelled, pulled the dagger away, and threw it furiously over the rebel's head.

Ephiny jumped out of the way just as the dagger screamed past her shoulder and sunk into the wood door of the jail.

"Leave!" yelled the enraged ruler.

The rebel held her ground, still kneeling but she braced herself for the next attack she expected.

"Leave!" repeated the Conqueror and she emphasized it by lifting the bard by her neck. She then threw the bard away onto her back.

Gabrielle hissed from the sharp pain up her back as she landed hard. Her walking stick was briefly airborne then clanked repeatedly against the floor and rolled off. She flinched as she moved about to get up. She saw the shadow now falling over her but

she would not stay down.

"Gabrielle, get away from her." The head guard was coming to help the bard. Ephiny was seeing just too many *deja-vu's* lately for her taste.

"No!" hissed the bard. She shoved the Amazon away then angrily stated, "This is between us." She got to her feet on her own and ignored all the pain in her legs.

The standing ruler straightened her back out at seeing how the rebel climbed up onto her weak legs. Her anger grew again at seeing the defiance of this rebel and that she would not stand down.

Gabrielle's adrenaline coursed through her anger shaken body. She stood completely up and boldly held her ground against the ruler. "I will not be conquered!"

"Then you will die!" The Conqueror lunged for her enemy.

Gabrielle braced herself and caught the ruler's hands almost too easily. She gripped the ruler's wrists tightly and held her down from doing anything. "I will not be conquered," she challenged up at the ruler, "And you will not make me give in."

The Conqueror's angry features were broken by sudden emotions. She tried to rip her hands free and even though she was much stronger than the rebel she seem to have lost all of her strength. "Everybody gives in," she hotly debated but her voice cracked from surfacing aged emotions.

"I'm not everybody," stated Gabrielle, "and I'm not giving in."

The Conqueror's revengeful will died as she fell to her knees before the rebel. Her shackled hands were held up yet the rebel's clenched hands hid the manacles over her wrists as if she weren't really chained anymore. "Everybody has... given up," she rasped with her head dropping out of defeat.

Gabrielle's body trembled, not from fear or anger but from success. She didn't release the ruler's iron covered wrists but she lowered her head some to whisper, "I told you... I'm not everybody."

The Conqueror forced her closed eyes to open and she raised her head up. She stared into the soft features of her enemy and saw only long hidden truth. "Why?"

Gabrielle searched the ruler's desperate face that needed an answer so bad and it broke Gabrielle's harden heart. "I can't tell you why... but I can tell you that I will never stop."

The Conqueror could only accept that promise given to her. She closed her eyes then her always tensed shoulders fell and finally she released a long breath that'd been holding old rage. She unexpectedly rested the side of her head against her enemy's quickly moving chest.

Gabrielle finally released the ruler's shackled wrists then her hands lowered to the dark ruler's shoulders. She no longer saw the weight much less felt them on the ruler's

shoulders as her arms encircled the ruler.

The Conqueror's freed hands now clung at the rebel's side. She breathed heavily in fear for the second time in her life. The rebel's rapid yet faithful heartbeat unconsciously soothed her old, festering wounds in her.

The Amazons were riveted by the scene. They watched on at the amazing change before them. And time later, they would continue to swear they'd actually seen something released from the dark Conqueror.

Gabrielle closed her eyes as she lowered her head closer to the ruler's. Her legs' pain was starting to sharpen against her like a raging hammer nailing her. She now started to clench to the ruler for support but she quietly breathed, "You must help the Amazons, Conqueror." She swallowed then murmured, "Cyrene needs your help. Melpomene." She then opened her eyes when she sensed piercing blue eyes upon her. "He has a cavalry..." Her voice held the plea and desperation then for once there was fear but not for the Conqueror but for these people's lives. "He's going to slaughter... all of them."

The Conqueror's returned strength started to lift her up by her legs. Her hands at the bard's waist no longer clenched but helped support the bard's weight. "Sit down," she ordered in a calm voice. She guided the rebel around until she was positioned on the bench.

Gabrielle let out an aspirated sigh as the beads of sweat rolled down her temples. Her eyes were briefly closed but she now gazed up at the ruler, her weak yet hot form slumped against the wall. "Please, you have to-"

"It's alright," cut in the Conqueror, "Just breathe for a heartbeat, will you?"

The bard relaxed some because she could see and feel the shift in the ruler. She had to have faith that it would be okay.

"Ephiny," started the turning ruler, "Amazon Law states that if a prisoner is willing to help the Nation in battle that they can be freed to do so."

The head guard tilted her head then said behind her mask, "Amazon Law also says we can reject the offer."

The Conqueror's hands balled up at her side.

"Ephiny, free her so she can help," started the arguing bard.

"You are not an Amazon," shot back the angry head guard, "and you're especially not the queen."

"Ephiny, if you free her then that means you six can fight as well. That's six more Amazons to help stop Darphus... and good warriors too." Gabrielle sat up now as her strength started to pick up again.

"Make that seven good warriors," piped up an Amazon's voice.

"Solari, be silent," ordered Ephiny.

Solari ripped her mask back and leveled her friend with a cold look. "This is stupid, Ephiny because if the Conqueror is willing to fight for us we should allow her."

"I don't trust her," snapped Ephiny.

Another guard stepped forward then stated, "I accept the Conqueror's aid... and I am Amazon." She reached up and pulled back her mask, which allowed her bright blond hair to spill out over her shoulders.

Ephiny yanked her mask back and stared wide eye at Callisto.

Callisto lowered her sword to her side then declared, "I have suffered under the Conqueror but even I can see that leaving her here when she wants to help will hinder the Nation. If we at all stand a chance at defeating Darphus then the Conqueror is the key to that success."

"Ephiny," softly urged Solari, "don't overlook the obvious here. Queen Cyane didn't put you in charge just to follow orders but to use your better judgment."

Ephiny's eyes flickered away from her friend and bore into the Conqueror. She stepped up to the ruler and continued to stare into the ruler that she considered more destructive than any army. She read the silent shift in the Conqueror, which told her gut to trust it yet her mind refused such nonsense.

Gabrielle was biting her lower lip but she let out a silent pray to whatever god when Ephiny reached for her key. She dropped her head against the wall and released a long breath that'd she'd been holding. Her lips twitched with a smile when she heard the wrist manacles collapse to the floor then finally the distinct snap of the ankle manacles filled the jail hut. After a heartbeat, her eyes fluttered open from the looming shadow casting over her.

"Time to go," ordered the Conqueror. She held out the rebel's walking stick to her, the first thing she picked up when she was free from the chains.

Gabrielle received the cane and noted the dried blood on the ruler's chewed up wrists. She could tell that the ruler could care less though about it. She merely moved her head in agreement then got off the bench. She limped through the small jail to the now open door.

Ephiny let the outsider through first then she follow suit. Next came the Conqueror behind her and then the five guards. "Gabrielle, you need to return to the healer's hut."

Gabrielle opened her mouth for an argument.

The Conqueror stalled it by stepping in front of the openmouthed rebel. "Just for once, listen to what somebody tells you to do."

The bard's jaw snapped shut and she peered up at the ruler. She swallowed then

simply nodded.

Callisto was the last out so she ripped the Amazon dagger from the jail door and held it out to Gabrielle. "It's wise to keep this on you, deary."

The outsider accepted the weapon back. "Thanks." She tucked it back into the sheath that was still between her long skirt's belt and her stomach.

"I need you to watch after mother for me," softly urged the ruler.

"I will," answered the rebel.

"Get her to safety if any of this goes wrong," added the Conqueror. At Gabrielle's nod, she backed away while hearing Ephiny speak to her.

"We'll outfit you with some weapons from the armory," offered Ephiny, "but we must hurry."

The Conqueror dipped her head in agreement at the head guard. "Let's go then." She stepped away from the silent rebel and started off with the Amazons.

Gabrielle stood still and watching the group quickly move through the village. Her sights especially rested on the evolved ruler.

The Conqueror stole a quick glance back at the still rebel.

Gabrielle's emotions surged and she held up her freehand as if her touch would reach that far.

The Conqueror only nodded then focused back on what was at hand.

The rebel leader knew she needed to get back to the healer's hut. She accomplished what she could have only hoped for but now why did she feel so wrong for it? As she started on her trip back to the healer's hut, she realized it was because the Conqueror could be killed today and that didn't settle well in her stomach or thoughts.

As Gabrielle limped along, she heard an odd whistle that she hadn't expected at all. She stopped and turned her head in the direction of the whistle.

"You know, I would have had you if I'd waited for the Conqueror to get further from you."

Gabrielle stared at her assassin's face for the first time that was filing the square of his jail hut door. She narrowed her eyes at him then decided to go over to him. "Well I guess you underestimated her."

The assassin shrugged then smirked at the approaching rebel leader. "It really doesn't matter now."

The bard's face tightened up at his words. "Why?"

"You want to hear a little secret?" inquired the smirking assassin. His right hand grabbed onto a bar as if he could lean forward more towards the woman. "I wasn't really trying to kill you... I mean if I did then great but..." He shrugged then casually mentioned, "I was just a distraction for the Amazons."

Gabrielle froze at this information as she started to piece the puzzle together. "You're with Darphus... you were suppose to keep the Amazons busy while he was setting up."

"For a blond, you catch on quick."

Gods what was it with these stupid blond jokes, inwardly grumbled the bard. She ignored it though and tried to pump the assassin for more information. "Does Darphus have any other plans?"

The assassin laughed and now held onto both bars with his hands. "Let me out and I'll show you some of my plans."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and muttered, "Pig." She shook her head and started to limp away in hopes it'd make the prisoner talk.

"Wait, wait," urged the assassin. "I bet you haven't heard this one."

Gabrielle slightly turned and mimicked the Conqueror's common look. "What's that?" she drew out.

"Darphus has everything worked out to beat the Amazons and kill the Conqueror."

The bard stepped closer then snidely stated, "I bet he didn't factor in the Conqueror fighting for the Amazons."

The assassin smirked at the rebel's spunk but he shrugged then replied, "Actually he did... he was sorta hoping for it really." He saw the shock wash over the rebel's face.

"What's he have planned?" demanded the worried bard.

The assassin just shrugged again. He considered whether to tell the rebel or not but he figure by her limp and the fact she can't fight that there was no harm in telling her. Besides he'd get to enjoy seeing the dread fill the rebel once she heard Darphus's brilliant plan. "He's gonna set her up." He laughed then explained, "He's gonna get her to fight him but away from the battle somewhat."

The bard stepped closer to the jail. "Why?"

The assassin revealed a wide grin. "He's got this special spot to fight her where three of his best archers are hiding in the trees." He then pressed his face against the bars then whispered, "Don't tell anybody but the archers' arrows are tipped with poisonous hemlock." He laughed at the rebel's shocked and fearful face. "Darphus could never fight fairly I heard."

"By the gods... no," rasped the bard. The Conqueror would undoubtedly walk into

Darphus's trap because she knew the Conqueror loved to challenge her enemy directly.

The assassin laughed again then gleefully declared, "Long live the Conqueror!"

Gabrielle broke away from her astonishment at the prisoner's words. She suddenly took off as fast as her mangled legs would allow her. She had to stop this; she had to warn the Conqueror. She came upon the healer's hut while yelling, "Cyrene! Cyrene!"

The mother threw open the hut's door and bounded down the steps at her daughter's frantic yells. She rushed up to the hastily limping bard and grabbed her shoulders. "What is it, Gabrielle?"

The Amazon guards shifted closer to the pair but not too far from the hut.

Gabrielle caught her breath then answered, "I have to go out there. The Conqueror... she's endangered."

"What's going on?" demanded the worried mother.

The bard caught Cyrene's right arm with her hand. "The Conqueror is fighting for the Nation." At Cyrene's relieved expression she sighed then told her about the assassin. After she told Cyrene, she whispered, "I have to get to her... I sent her out there, I can't-"

"Gabrielle, she can-"

"No she can't," debated the aggravated bard. "She'll be killed, I have to warn her." She started to move but Cyrene's grip suddenly at her wrist stopped her.

"You could be killed," refuted the mother. "I won't lose you both."

Gabrielle turned back to her mother. "And I can't let her die if there's something I can do about it." She lifted her freehand up to Cyrene's cheek. "You're just going to have to have faith that I'll be fine." She leaned forward and placed a kiss to Cyrene's other cheek and whispered, "I love you, Cyrene."

The mother finally released the rebel because she knew there wasn't anything she could do to stop the rebel. "I love you as well, daughter." She clasped the bard's hand into hers. "By the gods, be careful."

Gabrielle nodded then let go of Cyrene and hurriedly limped off.

Cyrene's chest tightened then her eyes stung from hidden tears. She wanted to chase down Gabrielle and drag her back into the safety of the hut but Gabrielle would only fight her.

Gabrielle made it to the stables. She prayed there was a horse or two left behind seeing as the Amazons really didn't have a cavalry. The Amazons were known for their mastery of riding but even that was becoming a legend these days. When she entered the distinctly smelling hut, she heard a few whines that were like wine to her

ears.

A horse in the closest stall threw his head up and whinnied at the outsider. He stepped back when the limping human came into his stall.

"Sssh." Gabrielle touched his head to calm him. "I need your help, boy. I don't know your name or anything but I do need your help."

The gelding whined then threw up his head and finally calmed down.

Gabrielle only had a minimal knowledge of horseback riding. She'd never truly learned but that surely wasn't going to stop her now. She found the tack for the horse off to her right. The face tack was hanging from a wood peg while the saddle was high up and resting between the stall walls. She dismissed the saddle because she knew it'd be impossible for her to lift it with one hand let alone put all the tack on too.

The gelding watched as the human hastily put the harness over his face. He normally wouldn't take the bit into his mouth so easily but this time he did. He then scraped his hoofs through the soft, hay covered dirt and whined.

Gabrielle grabbed the horse's mane and urged him closer to the stall wall because there was a stack of hay there.

The gelding side stepped the paces then threw up his head in excitement. He could tell this human was wired by fear and courage all at once.

Gabrielle first unlocked the stall door. "Here goes," muttered the bard. She climbed the hay stack and then held tightly with her left hand to the horse's mane. She tried to push off the hay with her weak legs and painful yelp exploded from her lips. Yet Gabrielle made it onto the horse's back but slightly lopsided. She was breathing heavy but she had no time to calm down. She glanced at her walking stick still in her right hand. It would be almost impossible to hold onto it, the horse's mane, and the reins. She tossed the cane onto the ground and gathered up the reins. "Ya, boy!"

The gelding whined then pressed forward through the unlocked door. He hurried out of the stables then followed the human's signals for direction. He was going at a fast trot with the human bouncing on his back.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth from the bumpy ride but she held on tightly. Her legs were screaming in pain and her body was completely tense from the pain, perspiration forming over her skin.

The gelding approached the cracked gates so he slowed down then aimed for the open crack.

"Stop there!" yelled a guard at the gates.

Gabrielle ignored them and urged the horse through the gates.

"Stop, Gabrielle!" called an unfamiliar Amazon's voice.

Once outside the gates, Gabrielle tapped her boots against the horse's sides.

The gelding whined then broke into a canter for the open woods before him. He was thrilled to be out as he raced through the woods. He easily jumped over fallen trees and low ditches. He never lost his rider but he sensed her guidance from the reins and her holding onto his mane.

Gabrielle was breathing heavily as she held on for life. She was bent forward over the horse's neck but her head was up and her eyes scanned the forest. It was her ears though that first detected the battle before anything else. She pulled on the gelding's right rein and urged him that way.

The horse huffed harder and harder as his canter turned into a full gallop. He darted around trees with perfect precision. He was well trained by the Amazons to handle such heavily wooded forests.

"By the gods," whispered the awestruck bard. Her eyes filled with the scene of the battle; the warriors, the Amazons, and clanking steel. She pressed the gelding to keep going to the fight. She tried to hone in on the Conqueror knowing she had to be somewhere in there. When she was finally upon the battle, the gelding came to a fast stop so he wouldn't be hit.

The gelding whined unhappily yet he jumped over two clashing swords then started the dodge training around the various lumped fights.

Gabrielle merely clung to the black mane and let the horse guide her. She searched the many faces for the distinct one that she wanted. Then in the distance she heard the loud warcry echo through forest but unexpectedly she lashed forward.

The gelding abruptly stopped when a warrior cut down an Amazon.

The Amazon's blood, from her neck, sprayed in a fine mist up towards the shocked horse.

Gabrielle cried out and clung to the horse. She was suddenly spotted in blood and when she looked over the horse's neck she saw the dead Amazon and approaching warrior. Her body charged with fear.

The warrior leered at the vulnerable woman on the gelding and rushed up to her. His sword was raised yet as he brought it down, it was stopped by a long blade. He turned his head to the owner of the sword.

"Ah-ah-aaah."

The rebel leader was amazed to see Callisto.

Callisto kicked the warrior away from the gelding and then attacked him.

Gabrielle was about to urge the gelding to keep moving but she heard a bird call. Just as she was about to signal the gelding, a new weight was on the rear of the horse. She grabbed for her dagger at her waist but a hand to her wrist stopped her.

"Relax," coldly ordered a woman's voice. "What in the Hades do you think you're doing here?"

The bard let go of the dagger's hilt as she realized it was Velasca. "I have to find the Conqueror."

Velasca tried to steal the reins from the rebel but failed. "The Conqueror can handle herself fine, rebel. You were suppose to stay in the hut to protect the queen."

Gabrielle thought that was a joke considering her condition. "Darphus is setting up to kill her!"

The Amazon paused at hearing this news. She glanced off to her right when a warrior was trying to sneak up on them. She kicked at him and sent him reeling into a tree. "What are you talking about?"

"He's going to lead her away from the battle then fight her. He has archers with hemlock tipped arrows." Gabrielle looked sidelong at the Amazon. "I have to get to her, Velasca. So either help me or get the Hades off. Now!"

The Amazon made a quick decision then replied, "Let's go." She wrapped her arms around the outsider's waist.

Gabrielle had pinpointed the famous battle cry earlier but she could only imagine if the Conqueror was still there. She ordered the gelding forward and helped guide him through the battle.

Velasca supported the bard's weight with her arms and anchored them down better with her strong legs. Her dark eyes scanned through the battle and tried to lock on the Conqueror. "Over there!" She pointed off to her right briefly then slipped her arm back around the bard.

Gabrielle had already seen the Conqueror. She pressed the gelding to go harder.

The horse whined loudly then leapt up over several fighting groups.

Gabrielle's head just skimmed under a few tree branches. She cried out in pain from her legs when the horse's hoofs abruptly connected with the ground. Her eyes welded up with tears but she ignored it all. She was getting closer to the Conqueror.

The Conqueror was armed with two swords. She twirled them both and rammed them behind her body, her swords plunging into two enemies that were racing up behind her. She jerked her swords free then flipped them around in her hands as she lunged after two oncoming warriors.

The two warriors' swords sparked against the dark ruler's Amazon blades. They tried to outwit her but failed miserably as one took a sound kick to his chest. The second had his neck slashed open and he fell to the ground bleeding to death.

The Conqueror rushed up to the one warrior that was still conscious. She crossed her

swords just at his neck then pulled them apart in a blur.

The warrior's mouth was hung open but his head was sliced away from his neck. His blood sprayed over the Conqueror then his head crashed onto the ground.

"Conqueror!" yelled a laughing voice.

The Conqueror's head snapped up in the direction and she stepped back with her right sword spinning. "Darphus," she sneered at the warlord.

"I didn't expect the Amazons to let you out," toyed the Darphus as he sat proudly up on a horse. His yellow teeth shined at the dark ruler.

"They can't resist me," mildly joked the blood soaked ruler. Her former second in command still repulsed her like he had so long ago. "I see you've become uglier."

The warlord's smirking face hardened at the Conqueror. "Bitch," he growled.

"You could never come up with good remarks," jabbed the stalking ruler.

Darphus turned his horse around by his right rein. "You want me, Conqueror then you have to keep up!" He spurred his horse into a run.

The Conqueror watched him go for a heartbeat then she laughed excitedly for the hunt. She spun her swords, sheathed them behind her back where they crossed, and she leapt up into the trees. She landed neatly in the branches but she hastily took off after her prey.

"No!" screamed Gabrielle at the top of her lungs. She'd seen the man on horseback that she assumed was Darphus. Her desperation escalated when the Conqueror took the bait and chased after the warlord. Also Gabrielle barely had a clear view of the fast moving ruler in the leafy cover.

"Follow Darphus," called Velasca over the din of fighting.

The rebel leader calmed some at hearing the perfect alternative. She spied the warlord that was hurrying through the battle. She urged the gelding to follow the distant warlord and she was amazed to see they were catching up.

The Conqueror knew she was being led away from the battle but she wanted Darphus. Her blood pulsed with hunger for this insolent man's death. She saw he entered a clearing and stopped with his horse rearing up on its hind legs. The Conqueror's leering grin formed and she neatly landed on the ground on the edge of the clearing.

Darphus unsheathed his sword and pointed it at his long enemy. "Today you will die, Conqueror." He grinned wildly. "You have lived far too long."

The Conqueror clenched her hands at her sides. "Get off that horse and I'll show you how long you have to live, Darphus."

Darphus laughed then spun his sword. "Have I ever been a fair fighter, Conqueror?"

"Shut up in fight," snapped the ruler.

"With pleasure." The warlord spurred his horse towards the ruler and gave a battle cry.

The Conqueror growled, her eyes narrowing at her target but it wasn't Darphus. Her warcry broke free as her hands went to her back for the swords' hilts. She dropped down onto one knee as her swords sprung forward.

The horse's chest sunk into the Conqueror's swords. The horse cried out in sharp pain then went crashing to the ground with dirt and grass spewing up into the air.

The Conqueror had extracted her blades in time then whirled away and climbed to her feet expertly.

Darphus was rocketed from the saddle and hit the ground hard with his sword rolling out of his hand. He groaned then tried to get to his feet with his hands.

The Conqueror smirked then warned, "I told you to get off the horse. You still don't listen." Her backside was to the clearing then something made her skin on her back crawl from the clearing's direction. She had no time for this though as Darphus approached her.

Darphus wiped the blood away from his face but it wasn't his, it was the dying horse's. He glanced at the raggedly breathing horse that had a dark pool of blood seeping from its chest. He then turned back at the smirking ruler. "You fuckin' bitch." He quickly engaged the ruler.

The Conqueror laughed in amusement at her opponent's attempts to break her defenses.

Darphus pressed harder, which forced the Conqueror to back step into the clearing. His eyes flickered up to a tree branch but quickly returned to his opponent's face.

The Conqueror caught the motion and that confirmed her earlier suspicion that something was wrong. She couldn't make any confirmations as her enemy was pressing her hard.

"Conqueror!" cried out a familiar voice.

The Conqueror's concentration was broken for a heartbeat and that cost her as Darphus's blade cut her left arm. She hissed then jumped away with angry features.

Darphus laughed but glanced over to see a gelding with the famed rebel and an Amazon on it. This wasn't exactly what he had planned for yet he knew he had to be flexible.

Gabrielle pulled the gelding to an abrupt stop on the edge of the clearing.

"Get out of here, Gabrielle!" yelled the furious ruler. She then jumped when Darphus lunged at her. She raised her swords and stopped his feverish attacks.

"No, Darphus has set you up!" hollered the bard into the clearing, "He has-"

The Conqueror's face froze when she heard the rebel's words cut off. She watched in horror as the Amazon, Velasca, threw the rebel off the horse's back. "Hades," she hissed.

Gabrielle clawed the ground as she lay on her aching stomach. She heard the Amazon's boots hit the ground then when she lifted her head some, she her vision filled with the angry Amazon's face.

"It's time for you to shut up, rebel," snarled Velasca. She reached behind with both hands and unsheathed her sword. She was looking forward to finishing what she started in the meeting hut yesterday. "I will do what the Conqueror should have done a long time ago."

Gabrielle's breathing was erratic as her mind raced with what to do.

The gelding reared up when he saw the danger to the smaller human. He tried to bring his hoofs at the Amazon that he'd never liked from the start.

Velasca darted out of the way then growled at the protective horse.

Gabrielle used her hands to push her body up.

The horse came along side the rebel leader and he angrily huffed at the Amazon. His teeth showed.

"Stupid horse," hissed the Amazon.

The rebel clung to the horse's nearby leg and used it to help her get up. She eventually got to her feet with the gelding's body for support. "You were the leak, weren't you?"

Velasca laughed and held her ground, legs in battle stance, and her sword pointed at the rebel. Off to her right she heard the crossing blades. "I am the Amazons' savior, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle stared at the Amazon like she was insane. "You're with Darphus... by the gods."

"Finished her, Velasca!" yelled Darphus, "And get over here to help me."

Velasca stepped closer to the rebel leader. "This Nation has become too weak and you've proven that, Gabrielle." She pointed her sword at the fighting warlord and the Conqueror. "Now they trust her to fight for us." She bitterly laughed and directed her sword at the rebel. "Darphus will defeat this weak Nation and I will be the only Amazon left." Her dark eyes brightened with excitement. "And I will rebuild the Amazons to their glory days. Queen Cyane's Nation has come to an end."

Gabrielle was stunned by the evil Amazon's proclamation. "You setup your Nation to die," she chewed out.

"No," sneered the angry Amazon, "I am exterminating the weak links of the Amazons. It is time for a new Nation with a new queen." She stepped closer as she hotly whispered, "And a new realm without the Conqueror... and without a rebel leader that spreads lies."

"They are not lies!" yelled the bard.

Velasca gave a battle cry then came at her opponent.

The gelding tried to bite the Amazon but missed.

Velasca struck with a hard kick to the rebel's chest.

Gabrielle screamed as she went sailing into the air then crashed into the ground.

The gelding protested by rearing up again and came at the Amazon. Yet he whined out in sharp pain when cold steel went thrusting into his chest and caught his heart.

Velasca quickly moved away with her bloody sword when the gelding collapsed to the ground in a dying heap. She then turned her cold eyes onto the rebel leader that lay on her back only a few paces away. She spun her sword then stalked up to her weak enemy. "Your time has come, rebel."

Gabrielle sat up with her hands behind her. Her ears pounded with her heartbeat yet in all the chaos the close din of clashing swords filtered to her. She hastily reached for her dagger under her shirt as the Amazon raised her sword. "No, your time has come, Velasca!"

Velasca saw the rebel's movement for the hidden dagger yet Velasca was moving faster. Her sword came down towards the rebel in a blur.

The rebel leader had already let go of her dagger when the background behind Velasca had changed. She screamed as she used her hands to hastily roll away but the Amazon sword caught her left leg in the thigh. She cried in pain as she laid partially on her side and stomach however she glanced over her shoulder.

Velasca remained hanging on the Conqueror's sword by her stomach. Her mouth was open with blood seeping out from the corners and her eyes up to the trees, praying to Artemis.

Gabrielle's terrified eyes lifted further past the dead Amazon and focused on the Conqueror.

The Conqueror's left arm was still stretched out with the dead Amazon on her blade. Her other sword was across her body horizontally and had just stopped Darphus's vertical slash. She snarled at her enemy then extracted her sword from Velasca's stomach and swiped her left sword at him.

Darphus backed away just in time then called out, "Now!"

"No," screamed the rebel, "Conqueror!" She watched helplessly as two arrows whizzed from hidden spots on the edge of the clearing.

The Conqueror rammed her swords into the ground then raised her hands in time to catch the shafts, the tips just near skin at her chest. Her nose detected a mousy odor on the arrowhead; she instantly knew what that smell meant. "Nice try, Darphus." She threw the arrows to the ground. She then grabbed her swords' hilts.

"There are three archers," shouted the bard.

The Conqueror had already extracted her blades from the ground when she heard the third whistle. She ran out of time to pinpoint it.

Gabrielle stared in shock as the third arrow pierced the Conqueror's lower back side, through the leathers into the skin and sunk into her muscle. "Gods... no," Gabrielle whispered fearfully.

The ruler clenched her teeth then suddenly whirled around with her left hand raising the sword. She released the sword's handle when she had her aim perfect.

The sword whirled through the air in a spinning circle. The blade cut into the hidden archer's chest and his cry filled the air.

The archer dropped to the ground with the Amazon sword protruding from his chest.

The Conqueror had a satisfied look yet she peered down at her injured backside. With her freehand and clenched teeth, she ripped the arrow out then lifted it to her nose. Her features wrinkled up at the mixed smell of her blood and the mousy scent again.

Darphus was grinning then started to laugh. "How long do you think you can last, Conqueror before it makes it to your heart?"

The Conqueror dropped the arrow to the ground, stepped on it with a distinct crack, and lifted her right sword. "Long enough to kill you, Darphus."

"Not likely," argued the warlord. He raised his sword then defended himself when the Conqueror attacked him. He could already tell the Conqueror was slightly weaker, which encouraged him more.

Gabrielle scanned about desperately as she tried to think of some way to help. She saw over her left shoulder was Velasca's lifeless form but she was fairly far. She pulled up her internal strength then tried to get to her feet. But her attempt was futile as her mangled and now injured legs could not help her. She collapsed to the ground in a painful, defeated display.

The Conqueror's attention was briefly caught by bow strings going taut in the distance. She growled then gave a piercing warcy. She flipped up into the air and landed past Darphus several paces and her sword was dropped. Her hands quickly moved to her sides as she unsheathed the daggers at her side. She threw her arms and her wrists flicked the daggers.

Darphus had finally recovered from the unexpected launch and turned around. He caught the tale end of the amazing display as the Amazon daggers shot through the air towards his hidden archers.

The Conqueror's now free hands were able to catch on the oncoming poisonous arrows. She stopped them just in time then spun around and tried to throw them at her enemy.

Darphus yelped and ducked out of the way from one almost scraping his upper, exposed arm. He smirked at the injured ruler. "Nice try." His smirk was lost though when the archers far behind the ruler hit the ground, dead.

The Conqueror heard the bodies hit the forest floor. Now her smug features showed as she bent down and grasped her sword's hilt. "It's just you... and me, now."

"You won't live long enough, Conqueror," challenged the warlord. "I'm sure you can already feel the hemlock coursing through your veins. It'll travel to your heart."

"Not before I have yours in my hand," snarled the ruler. She wasted no more time and attacked her enemy. She caught a quick view of the rebel leader several paces away on the clearing's edge.

Gabrielle hissed as her arms dragged her aching body across the forest floor. Her hands finally touched the dead Amazons and her hands were coated in Velasca's cooling blood. She ignored it then rolled the Amazon over as best as she could. Her eyes were filled by the view of the Amazon sword that she'd been after. She clenched the bloody hilt then rammed the tip onto the soft ground.

The rebel leader's jaw was set as she tried to haul her body up. She muffled a whimper of pain from her legs but she slowly made progress. At some point, her left hand slipped and ran down the coated blade and cut her palm. She ignored it and held tight to the handle with both hands again.

Finally Gabrielle made it to her feet. She used the sword as a walking stick as she very slowly limped towards the ensuing fight. Despite it was a battle, she was amazed by the Conqueror's beautiful dance against Darphus.

The Conqueror spotted the rebel coming closer to them. She growled then clashed her sword against Darphus. She spun him around so that she was now between him and Gabrielle.

Darphus spied the nearing rebel with amusement. "She's as restless as you, Conqueror."

The ruler popped a punch at his face and caught him for his distraction.

The warlord hissed as he stumbled back from the blow. He straightened up with a bleeding lip and nose.

"Get back, Gabrielle!" commanded the ruler's cold voice. Just as she raised her sword at the warlord, her right hand was shaking uncontrollably.

Darphus surprisingly watched ruler's grasp on the sword's hilt falter.

The Conqueror's right hand was numb now but her left hand caught the sword by the hilt just in time. She growled at her enemy as she knew she was running low on time.

Darphus was gleeful at seeing the hemlock's paralysis coming into affect. He charged the ruler with a dangerous attack.

The Conqueror was both left and right handed with her sword however the hemlock quickly weakened her abilities. She just barely caught the warlord's blade with her vertical blade.

Darphus was moving much faster in comparison to the ruler. He dodged around her shaken defenses and kicked at her stomach.

The Conqueror absorbed the blow yet her legs suddenly gave up control. She dropped to her knees and her left fingers stopped receiving commands to hold the weapon. Her sword fell to the dirt. The Conqueror only had upper body motion and she lifted her head back.

Darphus towered over the prone ruler. "Who would have thought the great Conqueror would ever come to this?" He lowered his sword and smugly bent over the ruler. "Paralyzed and helpless... it's becoming of you." He suddenly struck the Conqueror with a blow from his sword's hilt.

The Conqueror could do nothing as her head was slammed by the hard metal. She growled as she crashed into the ground and her vision briefly swam while her mouth filled with the taste of blood.

"She's not completely helpless," challenged the limping rebel.

Darphus's head snapped up from staring down at the motionless yet still breathing Conqueror. He pointed his sword at the rebel leader. "You!" He laughed as he simply stepped over the Conqueror's body and approached the rebel. "You've caused enough problems for me."

Gabrielle stood before the warlord and despite she was slumped over she proudly held her head up. "I plan to keep doing it," she hotly defied.

"Not anymore." Darphus readied his sword.

Gabrielle put both her hands on the Amazon sword hilt and prepared to raise the sword at the right moment.

Darphus yelled and raised the sword over his head. His blade came down but was immediately stopped by another sword. His shocked features turned to the dark, angry face of the Conqueror.

"Nor am I completely paralyzed, Darphus." The Conqueror held her body up with her left hand and her shaking right hand held the trembling sword. "Drop, Gabrielle!" she

yelled as her sword quickly tucked under Darphus's arms and slashed up.

The rebel leader released the sword hilt and she fell to the ground as Darphus's sword swept over her head. She then felt warm blood spray from above and coat her. She closed her eyes and turned her head away.

Darphus screamed in pain then stumbled back, his sword forgotten and his hands around his sliced neck.

The Conqueror dropped her sword and turned her head. She watched in satisfaction as her enemy fell to his knees now, teetered for a heartbeat, and slowly dove to his right side.

Darphus's hands loosened from his neck and his ghostly, cold eyes remained lifelessly staring at the Conqueror. The shock of his defeat was written all over his face.

The Conqueror released a painful breath then her upper body gave into the poison. She slumped onto her back and stared up through the opening in the forest to the lively blue sky. "Gabrielle?" she softly called.

The rebel leader crawled over to the Conqueror and stopped at the ruler's right side then used her hands to sit up. Her left hand balanced her from behind her and her right hand in her lap but she wanted to touch the dying ruler. "I have to get help, Conqueror."

The Conqueror shook her head then her eyes focused onto the rebel. "It's too late for that." She swallowed as her thoughts were starting to slow down. "Especially... since... you're legs are injured." Her chest rose and fell quickly.

"I have to try," argued the frantic bard.

"No," whispered the ruler. She willed her paralysis away from her right hand and she collapsed the rebel's hand. "Stay here... with me."

Gabrielle clenched the ruler's blood slick hand and her eyes burned from unshed tears. "I have to try," she hoarsely repeated.

"Sssh," whispered the ruler. Her eyes closed as she murmured, "Isn't this what you've always wanted?" Her eyes fluttered open and locked on the blurring rebel that hovered over her.

"No," rasped the bard, "not anymore." She couldn't do this; she couldn't sit here and watched the Conqueror die. "I have-"

"Gabrielle," softly drew out the ruler's voice. Her tone wasn't her normal cold monotone but inviting and almost tender. "Everything will be fine."

Gabrielle glanced at their clenched hands then back at the ruler's motionless face. "You can't die... the realm needs you. What are we going to do?"

The Conqueror's chest rose high then slowly fell. "Just go forward." A brief emotion

passed over her face then disappeared. "The known-world doesn't need a tyrant, Gabrielle... you know this."

Gabrielle's chest rose and fell wildly as she whispered, "No, you're not that tyrant... I was wrong." She lowered her head down closer to the ruler's. "You've helped so much too. You've stopped all the warring Greek states, brought peace... the economy is strong. And we can worship under any religion in your realm. We're well protected from outside threats."

The Conqueror sadly smiled at that last statement. "Just my punishment and taxation could use some help huh?" Her joke was delivered to the bard but she got the wrong effect.

Gabrielle broke into hot tears.

The Conqueror's slow mind tried to think of a way to ease the rebel's new fears. "You know what... I've come to... realize about you, Gabrielle."

The crying bard tried to calm some as she throatily whispered, "What's that?"

The Conqueror's fuzzy blue eyes locked on the rebel for once instead of beyond her. "You make a great enemy but... an even better friend."

Gabrielle's tears only strengthened and she shook her head frantically. "Oh gods please... don't leave, Conqueror."

"Xena," murmured the Conqueror then she finished the line at seeing Gabrielle's confused features. "My name is Xena."

The bard's rapid heart wavered then continued its hasty beats. Gabrielle lowered her head down onto the ruler's slowly rising chest. Their locked hands remained between their bodies.

The Conqueror clenched her teeth as she forced her left hand to lift off the ground. She just managed to rest her hand on the bard's shoulders to soothe her.

Gabrielle's powerful tears rolled down over the bridge of her nose and cheek then pooled on the dark ruler's chest.

The tears rolled down the Conqueror's chest then stopped over the Conqueror's slow beating heart. They then suddenly picked up momentum as the ruler's chest fell and they streamed down against the ruler's neck.

Gabrielle's head rose high up on the Conqueror's chest but her ear heard the slurred heartbeat. She quickly lifted her head when the Conqueror's chest fell one last time. "No," she breathed, "Conqueror?" She touched the ruler's left cheek and it was chilled from the working hemlock. "Oh gods no... please, no."

The Conqueror's left arm fell off the rebel's back and hit the ground. Her right hand had long ago lost its grip.

Gabrielle became hysterical as she yelled, "Don't leave... I need you." She searched the lifeless, staring blue orbs below that didn't respond to her. "Don't leave me," she breathed emotionally. "Wake up!"

The Conqueror made no response. Her face was peaceful for the first time since her childhood.

Gabrielle stared at her legs that had betrayed her. Her life was nothing but irony as the Conqueror shattered the very legs that could have brought her help. She suddenly threw her head back and started screaming, "Help!" She inhaled sharply and hysterically cried out, "Help! I need help!" Her tears rushed down her cheeks at the resounding silence coming back to her ears. "Gods please, help!!"

Chapter 18 - Unraveling

Janice Covington bent down then snapped the strap into place over her revolver's handle. She patted the gun's handle and grinned at finally having her precious weapon back. She stood up and slightly stretched so that the rest of her fitful sleep would work out of her body. She'd awoken half an hour ago and now was preparing for a long day with her squad.

Just at the thought of being a dekarchos was quite foreign to her. In many ways it was providing her with first hand account of Corinth, Greek military, and the people. So for Janice, it truly was a way for her to secretly carry out her archeological findings about ancient Greece.

Janice was clothed in her Amazon leathers minus her cloak and sword, which rested on the foot of the Conqueror's bed. She strolled across the large bedchambers and went into the washroom. After she was cleaned up and ready to the face the day, she stepped into the center of the quiet bedchambers. She figured Melinda must have left a couple of hours ago since she'd awaken alone.

Then something on the large coffee table in front of the long sofa caught her eye. Not that they had coffee in ancient Greece, inwardly joked the archeologist, but Christ it would be nice with a shot of whiskey. She neared the table then bent over and studied the bowl of fruit, her right hand eventually curled over a round fruit. Janice held up the orange in front of her face and smirked. "I'll be damned... an orange in ancient Greece." She peered back down and saw on the right side of the bowl a banana was tucked in between some apples. "Sweet Jesus."

The bedchamber door quietly opened up and two forms entered, Lao Ma and Melinda Pappas.

Lao Ma softly smiled at the archeologist's full absorption in the orange. "The Conqueror is very fond of citrus fruits."

Janice Covington quietly gasped after being scared out of her skin. "Christ... couldn't you have knocked?" She lowered the orange to her side as a slight flush colored her cheeks.

Melinda folded her arms over her chest and arched an eyebrow at her friend. "Good mornin' to you too, Doctor Covington."

The archeologist's blush proceeded to deepen. "Sorry," she muttered and put the fruit back on the stack. She approached the pair. "So what's today's agenda?"

Melinda's eyebrow descended but her lips spread into a wide grin. "Since ya asked, Janice you'll be spendin' the day with Ma."

Janice opened her mouth then closed it at the warning look over her friend's face. She smiled warmly at the Chin ruler. "Bored of the damn fortress huh?"

Lao Ma tilted her head then explained, "I believe I can help you find this mysterious Cronos Ring." At Janice's newly twisted features she further explained it. "I can detect its source of power."

Janice slowly nodded then peered up at Melinda behind the Chin ruler. "Should I take the squad?"

"It would be wise," agreed the southerner. "Lao Ma's two guards will join her."

"Alright." Janice Covington shifted her weight on her feet. "What about Alti?"

"I'll deal with her," answered Melinda. "Ya need to worry about this ring and the thief."

Janice nodded then returned her attention to Lao Ma. "When will you be ready to go?"

"The present is most desirable," responded the Chin ruler.

The archeologist blinked then a slow grin shaped her soft lips. "My kinda woman." She turned then called to the curtains, "Hu?"

Within a few seconds, the tiger casually strolled in from the balcony with his tail flickering behind him. He came over and sat between Lao Ma and Janice Covington, his favorite two people. He dropped his head back and bared his teeth at Melinda Pappas though but there was no snarl.

Melinda narrowed her eyes at the furry beast.

Lao Ma ran her fingers through the tiger's heavy coat. "Two tigers form a deep bond but they always fight about who is in charge." Her words fell to Melinda despite she wasn't look at her.

Melinda grinned at this then softly replied, "I reckon so, Ma." She gently touched Janice's shoulder to get her attention. "Ya should get started before the sun gets any higher."

"Christ, Mel it's like nine in the morning."

The linguist's lips tugged with a warm grin. "And I have been up since seven."

Janice rolled her eyes then under her breath said, "That's for the birds." She felt a squeeze to her shoulder then Melinda released her.

"Find me later," ordered the translator, whose back was to the group as she left through the open door.

Lao Ma smiled at Janice then offered, "Perhaps we should get started."

Janice nodded then went to the foot of the bed. She'd made the bed when she first got up even though she didn't have to since it was Nakia's duty. She was just too used to doing it. She put her sword over her back then collected her cloak. "Where are your guards?"

"They're waiting down in the court," answered the Chin ruler.

The archeologist nodded then they were headed off. Janice had Lao Ma wait on the grounds with Hu and the two Chin soldiers while she went to the barracks to collect her men. She was quite impressed with the two Chin guards as they were almost as tall as Melinda. They wore a heavy black robe, their chests protected by coin design metal armor, and they carried a sword at their sides but spears in hand. Their faces remained impassive from years of training, high cheek bones, long hair that was tied into a bun, and thin mustaches.

It wasn't long before the large group mixed together and marched into the city of Corinth. Janice Covington decided the best place to start was back at the alchemist's shop. Lao Ma readily agreed because it would give her a feeling for what this Cronos Stone's powers were due to the green liquid that Janice described to her. It wasn't long before Janice and Lao Ma entered the alchemist's shop. Janice was happy to see that the posted guard was on duty at the shop. Janice led the Chin ruler to the back of the shop and showed her the workstation.

Lao Ma neared the workstation and studied the green teardrop that rested on the metal plated desk. She was quite intrigued as she leaned over it closer.

Janice closely watched the oriental woman. "What you think, Lao Ma?"

The Chin ruler didn't respond right away instead she cupped her hand over the green droplet then, to Janice's amazement, the droplet started to float up in the air. Lao Ma turned her hand over and the droplet hovered in the small woman's cupped hand without touching her skin.

"Jesus Christ," muttered the archeologist, her hands slipping from her chest. "How...."

Lao Ma turned to the archeologist, a thin smile showed. "Melinda did not tell you?"

Janice closed her gaping mouth with a sharp snap. "No." She tilted her head then asked, "You're a psychokinetic?"

The Chin ruler considered the word then replied, "I do not know this word, Janice."

She studied the green droplet more carefully while mentioning, "My abilities come from Light."

Janice's interest showed over her face and she stepped closer. "Can anybody do that?"

"Essentially yes," replied Lao Ma, "but you must enter a new world... a world without desires and without will." She lifted her head and her soft brown eyes locked on the stranger. "It is derived from the qi. Do you know this concept, Janice?"

Janice Covington's archeological mind had a few bells ringing. She considered it deeply then whispered, "It's Chinese mythology and if I remember right it translates to life force or spiritual energy. It's really a Buddhist or Taoist concept." She tilted her head then further added, "It's used a lot in Chinese medicine."

Lao Ma's smile lengthened at the archeologist. "Yes but it is not mythology as you say."

Janice cleared her throat and stared back at the floating droplet. "No, it doesn't seem to be." She focused back on the Chin ruler's face. "Can you tell anything... about that?" She pointed at the droplet.

"It is very unusual," murmured Lao Ma, who was still dissecting it.

"There's the pot calling the kettle black," mumbled the archeologist.

"Do you know of anything called a Cronos Stone, Janice? Melinda mentioned you are excellent with ancient Greek history and stories."

The archeologist bit her lower lip then replied, "There's only one story about Cronus and any stone. Cronus was a Titan and ruled the heavens before the regular gods. When Cronus's children were born, all the current gods, he ate them except for Zeus because he wasn't born yet. When Rhea had Zeus, she hid him and gave Cronus a stone to fool him."

"Cronus ate the stone?" inquired the Chin ruler.

"Yes," answered Janice, "and not long after Zeus overthrew his father and saved his siblings."

"Are Cronos and Cronus the one in the same?" probed Lao Ma.

Janice shrugged then replied, "They're inner changeable when the name is translated." She sighed for a second. "The stone that Cronus ate though was called Omphalos not the Cronos Stone."

"Perhaps they are the one in the same." Lao Ma lifted her hand and let the droplet lift in the air higher. "Perhaps much like Cronus's name, the stone's name has been lost in translation."

"It's definitely possible," agreed Janice. "But the Omphalos Stone is suppose to reside in Delphi with the oracle... not wondering from hand to hand."

Lao Ma's lips shaped a small grin. "Do you really believe that a powerful stone from the gods would remain in Delphi?"

"Now that you put it that way," grumbled the archeologist. "This is really sticky."

Lao Ma mentally moved the droplet deeper into her hand and she closed her hand around it to hide it. "This will help me detect any object with the same powers."

Janice released a long breath then nodded her head. "Great."

"The stone is very powerful, Janice. It is not something that should be in Alti's hands."

Janice stepped up closer to the Chin ruler. "Do you think it's possible to... split the stone's power in half and for it to remain just as strong?"

Lao Ma slowly nodded her head. "From that mere droplet it is possible to use its powers."

"Christ," muttered the worried archeologist. "That's not good... at all."

"We should begin our search," suggested Lao Ma.

"Yeah no telling what lunatic will use that ring... if it's real." Janice started out of the workshop and into the shop.

"The stone does have a safety feature," mentioned Lao Ma, "it is inactive if the bearer does not understand its powers."

Janice huffed. "Well thank god for small miracles... let's hope our thief is a dumb lunatic." She marched out of the shop and came to the street level where her squad waited along with the Chin soldiers and Hu.

Lao Ma glided down the steps and quietly stood beside the archeologist.

"We're going to sweep through the city," ordered Janice, "Keep your eyes open for anybody that might be talking about the murder from yesterday." She glanced over at the Greek soldier to her right. "You're free of your duty. Return back to the fortress's barrack. See the tetrarchès."

"Yes, dekarchos." The soldier clapped his fist across his chest then marched back to the fortress.

"Let's go," ordered Janice.

The Greek file broke into half as five soldiers walked ahead and five behind. Lao Ma and Janice stayed in the center with Hu near them then the Chin soldiers stayed directly behind Lao Ma. Lao Ma opened her right hand and revealed the droplet that was a dull emerald shade.

Janice peered at the oriental woman and noticed Lao Ma was concentrating. "Just let

me know if you... pick up on anything."

"Of course," replied the distant voice of the ruler.

Janice realized that many street vendors and citizens were observing them as they went and most likely because of Lao Ma and her unusual guards. She knew that ancient Europeans rarely encountered the Asian culture and very much the reverse too. Janice tried to not let it bug her since she was use to being popular in public eye.

By the time the sun was overhead, Janice was beat and there was no luck. She commanded the group to halt then ordered her squad to take a break for a candlemark and that they'd continue afterwards. She realized by this afternoon they will have successfully sweep the entire city but she just hoped they'd get a bite.

Lao Ma stayed with Janice as did Hu and the guards. Lao Ma reached into her robe then fished out a small, silver box that she opened.

The emerald droplet floated into the box then it was sealed away for later.

Janice tilted her head then asked, "How about lunch at a tavern by the port?" She grinned at the Chin ruler. "It'll be a cultural experience for you."

Lao Ma revealed a grin of her own. "I believe that would be desirable. Thank you."

"Come on, I know just the tavern too." Janice took them to the Fish Head Inn down by the port, the first tavern that Janice went to when she arrived in Corinth. She found them a large enough table and they all sat while Hu curled up behind Janice's chair and the wall.

The tavern's lunch special was shortly brought out then they ordered drinks as well. Janice, for her part, inquired about how Lao Ma came to meet the Conqueror, which really fascinated her. She could only wonder if Xena, in her world, met Lao Ma too. Janice mostly assumed that Xena had considering Gabrielle's scrolls were written not long after Xena's changes, not long after Hercules.

"Do you think the Conqueror will be able to change?"

Lao Ma had finished eating and she set her plate aside. She straightened up in her chair rather formally. "Anybody is capable of change, Janice but it is a matter of will." She studied the thinking archeologist. "Do you believe she could change, Janice?"

Janice Covington heavily debated with herself then she found that she was nodding. "In my world, Xena followed some of the same path as the Conqueror but she changed paths at some point."

"Do you know why?"

The archeologist cupped the wood mug in her hand then answered, "Xena changed because of this demi-god known as Hercules." She shrugged then after a beat she continued speaking. "Maybe the Conqueror is capable of that same change... she can't

be that far different from the Xena in my world. Maybe Gabrielle will see that change in her. The Gabrielle in my world, she inspired Xena to stay on a set course."

"They are one another's balances," stated the Chin ruler. "Very much like you and Melinda are too."

Janice dipped her head down, peering into the quarter filled mug. "I'm not like Gabrielle though... nor is Melinda like Xena." Her head came up.

"You each have your path to follow," agreed Lao Ma, "but your karmas are fated. It is as certain as the sunrise each day or the moon's cycle." She sensed that Janice was somewhat uneasy still. "There is a common Chin saying, Janice. We say that it is impossible to change your basic characteristics."

"But it's easy to fine tune huh?" Janice slightly grinned.

Lao Ma stretched her hand out and collapsed it with Janice's. "A great tree can bend and stretch in the wind because if it didn't then it would topple over."

Janice nodded her head then she smiled as she took in the proverb more. "Do you mind if we make a stop somewhere?"

"Not at all." Lao Ma climbed to her feet, which prompted the guards to get up too.

Janice quickly paid the tavern owner then escorted the group out of the inn. They then trekked across the city until Janice finally located the back alley that she wanted. She went to the door and knocked on it but there was no response from anybody.

"You were expecting somebody here?"

The archeologist shook her head at Lao Ma's question. "Not really. It's Gabrielle's home actually." She stepped backed twice. "Watch out." She followed Iolaus's handy open the door trick and she gave a brisk kick to the door.

The door flew open and revealed the inside of the quiet, low lit home.

Janice went in first followed by Hu, Lao Ma, and the guards. "I just want to check on things in here. Why don't you wait here?"

Lao Ma dipped her head in agreement.

Janice glanced about the quiet home then she hurried upstairs to see if anything had been disturbed. Nothing seemed to be touch as far as she could tell. She entered Gabrielle's room last, where she removed the glowing matt from the window. She then scanned the room and found everything fine. She then sadly smiled at seeing her leather pack she'd picked up in the market with Melpomene.

Janice picked up the pack and put the straps over her shoulders. She then debated whether to take Gabrielle's scrolls but decided it was best not to do so. She put the matt back into place and hurried downstairs. "We better get back before the squad shows up."

"A wise idea." Lao Ma left the home then waited for Janice.

The archeologist closed the house back up and led the group to the location where the squad had separated. When they made it, a soldier hurried up to Janice's side with an excited expression.

"Dekarchos, I heard news of this thief."

Janice jumped at this and demanded, "Who? What? Where?"

The soldier slightly grinned at the dekarchos's excitement too. "Biton and I heard a vendor talking to a customer. He was rattling on about how he got this magical ring from some guy that sold it to him."

The dekarchos's eyes widened. "Do you recall the merchant?"

"Sure," answered the soldier, "he's hard to miss." He chuckled then offered, "I will point him out, dekarchos."

"Perfect." Janice saw the rest of the squad had arrived. "Let's go, men."

Within fifteen minutes, the squad entered the bustling market and Biton and his comrade directed the group through the people. They finally came to a stop in the busy street. Biton stood next to the dekarchos and pointed to the left at the merchant and his stand.

Janice Covington nodded then turned to Lao Ma at her side. "Are you sensing anything?"

"I do not believe it is here," sadly informed the Chin ruler.

"Well, let's see what we can find out... nothin' like a little detective work." Janice made everybody stay, except for Hu, and she stepped up to the merchant. "Afternoon, sir."

"Hello, little friend, looking for some Conqueror merchandise?" When the merchant saw the immediate irritation of his little friend, he quickly rattled forward. "Ssh, ssh not too loud, not just because of the Conqueror's squads but because these are incredible bargains."

Janice ticked off another back molar after not only taking a height joke but this man's annoying attitude. "I don't have time for this," she hotly stated through her teeth.

"Time? Who doesn't have time for a great deal? Trust Salmoneus, he only has the interest of the customer at heart. Ask anybody... later. Take a look at this huh?" The merchant picked up a small bag. "This nice pouch... you can put it on your back. You can put a vegetable in there... a scroll. Take a look..." He held it closer to his little friend. "It's the Conqueror's seal. I call it my Conqueror pack... Conqueror pack... get it? You like that?"

"That's it!" growled the furious archeologist and her right hand shot out. She grabbed the merchant by the collar and yanked him up onto the stand. "Listen, I'm looking for some information."

Salmoneus held up his hands then replied, "I don't have any information for anything. I'm just a humble merchant."

Janice snarled deeper.

"My... perhaps you could use my handy scroll for proper manners?"

Janice Covington's eyes were growing a deep green by this point.

Quickly Biton came up to the merchant stand and asked, "Is there a problem?"

Salmoneus was relieved to see a squad soldier for once. "Ooo thank the gods, could you tell this woman to unhand me? She is wrinkling my best suit."

The archeologist proceeded to twist her hand and she wrinkled his shirt more. She then leaned in closer to the man but her words went to Biton. "Is it illegal to merchandise the Conqueror?"

The squad soldier scanned the merchant's hidden products behind the stand. "The Conqueror would be very displeased." He came around the stall to get the merchant. "You are to come with me," he ordered.

Janice tossed the merchant back so that the soldier could get him.

"Wait," argued Salmoneus, "I have every right to sell these." He held up his hands. "I was once the Conqueror's personal biographer."

"Yeah, yeah." Biton grabbed the man's forearm. "Sure you were, man. Come with me."

Janice huffed then stepped off the sidewalk and neared Lao Ma. "Nothing?"

"I am afraid not, Janice."

The archeologist sighed but turned her attention to her squad. "I want some of you to haul this merchant's stand back to the fortress." She saw the surprised features on their faces. "Right now," she chewed out. "He has illegal merchandise."

"Of course, dekarchos," spoke a soldier.

Three soldiers broke away and carried out the orders.

"Gilles, where will Biton take that merchant?"

"To the dungeons, of course."

The archeologist secretly flinched then nodded her head. "Alright, let's finished up our

sweep of the city."

The thinned out group continued the last of the search through the city. Lao Ma never detected the mysterious ring but Janice still had at least one lead that was waiting in the dungeon. She only hoped that this merchant wasn't being tortured much like what she'd seen previously. Her stomach pitched just at the thought especially since she would be the cause of it.

The small party finally returned to the fortress an hour before sunset with empty hands. Lao Ma parted from Janice and said she was going to rest in her chambers. Janice dismissed her squad then went into the fortress to seek out her friend. She wasn't the least bit surprised to find Melinda anchored to her desk chair behind the desk still doing scroll work.

"Did ya have any luck, Janice?" Melinda set her quill and got up from the chair. She needed to stand for awhile since she'd been sitting for far too long.

"Not really," admitted Janice. She padded across the office and stopped in front of Melinda. "Either there isn't one or it's out of the city by now."

"God," whispered Melinda, "I hope the latter ain't the case."

"I did... um..." Janice hesitated as her right hand went to the back of her neck.

"What happened?" urged the translator.

"I arrested a merchant."

Melinda Pappas's eyebrow hiked up. "Ya what?"

"I... arrested a merchant... he really pissed me off too."

"Janice, ya can't just arrest merchants 'cause they piss ya off."

Janice held her hands up to stop her friend's rant. She saw Melinda take a steady breath then she explained the situation. "I think he might have information about this ring thing. He wouldn't answer me then one of my squad soldiers came up to stop me from doing anything stupid." She lowered her hands. "Did you know merchandising the Conqueror is illegal?" She then realized who she just asked and she moaned softly. "Don't... say anything to that."

"Where is this merchant now?"

"Down in the dungeons."

"Ooo my," whispered the linguist. "You think he might be a lead?"

The archeologist shrugged. "I won't know 'til I try."

"Let's handle this together," stated the linguist.

Janice easily agreed then she and Melinda left the office together. Janice stole a few silent minutes to admire her friend in her leathers, bronze armor, and the chakram glinting at her side. The old memory of the chakram running up Janice's arm hit her and she unconsciously shivered. By the time she got rid of the memory, she and Melinda were on the first floor of the dungeon where Janice had been for some time.

The archeologist tried to remain calm but her breathing was labored.

Melinda touched her friend's midback after detecting the uneasiness. She then dropped her hand when the guard in this sector of the dungeon approached them. "A merchant was brought in earlier?"

The sentry clapped his right arm across his chest. "Yes, my liege. He is in the last cell. Do you wish to go in?" At the Conqueror's nod, he escorted the former prisoner and ruler down the dark, stone corridor. He stopped at the end of rowed cells on his right and turned on his heels. He removed the ring of keys from his side and stepped up to the door.

Janice let her friend enter the cell first.

The Conqueror swept into the cell then her eyes sought out the man slumped on the floor.

The merchant stared at the Conqueror's boots. "Wait a minute. Those boots...." His eyes traveled up. "That leather." His gaze journeyed up the Conqueror's legs. "Those legs." Finally his beady eyes met the dark, dour face of the owner of those boots, leather, and legs. "Conqueror!" He jumped to his feet.

The Conqueror folded her arms over her chest. "Salmoneus."

Janice sidestepped the ruler and huffed at the annoying merchant.

"You!" Salmoneus pointed a finger at his little friend. "That's the little Miss Innocent that got me thrown in here in the first place."

The Conqueror smirked then stated, "She's my dekachos."

"She's your... dekachos," whispered the suddenly fearful merchant. "She's your dekachos? You have a female dekachos? What? Is she an Amazon?"

Janice's temper sparked again. "Hey, hey back off! You know, you wouldn't be in here in the first place if you kept your mouth shut!"

Salmoneus stepped back and smiled real brightly.

The Conqueror held up her hand to silence Janice, her warning look given to the archeologist.

Janice grumbled then rested her hands on her hips.

The Conqueror rotated her head back to the merchant as her hand fell. "Salmoneus, I

hear you're merchandising me... again."

"Just call it fringe benefits after being your biographer," rambled Salmoneus, "You're more than welcomed to collect royalties. Everything has been a real big hit."

"Especially the Conqueror pack," jabbed the archeologist.

Salmoneus glowered at the dekarchos. "I've been meaning to send you one of everything. I just have gotten so busy lately... business and all. You should really stop by my stand, Conqueror."

The Conqueror's features darkened considerably. She took two long strides and towered over the older man. "Listen, Salmoneus I don't have time for this."

Janice rolled her eyes at the similar line.

"You have information that I need."

"Information?" squeaked the merchant, his back against the wall. "Conqueror, I have never hidden a single thing from you. What could I possibly be hiding from you?"

The Conqueror's ruthless smile appeared. "Does a green ring sound familiar?"

"Green ring?" dodged the merchant.

"Salmoneus," snarled the ruler, "if I find you're hiding anything from me then our trust will be quickly broken... along with a few other things."

Salmoneus smiled suddenly. "I think I do recall such a ring, my liege. Made of silver perhaps?"

"You're getting warm," encouraged the Conqueror. "Tell me more and I might let you leave without a scratch."

"Does that include my Conqueror merchandise?" Salmoneus heard a low throaty growl from the ruler. "Well actually you should keep the merchandise since I've been meaning to give you a set."

"Salmoneus," warned the ruler. Her hand slowly rose up and her fingers wrapped around his collar. "My limited amount of patience are almost gone."

"My liege, please it was several candlemarks ago that I had the ring."

The Conqueror tensed at this news. "Where is the ring, Salmoneus?"

"I already sold it to some guy... I don't know who he is or anything."

Janice took a step closer then questioned, "Do you remember what he looks like maybe?"

Salmoneus grinned. "I do not divulge my customer's identities... its bad for business."

"And if you don't," hissed the ruler, "it'll be bad for your health."

"But for you, my liege I am willing since you are the realm," back peddled the merchant's words. "And no, I didn't really get a look at his face."

"Why not?"

"He wore a hood over his face, my liege." Salmoneus held up his hands. "The only thing I can remember was that he had blue eyes... similar to yours actually." He then smiled weakly. "Did I ever tell you, my liege that I'm very fond of your eyes?"

"You and a thousand others," clipped the ruler. "Who did you get this ring from, Salmoneus?"

Salmoneus lowered his hands some then replied, "That I can tell you!"

The Conqueror backed off finally then took her spot beside her dekarchos. "Start talking, Salmoneus."

The merchant straightened out his flashy Chin mockup robe. He cleared his throat then peered up at the waiting women. "I didn't get his name but I did get his face."

"Jesus Christ, just tell us already, man," demanded the agitated dekarchos.

"You know, you could probably use my temper management scroll too along with the proper manners," offered the merchant.

Janice took a dangerous step closer to the merchant.

Salmoneus looked at the Conqueror for help.

The Conqueror shrugged and folded her arms over her chest. "It would be wise to answer the question, Salmoneus... and quickly."

Janice Covington reached back for her sword just to toy with him.

Salmoneus's eyes widened in fear and his hands came up. "Wait, wait!"

The archeologist bit the inside of her mouth to hold back her grin at finally getting this man's goad. "Start talking before I show what a female dekarchos does differently from a male one."

"Sounds like an interesting proposition but I think I'll pass." Salmoneus lost his smirk when Janice started to go for her sword again. "Okay, he was a younger guy... like your age," he informed the dekarchos. "He had almost black hair, short... carried a sword and brown eyes." He considered something then brightened up. "He also had a few scars, right here." He demonstrated by running his index finger across his forehead. "And here." His finger traced across his right cheek. "And a third was on the same cheek." He paused, shrugged and casually added, "It looked a bit battle worn for such a young kid."

The Conqueror narrowed her eyes at the familiar description.

"Actually," mumbled the merchant, his eyes staring at the floor. "I swear I've seen him before."

Janice Covington processed the description in her head then she let out a low moan. "Ooo goddamn it."

"What is it?" questioned the cut tone of the ruler.

"I know exactly who it is, my liege." Janice shook her head. "He served in your army for twenty seasons... his name is Perdicus."

The ruler's eyes filled with realization.

"Ooo yeah." Salmoneus brightened up. "He was the foot soldier you conscripted from Potidaea, my liege." He nodded then smiled at the ruler. "See? I knew exactly who he was."

The Conqueror rolled her eyes but returned her focus on the dekarchos. "How do you know him?"

The archeologist realized she was slightly under the spotlight for this one. She cleared her throat then answered, "Long story, my liege." When her friend narrowed her eyes at her she hastily promised, "That I will tell you... later."

The Conqueror's agreement showed by her saying nothing in response but she turned her sights back on Salmoneus. "Salmoneus," she drew out in a sultry voice.

"Yes, Proud Warriress?" Salmoneus tensed at the ruler's snarl and closer step. "I forgot you don't like to be undressed that way... I mean addressed!" He backed against the stone cell when the powerful ruler emerged high above him. He smiled sweetly then whispered, "Yes, my liege?"

The Conqueror bent over him and smiled sensually at him. "I'll cut you a deal... I know how much you love deals."

"Especially yours, my liege because they're so unfair... fair!"

The ruler arched an eyebrow then with her husky tone she offered, "I'll let you go right now without a single scrape if you do something for me." She placed her right fingertips under the merchant's bearded chin and tilted it back. "I want you to keep your eyes and ears open for this man you sold the ring to." Her eyes twinkled down at the man. "If he so much as breathes in your general direction you are to warn one of my soldiers."

"A stool pigeon, my liege?"

"No... not at all, Salmoneus think of it as life investment because it's either him...." The Conqueror's eyes went cold like her tone. "Or you."

"You are most gracious as always, my liege... truly." Salmoneus slapped on a fake smile.

"I know I am," murmured the ruler as she freed her hand. "So we have an agreement, Salmoneus?" Her hand came up.

The merchant swallowed and decided it was definitely in his best interest to shake. He took the larger hand and suddenly bit his lower lip when the ruler's grip was strong enough to almost crush his hand.

"You've agreed to a deal of a lifetime, Salmoneus." The Conqueror released the man's aching hand. She then backed away suddenly.

Salmoneus sighed in relief then slumped against the wall.

The Conqueror stopped next to the archeologist. "See that Salmoneus's stall is returned to him."

The merchant perked up as he carefully listened.

"Without the Conqueror merchandising," further emphasized the ruler.

Janice was smug at the merchant but peered up at the ruler. "Of course, my liege."

The Conqueror went to the door however stopped and glanced back at the merchant. "See that you use all your resources, Salmoneus... I know you have a sea of them."

"Most definitely, my liege," hastily replied the merchant.

The Conqueror nodded, opened the door, and left with her dekarchos trailing her.

Janice held the door yet she couldn't help poking the merchant one last time. Her head hung around the corner of the jail door as she tormented, "I'll be sure to stop at your stall daily, Salmoneus to check that you're keeping up on your side of the deal." She then slammed the heavy door.

Salmoneus let out an aspirated and long breath then slid down the wall until his butt hit the floor. "By the gods... women leaders... what's this realm coming to? Next any Amazon army will really exist."

The Conqueror's long strides carried her out of the dungeons and into the many portion of the fortress.

Janice had to walk quickly to keep up with the ruler.

"How do you know Perdicus?" questioned the Conqueror.

The archeologist peered up and gauged that her friend was still in the ruler mindset. She held back her sigh then replied, "He's a guard in the rebel faction."

The Conqueror came to a complete stop in the middle of the hallway and faced the small woman. "The faction," she drew out carefully. "Why would the faction want the alchemist dead?"

The archeologist also was considering this too; she shook her head. "Maybe they caught wind of Alti going to the alchemist's shop." Her head dipped forward as a slight headache was beginning to appear. "I'll be sure to ask when I get my hands on Perdicus." She rubbed her forehead.

"You're going to find out tonight, Janice," commanded the ruler.

"Tonight?" questioned the archeologist. Her head came up and she tried to blink away the dull ache behind her eyes. "Why tonight?"

"We don't have time to waste so I want you to go out tonight. Find Perdicus and question him." The Conqueror tilted her head. "You can also tell them what's going on with Gabrielle."

"Alright," murmured the archeologist.

"And where is Hu?" snapped the ruler.

Janice's features tightened. "I left him with Lao Ma for the afternoon... I thought he could use a break from me."

"He needs to be with you at all times, Janice." The Conqueror stepped closer then threateningly whispered, "Or I will reinstate those two guards on your backside again."

Janice's mouth opened some yet she didn't say anything. Her tightened features loosened then she murmured, "I'm sorry, Mel... I didn't mean to...." She shook her head as her headache strengthened.

The Conqueror's tense shoulders slightly lowered. She stepped closer to the smaller woman and her hands came up to Janice's temples. She slowly worked the muscles to soothe her friend.

The archeologist let out a quiet moan of gratitude, her eyes now closed.

"If something happens to you, Janice I will tear this realm apart," warningly promised the ruler.

"I know, Mel," whispered the archeologist. "I'll keep Hu with me all the time."

"Thank you," murmured the Conqueror. Her left hand disappeared while her right hand trailed down to Janice's cheek then under the side of her chin. She carefully tilted the archeologist's head back as she lowered hers.

Janice released a moan as her right hand now clung to her friend's leather clad hip. She inhaled the sensual smell of leather and sandalwood coming from the ruler. She pressed her body against the Conqueror's just as their tongues met.

The Conqueror slowly withdrew from the kiss, her eyes glowing in more warmth. "Take care of Salmoneus and Perdicus then come back here."

"After I get Hu," emphasized the slightly grinning archeologist.

The Conqueror's body shook with a silent laugh. "Exactly." She lowered her head and brushed their lips but only bit Janice's lower lip then huskily whispered, "I'll be waiting for you tonight." She then separated their bodies and retreated down the hall without another word.

Janice completely forgot about her headache as she was overtaken by other sensations in her body. She exhaled loudly and stared down at her friend's retreated back. "Wow," she murmured then tried to shake off the hazy over her head. She quickly went to work to get things finished up. She first went to the Conqueror's bedchambers and dropped off her pack, next was to Lao Ma's to get Hu, followed by the babbling Salmoneus and his stall, which she swore she wouldn't sock the man, and finally she separated from him and went through the sunset lit city.

Janice figure the best place to start was going to the faction meeting place. She figure either she'd find somebody or stir up attention first. She eventually found the place and banged on the door but there was no response. "Great. What you think, Hu? Should I bust it open and double-check?"

The tiger yawned but then he unexpectedly started to growl, his head turned to the right.

The archeologist looked up and spotted a silhouette of somebody at the end of the alley. "Who's there?" She then heard the distinct sound of a sword being unsheathed. "Christ," she mumbled but didn't go for hers yet especially since she had her gun now.

Hu though didn't relax as he stepped in front of Janice.

"Listen," called Janice, "I'm not here to fight. I'm just looking for some friends of mine."

The figure moved forward; their sword now at their side. "And what friends do you think you have here, Janice Covington?"

The archeologist sighed. "Joxer... Christ you really scared me." She peered down at Hu and petted his backside. "It's okay, boy... come on."

The tiger gave a last growl for good measure then he sat down, still between the stranger and his human friend.

Joxer still hadn't sheathed his sword and his expression was unwelcoming. "What you want, Janice?"

"What's with the damn chip on your shoulder?" snapped the archeologist. "I came here to talk to Perdicus but you'll work too." The faction guard narrowed his cold eyes. "We're not allowed to speak to you... to traitors."

"Ooo sweet Jesus," muttered the annoyed archeologist. She swore her headache was going to return any second. "I'm not a damn traitor, Joxer."

"And yet you're a dekarchos now? I heard how you arrested that merchant without any reason."

Janice narrowed her eyes at the man. "He is perfectly fine right now and free." She sighed then tried to keep her temper at a minimum. "Listen, it's really complicated, Joxer and I just need you to trust me on this." She impersonated Melinda's arched eyebrow technique. "If I was really with the Conqueror don't you think the entire faction would have been killed by now?"

"Maybe it's just a trick," challenged the faction guard. "We're completely in the dark... we have not heard anything from Gabrielle or Cyrene and you're now apart of the Conqueror's legions. What in Hades are we suppose to think?"

"That maybe something is a little fishy," shot back the archeologist. She groaned and hastily spoke again. "Maybe fishy in another way than you're thinking." She tried to think of a way to calm the man. "Look... see if this helps you decide." She carefully reached up and undid the clasp to her cloak. She removed her cloak to reveal her scabbed body from her torture.

Joxer stared at the woman's body that the setting sun poured over. He was astonished by the number of cuts but then something else caught his eye. He lifted his sword and the tip of his blade caught the ends of the purple leather thong. "And this?"

Hu reacted hotly by growling loudly and his left arm shot up and pawed away the sword. He was up on all fours and snarling at the stranger for threatening his friend. His eyes were fired by protectiveness.

Joxer jumped back and lifted his sword in defense.

"Joxer, just put the sword away before he does something we'll all regret."

Hu's lips curled up higher and revealed his sharp teeth, his whiskers flinching from the motion.

"Hu, its okay." Janice carefully touched the tiger's prickly backside. "Joxer, just put the goddamn sword away. I'm not here to fight you or run you in or whatever else you're thinkin' in that damn pea brain of yours. Just put the fuckin' sword away."

The faction guard swallowed then he slowly sheathed the sword after agreeing to Janice's promising suggestion. As soon as he released the hilt, the tiger backed away and he sighed in relief.

"Thank you," breathed the archeologist. She then quickly put her cloak back on to hide her body again. "Listen Joxer, I'm here to help but I just need your trust on this. I also need to talk to Perdicus... there's a lot going on here. Do you know where he is?"

"I can get him," answered the faction guard.

"Alright how about this..." Janice stepped closer and her expression was softer. "I'm really damn hungry so how about we all meet somewhere? I'll tell you everything that's going on."

Joxer hesitated then he slowly nodded because he wanted to trust Janice. "Alright. Give me a half a candlemark."

How long does a candle take to burn to half a mark mentally speculated the archeologist. "Where do you want to meet?"

"There's a tavern right on the street in front of the port. It's called Jellyfish Jason's."

Janice chuckled at the name but she went serious. "Okay, I'll meet you both there and we'll work this out."

Joxer nodded then turned to leave yet Janice's voice made him stop.

"Thanks, Joxer."

The faction guard wavered, glanced over his shoulder, and gave a smile but it was solemnly. He disappeared out into the busy street.

Janice let out a deep breath then peered down at her furry friend. "Thanks too, boy." She ruffled his furry head. "Just try not to eat him later."

Hu smiled with all teeth showing.

The archeologist laughed then joked, "Who would believe a tiger can understand English? Come on." She quickly hurried off and went in search of this tavern. It took her about fifteen minutes to get to it as it was a pretty busy place. She reserved a table in a corner that was enough room for them all. She thought on a few occasions that some people were going to ask her to move but when they saw the tiger near her they decided to look someplace else.

Then a half a candlemark passed or what Janice deducted was thirty minutes, and the faction guards appeared in the doorway. Janice signaled them over and tried to remain relaxed as they sat with her.

Perdicus and Joxer sat the opposite side of the round table from Janice.

Hu was lying on his stomach beside Janice's feet and yet his ears were perked to listen for any trouble from these strangers.

"Thanks for coming, guys," mentioned the archeologist.

Perdicus eyed the archeologist warily then nodded his head. "You look like you got in a fight with a dagger and lost, Janice."

The archeologist huffed, which caused a few blond strands to pop off her forehead then flutter back down. "You could say that, yeah." She leaned back in her chair then

asked, "So where you wanna start?"

"How about after I left you at the cave," offered Joxer.

"Right... good place." Janice saw that the waitress, or rather barmaid as they called them in this day of age, was very busy. She figured it would be a little bit before they'd have meals so she hoped her mood wouldn't go under because of that. "I got into the dungeons fine and eventually into the fortress." She continued to tell them what'd transcended for the past several days. By the time she was finished telling them, the barmaid showed with their plates of food.

Joxer shifted his plate around but hadn't started eating just yet. "So you're telling us that your best friend, who happens to be the Conqueror's descendent, is here and posing as the Conqueror?"

The archeologist pushed her feta covered fish around for a second then replied, "Yes. I know it sounds quite off but that's what happened."

Joxer shook his head and exchanged looks with Perdicus.

Perdicus shrugged and started to eat.

"Well," muttered Joxer, "it can't be that far fetched if you're here, Janice."

The archeologist grunted then started to eat before her complaining stomach gave her another type of headache.

The group quietly ate then after the meal the conversation picked back up again. Janice could tell that Joxer and Perdicus were relaxing now that they knew what was going on despite it did seem unreal. She didn't though tell all the details such as what may be going on with this odd ring; she was saving that for later.

"Perdicus," questioned Janice, "did you happen to be near an alchemist recently?"

The faction guard glanced at his companion then back at Janice, he let out a low sigh. "I've heard word you're trying to find the thief... murderer."

Janice leaned back into her chair and stretched her legs under the table. She gave an inquisitive look. "I heard you may have sold an... interesting ring to a merchant."

Perdicus pushed his plate away as he debated what to do.

Joxer poked him in the ribs with his elbow. "Just tell her, Perdicus."

Perdicus's lips were tightly set but he focused back on Janice. "I did kill him... by accident really." He saw that Janice was waiting for him to share his story now so he reeled into it. "I saw Alti leave the fortress... one of our duties as a faction guard is to keep track of her movements. So I followed her and saw she went into an alchemist's shop and I went to an open window that was on the back of his shop. I heard them ranting on about this stone and powers... I couldn't hear it all but I knew enough." Perdicus stopped and quickly took a drink from his mug. He set it back down but

played with the handle for a heartbeat. "I followed Alti back to the fortress but I was worried about this alchemist so I happened to track him down in the port area."

"You were tailing him for awhile huh?" questioned the archeologist.

"Yes," answered the faction guard, "and I realized that ring he was wearing had that power that him and Alti had been talking about. So I decided I had to get it away from him."

"Perdicus didn't mean to kill him," answered Joxer.

"The alchemist was going to stab me," clarified Perdicus. "The plan to steal his ring turned out really bad."

"You got the ring though," suggested Janice.

Perdicus nodded then pushed his mug away, his eyes finally meeting Janice's. "I took his ring and the money just to make it look like a robbery gone bad."

"What'd you do with the ring?"

"I sold it to that merchant you arrested today," answered Perdicus.

Janice let out a low groan and she shook her head because that wasn't what she was hoping for. "Why'd you sell it to him?"

Perdicus frowned. "I thought that if the ring was in circulation and nobody knew what it really was then it couldn't be used."

"That is the most idiotic thing I think I have ever heard," snapped Janice, her eyes alive with anger. You should be arrested for stupidity Perdy boy, mentally threatened the furious archeologist. "Didn't you think that the ring could fall into the wrong person's hands?"

Perdicus clenched his jaw tightly and looked away.

"Better than in the Conqueror's hands," reminded Joxer.

"No, instead it could fall into some lunatic's hands who wants to destroy the timeline or people's lives! Yea that's really fucking smart," shot back the archeologist.

"I'm sorry," hotly snapped Perdicus. "It was a mistake... a stupid mistake." He saw how Janice instantly retreated from her attacking manner. "We didn't have much choice though, Janice. We didn't know what the ring could do or anything nor are there many people we can trust right now."

The archeologist dropped her head at this as she realized they were in a tight squeeze. "I'm sorry, Perdicus... it's just there's a lot happening here. Mel and I just didn't need this on top of everything else."

Joxer could tell that Janice had been through a lot and the stress was wearing on her.

He let go of his earlier frustrations and insecurities about everything and he softly promised, "We'll help you as much as we can, Janice."

Perdicus nodded his agreement.

Janice sadly smiled as she calmed down. "Thanks." She and the faction guards continued to talk for another half an hour or so then they left the tavern. She said goodnight to them and promised to catch up with them soon so that they could collaborate on their efforts. She and Hu then made the journey back to the fortress and her walk was rather brisk as she could only imagine what Melinda was doing.

Janice Covington quietly entered the Conqueror's bedchambers and found the room was dimly lit by candles. "Mel?" she called as she scooted in and let Hu in too. She leaned against the heavy doors then she smiled when Melinda appeared from the balcony, the curtains open and letting a cool breeze flow through the room.

"Hello, Janice."

The archeologist lifted her head from the door. She was awestruck by what Melinda was wearing. "Holy...." She bit back the rest of her swear then tried to think of something much more appropriate. "Mel, you look amazing." She lifted her body off of the door as her friend slowly moved across the distance to come to her.

Hu quickly concluded that these humans needed private time so he vanished out on the balcony for some fresh air and silence.

Melinda Pappas's body was being hugged by a red silk dress that was simple yet beautiful. It was sleeveless except for one strap that went over her right shoulder. At her waist she wore a golden chain belt that matched her left golden arm band. Her midnight hair was twisted into a bun and kept in place by a gold headband while her gold chandelier earrings displayed rubies.

Janice held her breath when her friend was upon her.

"Thank you," came the linguist's sensual voice. "Come sit with me." She laced her hand through Janice's then guided her to the long sofa.

Janice could only follow but before she could sit, Melinda's hands were at her neck and worked the Amazon clasp open.

"You should stay awhile," warmly teased the translator. She removed the cloak then moved down to the other end of the sofa, she draped the cloak on the arm. "Would you like some wine with me?"

The archeologist mutely nodded. She didn't detect any southern accent from her friend yet she wasn't going to disrupt this moment that Melinda obviously planned out and quite well at that. Besides that, she fully trusted Melinda.

Melinda had been bent over, pouring a sweet wine into two gold cups. She straightened up and handed one to Janice. "It's a rare, sweet wine from Chin."

Janice carefully smelled the wine from the cup as she asked, "It's not made from rice?"

"No," answered the linguist, "that's why it is so rare because most Chin's wines are but this is a sweet grape mixed with lychee... it's a plum fruit."

Janice was very interested by this and it showed.

Melinda softly grinned yet she drew Janice down onto the sofa. "Try it." She and Janice each took a delicate taste of the incredible wine.

The archeologist peered into the cup and whispered, "Wow... that is very sweet."

"It's a beautiful mix of flavor," agreed the translator. "Do you know what wine is in the Chin tongue, Janice?"

Janice slightly grinned then answered, "Mel, this is why you're the translator between us."

Melinda mirrored the grin but with how she sat, side against the sofa, she was able to lean closer to Janice. "It is called pútáo jiu, which literally translates to grape wine."

"Pútáo... jiu," carefully tried the archeologist.

Melinda smiled at the perfect attempt. "Exactly." Her smile spread at seeing Janice taking another taste of the wine.

Janice kept the cup between her hands as she lowered it to her lap. She cleared her throat quietly then informed, "I took care of everything tonight with the faction."

The translator nodded after just taking a sip of her wine. "We'll talk about it tomorrow." With her freehand she lightly touched Janice's cupped hands. "Tonight we're going to talk about us... nothing else."

Janice's lips pulled into a smile at this promise for tonight. She released her hand from the cup and that was being touched by Melinda. She threaded her fingers through Melinda's.

"Now, Janice Covington, tell me something about yourself that I haven't learned yet." Melinda released the archeologist's hand so that she could twist around from her spot. She picked up the gold flask that contained the sweet pútáo jiu. She refilled her and Janice's cups while she waited for a response.

"Hmmm." Janice grinned then mentioned, "I'm sure I could tell you one thing that'll throw you for a loop."

The translator had returned to the flask to the table and now revealed a smile at her friend. "It's always worth a try."

Janice softly laughed at Melinda's challenge. She hesitated then shrugged, her eyes lowered to her cup of wine yet when she lifted her gaze she found Melinda studying

her over the rim of her cup.

Melinda finished her draw of the sweet wine and lowered her cup away.

Janice was on the verge of fidgeting as Melinda's inquiring blue eyes made her almost squirm.

Melinda propped her left arm on the back of the sofa, her hand stretched out and running through Janice's short hair. "What don't I know about you, Janice Covington?" she tried again.

The archeologist bit the inside of her lower lip then she answered, "I actually do understand how you feel about society... back at home, I mean." She briefly glanced down at her wine then back at Melinda. "I know we seem really opposite at first glance but honestly there are some similarities."

"What are those similarities?" posed the linguist.

Janice took a brief drink of her wine and the alcohol helped sooth her earlier retention of will. "I was actually baptized Roman Catholic."

Melinda shifted some as she took complete interest in this unexpected topic.

"I went to Sunday School," went on Janice, "and service every week." She tilted her head at Melinda. "I went to confession for the smallest swear and carried out my Hail Mary's."

"What changed?" encouraged the translator.

"It started to change when my mother ran out on Dad and me." Janice stopped then corrected, "I guess when she was... murdered." She took a second to enjoy the wine again and Melinda did the same. She lowered the cup then sadly smiled at Melinda. "My mother was Roman Catholic and she really followed the faith so she instilled that in me too. Dad... well he just went along with it because it made Mom happy but he really didn't care one way or the other."

Melinda cupped her left hand behind Janice's neck. "So after you thought your mother ran out on you, you gave up the religion?"

"Yeah that's about the sum of it," answered Janice. "I just gave up on the faith... I just thought it was worthless since Mom believed in it."

"Just like she was," theorized the translator.

The archeologist sadly nodded. "It didn't happen all at once... old habits are hard to break but as I got older I just turned away from the faith." She shrugged. "My dad, for some reason, he gave me my mother's silver cross necklace that she wore everyday. You would never catch her not wearing it." She let out a long breath then quietly added, "I always wondered how he managed to get it if she'd really had ran out on us."

Melinda carefully studied her friend as she saw the flicker of emotions on Janice's

face.

"I still have her cross necklace," softly mentioned Janice, "I could never bring myself to throw it out." She peered up at her friend. "Just too many memories linked to it, ya know."

"I know, Janice," murmured the linguist. She then saw the tear track down Janice's right cheek. She easily moved her hand from Janice's neck and caught the tear. Her thumb brushed it away along with the trail. "You know, your mother does love you."

"Yes," whispered the archeologist, "I know now. I just don't... don't know why my father never told me."

"You were young, Janice... I would imagine he was protecting you from the horrible truth."

"So instead I'm left thinking my mother never loved me or Dad and left us?" Janice huffed then shook her head.

Melinda brushed her friend's soft, blond hair back. "I don't think it was an easy choice for your father."

"Yea... you're right, Mel." The archeologist took another drink, which calmed the ache in her heart. She slowly grinned at her friend as another thought came to mind. "You want to hear the biggest scandal in my family history?"

Melinda softly laughed after taking her own drink. "This should be quite interesting."

"Ooo it is that," joked the archeologist. "I may have been born in New York but my roots go to the south."

The true southerner gracefully lifted an eyebrow and gave a challenging grin. "Oh really?"

"Mmmhmmm." Janice chuckled then defiantly questioned, "Does the last name Caldwell sound familiar?"

Melinda drank her wine but when she drew back the cup she had a devilish grin. "It is an old southern name, yes."

Janice nodded then proudly stated, "Janice Caldwell Covington." She chuckled at Melinda's mix of amusement and fascination. "Can you guess who my great, great... great uncle happens to be?"

Melinda's eyes lit up as she toyed back. "Perhaps Vice-President John Caldwell Calhoun."

Janice smiled proudly. "Don't you see the resemblance now?"

"I believe so... the hair and the attitude."

Janice dropped her head back and laughed. She smiled at her friend.

"Covington is also a very southern name," informed the translator.

"It's an all around name," argued Janice, "that's from the British originally."

Melinda grinned as she swirled the last mouthful of wine in her cup. "So what's your family scandal?"

Janice chuckled then replied, "Well I'm not that far placed from the southern roots it seems. My maternal grandmother was born in Georgetown, South Carolina."

Melinda turned and picked up the flask of wine. She refilled her and Janice's cups then returned the flask. "So what trouble did Grandma Caldwell get into?"

The archeologist stifled her laughter but her eyes were just glowing. "Grandma Caldwell fell in love with a damn Yankee and moved to New York City."

Melinda covered her chest with her freehand then fake gasped, "Ooo my, the thought is even enough to swoon."

"Well that's only the half of it," mentioned Janice, "not only did she marry the damn Yankee but she changed faiths just to marry him." She leaned in then quietly whispered, "She went from Methodist to Catholic."

Melinda was glowing from enjoyment of the topic. "Unthinkable... such disgraces to the Caldwell name."

"It sure was," agreed the straightening up archeologist. "Needless to say, Grandma Caldwell lost out on her father's big fat will."

Melinda softly smiled now at her friend but she held up her cup and started a toast. "To family scandals... we shall proudly continue them, Janice."

The archeologist laughed then clanked hers against Melinda's.

The translator then refilled their cups once again as she knew the alcohol was soaking into their bodies and minds. She noted the coy smile on Janice's face, which made her grin.

"Are we back to your seduction plans, Mel?" The archeologist indicted her continued flow of wine.

"Hmmm." Melinda's eyes darkened a shade. "Do you require more seduction, Doctor Covington?"

"To be honest," mentioned the archeologist, "I just don't think I could last much longer." Then Janice really debated whether she just said that out loud or not.

"Then perhaps this conversation is better suited for the bed, Doctor Covington." Melinda set her cup down then stole Janice's away too.

Janice blinked as she realized the switch of tide here. Then there were strong hands that simply helped her rise up from the sofa before she figured out what was happening.

Melinda lowered her head and captured Janice's lips.

Janice held onto Melinda's hips as the translator's sweet wine tongue ran across hers. She wistfully studied Melinda at the end of the kiss. "That really is amazing wine."

The linguist's lips curled into a predatory grin. "Yes, even sweeter in the kisses I've noticed." She laced her hand through Janice's then slowly brought her across the bedchambers that was softly lit by candles. She came next to the bed but stopped and pulled Janice against her body.

Janice's stomach twisted with passion and her heart was very alive. She felt Melinda's warm hand on her shoulder then nimble fingers working her leather strap across her shoulder. She hastily ended the kiss then rasped, "Mel, are you sure... I mean.... Christ I think a tiger has my tongue again."

Melinda had Janice's leather strap just on the edge of Janice's shoulder. She did have a cat like smile on her face as her sultry voice whispered, "Don't worry, Janice this doesn't require any talking... it's actually preferred that there are sounds over words."

That little speech didn't help Janice's shattering resistance. She whimpered then held onto the stronger body against hers for support. "Mel, I just...."

Melinda smiled warmly then lowered her head closer to Janice's again. "I told you, it's just us tonight... nothing outside these walls matter here." Her lips diverted from Janice's and came to the silky skin of Janice's neck.

Janice closed her eyes as Melinda's lips brushed over her neck then she sharply inhaled at the light nip that went straight between her legs. "Ooo god," she muttered. She then followed Melinda's guidance to the bed where she sat then warm, large hands trailed down her legs.

Melinda easily removed Janice's boots then rose up some. Next she removed the sheathed sword and placed it by the boots.

Janice still had her eyes closed but when a warm hand pressed against her stomach and lightly pushed, she followed the signal. She crawled back onto the bed but she opened her eyes when warm lips brushed against hers. She was amazed to see the beautiful mix of passion and tenderness in Melinda's face and illuminated eyes.

Melinda remained poised over top of the archeologist. She moved her head, her lips closer to Janice's right ear. "I've wanted you since I first saw you at the dig site, Janice."

Janice had her eyes closed and she slightly lowered but rested on her elbows against the inviting bed.

"The way you handled those men," murmured the translator, "and used that big gun." Her tone showed she was teasing.

Janice had to chuckle as she lightly bantered back, "Machine gun, Mel."

"Mmmm," simply agreed the southerner. Her left hand came up and returned to working off Janice's shoulder strap but much slower this time. "You remember how I said sounds are preferred over words, Janice?" She gently pulled the leather shoulder strap off finally just as her tongue's tip touched Janice's earlobe.

Janice sucked in her breath then whispered, "Yea... I remeb...er."

"Good," breathed Melinda, "I want to hear those sounds, Janice." Her teeth lightly grazed over Janice's earlobe and she received a moan of enjoyment. "Just like that, Janice." Her left hand came back down onto the bed as she crawled more over Janice.

The archeologist was forced to lie down completely.

Melinda's right hand now worked the left strap off Janice's shoulders while her lips found Janice's neck again. "I want to hear what makes you feel good."

Janice's pleasing moan escaped her lips. She arched her neck when Melinda's tongue touched her burning skin. Her hands slid up Melinda's back as her right leg wrapped around Melinda's.

Melinda now had both straps removed from Janice's shoulders then she easily helped Janice arch her back up instead. Her hands made quick work of freeing the back strap from Janice.

Janice released a louder moan when Melinda's cool silk brushed over her already hardened nipples.

Melinda lifted her head and met Janice's hungry lips in a long kiss but her hands kept busy with Janice's heated body. When she withdrew from the kiss, Janice moaned in protest, which made Melinda grin and huskily whisper, "You're so amazing, Janice and now I'm going to make you feel that way." And Melinda soon delivered on her promise with every sensual kiss and exact touch.

Janice was convinced she was more than amazed as she later lay heavily breathing with a heart rate that was frantic. Her body coated in perspiration and her mind empty of any rational thought. She took some time to gain any balance again before she was able to show Melinda what she thought of her.

The new lovers spent most of the night taking and giving until Apollo had his beautiful quarter moon high in the starry sky. The couple now rested in a tangle of sheets with Melinda on her back and Janice's hot body curled up against her. Melinda was currently trying to catch her breath after receiving a demonstration from Janice about how shooting a machine gun gave her exceptionally strong fingers and arm strength.

"You okay, Mel?" softly spoke the archeologist.

"Hmmm?" asked the wistful southerner.

Janice's head popped up with a smug look. "Are you okay?"

"Mmmhmm." Melinda turned her head and smiled. Her left hand brushed Janice's cheek then she lifted her head for a short kiss. "Very okay." She lowered her head then watched as Janice lowered her head back down. "Now are you ready to sleep?"

"If I recall correctly," prompted the taunting, husky voice of the archeologist, "you started this here party."

Melinda softly laughed at the joke then slowly started running her fingertips up and down Janice's bare back. Occasionally she would detect a scab but she tried not to think about that tonight or else it would spoil the mood. "I reckon I did."

Janice kissed her lover's shoulder then carefully asked, "No regrets?"

Melinda turned her head so that her chin rested on top of Janice's head. "If I thought I was gonna regret this I would have never started it."

"True," readily agreed the archeologist. "I just wanted to be sure."

Melinda considered this then returned the question. "How 'bout you?"

"I would have stopped you at hello, Mel."

The southerner genuinely smiled in the dark room; the candles having expired a long time ago. Then Janice's movement made her peer up to see the archeologist's hovering features. Before she could say much, Janice kissed her and it was a kiss of passions for more. At the end of it, she hoarsely whispered, "I take it ya ain't tired yet?" She saw Janice's glinting grin in the moonlight coming from the balcony.

"Mel, sleep is for those that are in bed... alone."

Melinda's eyebrows hiked up as she realized she let loose a monster in this bed. "Ooo my," she murmured yet she pulled Janice down for a passionate kiss. She wasn't about to be caught on the descending side of something she started in the first place, especially making love to Janice Covington.

Chapter 19 - Welcome to Tartarus, my Liege

The Conqueror slowly opened her eyes and the low lit beach filled her view. She inhaled the sharp poignant scent of the black river in front of her. She swallowed hard when she realized all her teachings of Hades were now in full truth before her eyes.

"Well, well... welcome to the underworld," greeted a gritty voice off to the left.

The Conqueror turned her head to the left and assessed the pale, robed man that had a long reaper in his left hand. "You must be Charon." She spotted the black boat behind

him.

"No, I'm Tilulu the dancing girl. Of course I'm Charon. Who else would be crazy enough to be down here?"

The Conqueror remained calm despite she was beginning to grasp her fate. She glanced to the right when a man walked past her. His ghostly eyes fixed on her as he strolled past.

Charon watched the same man go past then he mentioned, "Excuse the pauper... he only has ninety years to go before he can cross." He then neared the ruler. "Let's have my obolus." He held out his hand.

"I don't have any money," remarked the ruler.

"Sure you do... you're the Conqueror of most of the living." Charon grinned at the ruler then ordered, "Open your mouth... go on."

The Conqueror opened her mouth almost involuntarily.

Charon stretched out his bleach white hand and plucked a gold coin from under the ruler's tongue. He held it up in display. "See? Somebody among the living cares enough for you." He tucked the coin away then ordered, "Get on board."

The Conqueror paused as another pauper passed her. She shivered some then neared the boat. Her thoughts were a mere daze as she stood in the center of the small boat.

Charon climbed in next then put his long reaper into the water. "How about a guided tour on our way across the river Acheron?" He pointed with his chin off to the right. "That's the river Styx... the river of hate." He smirked at the dark ruler. "I'm sure you can appreciate that river out of the five."

The Conqueror's cold eyes settled on the ferryman. She ignored him and glanced off the edge of the boat but she stiffened once she realized the water wasn't really black but a deep red.

"The river Acheron is the river of sorrow," explained Charon, "there is much blood in sorrow." He watched as the former ruler backed away from the edge of the boat. "You don't want to fall in the Acheron." He lifted his reaper from the water and showed how it was stained red from his time being a ferryman. "I've seen some men try to cross the Acheron. They'd only make it so far before the blood water filled their lungs and they'd scream before disappearing under the surface." He continued to use his long reaper to push the boat across. "Hades only knows what's at the bottom of the Acheron."

The Conqueror glanced over her shoulder when she saw the other shore came closer. Her stomach slightly pitched but certainly not from the boat's rocking motion.

"And here we are the shores of Hades." Charon disembarked just as the ruler did the same. "Follow me now."

The Conqueror tried to recall from her memory how the underworld worked. She knew everything but yet her mind was so foggy for some reason. She could only trail behind the ferryman.

Charon waved his reaper at the snarling, large dog that had three heads. "Down, Cerberus."

The heavily fanged dog's three heads bore at the very evil soul coming with the ferryman. He howled as the pair walked past him.

Charon finally came to a stop before three men in front of a black gate. "I have brought you Xena of Amphipolis." He bowed to the men then turned and left the Conqueror to her fate.

The Conqueror stared at the three lined men and her quickening mind recognized the men. Old paintings from the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea and the island of Aegina from the Saronic Gulf quickly flashed in her head.

"Do you know who we are?" spoke the man in the center.

The Conqueror's mouth was dry but she whispered, "You're Minos... the former king of Crete." Her eyes flickered to the man on the right. "Rhadamanthus... Mino's brother and...." Her focus went to the far left man. "And Aeacus the king of Aegina."

Aecus folded his arms over his chest. "I hear Aegina suffered under your reign, Xena of Amphipolis."

The Conqueror clenched her hands at her sides because she realized that it was Aecus that would judge her. Rhadamanthus only judged those from the Chin providence while Minos held final say. Her history with the island of Aegina would not bolster well for her judgment not that she stood a chance anyway.

"We have long awaited this moment, Xena of Amphipolis," spoke Minos. "You have kept us busy with spirit after spirit coming to the gates of Hades but now it is your turn."

The Conqueror wanted to move away, to run and be free of her fate but she stood her ground.

Minos signaled the judge to his right.

Aecus now approached the former ruler and smiled toothily at her. "There are two punishments that await you, Conqueror." He lifted his right hand and waved it past the woman's beautiful face. "First, your inner ugliness from your life will now show outside." When his hand lowered, his smile shifted into a grin of satisfaction.

The Conqueror's skin cracked open all over in various spots. She lifted her hands and saw that her hands and arms were covered in slash marks. Her eyes lowered to take in the view of her now mutilated body.

Aecus chuckled at the astonished look on the Conqueror's slashed face. "For every life

you killed you suffer a cut." He backed away but stopped and held out his hands at the Conqueror's ugly body. "Now look how many you've killed, Xena of Amphipolis."

The Conqueror touched her face that was plagued with thick gashes. Her eyes were wide as her hand pulled away she saw a new cut forming in the center of her palm.

"Another life has just died because of your hands," mentioned Minos when he saw the cut form. "There are many that will still die because of you." He then stepped up to the ugly, former ruler of most of the known-world. "Your second punishment, Xena of Amphipolis, is you will spend eternity in Tartarus where you will be confined to a field. The field contains the hacked, bodily remains of all those that you've killed. You will spend eternity making those bodies whole again so that they may finally have peace for what you've done to them." He backed stepped, turned sidelong, and held out his hand to the right.

The black gates of Tartarus creaked open to the black, unknown space behind it.

Minos turned his head to the mangled Conqueror and harshly stated, "Welcome to Tartarus, my liege."

The Conqueror uncontrollably walked up to the open gates then she was engulfed by blackness once she passed the gates. Her scream suddenly exploded through Tartarus to show her arrival then the world around her cleared. She found herself on her hands and knees on something cold but soft, her eyes closed. She rasped as she lifted her head and opened her eyes. The Conqueror scanned her surroundings as her dead heart pounded against her chest.

Spread out for more leagues than any human could see was a covered field of human remains. The stench in the air was that of dead, decaying bodies. In one spot, stood a hill like mound of stacked bodies or pieces with legs or arms jutting out. At the top was one of the Conqueror's flagged pikes with a man's head skewered on top and it was the head of Julius Caesar with his mouth open in his final cry.

The Conqueror now felt a breeze that circulate the stench, which caused something to move on her left hand. She gazed down as the hair of a bodiless, nameless man covered her palm. Horror and terror exploded in the Conqueror's dead body as she realized she was kneeling on top of a thin stack of body parts. She hastily climbed to her feet but her weight crushed the bodily remnants under her boots. The head under her left boot crunched, which meant she'd have to put it together as well as find the rest of its body.

The Conqueror ignored it as she stood on the small mound of hacked bodies. She stared in horror at the endless field of people she'd killed in her lifetime. She frantically shook her head then whispered, "No. By the gods... no." She realized this would take longer than eternity to repair.

Just then she felt a cut form on her left arm and she glanced at it. She then heard some strange noise high above so she gazed up. From the bleak clouds above came a body falling down. She stared in revulsion as the body was marred into pieces in midair then blown across the field to be tangled in the mess.

The Conqueror made a small circle where she stood and her vision just filled with endless mounds, hills, and piles of mutilated bodies. She came full circle and stared at the pierced head of Julius Caesar at the top of the opposite mound. Her rage for Caesar's betrayal never surfaced like it use to every time but instead her dead heart pounded wildly and a cry of pain broke free from her lips.

After the Conqueror tried to release her endless pain, she went down the small pile she was on and her boots connected with the blood soaked grass. She turned to the pile she'd just descended and started her punishment for eternity. Time moved by slowly as the former ruler started to sort the body parts and tried to identify and match but it was almost impossible.

The Conqueror did not cry though. She did not escape her pain. Her memories of her life agonized her. She worked nonstop at her punishment but would never make any really progress. Finally after some unknown time that could have been candlemarks, days, or moons, she stopped and collapsed to the red grass.

The former ruler remained still, breathing heavily, and her inward rage high. Then something caught her ears and it was the sound of somebody coming. She jumped to her feet and held up her mutilated hands. "Who's here?"

From around a pile stepped out a familiar face, his shiny yellow teeth showing. "I'd wondered where you were, Conqueror." Darphus put his hands on his hips. "Once I saw this field, I knew it couldn't be anybody but you." He inhaled until his chest filled then he remarked, "Smells just like you too."

"Leave me, Darphus," snidely ordered the Conqueror.

The dead warlord laughed and shrugged. "I figured we could spend eternity together, Conqueror." He tilted his head as an amused expression over his face. "I see your remark about my ugliness has come back to haunt you."

The Conqueror's bleak azure eyes narrowed at her enemy.

Darphus smiled toothily but he twisted his head to the right, which made his slashed neck show more. "I've brought another old friend of yours too."

The Conqueror took a faint step back when another of her past commanders stepped around the other side of the pile.

"Hello, Xena," greeted the sultry voice.

The Conqueror realized that maybe her punishment for eternity wasn't just this field but all her dead enemies. She glared at her other commander. "How's Tartarus treated you, Draco?"

"Better than it seems to be treating you," replied the smirking warrior.

"It seems Draco and I have a few things in common," mentioned the warlord. He reached to his side where he had his sheathed sword. "One of those is seeking revenge for our deaths."

"You can't kill me," reminded the grinning Conqueror.

"Maybe not," agreed Draco, who unsheathed his sword. "But having you live in pieces for eternity in this field sounds like a great start." He charged the former ruler.

Darphus followed suit.

The Conqueror's warcry vibrated through the field and she back flipped onto a pile of bodies. She just missed the top so instead went surfing down on the crumbling pile. She launched herself into midair from the speed then sailed into the air high above the field. She tucked into a ball to help her go further then when the drop came, her body opened again. She neatly landed on her feet, her boots crushing an arm. She distinctly heard her two opponents running after her not that she could see them with all the mounds in the way.

Darphus and Draco chased after her but the Conqueror had no weapons to defend herself. They chased her almost in a perfect circle in the field.

The Conqueror launched herself into the air as she came back to the mound with Julius Caesar's speared head. She landed at the top of the mound and yanked the spear free. Her purple flag snapped in protest loudly in her right ear.

Draco and Darphus stopped at the bottom of the mound and leered up at her.

"Come on, Xena," coaxed Draco, "I never thought you were the one to run."

The Conqueror smirked then shot back, "I'm not... I'm just buying some time." She gave the pike a sharp slash in the air, which caused Caesar's head to go flying.

Caesar's head landed then rolled a few paces then a booted foot stopped the rolling head. The head then was picked up from the ground by a pair of large hands.

"Nice to see my destiny hasn't changed here either." The heavily clad Roman lifted his pale brown eyes to the Conqueror at the top of the pile.

The Conqueror's lip curled at seeing her old enemy. "Long time, Caesar... I expected you here sooner."

Julius Caesar tossed the head over his shoulder then approached Draco and Darphus. "Come down here, Xena... we can talk this out."

The former ruler grunted then pointed her spear at the three men. "Over my dead soul." Her joke was lost on her past commanders but it wasn't on Julius Caesar.

Caesar smirked then called up, "That is already being arranged, Xena."

The Conqueror shivered at his threat that most likely could mean anything. Her warcry tore through the air and she sprung up, twisted, and landed behind the three men. "Come and get some, boys." She gave a loud cry then came at her enemies.

Darphus and Draco attacked together.

Julius Caesar unsheathed his sword from his side. He stood still and observed as his gold plated chest reflected the movements of the fighting. His focus then shifted beyond the dead ruler and centered on another arrival, an Amazon.

Velasca snuck up behind the Conqueror with her sword at the ready. She raised it once close enough.

The Conqueror moved the thick pike behind her back as the Amazon blade tried to slice her back. She spun around Velasca, kicked the Amazon onto her face, and grabbed up the sword.

Velasca growled and wiped the blood from her face. She jumped to her feet to face her killer. "I had everything planned out," she yelled in outrage.

The Conqueror stepped back and pointed her sword at the evil Amazon. "Except for your death I suspect." Her eyes flickered to the gaping hole in Velasca's stomach. She hefted the pike in her left hand then stared at the four opponents. She suspected that more would show up looking for a piece of her hide. Her confirmation was made when a very familiar man stood atop the pile just a few paces away.

The Conqueror stared in horror at the face she'd never forget. His face often haunted her dreams at night especially as a child.

The man hurried down the pile and stood beside Julius Caesar. "Did you ever know, Xena that you were of Roman decent?" He held out his hand to Julius Caesar. "Caesar here is distant relative of yours."

Caesar showed his smug smile at the Conqueror. "I take it your heritage never came up in the family discussions huh?" He clapped the man beside him on the back. "Your father and I have been catching up on old memories, Xena."

The Conqueror shook her head then hotly yelled, "I am Greek... not Roman."

Atrius, Xena's father, moved past the Roman then chuckled at the dead ruler's fighting spirit. "You were Roman before you were Greek, my dear." He extracted his sword. "I am pure Roman but your mother..." He shrugged then stated, "Supposedly she's Greek but she's all whore."

The Conqueror's anger instantly flared up at her father's words. "You fucking bastard!" She threw the spear with all her strength at Atrius.

Atrius didn't bother to duck as the spear pierced through his gut. He easily ripped it out then tossed it aside. "Temper... temper, daughter." He extracted his sword from his side. "After we're all finished with you, I'll have to tell you the family history. You've followed well in the footsteps." He smirked then approached his daughter.

The Conqueror tensed up as the score of enemies started to close in on her. She spun her sword and stepped backwards between two large carcass piles. Her ragged breathing heightened her senses as she prepared to fight them all.

Abruptly there was a loud cry then a soaring body from nowhere landed in the space between the Conqueror and the approaching enemies.

The Conqueror was stunned and frozen by her shock.

The newcomer was a dark colored female, who had another spear that had the Conqueror's flag. She rammed it into the ground and gave a loud cry as she ran then jumped up. Her famous whirling kick managed to knock out Velasca, Draco, and Darphus then she rocketed into the air and landed beside the Conqueror. "We must run, quickly." She grabbed the Conqueror's hand and didn't waste time in fleeing.

The dead ruler recovered from her initial shock and hastily escaped with her unexpected savior. Behind her, she could hear the yells of her pursuers but they were falling behind them. She and her savior came to quick stop behind a tall pile of body parts. She glanced around the corner of it and saw nobody was tailing them then she turned her head back. "What are you... you shouldn't be here, M'Lila."

M'Lila smiled at her old friend that she hadn't seen in so many long seasons. "But I am here, my friend." Her smile widened, which brightened her beautiful features. "It has been a very long time, Xena."

The Conqueror wanted to touch the Gaelic but she didn't because of the nearing voices of her enemies.

"We must go," urged M'Lila. She grabbed the woman's wrist and started to haul her away.

"Where are we going, M'Lila?"

M'Lila didn't respond as she was worried they'd be overheard. She finally let go of her friend's wrist when she felt that the Conqueror would stay along side her. "We are getting close," she assured.

The Conqueror shook her head as she wasn't sure what woman had in mind. She came to an abrupt stop when a shadowy figure formed ahead.

M'Lila went a few more paces but stopped and glanced back at her friend. "Come on, Xena. There is only so much time." She followed the concerned gaze of the Conqueror's to the shadowy figure ahead. "It is okay," she hastily assured.

The Conqueror's attention snapped away from the shadowy figure when she heard her nearing chasers. She turned back to M'Lila and the figure that hid in the shadows of a corpse pile.

"He is a friend," promised M'Lila, "we came to help. You must come, please." She held out her hand to offer assurance.

The Conqueror stretched out her hand and her cut fingers laced through her friend's.

"Come, now." M'Lila pulled her friend along hastily.

The Conqueror held her breath as they approached the silhouette that soon took on a face.

M'Lila called out to the figure. "I have her, we must hurry... they are not far behind us."

The Conqueror inhaled sharply when the man smiled at her and took up running pace at her side.

"What can I say, Xena? You still have my heart after so long." Borias winked at the Conqueror then focused on where he was going.

The Conqueror hadn't expected this help but she wasn't in any position to argue either. Just ahead, she saw a wall of fire that rose up to the skies and it was what defined her punishment field from the rest of Tartarus.

Borias rushed ahead of the pair and he leapt through the fire wall to land on the other side. He turned back and yelled, "Hurry!"

M'Lila was next as she passed through it with ease.

The Conqueror came to a jerking halt at the edge of her punishment and Tartarus. "I can't leave this field," she called through the roaring flames.

"Yes you can," hollered back Borias. "Hurry your ass up, Xena!" He was thrusting his hand through the flames while yelling, "Take my hand."

The Conqueror's right hand collapsed but she still feared the flames as she took a step closer. Her body protested it and her open wounds peeled back at the nearing heat. "I can't come through!" She held up her left hand at the wall of fire as it lapped at her.

M'Lila put her hand through and grabbed her friend's freehand. "Ni h-ea, you must hurry, Xena. They are coming for you!"

"I can't," hotly debated the Conqueror.

"Trust what M'Lila is telling you, Xena," growled the Conqueror's former lover.

"Please, Xena... you'll be safe." M'Lila tugged on her friend's hand.

The Conqueror closed her eyes then quickly went through the flames. Her skin screamed in protest but her cries were muffled by her clamped jaw. She then felt relief when she was safely yanked to the other side. She bent forward then kneeled with heavy breathing.

M'Lila knelt down beside her friend, her hand still linked to the Conqueror's. "See? It wasn't that bad." Her bright smile appeared again as her friend glowered at her for the smart comment.

"What are you two doing here?" the Conqueror whispered as her body started to calm down.

"We're here to help you," answered M'Lila. "We must keep moving... we're not safe here." She hauled the dead ruler to her feet.

The Conqueror straightened out her back, which popped into place. She then stared at yet another familiar face that she hadn't seen in so long. She sadly smiled at him. "Chuang."

Chuang, the Conqueror's commander from Chin, smiled and nodded.

The Conqueror's lips curled as she teased, "Still even loyal to me in Tartarus?"

Chuang bowed then straightened up and clapped his fisted hand across his leather chest. "Always, my liege."

"Listen," broke in Borias, "we don't have time for chitchat if we're going to make it."

"Borias is right," agreed M'Lila. "We must go now." She looked up at her friend then promised, "I will explain as we go."

The Conqueror nodded then she and her small alliance of friends broke out into a jog across the bleak yet fiery domain of Tartarus. To her right, M'Lila stayed at her side and Borias to her left while Chuang remained ahead. "What is happening, M'Lila? Why are you here?" She shook her head then urged, "You should be in Elysia."

M'Lila bitter sweetly smiled at her friend. "I have been judged for life in Tartarus, my friend. I have committed my share of crimes during my life."

The Conqueror hadn't known because she was never able to communicate with her friend. "What happened?"

"It is a long story," refused the Gaelic, "but I betrayed my clansmen." She looked away from the troubled features of her friend. She gazed down the long, endless road they were traveling along. "We must discuss our plans."

"Where are we going?" probed the dead ruler.

"Have you ever heard of the Tree of Life?" M'Lila saw her friend's mind working through the thickness in her head. "Perhaps in Norse folklore?"

The Conqueror confusingly questioned, "The Yggdrasil?"

M'Lila nodded then explained, "It is even in Greek stories too... the bay tree?"

The Conqueror's mind ran through the tales then she nodded her head. "The nymph Daphne turned into a bay tree by a river side." She shook her head then quickly added, "Even in Chin folklore there is a famous peach tree and that eating its peach will grant immortality."

"Yes but the peach grows only every three thousand season cycles."

The Conqueror did recall that minor detail. "Every culture has some folklore about a great tree. Why are you bringing that up?"

M'Lila smiled at her friend's lack of perception but she explained it all. "The Tree of Life is the link between all the cultural folklores. It does truly exist because I have seen it with my eyes."

"I think we have a problem ahead," called back Chuang. He stopped as the group came up to his side. He pointed ahead as his feet shook overtop of the ground.

"We must hide," cursed Borias. He waved the group away from the brightly lit road.

M'Lila grabbed the Conqueror's hand then pulled her quickly off the road as the ground shook under her feet.

There was a loud roar in the air.

The group ducked behind a large boulder as the ground continued to shake under their feet.

"By the gods," breathed the Conqueror, "is that really a hecatonchires?"

Borias huffed then murmured, "If it has a hundred hands and fifty heads then it must be huh?" His dark eyes flickered up to the stomping monster.

"There are three hecatonchires of Tartarus," informed Chuang to his former leader.

The Conqueror nodded then quietly stated, "Briareus, Cottus, and Gyges."

M'Lila tilted her head then stared at the gargantuan giant stomping nearer. "That hecatonchires is Cottus."

The dead ruler blinked and turned her head to M'Lila. "How in... Hades can you tell?"

M'Lila slowly revealed a grin then murmured, "Cottus is the ugliest of the three."

"They're all damn ugly," lowly shot back Borias. "We need to do something to distract him."

The Conqueror started to stand up but M'Lila's sure grip stopped her.

"Ni h-ea," M'Lila started in her Gaelic tongue, "what are you doing?"

"I'm going to distract him... be ready to move any heartbeat." The Conqueror stood up then hurried out onto the road.

"She's crazy," spat Borias however he grinned.

Chuang grunted then joked, "She's still reckless like always."

The Conqueror held the Amazon sword in her right hand. She cupped her left hand over her mouth then gave a resounding warcry to get the hideous monster's attention. "Chaaaaayaaaaa!"

Cottus spun around on his heels and flayed out his hundred swords then his fifty pairs of eyes honed in on the prisoner.

The Conqueror laughed at him and held up her single sword in display. "Come and get some, big boy."

Cottus's mouths all opened and Tartarus erupted from his fifty yells. He then stomped across the short distance after the escaped prisoner.

The Conqueror cracked her neck to the left then muttered, "The bigger they are the harder they fall." She spun her sword, did an about face, and took off at a fast run.

"What is she doing?" whispered the worried Gaelic.

"She's keeping him busy," answered Borias. He clung to the bouncing boulder as the monster came after the dead ruler. Once the hecatonchires was past them, he quietly ordered, "Let's go."

M'Lila stepped up onto the road then stopped. She stared down at Cottus chasing her friend then she heard Borias and Chuang calling for her. She turned her head to them and called, "I must help her. Go, we will catch up."

Chuang stepped back but Borias yanked him forward.

"They can handle it. I have a plan to stop that ugly thing." Borias saw Chuang's agreement so he and Chuang hurried off.

M'Lila followed the distinct cries of the monster and the Conqueror's laughter faraway. Then she was amazed to hear swords clashing loudly but it was impossible for it to be her friend fighting Cottus. Her heart rate picked up and she ran faster. When she broke through a dark mist on the road she came to a quick stop.

The Conqueror's warcry broke from her lips while she back flipped from Caesar's attack. "You have gotten slow, Caesar!"

Cottus wailed at the all the escaped prisoners. He lifted his right foot and stomped down but only smashed one prisoner, some scanty clad female.

The Conqueror's laugh filled the air as she did several back flips away from her enemies then sprung high up into the air.

Cottus slashed with three swords at the flying form of the ruler.

The Conqueror easily twisted her body past the large blades and landed on her feet neatly.

M'Lila inhaled sharply at the amazing display because she never imagined her friend learning so well. She hastily joined into the battle and stopped Darphus from coming at Xena. She kicked his sword free then punched him square in the face.

The Conqueror smiled at her friend's help. She then heard Cottus's piercing cries, which meant he was about to attack. She saw he was going after M'Lila and Darphus so she warned, "M'Lila!"

The Gaelic peered up when a foot shadow came over her. Her eyes widened then she saw Darphus was too shocked to do anything but she acted quickly. M'Lila copied Xena's amazing back flips and launched into the air but lost control.

The Conqueror held her breath and chased after her friend, trying to gauge it just right.

Cottu's foot flattened Darphus but his screams rang out for missing the dark female.

The Conqueror braced her body as the tumbling woman came at her. She dropped her sword then caught M'Lila with her back slamming into the ground.

M'Lila was rasping but she lifted her head then stated, "You did not have to catch me."

The Conqueror smirked up at the smaller woman on top of her then whispered, "Just giving you a soft landing."

The Gaelic's head snapped to the right at seeing Caesar, Draco, and Atrius coming for them. "We must go." She jumped to her feet.

The Conqueror picked up the sword then sensed the hecatonchires's next attack. "Time to go is right." She grabbed her friend's hand then dragged her away.

M'Lila ran along side her friend back down the road towards Borias and Chuang's direction. She glanced over her shoulder to see that the monster just flattened Caesar and Draco. "Only your father is alive."

The Conqueror grunted then muttered, "Alive... right."

M'Lila had a thin smile as she teased, "Meeting your father was not what I imagined it to be."

The Conqueror glanced at her friend then shook her head with a grin at the joke. "I never expected you'd have such a sick sense of humor, M'Lila."

"If we cannot laugh here in Tartarus then where can we?" challenged the heavily breathing Gaelic.

"By the gods, life was dull without you, my friend." The Conqueror's feature didn't show a smile but her eyes were lighter. "So why the Tree of Life?"

M'Lila glanced over her shoulder. She spied that Cottus was coming for them now. "Because it is the only way to bring you back to life."

"What?" yelled the astonished Conqueror.

"Hurry up, you two!" hollered Borias. "This way! Bring him this way!"

The Conqueror raced for the stone bridge that rested ahead, her feet vibrating under her. She broke out onto the bridge with M'Lila at her side. She glanced over the edge and realized it was a bridge over a deep chasm that seemed bottomless from her point of view. Just as she came to the middle of the stone bridge, she came upon a black pile of almost fine looking sand. She stopped and grabbed M'Lila. "Run ahead, get out of here."

M'Lila shook her head then stated, "I must stay with you."

The Conqueror growled then shoved her friend towards Borias and Chuang. "Go! Now!"

M'Lila stared at her friend but could see she wouldn't accept the help. "Be careful." She turned and hurried down the stone bridge the rest of the way.

"Where's Xena?" demanded Borias.

"She's still on the bridge," informed Chuang, "she found my black powder."

Borias gazed horrified at the man he'd fought along side for many seasons. "You told her about your black powder!"

Chuang cringed but nodded yet his attention was drawn away when the ground shook heavily under him.

The Conqueror grinned up at the hecatonchires's ugly faces then yelled out, "Hey Cottus, I hear you're the ugliest of the hecatonchires!"

The monster roared in protest then stepped out onto the bridge.

"Come on you ugly centaur ass," muttered the crouching ruler. She stepped back, her boots scraping over the black powder. "Come to mamma."

Cottus took another step forward.

"Get ready, Borias," whispered Chuang.

Borias walked over to the tall pillar at the ledge. He ripped a lit torch then stepped onto the bridge at the ledge. "Bring him further down, Xena!"

The Conqueror kept her back to her comrades as her boots scraped down the stone bridge.

The monster stepped out again but carefully so he wouldn't misstep and slip.

"The bigger they are the smaller their brain," huffed the ruler. She then stepped back

as the monster took a fourth step out onto the bridge. She needed him just a bit further to make sure he didn't grab onto the ledge when the bridge would go out from under him. "Come on! I heard you came out of Uranus, Cottus!" She laughed at her bad joke then back peddled a few steps. Her feet jounced on the bridge when the monster came further out.

The bridge suddenly protested at the great weight. Cracks quickly formed in the center of the bridge, near the black powder, and at each end of the bridge.

"Ooo Hades," growled the former ruler. "Borias, I need that torch now!" She spun around then yelled, "Throw it to me!"

Borias spun his arm with the torch in a windmill technique then launched it.

The torch rocket into the air then went reeling back down a third of the way over the bridge.

The Conqueror sprung up into the air then caught the lit torch before the air could extinguish it. She landed on the bridge but the monster's step made her stumble towards the ledge.

"Xena, look out!" yelled M'Lila.

The ruler caught her balance just in time then stepped into the middle again. She turned to the hecatonchires and leered up at the monster that was now far enough.

The bridge crunched but it wasn't quite giving way as it faithfully held Cottus weight.

The Conqueror was halfway between the end of the bridge and the middle. She had one clear shot at this so she traded the sword and torch hands. She inhaled deeply then gave her loud warcry. The Conqueror mimicked Borias's windmill throw and sent the torch on its way.

The lit torch shot through the air then clunked off of the monster's metal clad chest. It bounced then started its quick decent.

The Conqueror quickly turned and began her frantic run for the end of the bridge. Behind her she heard Cottus cry in protest then there was a loud explosion.

"Jump, Xena!" shouted M'Lila.

The ruler took the good advice then launched her body into the air just as the stone bridge crumpled under her feet. She aimed herself for the ledge that was many paces away.

"Back up." Borias pushed Chuang away but he noticed M'Lila wasn't moving. "M'Lila, I would...." He trailed off as M'Lila rooted her feet then the heavy Conqueror's body slammed into hers.

The Conqueror gasped as she lifted her body off of M'Lila's and stared down at her. "M'Lila, you didn't have to catch me." Her words echoed the Gaelic's earlier ones.

M'Lila softly moaned after deciding returning the favor wasn't in her best interest. "I think you're right, Xena."

The Conqueror deeply chuckled then got to her feet however made sure to help her friend. "Come on, no time to lie around."

M'Lila groaned but got up too.

"Thanks for the black powder, Chuang." The dead ruler smirked at her former second in command.

Chuang dangled a small leather pouch at all his comrades' faces. "Don't leave the living without it."

Borias rolled his dark eyes then ordered, "Let's go... it's a long trip to the Tree of Life."

"Can we walk for awhile?" protested the aching Gaelic.

"We'll stop in awhile," offered the Conqueror.

M'Lila nodded as she walked along side her friend. "You were brave to do that, Xena."

The Conqueror grunted then mentioned, "I am sure Borias would tell you otherwise."

Borias threw a smirk over his shoulder at the women. He held his tongue though then turned his head around.

M'Lila adjusted her red headband then touched the ruler's arm. "You have learned much since we last met."

The Conqueror, for the first time, realized how M'Lila's touch tingled against her skin. She peered at her arm when the Gaelic removed her hand and her eyebrows furrowed tightly. "What did you do?" Where M'Lila had touched her there were no more cuts.

M'Lila pointed at the Conqueror's hands.

The Conqueror lifted her freehand and left hand with the sword. Her hands were completely healed from the cuts of her punishment. Her amazed features turned to the Gaelic for answers.

M'Lila shrugged then quietly offered, "I will tell you when we stop." She brushed back her disarrayed curly locks.

The Conqueror sighed yet she agreed with a simple nod.

The group continued down the torched lined road that seemed so endless. Occasionally they would see other prisoners that were trapped in their punishments. One familiar punishment in Greek folklore was that of King Sisyphus and the

Conqueror actually saw him pushing the heavy boulder he was chained to up a hill. The Conqueror decided that punishment was far more to her liking than hers. She also found it amusing to see the former king of Corinth, who's Isthmian Games she still upheld to this day.

After a solid candlemark, the group steered off the road and walked into the ruins of some temple. They sat on the steps and tried to let the dull ache wear out of their legs and feet.

The Conqueror though was the only one that sat on the stump of what was a column. She propped her boot up on the toppled pillar next to her. "Now tell me what's going on here."

Borias sighed then glanced at the group as he suspected he was the one that had to explain. "It's because of Alti, Xena." To this day, he still said the shaman's name with pure hatred.

"It always is," grumbled the Conqueror.

"Now that you're dead," explained Borias, "Alti will take your soul."

M'Lila stood up, came over, and sat on the fallen column next to the Conqueror's foot. "She will be far too powerful to be stopped."

The Conqueror dropped her foot from the pillar and shook her head. "What's this have to do with the Tree of Life?" Her eyes flickered between the three silent faces then it struck her. "You want me to live again so that Alti won't have my soul."

M'Lila leaned forward so that she was closer to her friend. "She must be stopped, Xena."

The Conqueror closed her eyes then turned her head away.

Borias jumped up to his feet then yelled at the Conqueror, "Its time you finally corrected your mistake, Xena!" He pointed finger at the now staring ruler. "You made her and now you must destroy her."

The Conqueror stood up hastily. Her upper lip curled into a snarl at her old lover. "Don't tell me what to do, Borias. You know very well how I respond to that."

M'Lila popped up and got between the pair. "Borias is right," she softly spoke.

Borias side stepped the Gaelic and gently reminded, "Xena, she was my mistake as well."

Chuang sighed from his spot then muttered, "All of our faults." He sensed the group staring at him and he murmured, "All of us saw what she was capable of but we didn't stop her."

The Conqueror's tense expression shifted to M'Lila. "You have nothing to do with Alti though."

M'Lila licked her parched lips then nodded her head. "You're right but..." Her hand came up and touched the ruler's right cheek. "I was your last hope in life." She placed her other hand to the ruler's other cheek. "It was because of my death... my sacrifice that made you so angry."

"No," whispered the ruler, "it was Caesar's betrayal, M'Lila." Her past pain filled her eyes. "It was never about you."

"But it was," protested the Gaelic, "and I must set that right again." She then leaned in the rest of the distance.

The Conqueror's cracked lips were sealed by M'Lila's sweeter ones. She moaned at the tender depth in her friend's kiss. She felt her face no longer cold but swallowed by warmth then her eyes fluttered open at the end of the kiss.

M'Lila's genuine smile brightened between them when she saw her friend's beautiful face restored.

The Conqueror lifted her hand and touched forehead where she knew there'd been a large gash. It was completely gone and no scar left behind. "What... how'd you do that?"

M'Lila pulled her hands away to reveal the ruler's healed face completely.

Borias observed with open interest at the scene.

"It is because I love you," murmured the Gaelic. "For every heart that loves you, your wounds will heal to an extent." She gathered the ruler's hands into her dark ones. "Just stop and think about those that love you."

"Nobody does," protested the ruler softly.

"Yet I do," argued the Gaelic. "Stop... listen for once, Xena." She squeezed the ruler's hands. "When the living think of the dead, the dead can hear their thoughts. Listen..."

The Conqueror did listen for the first time since her arrival here in Tartarus. Her eyes drifted shut and she tightly held onto M'Lila's hand for moral support.

"Xena... Xena...", whispered Cyrene's voice. "I know you can hear me. I am so sorry... I never told you how sorry I am. I was never there for you after Lyceus's death." Cyrene's voice faded then came back again. "I'm so sorry, Xena. I spent moons regretting that I shunned you and now I pay with a life where I can't tell you that there was never anything to forgive you for." Cyrene's voice faded again but returned at a low whisper, "I love you, Xena no matter who you are because you will always be my little one. I love you..."

"You were my greatest enemy, Xena but I always knew you would defeat your own darkness. I was proud of you that day when you conquered your darkness. The Amazon Nation will honor your sacrifice as you've repaid your debt." Cyane's whisper wavered then filled the Conqueror's mind again. "I am learning to forgive you, enemy

of mine."

M'Lila felt how tightly the ruler clenched to her hand. She squeezed back then whispered, "Listen, harder now, Xena."

The Conqueror inhaled sharply when the usually sweet but now painfully constricted voice of the rebel leader came to her.

"Conqueror, I know you can hear me... wherever you are. I know you probably think I am strong... but I can't be, not now. You can't leave me. I know it's not your time. I can feel it... in my heart. I feel this emptiness that I never felt before... and it scares me. Above all, just remember to fight... fight to come back. Your realm needs you... I need you." Gabrielle's whispered plea floated away but rested in the Conqueror's mind.

The Conqueror slowly opened her eyes and sadly stared at M'Lila. She understood the very emptiness that Gabrielle felt because it was the same kind she'd felt when her brother died.

M'Lila peered up into emotional blue eyes. "Now do you see?"

"Yes," whispered the ruler.

Borias stepped closer to the pair, his voice breaking the spell between them. "Alti must be stopped, Xena or else she will condemn thousands upon thousands of souls to her karma. If she takes yours then there is no stopping her."

The Conqueror bit her lower lip then softly asked, "Why are you helping, Borias?" She shook her head then reminded, "I killed you."

"In fair combat and under Alti's influence," also reminded the former warlord. He then rested his hand on the ruler's left forearm. "You may have never loved me, Xena but... you had a place in my heart." He tilted his head then his usually harsh voice calmed. "And you have always protected our son from a life of violence."

"Solan," she sadly whispered and dropped her eyes.

"He fairs well," confidently stated Borias, "I thank you everyday for keeping him safe, Xena."

The Conqueror locked eyes with Borias. "He'll never know or follow his parents' lives."

Borias nodded then removed his hand. When his hand drew back, the Conqueror's skin was healed over her forearm. "We must hurry now... Alti could take your soul at anytime. Time is a luxury that we can't squander right now."

Chuang stood up then neared the group. "Let's go."

The Conqueror and the rest of the small party continued the journey on the road. Her thoughts wondered off to the evil shaman back in the land of the living. By the gods,

she realized that once Alti had her soul that she would undoubtedly strike out against Melinda, Janice, the Amazons, her mother, and most of all Gabrielle. A sense of urgency to stop the shaman filled her as her long stride grew faster.

M'Lila hastened to stay along side. She peered up her friend's determined features and she whispered, "She will not succeed, Xena."

"No, she won't," snarled the newly driven ruler. "Not in this lifetime or any other."

Chapter 20 - The Tree of Life

The Conqueror knelt down just as a small, warm hand touched her right shoulder. She turned her head and her eyes lightened at her friend, M'Lila.

"We are close," whispered the Gaelic.

The dead ruler simply nodded her head as she gazed through the brush, her right hand parting the branches as she peered through the small opening.

"We must cross the bridge first," quietly reminded M'Lila.

"And it seems to be heavily guarded by..." The Conqueror's mouth remained open as mind tried to process what was guarding the bridge just ahead.

"Tree nymphs I believe you call them," finished M'Lila. She then leaned closer to her friend.

"What kind of tree is the Tree of Life?" murmured the ruler.

"I believe it is an oak, Xena."

The Conqueror nodded as she released the branches, her head now turned to M'Lila. "Those aren't just any nymphs... those are dryads." She sighed then saw the inquisitive look on M'Lila's face. "Dryads can only be killed one way, which won't work for us."

"Why?"

The Conqueror shook her head then explained, "A dryad's life force is derived from the tree it was born from... the mother tree is its life force so to speak."

"So the only way to kill a dryad is to kill its mother tree," summarized the Gaelic, "and we can't kill the Tree of Life."

"Exactly." The Conqueror glanced over her shoulder before saying, "Let's head back and work something out." She and M'Lila carefully lowered onto their bellies then crawled backwards for some distance. They then got to their feet but stayed hunkered down as they returned back to Borias and Chuang.

Borias and Chuang waited at another set of ruins from another temple, some unknown

temple. Borias had wondered inside of it while Chuang merely sat on the cracked, disheveled steps. Chuang climbed to his feet when the Conqueror and M'Lila appeared around the thick trees by the side of the temple.

"Where's Borias?" questioned the ruler.

Chuang pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the tilted entrance of the temple.

The Conqueror decided to follow after her former lover and partner while Chuang and M'Lila waited outside for them. When she entered, her eyes squinted from the unknown source of light that poured through the wide opening in the ceiling. With her head tilted back, her vision focused on the opening but she could not make out the source of light but only that it was strong and warm, much like the sun. She moved away then her eyes adjusted again to see Borias's back to her at the opposite side of the temple.

"Xena, look at this." Borias half stepped around and signaled for her but he turned back. "These temples in Hades are leftover from the fall of the Titans." He sensed the ruler at his side now. He glimpsed at her to see her also looking over the wall painting before them.

"This is a temple to Gaia," muttered the Conqueror. Her right hand stretched out and touched the weathered and cracked mural.

"Look at this." Borias took several side steps and pointed at the picture in the very center of the mural.

The Conqueror inhaled quickly and stared at the beautiful painting of a gigantic oak tree. The tree's branches stretched to the skies, its trunk through middle earth, and its roots spread out below the underworld.

"Now look here," offered Borias, he was now down by the left side of the mural.

The Conqueror moved down then saw that there stood a gorgeous woman that was almost as tall as the tree. Her right hand was stretched out, pointed to the tree, and her left hand was cupped upwards and some lifting movement.

The Conqueror glanced between the woman and the tree. "The Tree of Life was born from Gaia," she theorized and from the corner of her eye she saw Borias nodding.

"But on the right side there's more to the story." The former warlord strolled down to it with the ruler at his side.

The Conqueror tilted her head as she pieced together the mystery of the mural. "So Gaia birthed the Tree of Life then when the Titans were banished to Tartarus, Zeus ordered the hecatonchires to attack the Tree of Life... destroy it."

"Zeus was afraid that the Titans would use the Tree of Life to escape from their prisons in Tartarus," added Borias. "Come here." He turned, walked off the broken and tilted dais, and went to another wall with a mural.

The Conqueror followed then verbally described the mural to them both. "The dryads are the protectors of the Tree of Life... they keep the hecatonchires away from it."

"So does one other protect the tree." Borias stepped forward and pointed to a green creature that was wrapped around the base of the tree.

"A dragon," murmured the ruler.

Borias grinned at his former partner. "Not just any dragon, Xena... that is the dragon we heard about in Chin."

The Conqueror stared in awe at the dragon wrapped around the tree as she murmured, "The Lóng... it can't be, Borias." She rotated her head until her gaze rested upon him. "It's impossible."

"You would think so," slowly agreed Borias, "but Xena, we have already seen a hecatonchires."

"The dryads are real as well," stated the Conqueror. "So why wouldn't the Lóng be too?" She stared directly at the dragon's painting.

"This isn't going to be easy," observed the former warlord. He turned his head to Xena. "We have to get past the two remaining hecatonchires, the dryads, and the Lóng."

The Conqueror slowly revealed a dark grin at her ex-lover. "Nothing is ever easy between us, Borias." She leaned towards him then sultry whispered, "It hasn't been that long... has it?"

Borias supplied a sly smirk as he throatily whispered, "Xena, you should know me by now." He leaned in too, his lips a mere brush from hers. "Or hasn't it been that long for you?"

The Conqueror chuckled then she leaned in so that her lips grazed over his and she saw Borias's dark eyes close. She smirked then quickly drew away while saying, "I keep myself... satisfied in the mortal world." She then strolled away with that satisfied look on her face

Borias showed all his teeth at the ruler's backside but he shook his head as some things just would never change. "Maybe we can use this battle between the dryads and the hecatonchires to our advantage."

The Conqueror paused in the slanted opening of the temple, her head turned to Borias. "That's exactly the plan." She disappeared out of the temple.

Borias followed but stopped and he stole one last glance at the green dragon at the base of the Tree of Life. He turned away and joined the rest outside the temple.

"So what is the plan exactly?" questioned Chuang.

"Well we have a slight problem," mentioned the Conqueror.

"Slight?" Borias huffed then peered down at Chuang, who was standing next to M'Lilia. "The slight problem is named Lóng."

Chuang's eyes bulged and he quickly shook his head. "You are joking." He glanced between his two former leaders and slightly paled.

"Come on, Chuang," tormented the Conqueror, "you have the jewels for this, don't you?"

"My liege," started the oriental warrior, "it is not a lack of courage but a lack of success." He rested his hands on his hips. "The Lóng is immortal and very powerful in Chin stories. It will be impossible to stop him."

"Who said anything about stopping him?" The Conqueror chuckled at her former second in command's dim features. She then turned her sights to M'Lila. "Do you know what I have to do to be... reborn?"

The Gaelic sighed then neared her friend. "I believe you simply must touch the tree."

"Touch?" repeated the dubious ruler. "M'Lila, it can't be that easy?"

"It's easy minus the hecatonchires, the Lóng, and dryads."

The Conqueror chuckled at Borias's reminder. "I suppose we will see." She tilted her head then slowly grinned. "Now for that plan...."

It was within quarter of a candlemark that the group had worked out the plans to find a route to the Tree of Life. The plan itself was quite straightforward, which called for more brute strength than anything. They used the trees that were surrounding path to the Tree of Life as the path directly connected to the bridge across some deep, dark gorge.

The Conqueror was located behind the tree near the edge while her comrades were hiding behind the tall trunks further back. She knelt down with her left hand resting on the tree to steady her body. She carefully watched the dryads wondering up and down the stone bridge; they were faithfully guarding it. She gave her sword a quick spin then started to move forward yet she tensed and spun around with her sword moving fast. Her sword's tip just stopped under the intruder's chin.

The Conqueror had that sly grin because she'd caught the stranger sneaking up on her however she instantly lost it. Her sword slowly lowered to her side and she stared, shocked. Just as she was about to speak the stranger jumped forward because of some distant noise.

"Be quiet," hushed the stranger. He tugged the tall ruler down behind the tree to hide them while the sounds grew louder and closer.

The Conqueror heard it but it didn't matter to her as all she did was be awestruck. She then emotionally murmured, "Lyceus?"

Lyceus smiled at his sister warmly then touched her arm. "I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner." He turned his head away and pulled at his sister's broad shoulder. "Duck down... they're coming."

The ruler tore her gaze away from her young brother and her features darkened when the noises developed into footfall and voices.

"Come on, hurry up," ordered a gruff voice. He waved his axe in the direction of the bridge to the Tree of Life.

The Conqueror shook her head and muttered, "Kallikantzaroi."

Lyceus grinned then murmured, "You remember them? From mother's stories?"

"I do," whispered the Conqueror, "How could I forget? She always teased me that I would turn into a kallikantzaros during Solstice." She watched as about a dozen goblin-like creatures that were small and hairy waddle by with their chopping axes. Once they were gone and out of ear shot, she stood up and pulled her brother up to his feet. She looked him up and down in pure amazement as he looked like the exact same young man when he'd died. "Ly, is this...."

Lyceus lifted his hand and pressed his palm against his sister's cheek. "It is me."

The Conqueror revealed a long forgotten smile as she suddenly grabbed her brother into a long embrace.

Lyceus felt more alive than ever when he hugged his sister. He'd almost forgotten what it was like to hug her. He drew back but his sister still wouldn't fully release him. "You've grown, Xena."

The ruler cracked a grin. "You haven't aged a day, brother." She softly laughed at his boyish features and amazingly gold locks that reminded her of the forgotten sun. Then his eyes, gods they were still striking and reminded her so much of only one other back on the mortal earth. "You were always the catch of the village," she teased and clasped her hand into his.

Lyceus rolled his eyes. "I think you attracted more men than I did women," he thoroughly joked.

The Conqueror wistfully smiled at old memories then as her quick mind worked it out, her features darkened. "What are you doing here?" She shook her head then separated from him some.

"You've caused quite the stir in Hades and should I expect anything less of you?" Lyceus folded his arms against his chest.

"Tell me you're not here in Tartarus, Ly?" urged the concerned sister.

Lyceus sighed and dropped his arms finally. "Not exactly... I'm neither in Tartarus nor in Elysia."

"The meadows then," murmured the Conqueror, which was confirmed by Lyceus's nod. "Why are you here?"

"To see you," answered Lyceus, "and help you. Word travels fast here... faster than Pegasus."

"So it would seem." The dark ruler then saw that her comrades were coming to her with concerned features.

M'Lila hastily asked, "What were those things? And who is he?" She carefully studied the young man and tilted her head.

Borias rested his hands on his leather clad hips. "Who's the new stray, Xena?"

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at her former lover. She then clapped her right hand on her brother's shoulder. "This is my younger brother, Lyceus."

Borias blinked and his smirking features disappeared. "You have a brother?"

The Conqueror relinquished her hold from her brother and folded her arms. "Yes."

M'Lila stepped forward and warmly smiled at Lyceus. "I am M'Lila." She held out her hand.

Lyceus clasped arms then met Chuang and Borias as well. He could tell that each of these people had history with his sister but he wasn't sure about all of it. He then turned to his sister. "Getting you to the Tree of Life is very dangerous... you risk losing your soul."

"My soul will be lost either way," informed the ruler.

"Yes," muttered the young man, "to Alti."

"How do you know Alti?" inquired the Conqueror.

Lyceus released a sigh then answered, "Let's just say I know people, sister. I've kept my tabs on you beyond just your thoughts." He tilted his head before explaining, "The kallikantzaroi are exactly as they are in the legends... they are sawing the Tree of Life down."

"Solstice is a couple of moons away," reminded the Conqueror.

"Yes, but their numbers have increased this cycle... where there use to be six now there are twelve. They will manage to saw the tree down this cycle before Solstice... Zeus had proclaimed it."

"What happens if the Tree of Life dies?" questioned the Conqueror.

Lyceus frowned and his hands clenched at his sides. "If it dies then so does Gaia."

"The gods and Titans are not of my concern," stated the ruler.

Lyceus stepped closer to his sister then whispered, "They will be your concern when your realm dies because of plague, polluted water... crops failing. Without Gaia, Xena nature will die and so will life."

"Why would Zeus want the Tree of Life destroyed if it is the breath of nature?" questioned M'Lila.

"The gods want to beat the Titans. They do not care about any mortals." Lyceus glimpsed between his sister and the darkly tanned woman. "Gaia is the last Titan to have any influence in mortals' lives and Zeus wants to snub that out."

The ruler grunted and shook her head. "And I am the tyrant," she mildly joked.

Lyceus ignored the remark and instead asked, "Do you recall mother's stories about how to kill a kallikantzaros?"

"The sun and the holy number three."

Borias quietly laughed then asked, "So since there's no sun light here, you're telling me we have to get these hairy guys to say the number three? While they're swinging axes at our heads?"

Chuang smirked. "Don't forget the dryads-"

"The hecatonchires," added M'Lila.

The Conqueror sighed and muttered, "And the great Lóng."

Borias threw up his hands in the air and walked off then hotly yelled, "I rather face Alti alone than do this!" He turned around with the most frustrated features and his teeth showing.

"Listen," started the Conqueror, "none of you need to be here." Her eyes scanned her friends' faces and her brother's. "This is my fight." Then without another word, she started down the path with her sword at her side. She would try because if she did not then it would cost her soul regardless because there was not much to lose.

Lyceus quickly ran off and joined his sister side at the edge of the bridge. "Your fight has always been my fight, Xena."

The Conqueror turned her head to her young brother and whispered, "Not this time, Ly... you lost your life because of me. I won't let you lose your soul now."

Lyceus grabbed his sister by the wrist. "I have never regretted my life." His stared out at the bridge full of moving dryads. "Now I will not regret my death." He stepped out onto the bridge.

"Lyceus, no!" The Conqueror inhaled sharply when his brother's boot met the bridge then all the dryads reacted at once. She gave a battlecry and exploded forth with her flying jumped that landed her between Lyceus and the charging dryads. She raised her

sword. Then unexpectedly she lowered her sword and her left hand shot out towards Lyceus behind her.

Lyceus gave a small yelp as his sister yanked him forward.

The Conqueror quickly moved forward on the bridge as she and her brother dodge over, around, and through dryads without being caught. She saw that the distance to the end of the bridge was rather long and there was also a thick fog that obscured her view of what was there, waiting.

"Xena, watch out," hollered Lyceus and he jumped forward towards an oncoming dryad; he unsheathed his sword simultaneously.

"No!" The ruler's sword shot out and stopped Lyceus's blade from striking the dryad. She then wrapped her left arm around his waist and quickly shot up into the air.

Lyceus closed his eyes as the world spun around him. He tried not to get too sick feeling then his feet connected with the bridge again. He dared to open his eyes but he instantly regretted it. "Sis, I think that was out of the frying pan and into the fire."

The Conqueror released her brother and growled at all the surrounding dryads. She lifted her sword in preparation. "Fight now, talk later."

Lyceus raised his sword, the sword he'd fought and died with. He gave a strong yell and charged the nearest dryad. Behind him he heard his sister's war cry, which was much more powerful than he last recalled. He fought against two dryads that tried to use their long branch-like hands and fingers to grab him. He cut one dryad's fingers off but he was stunned to see them instantly regrow. "Xena?" he shouted while doubling his efforts. "I think we have a major problem."

"I know," hotly called back the ruler. "You have to get them off the bridge... it's the only way." She then made the unknown mistake of slashing her sword vertically down a dryad.

The dryad merely split in half and become two.

"I think these things are closer related to hydras," muttered the frustrated ruler. She backed stepped then another step when a dryad swiped at her. Suddenly her backside hit her brother's.

"Any more fancy tricks, sis?" Lyceus swiped at a groping tree-hand, which he cut off but it only regrew.

The Conqueror was about to reply but she suddenly smiled when she heard M'Lila's fighting cry sailing overhead. "Ly, drop... now!" She squatted just as her brother did the same.

M'Lila landed neatly between the pair, slammed her pike in the ground, and gave a cry as she lifted into the air. She effectively kicked every nearby dryad off the bridge and shot up into the air then neatly landed beside the Conqueror. She held down her hand and ordered, "You must not lie around, Xena if we are to succeed."

The ruler smirked at the joke and clasped her hand into her friend's. "Thanks for the backup."

M'Lila nodded and turned her head to the standing brother. "You are senseless like your sister. I had better hopes for you."

The Conqueror glowered at her friend but then she growled, "Duck, M'Lila."

The Gaelic obliged as her tall friend charged her then jumped over her.

The ruler nailed an approaching dryad in the torso and sent it flying into another dryad and off the bridge.

"I think its time to move!" yelled Borias, who dodged away from two more dryads and behind him was Chuang.

"Press forward," commanded the Conqueror. She sensed her comrades lining up beside her with her brother at her right and M'Lila to her left.

The group quickly moved forward as they covered the width of the bridge. They slashed their way forward, pace by pace, and shoved the dryads off the bridge. They edged closer to the end of the bridge where the heavy fog hid what was ahead and where the thick trunk of the Tree of Life plunged down into it. Finally with one last kick, the Conqueror was able to step off the bridge and into the fog.

"Xena?" called Lyceus. He then felt a warm hand grab his and hauled him into the thick fog. He could barely make out his sister's outline in the fog.

"There are steps here. Be careful, Ly." The Conqueror held his hand and guided him down deeper and deeper.

M'Lila was between Chuang and Borias but she hollered, "Can you see anything, Xena?"

The ruler came off the last stop and stared in wonderment at the gigantic trunk that was surrounded by a decorative marble stand. The marble floor that she stood on had brown lines that spread out like veins in every direction. She could only guess it was the great root system of the tree. When her eyes focused back on the marble stand around the tree she realized the kallikantzaroi had stopped hacking at the tree and turned to her and Lyceus.

Lyceus released his sister's hand and lifted his sword.

The Conqueror held her sword between both her hands and pointed her tip at the goblins. "Sorry, boys but you're not saying timber this time or any other." When she finished, her three friends materialized out of the fog and took sides with her.

A kallikantzaros pointed his axe at the intruders and hotly commanded, "Stop them!" He watched in satisfaction when his immortal comrades flooded down the stand and came at the dead souls.

"Chaaaaya!" The Conqueror laughed loudly and began the charge for the small, hairy creatures.

The battle between the immortal creatures and the dead souls raged forward but it were the souls that started to tire. Lyceus was caught off guard at one point and took a nasty swipe at his chest that almost missed but still cut his chest lightly. He stumbled back and caught the next whirlwind swipe with his sword.

The Conqueror saw it and her anger flared so she jumped and landed between the goblin and her brother. She laughed at the goblin's shocked features then she took her opening by kicking him hard.

The kallikantzaros sailed through the air and slammed into the tree trunk and slumped unconscious.

"Xena, this isn't getting us anywhere!" hollered Borias.

The ruler sighed because she thoroughly agreed. "Borias, remember what I wanted to do between the House of Lao and the House of Ming?"

"How could I forget?" chided the ex-warlord.

"Well now is a good time to execute that idea," suggested the ruler. She swiftly grabbed Lyceus and quietly ordered, "Back up to the bridge."

"Wha-"

"Just go," snapped the ruler, who shoved her brother towards the steps. She turned around quickly and caught an attacking kallikantzaros.

Lyceus, M'Lila, and Chuang hurried up the steps but stopped on the last one because if they touched the bridge again the dryads would react.

The Conqueror and Borias slowly went up the steps backwards while fighting off the goblins and drawing them upwards.

Lyceus glanced at the reformed dryads on the bridge and was amazed they'd regrouped so fast.

"Oh no," muttered Chuang. He pointed his sword at the new problem they'd forgotten.

M'Lila gasped and stared at the two remaining hecatonchires roared out and displayed their ugly faces and plentiful swords. "Xena," she yelled down, "The hecatonchires have arrived!"

The Conqueror cursed under her breath as she stepped upwards.

"This isn't exactly how we... planned it," growled Borias.

"You gotta be flexible, Borias." The ruler gave a hard kick and sent a screaming

goblin flying downwards through the fog. Her boots then rattled on the step from what she assumed was the stomp of a hecatonchires.

The hecatonchires, Briareus, stepped out onto the bridge and started the attack on the dryads. Behind him his brother, Gyges, followed him slowly.

The dryads cried out in pain then all together they attacked the gigantic monster to stop it.

Lyceus saw his sister's silhouette now form in the fog then come out of it. His eyes widened when the kallikantzaroi unexpectedly rushed up the steps and swarmed them all. He ended up stumbling back onto the bridge however the dryads were far too busy with the hecatonchires.

"We're wearing them down," yelled a kallikantzaros, "kill them! Throw them off the bridge!"

The Conqueror was suddenly hard pressed by four goblins at once and she tried to duck away from the wielding axes. She and her comrades were pressed backwards onto the bridge completely. She then lost her footing when a hecatonchires stomped on a handful of dryads.

Lyceus yelped as he teetered on the edge of the bridge and the nearest kallikantzaros charged him with a vertical slash. Lyceus tried to duck but lost his balance and went over the edge. "Xena!"

The Conqueror was already in motion and leapt into the air. She purposefully landed on her stomach just on the edge of the bridge as her brother lost his grip. Her left hand shot down and caught his wrist. "I've got you, Ly!"

Lyceus wrapped his fingers around his sister's larger wrist and held on tightly. He glanced down below his feet and saw nothing but blackness ready to swallow him.

"Xena, look out!" Borias couldn't make it yet Chuang did.

Chuang stopped the approaching goblin from attacking Xena's unprotected back.

"Lyceus, drop your sword and take my other hand," ordered the Conqueror.

"I need my sword," argued the young man.

"You need your soul more!" angrily shouted the ruler. She'd already let go of her sword and was stretching her right hand down. "Take my hand, now!"

M'Lila gave fierce kick to her opponent then jumped at him. She grabbed his axe by the shaft then gave a powerful swing, which caused him to lose his grip on the axe. She now had a better weapon and made her increase her efforts.

The flying goblin however went over the Conqueror then down towards the pit. His piercing scream came to a sharp stop when his claw hand ripped into Lyceus's leg.

Lyceus cried in pain and peered down at the monstrous creature hanging onto his right leg, his claws digging through his skin.

"No," whispered the Conqueror in fear.

Lyceus tried to stab at the kallikantzaros with his sword but couldn't reach. He then screamed when the claws went deeper.

"Lyceus, take my other hand!" commanded the Conqueror.

The hecatonchires gave a powerful cry of battle and stomped again on the bridge.

Borias fell onto his back then a goblin's axe went into his right thigh. He howled in pain but tried to roll away with his sword. Chuang quickly came to his side to support him.

The M'Lila only stumbled back but recovered easier.

The Conqueror however was shaken over the edge more so but she held tightly to her brother. "Ly, let go of the damn sword and take my hand!"

Lyceus finally let go of the sword and threw up his hand.

The Conqueror clasped it and held tightly. She quickly tried to pull him up but with the extra weight it was incredibly hard.

The hecatonchires growled loudly then sent two swords slamming down and connecting with the bridge. His swords not only took out several dryads but it sent a crack ripping down the bridge.

The Conqueror quickly felt the bridge's ledge buckling under her from the tremendous quake from the hecatonchires. She released her brother's left hand and yelled as she slammed her right hand against the bridge where it didn't crack. A chunk of the bridge broke away and fell from under her chest and just swiped past Lyceus.

"Xena, just let me go!" Lyceus emphasized it by releasing his grip on his sister's wrist.

"I am not letting you go!"

Lyceus gritted his teeth when the goblin dug his claws deeper. The kallikantzaros was obviously didn't agreed with Lyceus's idea.

The Conqueror growled and urged her body not to betray her now. She tried to use her right hand to lift them up but the angle was against her. Her left arm socket was already aching from holding the weight of her brother and the fat kallikantzaros.

"Xena," whispered Lyceus, "let me go." His voice was low but so soft. "I'll be fine."

"No," snarled the ruler, "I won't... not again." She closed her eyes and brought on a powerful surge in her body as she started to lift her body up and worked her knees under her.

The kallikantzaros decided not to wait any longer as he threw up his right hand. His claws dug into Lyceus's right thigh. He slowly started to climb up the young man's prone body.

Lyceus wailed out in pain but his eyes met his sister's. "He'll kill you too, Xena! Just release my hand before he gets to you!"

The Conqueror just had her knees under her but when she was going to move her right hand down to Lyceus's wrist the hecatonchires stomped again. She lost her advantage and her knees caved in under her. She slammed her forehead on the edge of the jagged, broken bridge and it almost knocked her unconscious but she wouldn't surrender.

"Xena," called Lyceus, "Xena... Xena... Xe-"

"-na," softly called a warm, feminine voice.

The Conqueror's heartbeat slowed in the middle of the chaos.

"Xena," warmly called the same voice.

"Lao Ma," murmured the ruler and her blue eyes glossed over with the image of the Chin ruler. The noise of the battle washed away from her.

"Xena, have you really forgotten what I tried to teach you? Heaven endures and the earth lasts a long time because they do not live for themselves. Remember the world is driven... driven by will... you control your own limitations. To conqueror others is to have power. To conqueror yourself is to know the Way. Remember Xena,...."

"Stop willing," whispered the Conqueror, "Stop desiring. Stop hating." She repeated the words in a mantra.

Lyceus cried out in pain from the ascending claws of the kallikantzaros.

The hecatonchires gave a vibrating cry and kicked at several dryads while taking another step out onto the bridge.

M'Lila hissed painfully when a goblin's axe sliced down her arm.

Borias fell to his knees because of the heated pain in his thigh. He lifted his head as the goblin raised his axe, prepared to behead the former warlord.

Chuang stopped a horizontal axe slash but didn't see the second one coming from behind. Then he closed his eyes because he knew it was too late for him.

There was a loud eruption of unseen power that rippled out from the end of the bridge.

The kallikantzaroi all screamed in unison as they exploded into midair and flew off the bridge, over the edge.

Lyceus briefly lost sight of anything but then he found his feet safely on the bridge and the goblin no longer clinging to him. He moved past his astonishment as he sought his sister. He held his breath when he saw his older sister actually glowing a dark pink shade and slowly walking down the bridge.

Borias limped up to his feet with Chuang's help. He peered down at the ruler.

Chuang gazed that way too and whispered, "She poses the qi... by the gods... it is real."

M'Lilia was heavily breathing as she neared Lyceus. "What is she doing? What has happened?"

"I don't know," murmured the astonished brother.

The Conqueror stopped several paces away from the lump of dryads. She lifted her hands as red orbs began to develop in her palms and she was still murmuring a mantra. Her hands shot out forward and the orbs flew from her hands.

The hecatonchires, Briareus, released a painful cry from the powerful explosion. He lost several of his swords however he had plenty left. He stomped his foot hard on the bridge, which caused the bridge to crack again.

The Conqueror ignored it but instead of sending off more orbs, she half turned and stretched her right hand out towards the Tree of Life.

Lyceus saw his sister's eyes were lively with something he'd never seen before and she was also gazing beyond them. He turned his head and called, "Look!"

The group turned around and watched as the fog surrounding the base of the tree was suddenly being moved away by an unknown and unseen force.

The Conqueror took a deep breath then called out loudly in an exploding volume, "Lóng, it is time, finally!"

"By the gods," rasped Chuang, his head dropped back.

The air filled with a piercing cry then the dark sky was filled by a green dragon swooping through the air. He lifted up higher and higher until he disappeared but his call cut through the chaos.

The Conqueror turned back to the two hecatonchires and she produced red orbs in her palms again. The powerful orbs grew larger than the previous two then she screamed at the top of her lungs. She threw them at the hecatonchires with all of her strength.

Lóng swooped down from the darkness above and attacked the hecatonchires as the red energy bursts struck them. The dragon shot out fire over Gyges, which engulfed the hecatonchires in fire. Lóng then reared back as his sharp hind legs came out and his talons buried into Briareus's shoulders. Lóng's long wings begun to beat heavily and he lifted the ugly monster off the bridge then they vanished into the black sky.

The Conqueror clenched her teeth as she willed new energy balls into her hands. She held up her hands and brought the balls towards each other. The energy spheres melted together then were lifted over the ruler's head. The Conqueror gave her fierce battle cry and hurled the powerful energy sphere at the hecatonchires.

Gyges was already wailing in pain from the fire but when the energy orb exploded against him and he lost his balance on the edge. He slipped off the edge of the gorge and disappeared into the darkness but his cry resounded back up.

The Conqueror was breathing heavy but she turned her head to the right when she heard a new cry from above.

Suddenly Briareus was tumbling out of the black sky then vanished down in the gorge with his brother.

The Conqueror suddenly fell to her right knee and her head drooped, her eyes closed.

"Xena!" Lyceus ran down the bridge to his sister. He knelt down next to his sibling and touched her hot skin. "Are you okay?"

The ruler could only nod but she was recovering.

M'Lila hurried down the bridge too and checked on her friend, an axe at her side.

Chuang and Borias remained still since Borias couldn't really walk yet but his wound was slowly healing. He considered the dryads at the other end of the bridge. "They're not attacking anymore."

Chuang noticed it too and he was quite happy about it. "Lucky for us."

The Conqueror stood up with gritted teeth. Her muscles ached however she would ignore it. She studied the slowly moving dryads that posed no threat now. She sighed in relief then turned to her brother. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," promised Lyceus, "thank you." He quickly pulled his sister in for a hug.

The Conqueror tightly hugged him back then when she pulled away M'Lila took her attention.

"We must get you to the tree," urged the Gaelic, "before it gets any later."

"You're right." The Conqueror hastily started into a fast walk then a jog as she gained control over her body. She, M'Lila, and Lyceus hurried past the guys then down the marble steps. She came to a quick halt though when her gaze met a very curious set of eyes at the base of the hacked tree.

Lyceus stopped beside his sister and stared at the beautiful rustic colored bird, which was perched on the edge of the tree's stand. "By the gods... what kind of bird is that?"

The bird squawked at them for a heartbeat then she flapped her wings to hover up in the air. She turned and landed again but now faced the badly chopped Tree of Life.

She cried again but this call was slightly different and a small flame formed on her head. The flame grew larger and crept over her body until she was completely on fire. She spread out her wings of fire and flapped them at the injured trunk.

The Tree of Life's trunk hastily healed over and was returned to normal as if never touched.

"It is the phoenix," whispered the Gaelic.

The phoenix seemed to hear this and hopped along the edge of the base. Once again she faced the souls but her focus centered on the dark ruler in the middle.

"Go to her," softly suggested M'Lila.

The Conqueror wasn't sure why but she agreed and carefully approached the beautiful firebird. She stopped a pace away then her eyes locked with the phoenix's and she became lost in it.

"Xena of Amphipolis, you wish to be granted life again," spoke the phoenix in an angelic voice but her beak did not open or move.

The Conqueror was uneasy however things haven't been all that normal since her arrival in Tartarus. "I wish that, yes. I must return to the mortal earth."

"To continue your plunders?" questioned the phoenix, her head twisted to the right. "The Fates decided it was time for your life to end."

The former ruler sighed as she hated to admit this aloud but she argued, "It's not really about my life... it's about everybody else's lives."

The firebird squawked and lifted her head as if considering this statement. "Since when has it not been about you, Destroyer of Nations? I have not survived thousands of lifetimes to believe such lies."

"They are not lies," argued the ruler hotly, "because I would have not done all that I have done here if it was only for me."

"Instead of paying your debt to those lives you've destroyed here in Tartarus, you greedily demand to be reborn. Where is the selfness in that?" The phoenix shook her head then folded her wings over her side. "You are incapable of change, Xena of Amphipolis and I will not grant life to the Bringer of Death."

"I am capable of change," shot back the Conqueror. "And if you do not grant me life then you'll be sealing thousands of souls to be imprisoned by a dark shaman. I am the only one that can stop her."

"The high and mighty Conqueror demands a chance to correct something that she did wrong so long ago. You should have thought of that long before your death when you had so many chances." The firebird's eyes glowed a brighter red. "And I do not trust you to keep your word to stopping this shaman. Perhaps the mortal souls imprisoned by the shaman are better suited than the suffering they shall endure under your rein."

She spread out her right wing and pointed it straight ahead. "Return to your deemed punishment, Xena of Amphipolis."

The Conqueror took a step forward then declared, "I will not." Her blue eyes held those of the firebird's burning pupils. "I am asking you to give me a chance to set all of this right." She hesitated and glanced back at her friends but mostly her young brother. Lyceus had been the only one to believe in her, ever but when she gazed back the firebird, who was the link to rebirth; she knew there was another that believed in her too.

"What is her name?" asked the phoenix, as if reading the ruler's thoughts.

The Conqueror's clenched hands loosened at her side as she whispered, "Gabrielle."

"The name of strength," defined the phoenix, "such a fitting name for such a powerful woman." She noted that the dead ruler wasn't arguing with her. "She believes in you when others do not."

"It didn't start out that way."

The firebird seemed amused as her laughing voice replied, "I can imagine." She folded her wing back up then stretched out her long neck. "Is it her life you wish to destroy above the rest?"

The Conqueror sighed then truthfully replied, "At one point, yes I thought so but I can't now... I don't want to."

"Why?"

"I don't know," admitted the former ruler, "but I do know that out of anybody she can help me change."

"She cannot make you change," reminded the firebird.

"No but she can help as long as I want to change."

The phoenix hopped to the right then tilted her head. "Is there some reason you want to change?"

"It's more of a somebody than a something... my brother." The Conqueror sighed then softly admitted, "I thought when I conquered the known-world that I would have everything. I was wrong. As a child I owned nothing but I had everything but now I own everything and having nothing... nothing but debts."

The phoenix chirped then straightened her head out. She thoughtful mulled over the ruler's words then she blinked and explained, "I am phoenix... I give rebirth and change. The Tree of Life creates life, which you've already expired. I can give life again but only in the form of rebirth otherwise it fails and your soul will be lost. If you wish to return to the mortal life you must be reborn from the ashes of your old, dead self." She waited a beat and stretched out her neck so that her face was closer to the Conqueror's. "If you cannot do this then I suggest you turn back now. Are you willing

to stake your soul to be reborn, Xena of Amphipolis?"

The Conqueror kept her chin up as she confidently answered, "Yes, I am."

"Then so be it." The phoenix waved her right wing at the souls behind the ruler. "You may have a moment with them before it is time."

The Conqueror dipped her head then stepped back once and turned. She approached her friends and explained, "The phoenix will try to grant me life again."

"Try?" questioned M'Lila. "What do you mean, try?"

The dead ruler exhaled audibly then explained, "The Tree of Life creates life and only once but the phoenix can give rebirth."

"What's the catch?" urged Borias.

"The catch is I have to be truly willing to change or else the rebirth will not work and my soul will be destroyed."

"Don't you think that's a little risky, my liege?" argued Chuang.

The Conqueror folded her arms across her chest. "I'm better off trying... if I fail then at least my soul can't go to Alti so either way she loses."

"And so do I, sister," cut in Lyceus.

The Conqueror lowered her arms and relaxed her posture then faced her young brother. "Ly, I have to try." She grabbed up his hands into hers and held tightly. "You were right about what you said... when you... when you were dying. I did become lost."

"It doesn't matter now though," whispered the brother. "We can spend the afterlife together."

"Here in Tartarus?" argued the Conqueror. "I am in punishment and you're in the meadows, Ly." She lowered her head closer to his then whispered, "Besides that Alti may soon have my soul then where's that leave us... any of us?"

Lyceus bit his lower lip before saying, "I can't lose you, Xena."

"You won't, Ly... I promise." The Conqueror revealed a soft smile only meant for her brother. "You always told me I could be a great warrior... for people, not against them. You remember?"

"I do," murmured Lyceus, his eyes now burning. "You protected Amphipolis... mother and me from harm. Even Toris."

"Then please let me try this, Ly. I don't know if it'll work but I have to try."

Lyceus finally nodded then whispered, "You can do it, Xena." He then quickly pulled

his sister into a long, warm embrace and between the hug, he murmured, "I believe in you, Xena."

The Conqueror pulled away from the hug then moved over to Borias and Chuang.

Chuang had his left arm free while her right was supporting Borias. He held out his arm then stated, "I don't do hugs, my liege."

The dead ruler huffed and took his forearm in a brisk shake. "I think I'll pass anyway." She flashed a grin but sincerely sated, "Thank you, Chuang."

"For one last adventure it was worth it, my liege." Chuang released the strong arm.

Borias put his weight on his good leg and released Chuang then tried to near the Conqueror. "Xeeena, I hope it's a long time before I see you again."

The Conqueror grunted then rested her hands on her hips. "Thank you, Borias... truly."

Borias rolled his eyes however he limped forward and held out his arm. "Maybe in our next lives we'll meet again."

"With any bad luck, we will," jested the ruler. She released his arm but leaned in and murmured, "By the way, you did have a place in my heart." She slipped away without saying anything else and went to M'Lila last. "M'Lila... I..."

M'Lila stepped forward until her body pressed against her friend's. She lifted her hands and pressed her palms against the ruler's cheeks. "Xena, I will miss you but I am happy we have met again."

"When we see each other again you can teach me Gaelic," murmured the ruler.

M'Lila softly laughed and a few tears trickled down her cheeks. "We will do that," she promised. "Thank you for all that you gave me in life. I made my sacrifice in life because I loved you... please never waste that again."

"I will not," promised the Conqueror.

M'Lila nodded then lowered her hands. She reached behind her neck and untied her prized Gaelic necklace she'd bore for most of her life and death. She picked up the ruler's left hand and placed the necklace into her palm. "Wear this when you return to the mortal life... it will protect you."

"M'Lila-

"You will take it." M'Lila closed the larger hand over the necklace. "Please."

The Conqueror sadly nodded then she lowered her head some, her eyes closing.

M'Lila met her halfway and began the brief yet conveying kiss. When she pulled back she quickly gave into a hug and wished her friend the best.

The Conqueror clenched the necklace in her hand but with her freehand she held it out to her brother.

Lyceus understood and laced his through his sister's. He walked with her back to the phoenix but they stopped in front of the bird. "You're sure about this, Xena?"

"Positive," answered the ruler. She squeezed his hand then gently swore, "I made you promise a long time ago... now I'm going to live up to it."

Lyceus finally smiled and nodded his head. "I know, sis." He then met his sister in a long hug. He closed his eyes tightly at the thought of not seeing his sister for so long again. "I love you, Xena."

Xena tightened her embrace then emotionally whispered, "I love you too, Ly." She kissed his temple. "Always."

When Lyceus broke the embrace he saw that his sister was completely healed of all her wounds that'd been given to her as her punishment. He didn't mention it as he knew Xena mostly likely sensed it.

Instead Xena turned to the firebird and nodded her head. "I'm ready."

The phoenix squawked and opened her wings to the dead ruler. "Take my wings and do not let go."

Lyceus stepped back to give them room.

Xena quickly tucked M'Lila's necklace away in the small, hidden pouch of her leathers in the front. She then stretched out her hands and her fingertips went through the hovering flames over the wings. She carefully collapsed the wings.

The flames lapped at her hands and trailed up her wrists, over her forearms, and up towards her shoulders.

Xena closed her eyes as the burning fire swallowed her face and hastily went down her body. She'd been holding her breath but she suddenly had to breathe and when she did she inhaled the flames into her body. The phoenix's cry suddenly echoed in her ears and her body was weightless then instantly it was all fire around her and in her. Xena let out a sharp cry that didn't contain pain but it was a release of her former self.

"Conqueror, wake up... come on."

The Conqueror rolled her head to the right and moaned. Her moan deepened into a low groan filled with pain that was coming from her lower left side at her back. She sharply inhaled and picked up the scent of balsam.

"That's it... you're safe," ushered a familiar, warm voice.

The Conqueror dared to open her eyes but the lighting ached against her eyes. She waited for everything to adjust, which took several heartbeats and she enjoyed the

cool compress dabbing against her forehead. When her eyes finally adjusted and focused on the fuzzy head above her, she realized there were concerned green eyes observing her.

"Welcome back," whispered Gabrielle, who pulled the damp cloth off the ruler's forehead and set it back in the water bowl on the nightstand. "How do you feel?"

The ruler tried her throat first by clearing it then she murmured, "Like I've been through Tartarus and back."

The rebel faintly grinned but her face showed she was quite weary and she leaned heavily against her walking stick. "I'm sure you do."

"How are you?" questioned the ruler.

Gabrielle was remotely surprised by the obvious concern the ruler showed for her. "I'm okay... now."

The Conqueror blinked away some of the sleep then asked, "Your leg?"

Gabrielle was further shocked by the ruler's keen memory about her injury from the battle. "It's healing but still hurts."

"Sit down," ordered the ruler and she was glad Gabrielle listened. She then took a chance to try and sit up some in the soft, warm bed. "Where are...." She was somewhat up and glanced about the room.

"We're in a guest hut," answered the bard, who sat heavily in a wood chair by the bed. "You've been sleeping for three days now." She lifted her walking stick into her lap then mentioned, "We thought we almost lost you there at one point."

"What happened?" asked the ruler, who was working her fingers through her hair. She felt some dried blood in her mussed hair.

Gabrielle grabbed her walking stick. "I'll tell you in a beat... let me get you some food. It's been three days." She stood up and very slowly limped to the front door.

The Conqueror carefully observed and she spotted the wrap around the rebel's leg that was only slightly tainted red. She then stole a moment to reach into the tiny pocket of her leathers. When her fingertips went inside she felt the bronze charm there so she pulled it out and sadly smiled at it. She clenched her hand around it tightly then her head came up when she heard the bard conversing with a familiar Amazon.

"How is she?" questioned Ephiny.

The bard nodded. "Her memory seems strong." She leaned heavily on her cane. "Can you get some food? She hasn't eaten in three days."

Ephiny nodded then murmured, "Neither of you. I'll get enough for you both." She turned her head to the right at another Amazon. "Solari?"

Solari had her mask off so her soft features showed along with her smile. "I'll get it now." She started off but heard the head guard calling a thank you.

"Go sit down, Gabrielle." Ephiny touched the bard's shoulder. "Solari won't be long."

"Thanks, Ephiny." The bard gave a warm smile then closed the door and returned to her chair by the bed. When she sat she released a long winded breath and studied the worn ruler. "What do you remember last?"

The Conqueror had already tucked away M'Lila's necklace and had worked her weak body up higher on the bed. Her bright blue eyes remained centered on the rebel leader. "The hemlock arrows, killing Darphus... Velasca... and you."

Gabrielle's head bobbed as she scooted back into the chair more.

"I should be dead right now," declared the ruler.

"You almost were," confirmed the bard. "After you... I guess passed out or whatever happened I started screaming for help." She stopped and dipped her head as her memories of the battle from three days ago came back to her. "I kept yelling and...."

"Help! I need help!" Gabrielle's tears rushed down her cheeks at the resounding silence coming back to her ears. "Gods please, help!!" She tried to get up, tried so hard but her legs were failing her more and her skin felt chilled. When she lifted her left hand, which had been holding the Conqueror's frozen hand, she saw that her sliced hand's blood had mixed with the Conqueror's.

"Oh gods no," murmured the rebel. Her skin was already cold from the hemlock seeping into her system from the mixing of bloods. She'd sensed the fuzziness of her thoughts much earlier yet now it was settling deeper. She stared down at the dead ruler and her emotions exploded again, which caused her to scream out, "Help!!" Her labored breathing was starting to slow and she felt very little sensation in her legs. "Somebody help us!"

"Gabrielle!" cried out a voice.

The bard's tear stained face turned to her left and she yelled, "Eilis! Over here... I'm over here!" She was relieved to see the healer burst through the forest into the clearing.

Eilis sheathed her bloody sword while she ran to the swaying rebel, who sat beside a motionless and bloody ruler. "By the gods... I'm too late." She was breathing hard but she knelt beside the bard. "What's happened? Do you get hit by a hemlock arrow?" she hotly demanded and grabbed the bard's shoulders to steady her.

"I... help... help the Conqueror," murmured the rebel, "she... was hit... back."

The Amazon healer glanced down at the ruler but saw the ruler's chest wasn't moving and blue eyes were beginning to gloss over. "I can't do anything for her now, Gabrielle but I can for you."

"No!" yelled the rebel. "Help her, Eilis. I can wait." She grabbed the healer's wrist then begged, "Please."

The healer relented because the sooner she proved to Gabrielle that hope was gone for the ruler the sooner she could help the bard. She reached to her side and pulled out the antidote she'd mixed when Cyrene had repeated to her what Gabrielle had told her. She untied the leather pouch and it fanned open to reveal a thick, yellow tinted paste.

Gabrielle's head rolled some but she steadied her weakening body by clinging to the ruler's body as an anchor. She observed Eilis placing the paste into the ruler's mouth.

Eilis then removed a skin from her other side as she wiggled behind the ruler. She lifted the Conqueror's upper body some after uncorking the skin. She poured an oozy liquid into the ruler's mouth, which washed the paste down into her throat. She then shook her head then declared, "It's too late, Gabrielle." She lowered the ruler back down.

"No," growled the bard, "keep trying."

Eilis ignored the command and came over to the rebel again. "Listen to me it's her time to passover. Let her go, Gabrielle." She picked up the leather pouch from the ground near the bard and ran her fingers through the paste. "Now let me help you." She held the paste up towards the bard yet hesitated. "So help me or I'll shove it into you."

Gabrielle swallowed but nodded. She detected the mustard scent of the paste but she opened her mouth. The mustard taste exploded in her mouth and her faces instantly screwed up.

"Here, drink this quickly."

The rebel brought her lips around the skin's spout and helped the oozy, amber colored liquid move into her mouth by sucking it. The taste repulsed her and she almost spit it up but she forced it down with the mustard.

Eilis pulled the skin away when she thought enough of the castor oil was in the bard's system. "Now lay down... you'll be out of here soon."

Gabrielle only nodded as she lowered her body against the lifeless ruler without really considering it. Her head rested on the Conqueror's warm chest, similar to last time, but she started to pass out from the quiet yet steady heartbeat under her ear. It was the most beautiful rhythm Gabrielle thought she ever heard even if she thought she was hallucinating yet it was all that could comfort her.

"I was wondering what that bad taste in my mouth was," complained the ruler. She caught the fain grin on the bard's face.

"I don't know how it happened," whispered Gabrielle, her head shaking and her gaze distant. "You just started breathing again... or maybe you were and we just didn't see it." She focused on the ruler again. "Eilis doesn't even understand."

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow then teased, "Did you think I was really that easy to kill?"

Gabrielle grunted and stretched her legs some. "I should know better huh?"

"Mmmm." The ruler lowered her eyebrow then quietly asked, "What of mother? Melpomene?"

"They're all fine," promised the bard, "even the queen is recovering." She shook her head. "I didn't see the rest of the battle but I heard that after Darphus was killed, his men started to fall apart. Then as the Amazons took the advantage a small cavalry from Tricca arrived and helped defeat Darphus's men."

The Conqueror's interest peaked and she carefully asked, "Does the Tricca Cavalry know that I am here?"

Gabrielle read the ruler's undertone and figured out that it was best to honestly answer. "No, we didn't think it was safe."

"Good." The ruler didn't add anything else as a knock came at the door.

"Come in," offered Gabrielle. She started to get up but the entering Amazon told her to sit down again. She decided not to argue as she was just too worn out to do that right now.

Solari set a tray of food down on the table then picked up a bowl of soup in either hand and handed one to Gabrielle and the other to the ruler. She then picked up the spoons and gave those too. She grabbed the table that was slightly behind the bard and dragged it closer to the bard to make things easier. "There's some fruit there too, Gabrielle. There's hot water in the skin to make tea when you're ready." She straightened up after getting everything in order then further informed, "Eilis will be in later to check on you."

"Have you seen Cyrene lately?" questioned the rebel.

"That last I heard," started Solari, "she went to your guest hut. Would you like me to check on her?"

"No but thank you, Solari." Gabrielle gave a tired smile. "Tell Ephiny thank you too."

"I will," promised the Amazon then she quietly left the pair.

"What's next? Somebody is going to feed me?" jested the ruler.

Gabrielle had her head down because she was stirring her soup. She paused and peered up then a slow grin shaped her soft lips. "The Amazons are grateful." She lifted her bowl up then spooned up some of the soup but before she ate it she mentioned, "You saved a lot of lives that day."

The Conqueror said nothing and silently ate her meal. The warm soup felt great and warmed her insides completely. She enjoyed the flavor of lamb mixed with vegetables

and she could already feel her strength returning. After she ate half the soup, she paused and asked, "How many Amazons died?"

Gabrielle frowned while staring into her bowl but she answered, "A hundred and twenty-seven."

"A little less than half the Nation," calculated the ruler.

The bard only nodded but then her gaze met the ruler's. "It would have been worse... a lot worse. If you hadn't stopped Darphus and Velasca... they would have succeeded."

"I knew I disliked that Amazon for a reason," muttered the agitated ruler. "There's always one psycho path in every state that thinks they can do better."

Gabrielle grunted as Alti's name came to mind but she said nothing.

"So what happens now?" inquired the ruler.

The bard stirred her soup again but before she ate anymore she replied, "We finished the trial in a couple of days." She swallowed but was relieved to see the ruler's agreement. "Today the Nation is mourning their loses then tomorrow the queen returns to power."

The Conqueror considered this however she didn't voice her thoughts. She finished off her soup then Gabrielle took her bowl from her. Just as she decided that maybe she'd tried to move out of bed there was a rap at the door.

"Come in," commanded the bard.

The healer, Eilis, strolled in and shook her head at the sitting up patient in the bed. "I know you were not going to move out of bed, Conqueror."

Gabrielle realized indeed that the Conqueror had been caught in midmotion of getting out of bed. She quietly chuckled then limped once over to her chair and sat down. "Eilis, I am verbally relentless and she's physically relentless."

"Such a charming pair of patience to have too," remarked the healer. She sighed and came to the other side of the bed. "How do you feel?"

The Conqueror knew the question fell onto her so she nodded. "Better."

Eilis huffed at the simple answer. "Your back?"

"I've had worse," quipped the ruler.

Eilis rolled her eyes then ordered, "Turn over to your left side." When the ruler complied she started probing the sewn wound where the leathers had been cut away for easier inspection. "It seems to be healing but I suggest you get out of these leathers." The healer decided that was a good idea. "Do you think you can get up and move around?"

"I believe so," answered the ruler. Her body was only partially covered by the pulled back bedsheets. She used her arms to move about as she swung her legs off the bed. She finally stood up and straightened out her back where a small pop sound came from.

Eilis tilted her head in question at the sound.

The Conqueror shrugged.

The healer sighed then pointed at the washroom. "Take your leathers off and I'll be in there in a heartbeat to clean your wound."

The ruler's agreement showed since she went to the washroom, which was a slow journey from all her aching joints, muscles, and general weakness.

Eilis went to the sitting bard and knelt down beside her. "What does she remember?"

"Everything," answered the bard, "She doesn't seem to have forgotten anything."

"Excellent," murmured the healer. "How is your leg today?"

"It's getting there." Gabrielle released a sigh then nodded her head.

Eilis touched the bard's flushed cheek then lowered her hand. "You need to rest soon. Have you stayed in here the past three days?" At the bard's faint nod she let out an annoyed breath. "Why do I bother to ask?" She shook her head then straightened up and went into the washroom.

Gabrielle chuckled but leaned back into the chair. Her aching eyes drifted shut but she listened to the healer caring for the ruler in the washroom. She even smelled the renewed scent of balsam in the air. She opened her eyes when the ruler padded out of the washroom with a white nightshift on now. She smiled at Eilis scowling features and she bit back her laugh.

The Conqueror got onto the bed again but sat on it instead of lying down.

"I advise you stay here for the rest of the day," suggested the healer, "until tomorrow but what do I know?" She started for the door then stopped and glanced back at the rebel. "I'll check on your leg later."

"Thank you, Eilis." Gabrielle gave a weary smile then watched the healer leave the hut. She then returned her attention to the ruler.

"What time is it?" questioned the ruler.

"Just a candlemark before Helios high," reported the bard.

The Conqueror pulled her legs in as she sat cross legged in the bed.

Gabrielle blinked as she never expected to see the Conqueror in such a mortal looking state of being. She'd always viewed the ruler as much higher despite she knew the

truth that the ruler was of peasant stock. It was a fascinating scene for the bard. "Your guards have been reduced to just Ephiny, Solari, and Callisto. You're allowed to move about the village and this is your hut until the end of your stay." All she heard was the Conqueror's breathing then finally the Conqueror spoke.

"What of the trial?"

Gabrielle tilted her head then replied, "Most likely you'll be pardoned of your charges but they still want to go through the motions of the trial." She twisted in her chair and started to get the cups with tea leaves.

The Conqueror though was faster as she came around the bed and brushed the bard's hands away. "I've got it... just relax." She picked up the warm water skin and after uncorking it, she poured the steaming water into the wood mugs. "What of the Tricca Cavalry?"

"Princess Terreis told me they returned back to Tricca but the princess and the..." Gabrielle couldn't find the right title that was on the tip of her tongue.

"Ilarchès," supplied the ruler.

"That's it," agreed the bard, "well he and the princess argued about what to do with the prisoners from the battle."

"What happened?" The Conqueror handed the rebel her cup of tea.

Gabrielle gladly received it and her hands cupped around the warm mug. "Princess Terreis relinquished and let him take them back to Tricca. She was too concerned about stepping on toes just after getting help from the realm."

"Smart leader," murmured the ruler as she sat on the bed again but this time she sat on the side facing the rebel. She propped her bare feet up on the bed's frame along the side. "When did you sleep last?"

Gabrielle shrugged and peered down into her mug as if it was more interesting. "I've nodded off here and there."

"You've been here the entire time," summarized the ruler.

Gabrielle could tell it wasn't a question but a statement of fact and she nodded anyway. "I just wanted to be here when you woke up, Conqueror." She still wouldn't look at the dark ruler.

"Xena," supplied the ruler, "I already told you."

Gabrielle finally lifted her head and saw that the ruler was very serious. "I'm sorry... I just thought... you were... I..." Her words jumbled up but she stopped when she saw the faint, teasing grin on the ruler's face. It made Gabrielle quietly laugh yet she shook her head and murmured, "I just thought since you were drugged then that..."

"That I didn't mean it?" finished the ruler. At Gabrielle's nod she let a low exhale but

she stole a beat of silence as she drank her tea. She lowered it to her lap again then mentioned, "I meant it."

"So...." Gabrielle bit her lower lip then urged herself to ask it aloud. "So we're friends?"

The Conqueror observed how nervous the rebel leader was by this and she was inwardly surprised but as she reflected on it she too was nervous to answer. She steadied herself as she honestly replied, "We are if you're comfortable with that?"

Gabrielle had a thin smile at the ruler's consideration so she nodded her head. "I'd like that." For the first time, Gabrielle witnessed a small yet precious smile grace the ruler's usually dark features. It warmed Gabrielle more than the tea and soup were doing and she felt a sense of peace settle over her. Now she truly felt exhausted from the endless seasons of weight on her shoulders that finally mounted to this, to an unexpected but welcomed friendship with her former enemy.

"You should rest soon, Gabrielle," suggested the ruler, who discerned the bard's high level of fatigue.

"For once," started the bard, "I completely agree with you." She then was shaken by the deep laugh coming from the ruler, which passed into her and Gabrielle softly laughed along side her new friend.

Chapter 21 - Sibling Rivalry

Janice Covington slowly opened her eyes and focused on the peaceful, slumbering features of her new lover. She worked her hand free and gently touched the southerner's cheek.

Melinda reacted by turning her head and she kissed Janice's palm. She then laced her hand through Janice's. "Mornin'."

"Hi," whispered the smiling archeologist. "How'd you sleep?"

"Pretty well," answered Melinda. "How 'bout you?"

Janice squeezed the linguist's hand. "Still tired."

Melinda chuckled then closed her eyes. "We need to get moving... I can't pick up your sleeping in habit."

The archeologist rolled her eyes but retorted, "And you say that like it's a bad thing."

Melinda smirked then opened her eyes. "Ya said it, Janice." She chuckled at the fake offended look she received. "Come on, we need to get ready."

"What's the agenda today?" Janice untangled her body from Melinda's and slowly worked her way out of the comfortable bed.

The southerner picked up the silk robe that rested on a chair nearby. "I need to practice with the squads this morning. Then I want you to check on Salmoneus for me."

Janice wore nothing as she came up to her lover.

Melinda didn't bother to close her robe yet and Janice took that to her advantage. Melinda grinned when the small warm body pressed against hers then small hands slipped under her robe and went to her back. "Janice?"

"Hmmm?" The archeologist kept an innocent demeanor and she placed a feathery kiss to her lover's chest. "Yes, Mel?"

"We don't have time," reminded the southerner.

Janice noticed there was little to no insistence in her lover's voice. Her tiny frame shook with a silent laugh. Her head dropped back and her glowing green eyes met Melinda's. "Are you sure?"

Melinda arched an eyebrow the archeologist's sexual appetite, which she'd unleashed. "Let's take a bath." Her suggestion was met by the archeologist taking her hand and leading them across the bedchambers.

"What is the point of a bath if we're going to be training shortly?" considered Janice aloud.

Melinda entered the large bathroom that had a tub. "This ain't exactly about getting clean, Janice," huskily whispered the southerner into a delicate ear under her lips.

Janice shivered and dropped her head back to see her lover's passionate face. It's a good thing these walls are several inches thick, mentally joked the archeologist, because otherwise the entire city would know what happened last night... and this morning.

By mid morning Janice Covington came off the last step from the main entrance of the fortress. She now donned a new long jacket that Melinda had gotten for her to keep her warmer against the cooling weather. The jacket was a combination of white wool and light brown leather that just stopped above her ankles and the leather collar was short. It certainly felt warmer than her Amazon cloak.

Janice glanced down at Hu to check on him then she continued her walk ahead but off to the left some. She observed her friend already warming up one squad for the morning but she needed to collect her men. She hurried across the fortress grounds and went to the small barrack that was attached to the large wall. Just as she made it there Biton was coming out with three other men.

"Good morning, dekarchos," greeted Biton.

The four soldiers simultaneously clapped their fists over their chests.

"Where is everybody?" questioned the archeologist.

"I roused them, ma'am," answered Biton, "They will join us at the field."

Janice nodded then ordered them to go; she wasn't too keen on being late in front of her friend. When she arrived she saw that Melinda was lecturing the dekarchos and his squad about better form. Janice carefully listened to it as she knew she could use some form tips too. She was by no means a master of the sword but she knew she had a knack for it and it would only take proper training.

The Conqueror dismissed the squad then turned her sights on Janice and her thin squad. "You are missing a soldier, dekarchos."

Janice did a snappy head count and she realized she was only missing one person. She focused back on her lover and realized this would not go over well. "He's being delayed, my liege. I apologize for his lack of punctuality."

"I don't want apologies," snapped the ruler, who spun her sword. "They have expectations and responsibilities to fulfill as do you, dekarchos. One of those responsibilities is making sure your entire file is here and timely."

"It will not be repeated, my liege," offered Janice.

The Conqueror pointed her sword at the archeologist. "Let me show you some of my other expectations. Come here."

Janice inwardly sighed as her good morning was instantly deflated. She waved at Hu so he knew to remain still. She then stepped into the sparring field while reaching behind and unsheathing her sword.

The Conqueror grinned and stretched out her sword, she tapped the blade against Janice's. "There are certain fighting skills I expect of every dekarchos." She quickly lunged at her opponent.

Janice was surprised but she recovered hastily and blocked the rapid attacks.

"A solid defense is one of them," growled the ruler.

The archeologist gritted her teeth when her blade met the ruler's. She then whispered, "I take it a solid offense goes along with that." She surprisingly dropped and swiped her sword.

The Conqueror amusingly laughed while she jumping up into the air. She then leaped higher into the air and performed several back flips until she was many paces away from Janice. She gave a loud battle cry then landed on her feet. She grabbed her chakram from her side and aimed it. "And expect anything!" She shot the chakram off.

Janice knew what that weapon could do and it almost froze her. "Act, Janice," she said under her breath and she twirled her sword then saw the chakram nearing her. Janice gave a decent battle cry and her sword shot up through the center of the

chakram. She spun the circular weapon on her blade then manipulated it to her advantage and threw it back at her opponent.

The Conqueror grinned at the beautiful display then her hand plucked the returning chakram from midair and she swiftly came at her opponent. She hooked the chakram back just as her sword came at her opponent.

Janice parried the blow and threw in a missing kick.

The Conqueror returned the kick and knocked Janice's sword from her hand.

The archeologist was weaponless and her right hand ached from the kick. She shook it off though and took one step back but she didn't show any fear. She'd been in enough fist fights in her time and especially ones where she was at the disadvantage. Her eyes slightly widened when the sword came swiping at her head so she ducked away. She popped back up and tried to think of a way to even her odds.

The Conqueror knew that Janice was calculating so she tried to figure out what the compact woman was planning. She didn't leave much room for scheming as she surged forward with her sword.

Janice duck over and around the swiping blade. She then hastily spun around her opponent.

The Conqueror flipped her sword around and tried to stab her opponent behind her body.

Janice had moved in time with her back against the ruler's. Her nimble hands shot out and caught the blade to her left. She smashed her knee into the ruler's hand and broke the sword free.

The ruler snarled as she reached behind and snared small shoulders.

Janice cried out when her feet were taken off the ground and she was thrown overhead. She just landed on her feet but her back was to the ruler. Her sixth sense picked up on the next attack and her eyes widened while she dropped just as a fist breezed over her head. She tried to make a dodge for the Conqueror's sword.

The Conqueror knew it as she stepped between the sword and Janice.

The archeologist stepped back and lifted her fists.

The ruler was snide as she raised her open hands. "Come on, shortie." She knew the jest would fuel the archeologist's easy temper.

Janice did react as she threw a wild punch.

The Conqueror caught the punch in her right hand, her fingers curling over the much smaller fist.

Janice used her free fist with a hurling punch targeted the ruler's face.

The Conqueror easily caught that too. Then she leaned down and whispered, "I also expect you to know your weaknesses." Without warning, she disappeared in a blur and took Janice's leg out from under her.

The archeologist groaned when her head hit the hard ground. She opened her eyes and her blurry vision focused on the looming form of the ruler.

"Get up," ordered the ruler.

Janice did just that after one last breather. She got to her feet and bowed her head at her lover.

The Conqueror nodded then dismissed her.

Janice collected her sword first then ordered her stunned men to begin training with the ruler. She rubbed the back of her head for a moment, which was a reminder to her that she'd have a nice chitchat with this late soldier when she figure out who it was.

The training of Janice's squad went quickly then the Conqueror gave them a lecture on better defense as she noticed most of the men were lacking there. She dismissed them to carry out their duties for the day and she took on the next awaiting squad.

Janice, with her squad, marched to the barrack to collect the tenth man that was missing.

Biton got the jump on his superior by rushing into the barrack to retrieve the foolish soldier.

Janice ordered her men to stay then she entered the barrack. She heard Biton's yelling voice so she followed his voice to the back of the barrack where the sleeping cots were stationed.

"Hurry up, fool," barked Biton. "You cost the dekarchos heavily this morning."

The soldier grumbled and picked up his helmet from his small trunk of belongings next to his pallet.

The archeologist had her sword at her side as she stepped up to Biton. She looked the soldier up and down then realized he wasn't a regular in her squad. "Who are you?"

"He's a transfer, dekarchos," explained Biton.

Janice's steel features shifted from Biton to the new soldier in her squad. "I was not informed."

"It was last heartbeat," answered the unknown soldier, "the tetrarchès transferred me last night, ma'am." The soldier put on his helmet that thoroughly covered his face.

Janice grumbled then stepped into the tall man's space. She pressed her face closer into his because she knew that intimidation was often half the battle to winning.

"What's your name?"

"Toris," curtly replied the soldier.

"Toris," drew out Janice, "the next time you're late you'll be mucking rotting carcasses out of the damn dungeons for a moon. You will be on time for now on. Is that clear?"

"Crystal, dekarchos."

Janice studied the sharp, cold blue eyes above her. "Good," growled the agitated archeologist. She turned on her heels then marched out of the barrack.

"Let's go," ordered Biton in a cutting tone.

Toris rolled his eyes behind Biton's back but followed the pair. He fell into step with his new squad.

Janice led her file out of the fortress and into the city. Her sour mood slightly calmed now that she was outside and enjoying the beautiful autumn weather that ancient Greece was providing. Her first stop would be Salmoneus she decided so she could work some her annoyance out on him. Just the thought of it made her grin.

Salmoneus straightened up when he saw a squad of the Conqueror's soldier marching through the market. He sighed when a fair haired blond materialized at the front of the squad and he pleasantly smiled when his little friend was upon him.

Janice quickly indicated she was in no mood by her angry expression.

Salmoneus stayed chipper looking as he cheerfully greeted, "Ooo goooood morning, female dekarchos."

"I'm not in the mood," snapped Janice. She grabbed onto the edge of the man's stall. "Selling anything interesting today, Salmoneus?"

The merchant hesitantly laughed then held up his index finger. "Now wait, I'm a reforming type of man."

"I bet," chided the archeologist. "Any information for me?"

The merchant fumbled a bit with some of his merchandise behind his stall. "Nothing yet."

Janice's eyes slotted and she partially turned and prepared to wave her men over.

"Wait," recoiled Salmoneus, "I was being honest."

"I find that hard to believe," drew out Janice. She faced him again after signaling her squad to stay put in the street. "The Conqueror authorized me to use any means to make sure you kept up your part of the deal, Sal."

"Salmoneus," corrected the merchant.

"Whatever," waved off Janice, "Now listen, if you have anything to tell me do it now. Or else my squad will be happy to shake it out of me."

"Alright, alright," gave in the merchant. "It's not solid but I heard from a fellow merchant that there was this guy asking around about you."

"What?" hissed the archeologist.

"Don't kill the messenger boy," defended Salmoneus. He leaned over his stall and quietly added, "He was asking about where you came from... if you're related to Gabrielle, that rebel leader." He pulled back then mentioned, "You actually do look a lot like her but I think she's taller than you."

Janice's right hand shot out and she yanked the man over the stall by his collar. "I'm really not in the mood for short jokes, Sal."

Salmoneus waved his hands at his little friend then squeaked out, "Well honestly the shortness becomes you because people can easily see your beautiful green eyes." He smiled brightly hoping that would save him. "Especially the fire in those green eyes," he said under his breath.

Janice just wanted to sock the man but knew that wouldn't help her. She tossed the man back then hotly demanded, "Who was this man?"

The merchant straightened out his mock Chin robe and replied, "Nobody knows because he was wearing a hood. Does that surprise you?"

The gruff archeologist grumbled, "No." She then sighed yet ordered, "Keep hunting around for more information. Or else."

"Or else...?"

Janice was half a step away but she turned back and completed her threat. "Or else the Conqueror will be out here to question you herself." She tilted her head. "And she is in a fouler mood than me today."

Salmoneus swallowed then showed all his teeth in a smile. "I'll work diligently on the mystery man."

The archeologist nodded then moved away and signaled her squad to follow her. She continued the sweep of the city that was a normal routine of their duties.

Salmoneus sighed in absolutely relief when the squad marched past him without any other incident. He kept watching them from behind his stall however something struck him odd about one of the soldiers. He also realized that the particular soldier glanced back at him but quickly turned away. Salmoneus shrugged it off then called out to some passing customers.

At Helios high Janice ordered everybody to take their usual candlemark break. She separated from her men and only Hu followed her. She decided to see if she could

catch up with Perdicus so she went to the market where she'd agreed, with Perdicus last night, to meet up. When she arrived there it wasn't long before she found the faction guard.

"How goes things?" questioned Janice. She stepped up to a stand whose merchant was selling food.

Perdicus stood beside her and decided he too would get something to eat. "We're not having much luck either. We can't seem to find out much about this guy."

Janice sighed then offered her small amount of information. "It seems Salmoneus heard that somebody is asking around about me. He thinks it's the same guy that bought the ring from him."

"Salmoneus? That merchant right?"

"Yes," answered Janice. She turned to the food merchant and ordered some food then paid the man. She stepped aside and let Perdicus order too.

"We haven't even heard that," stated Perdicus.

The archeologist sighed at the lack of luck they were having today. She plucked a skewer of meat from her small wood plate. She held it down to Hu so he could nimble on the meat. "How's the faction now?"

The guard paid the merchant then came to Janice's side. "Better." He glanced around their surroundings then said, "Let's go down by the coast. I need some sea air I think."

Janice readily agreed and headed down the streets of Corinth. She nibbled on a skewer of meat that she'd purchased while listening to Perdicus talk. She finally saw the beach that traveled along the coast of the Aegean Sea and despite the wind chill she really enjoyed it. By the time they made it, she'd eaten her skewers clean except for one, which she pulled each piece off and tossed to Hu.

"So what's his name?" Perdicus indicated the tiger.

"Hu," supplied the archeologist.

Perdicus nodded and he debated whether to ask more but decided against it. He found several large rocks buried in the beach so he sat on one while Janice took the one next to him. "Have you heard from Gabrielle?"

The archeologist sighed and stretched her legs out. She placed her right hand on Hu's head and trailed her fingertips through his thick coat. "Melinda keeps in contact with her." She chewed the inside of her mouth while she stared out over the choppy waters. "There's a small problem." She turned her head to young man. "Other than just this ring and mystery guy... there's a warlord uprising and he marched to the Amazon Nation."

"By the gods," murmured the faction guard.

Janice dipped her head then quietly mentioned, "Melinda sent the Tricca Cavalry to help then a legion out of Thebes is suppose to go up and secure things."

"Will the cavalry make it in time?"

"We're not sure," confessed Janice, "but we're hoping so."

Perdicus dropped his head and shook it. "Everything has gone so wrong... ever since Gabrielle spoke out against the Conqueror." He lifted his head. "It seemed to trigger all these events."

"Maybe," murmured the thoughtful archeologist, "but everything happens for a reason." She sadly smiled at the faction guard. "Whether you like them or not."

Perdicus huffed yet he moved his head in agreement. "Nothing seems to be going right."

"You gotta be flexible, Perdicus." Janice shrugged then considered her troubles since she first arrived here. "If things always worked out the way we planned it then life wouldn't be worth living."

Perdicus enjoyed the humorous attempt as he did laugh quietly. "You're nothing like Gabrielle yet I see the similarities here and there." He smiled when sparkling green eyes centered on him. "I guess I am flexible because Gabrielle and I never married." He saw that Janice went still and was waiting for more. "We were betrothed as kids to be married, her father really liked me... so did her mom and sister." He shrugged. "Gabrielle's parents and mine... they all got along."

"What about Gabrielle?" questioned the archeologist.

Perdicus sighed then studied the sea instead of Janice's inquisitive features. "When we were young Gabrielle and I were very close, not that we're not now but it's different." He went silent for a little bit then went back to talking. "After the Conqueror ordered his second in command, Draco, to attack Potidaea and enslave the women Gabrielle escaped and left. I didn't know she lived," admitted Perdicus. He licked his wind chapped lips. "Potidaea recovered but a few years later the Conqueror ordered every village and city she'd conquered to conscript fifty percent of their male youth. I happened to be one of the chosen from Potidaea and I was trained by Macedonia's finest foot soldiers and joined her army twelve moons later for the Peloponnese Campaign."

"What happened after that?" urged Janice.

"After that?" Perdicus sighed while shaking his head. "After that everything changed for me and Gabrielle. I survived my twenty seasons in the army then I was allowed to leave so I did. I was in Corinth and decided to stay here since I was pretty familiar with the area. I actually met Gabrielle by accident... in the market here. I heard her voice while she was in a heated barter with a merchant."

Janice laughed at this image.

Perdicus grinned from his old memory but he lost it. "Gabrielle was just starting her faction while the Conqueror was settling into Corinth as her capitol. I helped her get things organized along the lines of security for the faction members." He shrugged then his tone picked up remorse. "Gabrielle had changed so much... and so had I. I realized she was obsessed with the Conqueror... with the idea of defeating her. It seems to be the only drive in her life."

Janice Covington could understand that type of drive as her archeology for most her life was all she had and all she wanted.

"Gabrielle is much more distant than what she was like as a kid. I guess I'm not much the same either." Perdicus shrugged then mentioned, "We discussed getting married but we realized it just wouldn't work. She knew she didn't have any room for me or any spouse in her life because all her time and energy was consumed by her plots against the Conqueror."

"I wonder what she would do if the Conqueror was gone?" murmured the archeologist. What would I do if I couldn't be an archeologist internally questioned Janice.

Perdicus's lips twitched as he thought about Janice's question. "I've wondered the same thing too. What meaning will her life have once she defeats the Conqueror?"

"I suppose time will tell." Janice had no answers either.

Hu twisted his head to the right, which caused Janice's petting to stop. He then stood up on all fours.

Janice followed the tiger's gaze and saw that one of her squad soldiers approaching them. She couldn't make out who it was but she didn't like the fact they were coming and that she was here with Perdicus. She had to play this off. She climbed to her feet.

"Ho, dekarchos," called the soldier then his face took on shape as he neared.

The archeologist eyed the squad soldier suspiciously. "What is it, Toris? Is there a problem?" She knew that the break wasn't over just yet so it was odd he was looking for her.

"I've heard word from the Conqueror, ma'am... she's requesting your presence." Toris shifted his attention to Perdicus and studied him for a beat then turned back to his superior. "She wanted to see you immediately."

Janice nodded however her stomach pitched because something just felt very off. She signaled Hu to her side yet she looked at Perdicus. "I will see you later."

Perdicus dip his head in agreement but he decided it was safer to say nothing in front of the soldier. He simply started up the beach towards the soldier and when he came along side the soldier, he realized the soldier was smirking at him.

Toris rested his left hand on his leather hip while his right hand was loosely on his sword hilt. "I know who you are," he seethed, "faction scum!" He unsheathed his

sword.

The faction guard wasn't prepared as he was suddenly yanked into a choke hold and a sword across his throat. He growled when his back brushed against the soldier's leather chest. "You bastard," he growled.

"Toris, release him," ordered the dekarchos, who stepped a few paces forward. She didn't make any moves for her sword or her gun but it was very tempting.

"No," snarled the soldier, "I think it would be more fun to inform the Conqueror of your deceit."

Janice held her breath because she was treading dangerous ground as she couldn't expose Melinda's identity. "You don't want to do this, Toris."

Perdicus yelped when the blade over his throat nicked his skin.

"I've been following you since Helios high," spoke the soldier, "and I know you're a traitor... traitor to everybody."

Janice's eyes narrowed at his last words. "Toris if you do anything to him or even me, you're going to be playing a very dangerous game."

"I have a better game in mind," suggested Toris. His free left hand came up to his neck and he tugged out a hidden necklace from under his leather chest. He let the trinket at the end of the necklace dangle in the air. "You tell me what this ring does and I'll free your little friend here."

Janice's back straightened out when she took in the view of the Cronos Ring, which suddenly glowed green at sensing her.

Toris noted it too and he narrowed his eyes at the archeologist. "Tell me what in Hades this thing does or he dies!"

"Don't, Janice," ordered Perdicus but he hissed when the blade dug deeper.

Hu growled suddenly and his tail continued to flicker in the air. His teeth were showing and his fur standing up on his back.

Janice felt much the same way as she debated what to do but she had no options.

"Time's over," growled Toris.

"Wait," begged the archeologist. "I'll tell you."

Toris slightly pulled the blade away from Perdicus's neck.

Perdicus clenched his teeth and his left hand snaked down to his side.

Janice breathed heavily then carefully said, "That power of that ring allows you to-"

"No!" yelled Perdicus as he ripped a dagger free from his side and tried for his enemy.

Toris jumped away just as the dagger almost hit his stomach but he recovered and growled loudly. He still had his blade near Perdicus's neck so he slashed it up.

"No!" yelled Janice and she went for her sword.

Perdicus dropped his dagger and his hands instantly went to his sliced neck. His eyes were wide then he stumbled to his knees in the sand.

Toris lifted his head when he saw that Janice was charging him. He then spotted the fierce tiger moving faster than Janice for him. He lifted his sword and prepared for the battle but he was determined to win and it showed in his wild sapphire eyes.

Back in the fortress, the Conqueror just slipped into her office after talking to Commander Meleager about Darphus and the dispatchers that were sent out. She was still in her leathers, armor, and her weapons attached. She'd considered changing but decided she couldn't be bothered since she had too much work to do. Just as she got settled at her desk there was a knock so she peered up and called the person to enter.

Lao Ma swept into the office and bowed her head at the ruler. "Good morning, Melinda."

The southerner softened at her friend. "Sit down, Ma."

"I cannot stay long but I wanted to stop in quickly."

Melinda got up from her seat and approached the Chin ruler because she could tell something wasn't right. "What is wrong, Ma?"

Lao Ma's face was twisted by a variety of emotions. "This morning I detected the power of the Cronos Stone but I could not locate it exactly."

"The Cronos Stone is safely locked up in my bedchambers," reminded the ruler.

"Yes," agreed Lao Ma, "however this was different. It was a small quantity of power but it was from the stone." She slipped her hands into her robe's sleeves. "I apologize I could not properly detect it, Melinda."

The linguist offered an assuring smile. "Its okay, Ma... Janice has been working on it."

"She will succeed," declared the Chin ruler. "I must go as I plan to go to the market to shop."

"Do you want to wait for Janice? She and her squad can take you."

Lao Ma smiled at the prospect. "She is busy but thank you. My guards are highly sufficient."

Melinda agreed and escorted her friend out of the office with a goodbye. She then

decided to sit down at her desk and start her scroll work finally. When her finger wrapped around the quill in the ink pot there was another knock at her door. She sighed and hotly ordered, "Enter!"

A sentry marched into the office a few paces, stopped, clapped his shoulder over his chest, and stated, "I apologize, my liege but there is a merchant at the main entrance urgently requesting to see you. He says his name is... Salmoneus."

The Conqueror lost her annoyance and she quickly ordered, "Bring him up here." She watched the soldier excuse himself so she tried to do a few things before the merchant came up here but she was too curious about what information he may have for her. The expected knock came a couple of minutes later and she allowed them to enter.

Salmoneus rushed past the two guards that'd escorted him and he hurried up to the ruler. "My empress, there's a..." He stopped and breathed heavily.

The Conqueror got up because it was obvious to her that the man had been running between the sweat on his forehead and his ragged breathing. Not that she imagined Salmoneus was a fast runner. "What's happened?"

The merchant's shoulders slumped. "You have to swear not to kill me if I tell you, my liege. I had nothing to do with this."

"Salmoneus, I will if you don't tell me," threatened the ruler.

Salmoneus hesitated but then stepped back when the ruler came around the desk. "I found out who the mystery guy is... well not exactly because I don't know his name."

"Then what do you know?"

Salmoneus readied himself for this so he lifted his hands defensively. "He's one of your fortress soldiers." He braced himself but no outburst was forthcoming from the ruler. "One of my fellow merchants figured it out... he's been going around asking about your female dekarchos." He stopped when he saw the Conqueror was growing darker by the heartbeat. He quickly rattled on faster, "I tried to find your dekarchos to warn her but I could find her."

The Conqueror realized that Janice and her squad would be returning from their Helios high break. She suddenly grabbed the merchant and growled, "Are you sure?"

"Y-y-yes, proud empress. H-h-he is a sentry because he was carrying your marked sword."

"Damn," hissed the ruler and she suddenly released the merchant. She hastily headed for the open doors of her office and she ordered the two sentries to follow her.

Salmoneus craned his neck as he ambled out into the long hallway. He called out to the Conqueror, "Does this complete our deal?" He got no response so he cursed and decided to follow after the ruler.

The Conqueror came to the ground level of the fortress and she headed for the door to

the courtroom. "I want one of you to find me the tetrarchès. Now!"

A sentry took the order and he took off at a run down the hallway to take the side exit of the fortress that would take him to the barrack faster.

The Conqueror broke into a jog and she approached the door to the courtroom. She threw open the door and hurried down the few steps to the ground level of the empty court. Then something made her stop with the soldier at her side; she detected a loud commotion and shouting voices on the other side of the main entrance doors.

The entrance doors were thrown open and the sunlight streamed in through the door and covered two molded bodies.

The Conqueror squinted and her hands fisted at her sides when the two forms stepped up closer.

Janice let out a low snarl when the dagger nicked her throat again. "You fucking bastard."

The Conqueror sensed the sentry next to her going for his sword but she waved him off. Then there were the guards pouring into the courtroom behind Janice and her captor but she ordered them to stay back. "Are you okay, Janice?"

The archeologist faintly nodded her answer but she hissed when the blade cut her.

"You're suppose to answer our liege when she asks you a question," snapped Toris. "You have to do what she orders you." He dug the dagger up more.

Janice closed her eyes then answered, "I'm okay, my liege."

The Conqueror was flexing her hands in and out of fists as her mind quickly worked out a solution to the problem. "Who are you?" she demanded to the soldier. She scanned over Janice's body and saw her face was badly scraped up, her right hand bloody, and there was blood trickling down from her left leg just below her jacket. The jacket itself was torn, dirty, and stained with a lot of blood.

"I'm an old face, my liege." The soldier forced Janice to take a few steps closer but his kept his face shielded behind Janice and the helmet hid him well.

"What do you want?" demanded the ruler.

Toris chuckled darkly then whispered to his superior, "Go on, dekarchos tell her what I want."

Janice steadied her breathing. "He has... it. He wants to know what it does, my liege."

The Conqueror instantly knew what Janice was referring to and her eyes narrowed at the hidden soldier. "You're a fool if you think I'm going to tell you what it does."

"I'm a betting man though," challenged Toris, "and I bet you will if I stake your dekarchos's life on it." He stole a quick look at the sentries that were around him to

make sure they hadn't moved. He was rather confident but he wasn't stupid either.

The Conqueror touched her chakram at her side when he was distracted.

"I wouldn't," warned Toris, "throwing that thing might be bad for her health. I've heard it's already sliced her arm once."

Janice's upper lip twitched at his remark.

"Now, would you like to make this trade, my liege? Your dekarchos's life for the riddle to this ring."

The Conqueror kept her eyes centered on the enemy however something behind the pair captured her attention. She just needed a few extra heartbeats to get her opening. "How do I know you won't kill her after I tell you?"

Toris laughed then answered, "You'll just have to take my word for it, my liege. I am honorable... I'm sure you still recall those days you were too."

The Conqueror's anger mounted another notch but she slowly nodded. "Alright... I'll tell you what the ring does."

Janice closed her eyes and wanted to scream. How could she let this happen? Everything is so wrong yelled Janice's mind, I fucked up and now Perdicus and Hu are both dead because of me. Her dark eyes opened and locked on her friend.

The Conqueror read Janice's eyes and she wished more than anything they could trade thoughts. She inhaled then slowly said, "That ring will give you... immortality so long as you wear it."

Toris shook his head then started to laugh. He quickly dug the dagger's tip into Janice's throat. "I don't think so. Last chance before I give her a new breathing hole."

Janice's eyes screwed shut when the dagger's tip pierced her skin.

The ruler swallowed. She started to speak as her fingertips crept lower to her chakram. "The ring will... get you killed!" she yelled and ripped her chakram from her side.

Toris expected this attempt but he couldn't react fast enough when there was a furious roar from behind his back. He suddenly cried out in pain when teeth and claws sunk into his back.

The chakram slammed into the dagger's blade and broke it at the shaft then ricocheted off.

Janice quickly broke away when the blade was gone from her neck. She turned and stumbled back but she was amazed to see Hu on top of Toris.

The Conqueror started for the archeologist.

Toris's screamed filled the court then threw the wounded and weak tiger off him.

Hu hissed in pain as his bloody body hit the cold marble floor and he skidded away. He tried to get up but he was weakened far too much from his wound and traveling so far to stop this man.

Toris grabbed another dagger from his side while he was getting up. He saw the other soldiers preparing to charge him but he threw his dagger at Janice.

The Conqueror quickly moved after the flying dagger.

Janice yelled as she lifted her hands as if she would catch it herself. Then her rapid breathing held still when the dagger stopped in midair and the tip was a foot from her nose.

Everybody stopped moving at once as they stared in astonishment of the dagger's hovering in front of Janice. Then the dagger flipped over and raced back towards Toris.

Toris couldn't react in time and the dagger plunged into his right shoulder. He wailed in pain and fell to his knees. He reached for his sword but he abruptly was lifted into the air and was sent flying across the courtroom. He was slammed into the hard marble wall; his sword fell and clanked onto the floor then he moaned as he went unconscious.

The Conqueror's heavy breathing settled down then she scanned the courtroom. There in the side door stood Lao Ma with her hands lifted.

Lao Ma glided across the court and came to the ruler's side.

The Conqueror came to Janice's side and slipped an arm around her waist. "Are you okay?"

Janice only nodded and held onto the ruler for support.

Lao Ma tilted her head to the side and she pointed her index finger then spun it.

Toris swiftly was spun too and now hovered upside down. His helmet fell off and hit the floor with a thud. Next his unseen necklace dangled over his face and the ring started to glow.

Janice though moved away from the ruler and limped over to Hu. She knelt down beside him and saw that he was still breathing. "Goddamn it." She looked down at his head and saw his glossy fire eyes watching her. "I'm so sorry, boy."

Hu moved his head and licked the bloody hand that was near his face.

The Conqueror was staring at the upside down soldier and her eyebrows drew together. She stepped up to Janice and touched her shoulder lightly then the familiar features of the soldier struck her. "By the gods..."

"What is it?" urged Janice, her head dropping back.

"That's Toris," murmured the ruler.

The archeologist shook her head then also stared at the unconscious man that tried to kill her.

"Toris is... my brother," whispered the stricken Conqueror.

Chapter 22 - Xena of Amphipolis

"Goodnight, Xena," whispered Cyrene. She touched her daughter's back and she still hadn't lost that smile on her face since the beginning of the meal.

"Sleep well tonight, mother." The Conqueror gave a small smile only meant for her mother. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Cyrene agreed with a gentle squeeze to her child's shoulder. She then turned to the quiet girl at her left side. "Let's go, Melpomene."

The girl nodded and she stopped staring at the ruler. She took her grandmother's hand then led her away.

The Conqueror let out a low sigh as she watched her mother and the child, who her mother adopted, leave the dining hut. She could only wonder how long it would take for the young girl to speak to her but she wouldn't push it. Instead she returned her focus to the rebel leader left at her table. She was still adjusting to the fact that she was allowed to freely move about the Amazon Nation but it was certainly an improvement to the jail hut and chains. Still though, she knew her feathery shadows were never far away from her.

Gabrielle just finished a drink of her water then set the mug aside. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

The Conqueror stretched her legs under the table then she nodded. "Its time to finish this trial."

"I agree." The bard settled her left elbow onto the table and leaned against her propped hand. "I think everybody is ready to move forward."

"Even you?" challenged the ruler.

Gabrielle opened her mouth to reply but her words fell short. She closed her mouth then truly mulled over the question then she nodded. "I think I am... yeah."

The Conqueror slightly grinned at this but then she suggested, "Let's go for a walk...?"

"Mmmm," murmured the bard, "the stars should be out tonight." She chuckled then slowly worked her way out of the seat and got her cloak on because of the cool night.

The Conqueror had been given a new set of leathers that were simple but they at least covered her midriff unlike most Amazon fashion. She was also given an Amazon cloak to keep her warm on the cooling days and chilled nights. She was considerably surprised that the Amazons were being so gracious to her but Gabrielle was right when she said the Amazons were grateful.

Together the new friends quietly slipped out of the dining hut and they ignored the staring gazes of many Amazons. They were quite use to it anymore but they were growing fewer and fewer as everybody grew use to the new changes around the Nation. They were met by the cool night air and behind them were the three guards that were tugging on their cloaks too.

Gabrielle kept the pace slow considering her limp but her wound from four days ago was well healed after she'd spent yesterday and today just mostly sleeping. She finally felt like she could sleep well because there was less to worry about in her life.

The Conqueror glanced down at the silent bard however she wasn't fooled because she'd come to understand that a verbally silent bard was a quickly thinking one. "What is it?"

Gabrielle peered up but she gave a shrug. "I'm just still trying to..."

"Take it all in," completed the ruler.

"Yes." Gabrielle inhaled the brisk air around her, which awakened her senses. "What happens after the trial?" She glimpsed up to the tall ruler. "If you're pardoned of your charges, I mean."

"Then we returned to Corinth to take care of unfinished business," stated the ruler.

"Such as?" tried the bard.

"Such as your punishment that you agreed upon, Gabrielle."

The rebel stopped walking and faced the ruler. She wanted to ask why the ruler was still upholding the punishment when she'd hoped that was one of the things that would change but it seemed not to be.

The Conqueror saw the bleak features of the rebel leader, which made her grin. "Although I think the punishment is meant more for me than you." Without anymore information, she continued the walk to the sparring fields.

Gabrielle's eyebrows almost touched together but she quickly limped forward to catch up with the long legged ruler. "What do you mean?"

The Conqueror smirked at the bard's obvious confusion but she saw the sparring field up ahead. "Let's sit down first then I'll explain."

The anxious bard wanted to know quickly but she conceded and took a seat on a bench in the sparring field. It happened to be the same bench she and the Conqueror

occupied not so long ago. "What's the punishment, Conqueror?"

The ruler held up her hand then lowered it after the bard took a calming breath.

Gabrielle understood then she sheepishly grinned. "I'm sorry... I'm just not use to calling you by your name."

The Conqueror did understand as she wasn't use to many people calling her by her name. She liked how her title displayed her rank as much as distanced her from people subconsciously. She no longer wanted the barrier between her and Gabrielle, which she didn't understand why yet but she knew she would later down the road. "It's okay... just give it time. I'm not exactly use to people calling me Xena these days."

"I bet," murmured the rebel.

"To answer your question," started the ruler, "I've already decided your punishment."

"When did you decide this?" probed Gabrielle.

"This morning," admitted the ruler and she peered down into curious green eyes. She could see that Gabrielle was straining from exploding with a demand to know and trying to remain calm. That made the Conqueror grin and she decided to play along more. "I believe it is a very fitting punishment."

"I think you're already trying to do that now," drew out the bard's throaty voice.

The ruler revealed her hidden grin but she lost it and seriously informed, "I've decided you will serve as my advisor of state for one term."

The bard blinked and she stared very oddly at the ruler like she was Medusa. "You're... you're joking, right?" When there was no response she carefully asked, "You're advisor of state?" At the Conqueror's nod she carefully asked, "Why?"

"You're so keen on me reforming right?" The Conqueror shrugged then declared, "Then you can write and argue all the reforms in front of me and the court. You'll have your voice... and your words."

"By... the gods," muttered the stunned bard. "You're really serious, aren't you?"

"And have I ever lied to you, Gabrielle?"

The bard knew the ruler hadn't as every promise, whether it was a threat or not, was readily kept. She shook her head then a thought occurred to her. "What about Rhodes? He's been your state advisor for two terms now."

The Conqueror internally cringed at that small detail that she suspected Gabrielle did not know. She steadied herself to tell the bard, who she claimed as her friend now. She knew this could make or break things between her and the rebel. "Rhodes is no longer the advisor of state."

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed then she carefully asked, "Why? His term hasn't ended."

The Conqueror inhaled slowly then saw that darkening look on the rebel's face because she already seemed to suspect the truth. She prepared herself for her former enemy's reaction as she quietly answered, "He's dead... I killed him for treason to the polis."

Gabrielle hastily reacted without thinking because she wanted to get away from the ruler. She got to her feet with her cane rolling off her lap and falling to the ground. She only made it one step before her legs gave way.

The Conqueror swiftly acted and captured the small bard by her waist to steady her.

"No!" angrily yelled the bard, "Let me go!"

The Amazon guards appeared out of the shadows but they hadn't drawn their swords. They stopped short when they saw that the Conqueror was holding the bard rather than hurting her.

"Gabrielle-

"No!" The rebel tried to shove the ruler away but she wasn't as strong.

The Conqueror was frowning but she gently lowered the bard onto the ground so that she was sitting. She then knelt down beside her after letting her go. "Gabrielle-

"I don't want to hear it," snapped the angry bard, who stretched forward for her walking stick.

The Conqueror grabbed the outstretched hand and pulled it back. "Listen, please?"

The rebel's shadowy features lifted up to the ruler and a few tears brimmed at her eyelids. She was angry but more at herself for letting herself believe that this ruler could change.

The Conqueror let go of the small hand then gently spoke again. "I know Rhodes was a friend to you... he was a good man. He was even a good state advisor." She sighed then her mind flashed with images from her torture she performed on the man. She shoved them away then continued to talk. "As a ruler I can't tell you that I regret what I did or that I am sorry."

Gabrielle turned her head away and her tears finally spilled.

"I wouldn't be a true ruler otherwise," urged the Conqueror, "because if things were reverse and I was the good ruler and he was the evil traitor then the results still would have been the same."

Gabrielle's jaw flexed as she struggled between her emotions and thoughts, the ruler's words rolling around in her mind.

"As a person, Gabrielle I can tell you that I do regret what I did and that I am sorry." The ruler huffed at her last words as she murmured, "And sorry is fairly worthless in

the face of death... especially with all the lives I've taken or ruined."

Gabrielle's head was slumped as she gained control over herself again. She kept her head down as she quietly mentioned, "He had a wife... five kids too."

"I know," softly responded the ruler, "and they are being cared for. They did nothing against the polis... they're still receiving his salary until the end of his legitimate term."

The bard wiped at her cheeks then lifted her head. She read the Conqueror's revealing face that clearly displayed remorse for the past. She could also see some hidden pain deeply buried somewhere in the ruler, which was something Gabrielle had never witnessed. She realized this ruler, crouched next to her, was very different to the ruler she stood against almost two moons ago.

The Conqueror lowered her head closer to Gabrielle's. "Do you understand, Gabrielle the differences?" She knew she needed the bard to differentiate between the two.

Gabrielle could understand the two mindsets when she separated them logically. She knew sometimes people had to wear two masks to perform various duties in life but sometimes that became very complicated. She cleared her dry throat then whispered, "I do understand, yes but that doesn't mean I like it."

"I'm not asking you to like it," murmured the ruler.

Although when Gabrielle read the ruler's underlying tone and her face, she could tell some part of the ruler wanted her to not exactly like it but more so accept it. That's what Gabrielle assumed what it was and she would have to mull it over later.

"This isn't going to be easy for me, Gabrielle," admitted the ruler. "I'm use to being a ruler... only a ruler and it's easy when you don't have any emotions or people you care about in your life. The judgments are simple, the verdicts are quick, and nobody makes you question your motives."

Gabrielle bit her lower lip as she processed what the Conqueror was telling her. She nodded her head then peered up at the changing ruler. "Cut you some slack huh?"

"For now," urged the ruler.

Gabrielle slowly nodded her head to show her agreement.

"Come on." The tall woman helped the smaller woman get onto her feet and sit back on the bench. She then collected the walking stick and put it into her lap.

Gabrielle got comfortable again and reined control over her emotions. She studied the quiet sparring field and then lifted her gaze to the beautiful twinkling night sky.

"Conqu...." She fell short then she heard the Conqueror teasing her with a clearing noise from her throat. The bard had a faint grin but lost it when she went back to her original intent. "Xena, what about Alti?"

Well the Conqueror enjoyed hearing her name spoken from the bard's lips for the first

time. She just disregarded the fact that Alti's name happened to be included in that sentence as well. She stretched out her legs, put her hands behind her on the bench, and tried to relax despite the seriousness of the question. "I'm going to take care of her."

The bard understood the context of the sentence. "Nobody is safe from her... not even you."

"I know." The ruler glimpsed down at the bard then back at the starry sky. "But I'm overdue to correct my mistake, Gabrielle."

The bard understood what that mistake was that the ruler meant. "What if she... if she... what if something happens to you?"

The Conqueror sadly smiled at her new friend's growing concerns for her well-being. "Nothing will happen," she promised.

Gabrielle frowned and shot a glare at her former enemy. "You know you just completely jinxed that?"

The Conqueror couldn't help but chuckle and she shrugged. "I always know what I'm getting myself into ahead of time, Gabrielle."

The rebel's eyebrows tightened together and she thought about the ruler's word. She quietly asked, "Did you know that Darphus set you up?"

"I knew he was up to something because he wouldn't have gone through all that trouble to lead me away from the battle." The Conqueror now sat up straight. "I mostly figured it out."

"Then why did you follow him?"

"Because I wanted to kill him," honestly answered the ruler. "It was the only way to stop his men because once they knew he was dead then they would fall back."

Gabrielle realized that was true as Darphus's army did quickly crumble from what she heard of the rest of the battle. She then recalled the fight that day when the Conqueror fought against Darphus in the clearing. Something made her curious so she questioned the ruler. "Couldn't you have caught that third arrow?" She inquisitively peered up into the dark features of the ruler and she knew her answer when the ruler wasn't forthcoming. "Why didn't you catch it?"

"I've already told you." The ruler peered down. "The known-world doesn't need a tyrant," she softly reminded.

Gabrielle remained still as it dawned on her that the Conqueror had basically wanted death that day and in some shape she'd committed suicide.

"I didn't plan on leaving that battle alive, Gabrielle."

The bard swallowed against the truth and she peered up at the ruler. She sincerely

whispered, "I'm glad you're still here... Xena."

The Conqueror didn't have any words but all she could do was smile in return. She then swiftly stood because she wanted to end the emotional moment that she wasn't totally comfortable with yet. "Come on, it's getting late and tomorrow will be long."

Gabrielle stifled a yawn at the thought of getting some rest. She slowly got up then started the walk back to the huts. Her guest hut that she shared with Cyrene and Melpomene was near the Conqueror's so they walked in the same direction. She said goodnight to the ruler then slipped away into the dimly lit hut and prepared for bed.

The Conqueror slipped into her hut without saying a word to her guards. She removed her cloak first then set it down on the chair by the small table. She disappeared into the washroom and changed into her nightshift that'd been given to her. When she came out of the washroom in her nightshift, she also carried M'Lila's necklace in the palm of her right hand. She came over to the bed, sat down, and her head was bent over and her eyes transfixed on the necklace.

"I wish you were here, my friend," murmured the ruler. She clenched the charm tightly and closed her eyes. "This won't be easy, Ly." She released a deep breath as she thought about her brother. "But nothing is ever easy with me, is it?" She sadly grinned in consideration of her past. "At least this time I'll have some help." She opened her hand and studied the Gaelic pendent that shined back up at her. The old yet familiar design reminded her of the specially made armor she'd had designed many moons back that she'd never worn. It was the same Gaelic design that M'Lila wore on her shirt that she'd copy in honor of her last friend. She'd had the armor made along with a matching sword but she'd never dared to wear them as she felt too disgraceful to wear them. Just maybe that would change now though.

The Conqueror turned and gently set the precious necklace onto the nightstand. She then slipped from the bed and blew out the candles in the room then she crawled back into her bed. She didn't bother with the mat over the window or starting the fireplace because it just really didn't matter to her tonight. She was fairly use to sleeping through chilled nights.

By the following day, the Conqueror was standing with her back to the thinned out Amazon Nation and she carefully listened to the rebel leader's continued defense of her. Today was the last day of trial for the Conqueror and tomorrow she would hear her sentence or be pardoned and there was no definite on either option. Instead the ruler prepared for either outcome and placed faith in her friend's abilities as a bard to work it out.

"Ephiny," started the bard, "on the day of the battle against Darphus you released the Conqueror. I was there as well and I recall that you were originally completely against the idea of freeing her but you changed your mind. You're highly respected among the Nation for many things and particularly your abilities as a leader. So why did you change your mind and release the Conqueror?"

The Conqueror listened to the head guard's explanation to Gabrielle. Her attention broke for a heartbeat and she glanced over at Queen Cyane, who had recovered from the arrow wound and was now well on her way back to health.

Queen Cyane sensed the ruler's studying so she turned her head to the left, over her shoulder.

The Conqueror didn't change her demeanor into something sneering or taunting as she would often react. She could tell that the Amazon Queen held no malice for the Conqueror anymore but she was merely on even keel now.

Cyane discreetly nodded at the ruler then turned her head back to Gabrielle and Ephiny. She knew something had happened to the ruler out there on the battle field several days back. Cyane knew it was something life altering and whatever it was she was happy for it but it would take her time to fully accept it.

The Conqueror too turned back to the rebel and head guard for the second to last inquisition of the trial.

"And looking back on it now, Ephiny do you believe you made the right decision?"

The head guard kept her head up, her hands behind her back, and her eyes glued on the rebel leader. "Yes, I do not regret my decision and I believe by releasing the Conqueror that many lives were saved. The Amazons and the Conqueror had a common threat and for the first time that brought us common ground."

The bard's head was down as she took a few paces away then turned back to the Amazon. "It was mentioned that during the battle that the Conqueror saved you?"

"Yes she did," agreed the Amazon guard. "I was fighting two foot soldiers and my back was unprotected so a horseman charged me. The Conqueror stopped him before he made his mark." Ephiny's amber eyes flickered to the ruler that was several paces away. "For that I am in debt to her."

Gabrielle was inwardly stunned that Ephiny was that open about it and willing to publicly state this before the Nation. She also admired Ephiny because it seemed that Ephiny could accept that her foe could become her ally. "Ephiny, you have been guarding the Conqueror since her kidnapping from Corinth. From that first night to today have you noticed any changes in the Conqueror?"

"Yes, I have," answered the head guard.

"Can you explain?" urged the bard. She shifted her weight onto her cane.

Ephiny's lips slightly puckered as she tried to mentally explain it before voicing her answer. She glanced at the ruler then back at the rebel. "It's hard to exactly explain without actually witnessing it like I have over these days. When she first arrived she was very much the ruthless ruler that we all know... that we all fear." She stopped and shifted on her feet as she mentally composed her next words. "Over the course of the trial she was still that ruler but I could see it was affecting her somehow. It wasn't until after the battle that I realized she seemed to figure out she's human like the rest of us. She isn't that deity she's made herself out to be because even she believed she was too."

"Human?" questioned the rebel. She sidestepped and pointed at the Conqueror. "She's human?" Her hand fell to her side. "Did you see her as human before you met her, Ephiny?"

The guard sarcastically laughed at the question. "Even I can admit I saw her as that god she pretended to be. Once you've heard the stories so many times about her rulership, skills, and her campaigns it's easy to believe she's from Olympus. How many kings, rulers, and warlords have tried to accomplish what she's done? Plenty have tried and all have failed but her." Ephiny shook her head, which made her curly locks move. "However if you strip her of her throne, her skills, and her history then all you have left is this lonely and cold woman... and that's exactly what we did to her when she was brought here."

Gabrielle sadly smiled at the Amazon's beautiful insight about the Conqueror and these past days. "The Destroyer of Nations simply became Xena of Amphipolis." She stepped closer to Ephiny. "How do you view the Conqueror now, Ephiny?"

"I see her..." Ephiny tilted her head as she paused and truly thought over the question. Her eyes met the Conqueror's openly intrigued gaze then she clearly answered, "I see her as my equal... warrior to warrior."

The rebel leader thinly smiled at this as she understood Ephiny. "Thank you, Ephiny." She limped away and stood next to the Conqueror.

Ephiny glanced at the councilor for dismissal.

The head councilor nodded her head then gave a warm thank you.

The Amazon march forward and took her position behind the Conqueror where Solari and Callisto kept post.

"Next," spoke the head councilor, "we will move onto the final inquisition. Xena of Amphipolis, please come forward."

"You'll do fine," murmured the bard so that nobody would hear her but the ruler.

The Conqueror glimpsed down, faintly nodded, and then marched up to the claimed spot for questioning. She turned and faced the Amazon Nation but it was Gabrielle and Cyrene's faces that kept her grounded.

The head councilor waved a hand at the defense's new representative that'd been selected.

Magdelus stepped away from Queen Cyane and approached the Conqueror. She was an Amazon from Melosa's Nation and she was tall with wavy dirty-blond hair. She began the rigorous questions for the Conqueror.

The Conqueror kept up with the questions but then she was thrown off by a blind question.

"When you killed Velasca were you doing it to protect Gabrielle or were you

extracting revenge because she was prosecuting you?"

The Conqueror knew she needed to reply hastily or else her lack of forthcoming would be answer enough. "I was mostly protecting Gabrielle but maybe there was a piece of me that wanted her for prosecuting me," replied the ruler.

Magdelus nodded her head then stepped back, her hand held out to Gabrielle.

The rebel limped up to her friend and her eyes were down, which meant she was thinking out Magdelus's last question. "What were you thinking, Conqueror when you saw Velasca was about to run her sword through me?"

"I was thinking that I would show her my justice for deceit."

"But she didn't deceive you," argued the bard. "So why your justice?"

"Velasca allied with Darphus so that made her my enemy. Velasca deceived you... she deceived the Amazon Nation."

Gabrielle shook her head then questioned, "Then why wouldn't you have let the Amazon Nation carry out their justice instead of killing her yourself?"

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow then stated, "It was either her life or yours... I chose hers."

The bard was internally rattled by the truth behind the answer but she didn't show it. Instead Gabrielle took a few pacing steps away then turned back for her next questions. "The other day I was told by Princess Terreis that you're very familiar with Amazon Law. Is this true?"

"It is," answered the ruler, her head turned to the bard. "I've thoroughly studied Amazonian History as well."

"Why is this?" questioned the bard.

"I know my enemy," honestly replied the ruler.

Gabrielle shook her head then held up her hand. "When did you study the Amazons?"

The Conqueror dipped her head as she quickly ran through her memory then she answered, "When I was about seven I started learning about the Amazons."

"Seven," repeated Gabrielle. "I happen to be a Conqueror expert," she joked while limping back to the ruler, "You hadn't even lifted a sword by seven years old. Care to explain?"

The Conqueror nodded her head. "The Amazons always interested me as a child... a lot of bards came to my mother's tavern and often they had stories about the Amazons. I grew very interested in them so I would go to the local market in Amphipolis and put in a request with a merchant to get scrolls on them whether it was history, stories, law... I didn't care."

"It sounds like you thought highly of them," theorized the bard. "Did you?"

"Yes I did."

"When you came back from your campaign in Chin you went directly to the Amazon Nation. What drove you to Queen Cyane's Nation?"

The Conqueror watched the bard limp back to her and stand in front of her. "I knew I could learn from them."

"Did you intend to join them?"

"No," answered the ruler, "I only wanted to learn from them."

Gabrielle's head was dipped some then she tilted it back. "Did you have any intent to kill the elders and Queen Cyane?"

The Conqueror clenched her hands behind her back but she formed her honest answer. "Originally I did not have any intentions to kill any Amazon because I knew then I'd lose my chance to gain any skills and knowledge."

"What changed your motives?"

"Who changed my motives," corrected the ruler, "Alti showed me the Darkness that I'd only previously tasted. She promised that if we joined that I would become the Destroyer of Nations. That was far more than the Amazons could provide me with."

"Was there a catch to Alti's... partnership?" questioned the bard.

"Of course," answered the Conqueror, "ten dead elders and a queen. Then from there out she required a constant flow of dead bodies as she has a large appetite."

The bard was grim at this honest reply as her taste for the shaman was growing more disgusted. "The day prior to the battle against Darphus, I asked you to join the Amazon Nation to fight. Do you recall this?"

"Vividly," simply replied the ruler, "And I said no."

Gabrielle nodded her agreement. "Obviously you changed her mind so what was the cause of this? Was it so you could be pardoned from the charges of this trial?"

"No," answered the ruler, "I could have cared less about the trial or the outcome." She lifted her chin then clarified things. "I chose to fight to protect my mother and to protect you."

Gabrielle studied the ruler's calm expression and she knew it was true. She tilted her head. "What about Darphus?"

"The fact that I'd meet him in battle was only an added bonus." The glint in the Conqueror's eyes showed but only Gabrielle could pick it out.

The bard limped away a few steps then turned back around. "Who were you when you first arrived here?"

The Conqueror slightly grinned at this question then coolly answered, "I was the Conqueror... I was the Destroyer of Nations."

"And now?" probed Gabrielle.

"I am still the Conqueror," replied the ruler, "but I'm a daughter... and a friend."

The rebel leader tapped her cane on the ground. "What happened out on that battle field, Conqueror?"

"My death happened," replied the ruler, who was the only one that truly understood what her statement meant. Yet when she studied the bard she began to wonder otherwise.

Gabrielle tilted her head. "Almost," she murmured then turned and went back to her defense spot.

Magdelus stepped forward with a serious expression. "Is any of this an act, Conqueror?"

"No."

The Amazon shrugged then tried, "You've fooled the Amazon Nation once before." She sidestepped and loudly called, "Fool us once then shame on you but fool us twice and..." She turned back the ruler. "Shame on us." She folded her arms over her chest. "How many death threats did you make against Gabrielle since arriving here?"

"What's this have to do with the trial?" demanded the bard.

"It establishes exactly how little the Conqueror has changed since her arrival here," argued Magdelus.

The head councilor had a thoughtful expression then she nodded. "Answer the question."

The Conqueror focused back on the Amazon. "Four times."

"Four times?" repeated the Amazon. "When was your last threat?"

The ruler glimpsed at the bard, who was remaining collective despite the line of questioning. She returned her attention to the defense Amazon. "The day of the battle."

Magdelus nodded then backed away from the ruler.

As Gabrielle approached her friend, she questioned, "How many times did you save my life since being here?"

"Three times," countered the Conqueror.

"The day of the battle after you defeated Darphus you would not allow me to find help. Why not?"

The ruler rocked her boots for a heartbeat. "I wanted to die." She listened to the hushed voices of the Nation.

"Why?" urged the rebel.

"As I've told you," started the ruler, "The known-world doesn't need a tyrant."

Gabrielle nodded and backed away to show she was finished.

The head councilor saw that Magdelus wasn't stepping forward. "Nothing else, Magdelus?"

"No, council."

"Then we have completed the trial," announced the head councilor. She stood up and waved for the ruler to step away. When the Conqueror was beside the rebel leader, the head councilor spoke out again. "The council will spend the rest of the day discussing the trial along side the Conqueror's assistance in the battle against the warlord Darphus. Then tomorrow at first light the judgment will be passed. The trial is concluded."

The Amazon Nation broke apart and a din of chatter rose up.

Cyrene slipped forward and joined her daughters. "That was excellent work, Gabrielle."

The bard smiled but it wasn't quite sincere. "I just hope this pays off." She peered up at the ruler. "So what now?"

"We wait," simply replied the Conqueror.

Gabrielle sighed and muttered, "I'm not much for waiting." This earned her a distant grin from her friend. "How's Melpomene, Cyrene?"

"She was busy trading stories with the kids about the battle." Cyrene rolled her eyes then teased, "She's bragging about her crazy aunt's bravery."

Gabrielle wanted to act like a kid and stick out her tongue but she just refrained from it but did manage a glower. "The kid knows how to pick them... look who she selected for a grandmother."

Cyrene softly laughed then jested, "With any luck she'll fit right in."

The bard had to chuckle back but she returned her serious focus to her friend. "I think I'm nervous about the outcome of this trial."

"You did everything you could, Gabrielle," reminded the Conqueror. "You did what you shouldn't have done."

Gabrielle tilted her head as she absorbed the unexpected words and praise. "Its what I wanted to do."

The Conqueror expression softened at this declaration then she asked, "Are you hungry?"

The bard coyly smiled and her cheeks were touched by pink. "Am I really that obvious?" She glanced at both women for an answer.

Cyrene folded her arms and mocked her daughter's arched eyebrow.

Gabrielle giggled at it then teased, "Now I know where she gets it from."

The Conqueror grunted then walked off towards the dining hut.

Cyrene relented, slipped her hand through Gabrielle's left arm, and they followed after the ruler.

The rest of the day crept by but eventually Apollo raced his chariot over the western horizon and left the known-world with sparkling dust in the sky. The night was chilly yet brisk as Gaia called on winter to take over within the next moon cycle. The Conqueror this evening decided the cold called for a stoked fireplace especially considering the small bard was in her hut tonight.

The Conqueror finished pouring hot water into five mugs that held tea leaves. She stirred them each with a wood spoon and picked up the first one from the table. She carefully carried it over to the bard and held it down to her.

Gabrielle was sitting on a cozy fur in front of the fireplace and she received the warm mug. She inhaled the pleasant scent of the tea that instantly peaked her interest of flavors. "Cinnamon?" she questioned.

The ruler only nodded then walked back to the small table where the remaining mugs rested. She pushed three of the mugs together then with her large hands she was able to grasp all three. She came over to the door then called, "Ephiny, open the door."

The rebel leader had a grin slowly shaping her lips because the ruler took her suggestion to make some tea for the guards outside. She held back her chuckle by sipping on her tea.

Ephiny opened the door and her features showed she was absolutely perplexed. She stepped back when the ruler came out some then held out the mugs. She blinked at the steaming mugs and looked up at the ruler's stone face. "Um...."

"Is that cinnamon tea?" inquired the excited Solari.

The ruler shrugged. "The bard in there wanted cinnamon." She extended her hands

and ordered, "Go on. This should keep you three warm."

Solari just glowed as she happily took the first mug. "Thanks." She sipped the tea right away and moaned in happiness of the warm tasty liquid flowing into her belly. "That's great."

The head guard wiped away her dumbfounded look as she took a mug too. "Thank... you." She then glanced over at Callisto, who was more cautious.

The Conqueror knew this but she met the Amazon's uneasy eyes. "I don't think you have to worry about anything other than it warming you up."

Callisto narrowed her eyes up at the ruler but she lost that rejecting look. Her small hands came out and her slim fingers came around the mug, her fingertips touching the ruler's.

The Conqueror released the mug then decided it was time to escape back into the hut. "Just knock when you're finished." Then she was gone.

Callisto peered into the steaming mug then looked up at her friends.

Solari had a silly grin then stated, "It's really good." She took another draw of her tea.

Ephiny shook her head then teased, "She won you over with a cup of tea, Solar."

The Amazon shrugged and kept drinking the tea happily.

Callisto took a hesitant sip but after the tiny drops warmed her stomach she took a longer drink.

The head guard had a content smile and she leaned against the hut while breathing in the warm steam over face. Her thoughts wondered off to Janice Covington and wishing the archeologist was here to see what just happened. Hades if Janice would ever believe this one.

Gabrielle leaned over to her right, closer to the Conqueror. "So are they still conscious out there or did they pass out when you offered them tea?"

The ruler shrugged then mildly stated, "It's just tea."

"Sure it's just tea," teased the bard, "Tea from the Conqueror."

The Conqueror was inwardly smug but her exterior showed her as stoic. She sipped on her tea that had a nice flavor from Gabrielle's selection. It was no Chin tea but for what it was it was fairly nice.

Gabrielle had her legs stretched out in front of her as she could no longer sit cross legged since it hurt her knees too much. She'd come to realize her right knee typically ached more than her left so she had to always use her cane on the right side. She stared into the fire then murmured, "I can't believe I'm sitting here with you in the Amazon Nation and drinking tea." She laughed at the situation then turned her head to

the ruler and Gabrielle studied the ruler's calm profile.

The Conqueror had the mug wrapped between both her hands but she lowered it to her lap. "I can't either," she finally admitted.

Gabrielle cocked her head to the side then carefully asked, "Can I ask what really happened out there on the battlefield?" Her confusion clearly showed as her eyebrows pushed inward and her lips widened from her cheeks moving up slightly. "You've changed a lot... you're like a stranger."

"Yet I'm friendlier," quipped the ruler.

Gabrielle mulled over this then nodded once. "You're a stranger by comparison... just when I thought I had you figured then you do an about face."

The ruler chuckled then finally turned her head to the rebel. "I like to keep things interesting."

"No kidding," agreed the bard. She went silent though and waited for something else from the ruler. After a little bit she thought maybe she wouldn't receive any explanation.

The Conqueror searched her friend's face for awhile then turned her head away. She felt compelled to share her story with the understanding woman beside her. "I did die, Gabrielle."

"How... how can you be sure?" murmured the bard.

The Conqueror lifted her mug to her lips and sipped on it. She lowered it to her lap then finally answered, "I'm very sure because there's no such place like I was in... I don't even have an imagination to conjure it up."

Gabrielle had taken a sip of her tea but she probed, "What happened?" She shook her head then argued, "How can you be here then?"

The Conqueror chuckled then remarked, "Like I said... I like to keep it interesting." She could tell the rebel truly wanted to know the story about what'd happened. So after she stole some more tea between her lips she proceeded to tell her everything despite she wasn't the bard.

Gabrielle was captivated by the incredible tale about the ruler's journey through Tartarus. She never imagined that the ruler would fight so hard to come back and for reasons that did not deal with greed, hatred, or for dominance. About halfway through the story, the Conqueror paused as the Amazons quickly returned the mugs then Gabrielle was happy that the ruler continued.

At the end of the story, Gabrielle let out a deep breath as if she'd gone through the trials. She was astounded and she held a sense of respect for her friend for it all. She ran her right hand through her blond bangs and mentioned, "I never knew of M'Lila."

"Not many did," agreed the ruler.

Gabrielle sighed then whispered, "I wish I could have met Lyceus." She frowned and peered into her mug. "Cyrene often would tell me stories about you and him." A sad smile touched her lips. "He always sounded like quite the character."

The Conqueror had a sad smile too at the memories of her and her brother. "He was... among other things." She took the last gulp of her tea then placed the empty mug aside.

"You and Lyceus were stuck at the hips, Cyrene use to tell me." Gabrielle grinned at this image then lost it at other thoughts. "She always said if he hadn't died that none of this probably would have happened."

"Maybe... maybe not," whispered the ruler. "We all have our destiny to follow."

"Yes... yes we do," murmured the bard. She finished off her tea also then put the mug off to her right, away from her friend. "So you plan to stop Alti?"

"Yes," quickly answered the ruler. "No good comes from her and none is in her." She turned her head to the bard. "I plan to leave tomorrow if this trial finishes off the way we hope it does."

Gabrielle stared into the fire as she processed what the ruler told her.

"I don't expect you and mother to come to Corinth until its safe... until I deal with Alti." The Conqueror now was the one studying her friend's profile. She momentarily enjoyed the firelight flickering across the bard's soft face but then determined green eyes turned to her.

"I'm going with you."

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at the rebel leader. She opened her mouth but was cut short by the faster bard.

"I'll just follow you."

The ruler sighed then turned her head away. "This isn't your fight, Gabrielle. You know where I'm headed there'll be trouble."

Gabrielle casually replied, "I know." Then the Conqueror turned back to her and they held searching stares for several heartbeats.

"Then why would you want to go into that with me?" whispered the ruler.

"That's what friends do." Gabrielle tilted her head as she reminded them both of their new friendship. "We stand by each other when there's trouble."

Xena lost her Conqueror mask as her blue eyes visibly softened for only the bard. "Alright... friend."

Gabrielle didn't stay much longer that night as she knew tomorrow would probably be

very busy. She wished the ruler a goodnight and thanked her for spending time with her. She donned her Amazon cloak and crossed the short distance to her hut where she suspected Cyrene and Melpomene were already asleep. Her night's sleep was fairly peaceful after she pressed away her thoughts about her conversation with the Conqueror tonight.

When Apollo mounted his chariot at dawn the overnight fog was burned away. The Amazon guards at the Conqueror's guest hut were jarred awake from sleeping against the hut by the Conqueror coming out. They tried to play it off knowing that they'd catch Hades for having any winks and luckily the ruler didn't comment on it. Although the Amazons suspected that the ruler knew of their small error.

Just as the Conqueror was making her way for the trial's space she spotted her mother, Gabrielle, and Melpomene exiting their hut. She decided to go to them first.

"Good morning, dear," greeted the mother.

"Mornin', mother." The Conqueror was only recently getting accustomed to using mother again in her vocabulary. She then set her sights on the sleepy looking bard. "Morning, Gabrielle." All she received was a grumble.

Cyrene smugly whispered to the Conqueror, "She's not a morning person."

"Auntie Gabby," started Melpomene, "you would be a morning person if you got to bed earlier."

Cyrene stifled a laugh.

Auntie Gabby lowered her gaze to her niece and asked, "Did you want honey with your apples today?"

Melpomene smiled very sweetly and rocked on her feet with her hands behind her back. "Yes, auntie."

The bard sighed then held out her hand to the child. "We need to hurry." And she was right as they made it to the trial just in time as the council was preparing to take a seat at their table. She and the Conqueror took their usual spot while Cyrene and Melpomene stood at the front of the onlooking crowd.

Magdelus and Queen Cyane took their positions.

The head councilor stood up from the table then walked over to the spot where the inquisitions took place. She raised her chin and after a deep inhale, she announced, "For many candelmarks the council discussed the information brought to light during the trial. We have decided that despite Xena of Amphipolis committed these crimes that she did not fully act under her own will. As a result, Xena of Amphipolis cannot be held fully accountable for the crimes that she performed but she certainly is accountable for a certain weight of it." The head councilor waited a beat as she recalled her next piece. "Then there was the battle against Darphus that may have resulted in higher casualties or maybe even the destruction of the Amazon Nation if not for the help of Xena of Amphipolis. So it is the council's belief that Xena of

Amphipolis has repaid her debt to the Amazon Nation by saving these lives. In light of this, the council can see no reason to carry out a punishment thus Xena of Amphipolis is pardoned from her chargers." She then met the ruler's gaze then directly stated to her, "Xena of Amphipolis, see that in the future you take care of how you tread in the Amazon Nation. Nobody wishes to repeat such events again." She then held out her arms and loudly announced, "Our murdered sisters and our queen have found justice... now find peace." She lowered her hands and then turned away.

Gabrielle let out a heavy breath then whispered, "Its over." She touched her forehead. "By the gods."

"Not completely," murmured the ruler, who turned when her mother quickly approached her. She swallowed then quietly asked, "Mother, forgive me please."

Cyrene released Melpomene's hand then stepped up to her daughter. "There's nothing to forgive, my little one." Her right hand stretched out to touch her child's cheek. "We both made our mistakes and we've both suffered. Its time to move forward... together." Her eyes burned from her emotions surfacing. "So happy to have you back again." She then pulled her daughter into a warm embrace.

The Conqueror drew her mother in tightly and held on as she didn't care about all the gawking looks of the Amazons.

Melpomene took her aunt's hand and quietly asked, "Does this mean the Conqueror is family too?"

Gabrielle was shaken from her staring of the mother and daughter reunited. She digested the girl's question then peered down at her. "I think so, Melpomene... I think so."

Melpomene turned her head to the Conqueror hugging her mother. She tilted her head and her thoughts became quite deep for such a young child.

Queen Cyane neared the newly increased family of outsiders and she cleared her throat after the mother and daughter broke their embrace.

The Conqueror faced the Amazon Queen and tried to remain passive as she wasn't sure what to expect from her old enemy.

"We met on the battlefield many times," commented the queen.

The Conqueror clenched her hands at her side and only nodded.

"For first time we met on the battlefield without crossing swords, Conqueror." Cyane rested her hands on her hips. "Maybe this will be a continued trend."

The Conqueror knew it was statement that required her confirmation or disagreement. "Yes, hopefully it will be."

Queen Cyane nodded then slowly her right arm came up.

The Conqueror clenched her jaw then relaxed it as her right arm rose up. Then she slowly collapsed the muscular arm of her enemy for many moons now. She made her grasp firm to backup her words. "To the future, Queen Cyane."

"To the realm and the Amazon Nation," agreed Queen Cyane. She broke the shake then walked away feeling as if she'd accomplished more than she ever imagined she would in her lifetime. She actually had a faint smile while she walked away from her allied enemy.

Solari turned to her superior. "Ephiny, does this mean we're finished with duty?"

"Why?" clipped the head guard, "You have a hot date?"

"Not if you're staying on duty then I don't," teased the Amazon.

Ephiny was caught off guard then she grinned at her friend. "We'll check with the queen first."

"So... to Corinth now?" asked the rebel leader.

"To Corinth," softly agreed the ruler.

"My queen!" called a familiar voice.

The Conqueror turned her head to the left when she heard the shaman's voice. Her eyes narrowed and her head tilted as she honed in on the distant conversation.

"What is it?" asked the bard.

The Conqueror's eyes narrowed as she tried to focus on the low conversation better. "Wait here." She turned and approached the queen and shaman that were quietly arguing.

Yakut stopped short then her eyes rose to the nearing ruler.

Queen Cyane turned her head and inquisitively questioned the ruler with her eyes.

The Conqueror ignored it and focused on the shaman. "Why can't they cross over?"

Yakut's mouth hung open for a beat as she realized the ruler overheard their conversation from so far away. She glanced to the queen, who sighed and nodded. She finally answered the question. "Alti has locked them outside the gates to Eternity. Our holy word should have been strong enough to undo whatever has kept our sisters from Eternity."

"Then maybe you need a new holy word, one stronger than the last," mentioned the Conqueror.

Queen Cyane shook her head then whispered, "Our holy word is Courage... nothing's stronger than Courage."

Gabrielle had unknowingly neared the group. "Even Alti knows Courage."

"There's one thing she doesn't know though." The Conqueror focused back on the shaman. "I'll need your help with something, Yakut."

Yakut was uncertain but she was curious too. "With?"

"I hear shamans are good with astral projections," commented the ruler, "I could use a projection of what Melinda Pappas has been doing since I was taken."

Queen Cyane's eyes slotted. "You're going to face Alti?"

"We're going to face Alti," corrected the bard.

The queen glanced between the bard and the ruler as she realized this was quite serious. She turned back to Yakut. "Do it." She then waved at the three guards to come forward. "Ephiny, I have one more task for you, Solari, and Callisto if you three will accept?"

Ephiny glanced between her fellow Amazons and saw them agreeing easily with nods. She nodded back at the queen too then proclaimed, "Of course, my queen."

"Excellent. It's time Alti settled her debt with the Amazon Nation." Queen Cyane turned her head to Yakut. "And our sisters can enter Eternity without her petty tricks."

By the mid afternoon, Gabrielle finished a heated argument with her adopted mother about going to Corinth. Her head was throbbing and she knew she'd lost the argument completely. She ended up stomping out of the guest hut and going to the stables as she figured that's where the Conqueror was most likely.

The Conqueror finished getting the face tack onto the mare when she heard the distinct footfall of the rebel leader entering. She twisted her head around and saw the frustrated features. "I take it you lost."

The rebel huffed with a lot of aggravation coming out too. "How in Zeus's name did you put up with her?"

The ruler tossed the saddle onto the mare's back and worked at strapping it down with the girth. "The same way she put up with me all those moons. So I take it she and Melpomene are coming then?"

"Yes," answered Gabrielle. She leaned against the stall door. "Hopefully Ephiny and Solari won't mind them riding too."

"Melpomene shouldn't be coming," stated the ruler.

Gabrielle threw up her hand and hotly stated, "That kid is two of me put together!"

The Conqueror couldn't hold back her grin as she teased, "Poetic justice, bard."

The bard scowled her friend and grumbled for a bit.

"So did you ask Callisto if you could ride with her?"

Gabrielle snapped out her curses and sheepishly smiled at the ruler. "I... uh I really didn't... I just thought... since...." She just stopped her ramblings and sighed.

The Conqueror patted the mare's neck after finishing with tacking up the horse. "Its fine, Gabrielle." She opened the stall door and came out while adjusting her cloak. "Are you packed?"

"Cyrene was getting everything ready." The bard became even more sheepish as she muttered, "I told her since she wants to come she has to pack everything."

The Conqueror actually quietly laughed at this and shook her head. "Well I see my family's idea about sweet revenge has been carried on to you." She slowly started for the door with the limping bard at her side.

"It did make me feel better," agreed the bard then her nose crinkled up. "For about five heartbeats. I need to go help her though."

"Well be ready in a candlemark."

Gabrielle nodded her head. "We will be. I just need to catch up with Princess Terreis to say goodbye and return her dagger." She stopped, which caused her friend to do the same. "And she's in the opposite direction."

The ruler nodded her understanding and said, "I'll see you in a candlemark." Then she continued her way through the village to her guest hut.

The rebel sighed then decided she better hurry if she didn't want to get left behind. When she found the princess, they spoke for awhile and promised to contact one another then later visit. The princess also refused to take back her dagger and told Gabrielle to keep it even if she didn't carry it. Eventually the pair separated after a long hug then Terreis wished the bard good luck and safer travels.

Gabrielle hurried back to the guest hut and helped Cyrene finish with the packing then they all left to meet in the stables. Just as they arrived the three Amazons were filing out with horses in tow then a few heartbeats after came the Conqueror with her burrowed horse. Cyrene helped get their small amount of items loaded up into the saddles then she was given a spot behind Ephiny on her horse. Melpomene rode with Solari then all was left was to get the rebel into a saddle.

The Conqueror inquisitively eyed the bard then ordered, "Let me get up first then I'll lift you up."

Gabrielle inwardly sighed because she didn't feel comfortable riding with Callisto, which she thought was odd considering her history with the Conqueror compared to Callisto. She watched as the ruler easily mounted the chestnut mare then adjusted the reins. Gabrielle limped forward and dropped her head back some.

The Conqueror leaned over to Gabrielle. "Give me your walking stick first." She received the small cane and quickly lashed it down to the saddlebags because she knew any longer would pain the bard.

Gabrielle used the horse's side to balance herself with one hand while her other hand adjusted her Amazon cloak. When the ruler leaned back over, she gazed up and something around the ruler's neck caught her eye. A necklace poked between the ruler's cloak and shined its bronzy colors in the sunlight.

The Conqueror held out her hand and she noted how Gabrielle broke away from staring at her neck. She bit back her grin from the bard's observations then she hefted the small woman into the saddle behind her.

Gabrielle released a small yelp but she settled into the saddle behind the ruler. She cautiously wrapped her arms around the ruler's waist then tried to relax however it was very nerve wracking. It's only the Conqueror of most of the known-world I'm clinging to here, inwardly joked the bard.

"We better move before it gets any later," suggested Ephiny.

The Conqueror's agreement was simply her urging the mare to veer to the left and aimed for the gates.

"You know," mentioned Gabrielle, "this is the second time in my life I've rode a horse."

The Conqueror almost asked when the first time was then it struck her blindly. Her only advice to Gabrielle was: "Just hang on and don't look down."

At that instant, Gabrielle had just finished staring down at the ground, which she felt was very far below. She let out an audibly groan then murmured, "Don't they make these things lower?"

The ruler had a small grin but she didn't respond as she guided the group out of the gates and towards the thin path that twisted through the woods. Gabrielle stole quiet time to admire the beautiful forest that was turning golden colors mixed with the green. Her eyes were wide in appreciation. It was just under a half of a candlemark when they broke onto a main road that led directly to Corinth as all roads in the realm led to Corinth now.

"Gabrielle, remember what I said about hanging on?"

"Yes," answered the bard.

"I suggest you heed that advice... right about... now."

Gabrielle squealed when suddenly the horse rocketed into a canter down the road. Her arms instantly clamped around the Conqueror's firm waist and she buried her face into the ruler's wool covered shoulder. She jammed her eyes closed and sent out a pray for life.

The Conqueror however had the opposite reaction as she came to life in the blustery wind. Her cheeks slowly flushed red as her blood pumped harder to counter act the chill. Behind the horse, her ears detected the other horses' pounding hoofs quickly following. Horseback riding had always been her most favorite as she felt so free and especially at faster speeds.

Gabrielle's breath was warm against the ruler's back. Her hands were somewhat numb at the front but her grip was sure. She tried to gain some serenity about this riding concept and she used the Conqueror's body as her anchor. She eventually built some confidence so she lifted her head and peered around the ruler. Her eyes watered against the wind factor but she was amazed to see everything move by so quickly. This ride was much different than the one she experience on the battlefield.

The Conqueror sensed the rebel leader's boldness. It made her slightly grin in appreciation.

"So does this thing go faster, Conqueror?" called the bard over the noise.

"Possibly, rebel," jested the ruler.

Gabrielle grumbled but she knew the Conqueror couldn't hear her. "Does the horse go faster, Xena?" she corrected.

The Conqueror decided to find out and her thighs squeezed harder against the hot chest of the mare.

The horse inhaled sharply then pressed forward with all her stamina.

"Oooh my... gods!" cried out the rebel and her arms tightened harder.

The Conqueror thought breathing was going to become an issue from the rebel's squeeze. She glanced back over her shoulder and saw that the Amazons were falling behind but she figured they'd slow down soon enough.

Gabrielle squinted when she thought she saw something just ahead in the road.

"There's a fallen tree just ahead so hanging on tight." The ruler anchored them down by tightening her legs. Her right hand clutched the horse's mane then she bent forward. She sensed the mare preparing to jump the fallen tree so she lifted her body from the saddle with her feet.

Gabrielle tried not to scream but she was unsuccessful when she, the ruler, and the horse were all airborne. She dug her face into the Conqueror's back and rammed her eyes shut. Her butt then slammed on the saddle and she muffled a moan into her friend's back. She knew without a doubt that tonight she would forever regret riding and wish never to do it again.

The Conqueror lowered back down into the saddle then gently tugged the reins so that the mare slowed down. She didn't want to tire the horse out too early as it'd be awhile before they'd be upon Corinth. It wasn't until just before sunset that she decided it would be best to take a break and eat dinner.

The group pulled off the road and went into a clearing where they were able to eat some heavy trail rations that Ephiny and Solari packed. They then ate plenty of flatbread to put some weight in their stomachs. Afterwards the bottomless bard was popping in several dried grapes that she absolutely loved. Then she soon discovered herself eyeing the Conqueror and the mare again and she debated whether to fight it or not. She knew it was mostly impossible not to ride so she was lifted into the saddle again.

The Conqueror knew the rebel was most likely getting tired especially because she recalled riding when her legs were mangled from the cross. While they continued the ride to Corinth, the Conqueror considered what she'd done to the bard about three moons ago. She couldn't believe it'd only been three moons ago as it seemed like a lifetime in comparison. Regardless, the Conqueror sensed the growing seed of guilt because of what'd happened and how it now permanently scared the bard's memory and life.

Gabrielle sensed her friend's deeper thoughts. She knew she couldn't exactly ask what she was thinking about especially since they were riding at a gallop down the moonlit road. Her friend had to remain completely at focus so that they wouldn't run into danger. Gabrielle did figure she could break the ruler's deep thoughts with a quick and easy question. "I'm not hurting your back wound am I?"

The Conqueror shoved away her dark thoughts as she repeated the bard's question in her head. She silently cleared her throat then replied, "No, you're fine."

"How much longer you think it'll be?" called the bard over the din of the ride. "There's no way we're going to make it there tonight."

"No," agreed the Conqueror, "but hopefully tomorrow night if we keep this pace up."

"We'll stop just north of Thebes?"

The ruler debated that then decided from her mental map that Gabrielle's position was perfect. "I think so." She said nothing else as she wanted to remain focused on the ride. She figure they'd travel for another three candlemarks then stop to make camp. About six hours of sleep and continue the ride at first light or so and they would make it to Corinth only a candlemark or two after sunset tomorrow.

True to her consideration, the Conqueror slowed the group down and paced the horses for a quarter of a candlemark so they could cool down from the hard ride. She then guided everybody into the woods and found a large enough clearing for them. She first got off the horse then helped her friend next.

Gabrielle gripped the ruler's arm for balance while the ruler retrieved the cane. When she had her cane she carefully tried to work her aching legs forward.

The Conqueror unlashed the saddlebags and hefted it free from the tired mare. She came along side the bard and murmured, "Sit down on that log. We'll setup camp."

"I can-"

"Don't argue with me," clipped the ruler then she walked past the bard with the bags.

Solari, Ephiny, and Callisto hastily worked together to get the camp together. Cyrene discovered that Ephiny had been hiding a package of dried herbs and a few fresh carrots. Callisto had disappeared to catch a couple of rabbits so Cyrene prepared to make a rabbit soup that would surely calm everybody's hungry stomachs.

Gabrielle sat on the log as her friend had told her to do. Her legs did ache badly and she knew there wasn't much she could do to help around the camp. She had her legs stretched out and occasionally she would lean over and massage them, more so her right than her left.

The Conqueror kept her back to the group while she untacked the mare then gave her some feed.

Solari and Ephiny took care of the camp fire and made sure to use correct wood that wouldn't smoke. They didn't feel like attracting any attention tonight especially considering who was in this band.

Melpomene had been given the task of laying out her bedroll along with Cyrene and Gabrielle's. She then came to sit next to her aunt.

Gabrielle smiled at her niece and ruffled her sandy hair with a warm smile.

"Do your legs hurt, auntie?" questioned the girl.

"Not too bad, sweetie," lied the rebel.

The Conqueror paused in her administrations to the mare when she heard this because she too knew it was a lie. She inwardly sighed and finished off her duties with the mare. After she was finished, she mentioned to whoever was listening that she was going to check things around the camp to make sure all was quiet. By the time she surfaced from her perimeter patrol the soup was ready and Cyrene was serving everybody.

Once everybody had full bellies, they each curled up into their bedrolls and furs one by one. The only one to remain awake was the Conqueror, who didn't even bother to set out a bedroll and furs. She planned to take watch all night as she required little sleep compared to everybody else. She remained sitting on a cold rock near the fire and occasionally she would silently put a piece of wood into the fire to keep it alive.

Gabrielle stirred a few candlemarks later, got up to her weak feet with her furs, and made the few paces over without her cane. She slumped onto the ground in a huff and studied the golden profile of the ruler. "You're not going to sleep."

The Conqueror poked the fire with a long, thin branch then simply nodded her head.

The bard stifled a yawn and buried deeper into her furs that wrapped around her body completely. "What are you going to do with Alti?"

The Conqueror poked the fire and let the silence hang for a bit. She finally rotated her head to the rebel. "Do you want the truth?"

"Would you think I'd accept anything else?" argued the bard.

The Conqueror grunted at the truth behind the statement. "I plan to kill her," she calmly answered then turned back to the fire.

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows and not because she didn't expect that answer but that the Conqueror had no other answers. "I guess there's... nothing else you could do....?"

The ruler pulled the stick out of the fire and balanced her elbows on her knees while leaning forward. "Gabrielle, I'm considered evil but she makes me look like Aphrodite in comparison."

Gabrielle's nose crinkled up at this image and then she broke into quiet giggles when she tried to visualize the Conqueror with pink, frilly ribbons in her hair.

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at the rebel's amusement.

"I'm sorry," murmured the still giggling bard. "I am a bard, you know." She cleared the giggles out of her throat then went serious. "I wouldn't say you're evil, Xena just that... you've been misguided and misunderstood."

"We all make our own choices, Gabrielle," argued the ruler, "and I made mine. Mine require a lot of payment... a lot."

Gabrielle swallowed then tugged her furs closer against her body. "At least you recognize that though." She shook her head then whispered, "That's the step in the right direction... probably the hardest step."

"Admitting you were wrong all your life?" questioned the sarcastic ruler. "You hit the Roman nail on the head when you said that I became the very thing I tried to stop."

"Maybe so," agreed Gabrielle, "but now you have a chance to change that... to be better than them." She studied the ruler's passive profile yet she could read into her friend's longing blue eyes.

"It won't be easy."

The bard nodded. "It won't be but neither were your campaigns," she reminded. "Besides... you like to keep it interesting, I hear."

The Conqueror's lips slowly spread into a small grin, which broke her grim features apart. "I was right about one thing," she murmured.

"What's that?" quietly asked the bard.

"That you're a great enemy but a better friend."

Gabrielle shrugged and simply replied, "I'm glad you're finding that out."

Xena turned her head to her friend and murmured, "Me too."

Gabrielle shyly smiled then lost her eye contact as she gazed into the fire. She didn't stay up much longer as the Conqueror warned they'd be up not long after dawn. She yawned once or twice then said goodnight and even tried to urge her friend to get some sleep too but she couldn't win that battle. At least she won the war, she decided as she curled up into her bedroll for the night.

And dawn came all too quickly for the bard as her grumpy mood reined in for the first two candlemarks. They quickly ate, broke camp, and to her detest she was up on the high horse again. She just clung to the ruler when they broke out into the full gallop down the road to Corinth. She would be absolutely relieved when she could put her two feet and cane on the ground and casually stroll into Corinth. After all this was over she secretly promised herself she'd steal a day alone and dedicated it to sleep, food, and writing however she somewhat doubted she'd find that day.

The Conqueror's estimation about reaching Corinth had been exact as they came to a fast walk with the horses when the road turned into cobblestones. Night had already set in but the Conqueror wasn't taking chances so she dismounted as did everybody else. She pulled her cloak's hood over her head then softly ordered Gabrielle to stay near her. The Amazons kept close to Cyrene and Melpomene.

The party approached the road that rolled down the hill that went into the city so they tried not to grow edgy. They entered through the large, open gates without any problems then came through the quieting marketplace. Gabrielle took the lead because it'd been decided to spend the night in Gabrielle and Cyrene's home since it would be safest for tonight. Gabrielle also promised she could get word to Janice and Melinda once she made contact with her faction.

Gabrielle first came down the alley where the door to her home was located. She was only a few limping paces away from the door but she stopped short when a shadowy figure at the other end started to move for her. She clenched her hand at her side but she thankfully heard everybody behind her catching up to her. "Who's there?" she called.

"Gabrielle?" called Joxer and he formed out of the dark under the torchlight that was overhead. "Is that really you?"

Gabrielle smiled happily at seeing the young man. She took a step closer to him but hesitated when his face fell. She knew his gaze was beyond him but before she could explain anything Joxer went for his sword.

The Conqueror was much faster as she stood behind the bard, towering over her and her lightning reflexes had her Amazon sword out. She extended her right hand and let the sword's tip loom just under the unknown man's chin. "Who are you?" she growled in a dangerous tone.

"It's okay," gently assured the bard. She tightly gripped her cane as she felt the ruler's protective and powerful presence just behind her. The ruler's warm leathers slightly

brushed her back. "He's one of my faction guards."

"Guards?" repeated the Conqueror.

Joxer's fingers were wrapped around his sword's hilt but he wasn't moving it. Those piercing blue eyes under the hood were rooting him and he knew who it was as he was familiar with such a cold and threatening gaze that bore into his very being.

"Yes, I have several faction guards," explained the bard. She lifted her left hand and lightly touched the ruler's extended forearm. "He's fine."

The Conqueror secretly admired the rebel leader's insight to build a small security unit. She assumed it was how the faction often knew her very movements and probably explained how the bard escaped Corinth so long ago. She realized just how excellent of an enemy Gabrielle had made and would come to benefit her greatly in the court.

"Are we here?" questioned Ephiny.

"Yes, just in that door," answered Gabrielle.

Joxer stepped aside after freeing his sword's handle. He went to the door opened it and let the group file into the house before he entered backwards. He scanned the alley but didn't think anybody saw them so he closed the door and locked it up from inside. When he turned around he was embraced in the bard's one arm hug that he always loved. "I'm so glad you're alright, Gabrielle."

The rebel leader withdrew with a warm smile. "Me too. It's good to be home."

Joxer was staring beyond his friend when the tall ruler removed her hood and her high cheek bones showed and her raven hair spilled out. He swallowed plus the tension in his body shot up.

Gabrielle touched the faction guard's arm to help ease him. "There's a lot going on, Joxer."

Joxer kept staring at the ruler, who seemed to materialize out of the darkness when the candles in the house were lit one by one. He finally broke away and lowered his head to Gabrielle. "A lot has happened here too."

"I need either you or Perdicus to get a message into the fortress... to Janice or..." Gabrielle wavered because she realized that Joxer may have no idea about Melinda Pappas.

"Melinda?" finished the faction guard.

Gabrielle studied her friend then slowly nodded. "Do you and Perdicus think you can do it?"

Joxer's jaw tightened then he whispered, "Gabrielle... Perdicus...."

Gabrielle shook her head and clenched the young man's arm tighter. "Perdicus what?"

The Conqueror slightly turned her head down as she already knew what'd happened thanks to Yakut's astral projection. She hadn't mentioned it to the bard because there hadn't been a right time but now there was if it was even right. She stepped closer to her friend and rested her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder. "He's dead, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle became frozen then she side stepped and looked between Joxer and the Conqueror. "No... no, he's not." She turned her head to Joxer.

Joxer lowered his gaze to the floor.

The bard peered up into the ruler's revealing face and she hotly whispered, "You knew?"

The Conqueror wasn't ready for these impending emotions that she never had to deal with and it wasn't easy. "Yakut showed me in the astral projection."

Cyrene had just come back from her bedroom after placing her things in there. She approached the cluster because the Amazons were standing away but intently watching and listening. "What's happened?"

Gabrielle met Cyrene's gaze and whispered, "Perdicus is dead."

Cyrene became very solemn as her emotions raced faster than her thoughts. She hoarsely whispered, "How'd he die?"

"One of the squad soldiers killed him," answered the faction guard.

"What? Why?" Gabrielle ran her fingers through her bangs as her mind quickly tried to piece the puzzle together. She peered up at the Conqueror and asked, "Do you know what's happened?"

Slowly the Conqueror nodded her head. "A lot has happened since we both left Corinth." She sensed her mother also studying her so she steeled her mind because she would tell them the truth. She clenched her hands at her side then whispered, "Perdicus died trying to protect Janice." She didn't want to voice who the killer was because she was already having trouble fathoming that it was true. "It was Toris."

"Toris?" murmured Cyrene. "Xena, how can-"

"I know because he tried to attack Melinda... he thought Melinda was me."

"By the gods," rasped the bard. She quickly felt weak on her knees so she went over to the table and pulled out a chair. She almost fell into it and she dropped her cane with a loud clank. She lowered her face into her hands and tried to control her tears that wanted to rise up.

Cyrene first went to the Amazons and whispered something to Ephiny.

Ephiny only nodded then took Melpomene's hand. She soon disappeared back into

Cyrene's bedroom with the door closing.

Cyrene finally knelt beside the bard and touched her knee lightly. "Gabrielle?"

The rebel lifted her head; her reddening face met Cyrene's gaze. "My brother killed the man I was going to marry."

Cyrene's words were lost at that point when she read the pain in her daughter's eyes. She hadn't realized that Gabrielle was still harboring thoughts of marrying Perdicus in the future.

The Conqueror slightly turned her head and closed her eyes. Not only had she ruined the bard's abilities to walk but now she'd managed to bring her vengeful brother into this and steal away Gabrielle's future.

Gabrielle roughly asked, "When does this cycle ever stop?"

"When there's love and forgiveness," tenderly reminded the mother.

Gabrielle repeated her mother's words then her green eyes lifted up to the Conqueror and locked on her.

Cyrene followed Gabrielle's gaze to her eldest daughter, who she loved unconditionally.

The Conqueror opened her eyes to the world around her and saw that Gabrielle and her mother were watching her. She matched their stares as she repeated the quiet conversation that passed between Cyrene and Gabrielle and she began to believe her mother's words too. She just hoped it was enough to help her stop Alti.

Chapter 23 - The Return of the Conqueror

Doctor Janice Covington stepped into the Conqueror's office after being called to enter. Once she closed the door, she quickly asked, "What's going on, Mel?"

Melinda Pappas was standing by the open window that over looked the right side of the fortress. She was watching the city of Corinth buzz with activity despite the winter chill that was settling. She turned her head to the left and somewhat smiled at her lover.

Janice was in her usual Amazon garb of simple leather. Her leather and wool jacket had been cleaned and her wounds from Toris's attack were healing over. The torture that the Conqueror had performed was mostly gone other than a few of the deeper cuts.

"I received word from Gabrielle this morning." Melinda waited for her friend and lover to come closer to her.

Janice admired the Chin attire that her lover had selected this morning. "Didn't you

just get a message from her yesterday?"

"Yes." Melinda held out her hand and when slim fingers slipped through hers, she pulled Janice closer. "They're here."

Janice inhaled and read her lover's beautiful features. "In Corinth?"

"Mmmm." Melinda pulled the archeologist in closer to her body.

"And exactly who is they? What's happened to the trial?"

The linguist chuckled at her lover's keen interest about everything. She'd kept Janice regularly updated on everything she'd heard from Gabrielle as she didn't like keeping Janice out of the loop. "She was pardoned from her charges because she helped fight against Darphus."

"Jesus," murmured the archeologist, "is that good or bad?"

"Apparently it seems to be good," remarked the translator, "as Gabrielle believes she's changed. She didn't go into details."

"I'll believe it when I see it," chided the archeologist, who leaned into the taller frame next to her.

"You're going to have that chance tonight," informed Melinda. "We're going to Gabrielle's home to meet with 'em."

Janice stiffened and dropped her head back some. "And who is them?"

Melinda lowered her head and pressed her lips against Janice's temple. She pulled back some then murmured, "Ephiny, Solari, Callisto, Cyrene, Gabrielle, the Conqueor...." She lifted her head some. "Little Melpomene." She saw how Janice's glowing smile shaped at hearing the girl's name. "There may be a few others there."

"I've missed Ephiny and Melpomene," quietly admitted the archeologist, who rarely confessed to missing anybody to herself or voicing it to somebody.

"I know." Melinda ran her fingers through the back of Janice's short, golden locks. "Can ya come tonight?"

The archeologist sighed as she stared over the ancient city of Corinth; she particularly studied the area where Gabrielle's home resided. "This is going to be very awkward, Mel... and uncomfortable."

"It will be," agreed the linguist, "but if it gets us outta here and home then...."

Janice slowly showed her agreement with moving her head. "I've had enough of this dekarchos crap... I'm ready to play archeologist again."

Melinda had a faint grin at this.

The archeologist was transfixed by the city but she whispered, "You really think the Conqueror has changed?"

"Would Gabrielle stand by her if it were any different?"

Janice quickly understood then she turned back to her lover. "I'm not sure I can...." She wrapped her arms around her body.

Melinda took her lover's smaller hands into hers and gently promised, "I ain't gonna leave your side tonight."

The archeologist absorbed the promise and nodded her head. "Thanks, Mel."

"My pleasure," murmured the linguist, who leaned down for a gentle kiss. After her lips parted from Janice's, she whispered, "I need to tell Lao Ma what's happening... she'll stay here to watch things."

Janice nodded her head. "How's Toris doing?"

"I hear he's cursing up a storm in the dungeons." Melinda straightened up, which revealed her worried features.

"Mel, there's not much we can do to help him," reminded the archeologist. "He's just going to have to sit tight until the Conqueror can deal with him."

The linguist knew this too but she didn't completely like it either. "And exactly how do ya think she's gonna deal with him?"

"I guess we won't have an idea until we see what these changes are," theorized Janice. "This is going to hurt Gabrielle the worst... I mean Perdicus...." She shook her head and looked away. "I don't know what Perdicus was thinking."

"He was protecting you and stopping Toris," reminded the linguist but even her assuring words seemed hollow in comparison to Perdicus's wasted death. She knew too that once Gabrielle heard of his death that she would be the most devastated. Cyrene would follow suit too.

"Its events like that," murmured Janice, "that I think life is so fucked up." She was instantly reminded of her mother's death, which made her bitterness curl in her stomach. "If I'd just not been so goddamn trusting."

"Janice," debated Melinda, "it ain't your fault." She tipped her lover's head up so she could see those emotionally lit green eyes. "Toris made his choices and obviously he resigned to 'em a long time ago. It was his hands... not yours."

"I know," whispered the archeologist, "I just should have-"

"Learn to let it go, Janice." Melinda released Janice's chin then softly added, "The cycle has to stop at some point."

The archeologist sighed then faintly nodded but she would still debate it over for some

time.

"How is Hu doing, Janice?"

"He's still with Lao Ma and slowly recovering." Janice was relieved for that much as she knew any tiger, human or otherwise, was quite stubborn especially in the face of death. "I can't believe he dragged himself all the way from the beach, across the city, and into the fortress to stop Toris." She slightly showed a grin. "It must be a tiger thing."

"Must be," lightly agreed the grinning linguist. "Go finish up with your squad for the afternoon. Meet me here after sunset... we'll eat then head over to Gabrielle's."

Janice readily agreed, kissed her lover goodbye, and slipped out of the office. She spent the afternoon sweeping through the city with her patrol and more times than she cared to admit she wanted to stop at Gabrielle's home. Instead she kept her patrol busy and making sure all was quiet in the city. She also enjoy a little side trip to the market and picked on Salmoneus, which made her feel good for a bit. Salmoneus too pretended to enjoy his little friend's surprise visits and he was always quite pleasant but he knew the female dekarchos saw right through him. Still though, like any good salesman he continued trying to persuade his little friend that he was a changed merchant and had no products that remotely had to do with the Conqueror. Of course as soon as the dekarchos and her squad marched off his stall did an almost magical transformation and there were Conqueror products up for resale.

Janice ran a little behind in her patrol as she made it to the fortress half an hour after sunset but she dismissed her men for the night. She then decided first to go to the Conqueror's bedchambers because she wanted to pick up something for tonight. She entered the quiet and dimly lit chambers and noticed that Nakia had come through to clean up things. She rarely saw the Egyptian slave these days as she was so busy sashaying around as a dekarchos. She picked up her leather pack that she'd originally bought when first coming to Corinth and filled it with a couple of items then hurried out of the bedchambers.

When the archeologist started down the hallway her brisk walk went slower as she spotted the dark shaman, Alti, waiting at the end of the hallway. She knew she had plenty of protection on her between her sword and gun plus they were in the fortress, which was not only swarming with sentries but with Melinda Pappas as the Conqueror.

Alti slowly developed a dark smile when the small woman cautiously approached her. "I heard about your little incident yesterday... dekarchos."

Janice narrowed her eyes at how the shaman drew out her title as if it were a joke.

"Its strange how the Conqueror hasn't dealt with her brother," mentioned the thoughtful shaman. "She's usually swift with her executions."

"Maybe because it is her brother," chewed out the archeologist.

Alti laughed then leaned over the prone archeologist. "Who are you trying to fool,

Janice? The Conqueror does not know change but if she ever found it then the realm would be lost."

Janice's lips curled into a smirk as she too knew that the Conqueror was the realm. "What you so afraid of change for, Alti? You afraid to lose your spot as the biggest leech sucker in the world?"

Alti's face flickered with an angry reaction but then it disappeared as she threateningly whispered, "There are plenty of others that follow in Darphus and Velasca's wake, Janice Covington. You are just one minor passing in the Conqueror's life just like the rest." She lifted her right hand to bring it near the stranger but she paused. "There is change coming and you're days of sunrises are almost over." Suddenly she turned and glided down the hallway with her back to the archeologist.

"Yeah fuck you too," muttered the angry archeologist as she was so tempted to show Alti how many sunrises she had left. She adjusted her pack then turned to her right and entered the stairwell to go to the third level. She raced up and quickly ducked into the Conqueror's office because she couldn't be any later for Melinda.

Melinda informed Janice that she would need to leave first tonight and asked her to wait on the edge of the market for her. Janice found that Melinda had changed at some point into her leathers, bronze armor, and hooked on her sword and chakram. Janice received a quick kiss then left the office and eventually the fortress.

The translator passed some time by finishing up work on a scroll. She then stood up, pulled her black cloak off the back of her chair, and quickly put it on then went to the open window of the office. She scanned the torch lit city then she quickly moved about the office to blow out all the candles and torches. Her tall form disappeared in the bleakness of the office but she materialized by the dimly lit window that was rather large.

Melinda crouched on the edge of the window as her sights focused on the market where she hoped Janice was waiting for her. She pulled her hood over her head, peered down at the fortress grounds far below, and she quickly rolled out of the window and disappeared into the darkness without a sound.

Janice Covington studied the few passerbys that didn't give her much of a second glance. She toyed with a button of her jacket then she suddenly jumped when an unexpected hand touched her shoulder. She whirled around with her shocked features but sighed in relief. "Don't do that, Mel," she hissed hotly. She spotted her friend's devilish grin under the hood.

"Let's go quickly, Janice."

The archeologist conceded by swiftly moving along side her lover through the city. She guided Melinda through the city then finally ducked into an alleyway where the entrance to Gabrielle's home. She knocked on the door as Melinda inched closer to her, which comforted her greatly.

Joxer answered the door and he smiled at the archeologist. "Glad you made it, Janice."

"Come on, let us in before I freeze," complained the gruff archeologist.

Joxer quietly laughed at the woman's abrasive attributes but he side stepped and watched as Janice entered followed by a tall, unknown figure. He assumed it was this mysterious Melinda Pappas he'd heard so much about but hadn't met yet.

"Janice," warmly greeted Cyrene first. She wiped her hands on her apron and quickly came out of the kitchen to the pair. She first hugged Janice for awhile.

Melinda removed her hood and tried to stop eyeing Joxer because he certainly reminded her of Jack Kleiman. She then discovered that Cyrene had a hug for her too, which she warmly received.

Janice then saw at the bare dinner table sat the three Amazons she knew so well. "Can't you get off your ass and say hi, Eph?"

The Amazon in question laughed then quickly got up to hug her favorite irritating blond. She whispered in the archeologist's ear, "It's so good to see you, Janny."

"Yeah, yeah you too, feather head," teased Janice when she broke the hug.

Solari stepped up to the former stranger that she'd come to adore. "Ephiny and I have the most unbelievable story to tell you later." She then embraced the archeologist.

"Jesus Christ," complained the hugged stranger, "I thought you Amazons hated me."

"We should for sending us another irritating blond," jested Ephiny. She smirked at Janice's scowl then she faced Melinda Pappas, who she hugged too.

After the greetings between the friends Janice asked, "Where's Gabrielle and..." She fell short because her attention was grabbed by the bard, who stood at the top of the steps and was followed suit by the Conqueror.

"Glad you made it," commented the rebel leader from the top. She went down the steps as fast as she could then come up to her descendant.

The Conqueror stood back and watched with intent.

Gabrielle wouldn't be denied a hug from Janice.

Janice finally smiled as she tightly held her ancestor from another world. When she pulled back she found a warm hand against her cheek and concerned green eyes looking her face over.

"I was worried about you," sadly brought up the bard.

"I was worried about me too," confessed the archeologist. She took Gabrielle's hand into hers then partially turned to bring Melinda into the conversation. "Mel though took care of everything."

Gabrielle lifted her gaze to Melinda Pappas and warmly smiled as she greeted, "Its

good to see you again, Melinda."

Janice tugged on her lover's bracer covered wrist and pulled her forward.

Melinda received a gentle hug from the rebel leader, which made her smile too. She'd been in continuous contact with the rebel but face to face was always different in her opinion.

Gabrielle then half turned to urge her silent friend to join them because she knew this would be hard for the Conqueror. "A lot has happened while I was in the Amazon Nation."

"I reckon a lot has happened in Corinth while ya been gone," commented Melinda Pappas. Her features stoned over when she met the Conqueror's watchful gaze. She also unknowingly pressed her body against Janice's in a protective manner.

Janice's eyes swept over the dark woman that'd tortured her body for a week. The scabs were gone from her body but her mind was scarred by the memories. She wasn't quite ready to face any music that may sing of the Conqueror's changes. She cleared her throat then asked, "Where's Melpomene?"

"She was asleep," commented Cyrene, "but I would think she'd be up with all this noise." She glanced off to her right when she heard a sound. She smiled when she saw the girl's young and sleepy face.

Janice slipped past everybody and her grim face broke apart by a beautiful smile. "Hi, Mel."

Melpomene worked out the sleep fuzz in her vision. She smiled brightly at seeing the older woman she considered her sister. She broke into a charging run while squealing, "Janice!"

The archeologist knelt down and rocked back on her heels when the child landed into her body. She scooped up the girl into a powerful hug.

"I missed you, Janice," murmured the child.

Janice melted into Melpomene's affection and whispered back, "I missed you too." She slightly pulled back then gently stated, "I want you to meet my Mel." She saw the slightly offended look, which made her grin and correct, "My other Mel."

Melpomene switched back to her smile and clung to Janice.

Janice slowly stood up and hefted the girl so that she held her at her right side. Her newly increased arm strength made it much simpler compared to her past attempts. She was all a smile as she came over to her lover and introduced, "Melinda, you remember Melpomene?"

Melinda Pappas graced the child with a warm smile. "Oh yes." She stepped forward and gave the child a warm hug then a kiss to her cheek while Melpomene remained in Janice's hold.

"Sit down, everybody," offered Cyrene, "I'm almost finished dinner."

Janice lit up at the mention of food. "Mel and I ate already but...." She inquisitively peered up at lover for an answer.

Melinda chuckled then grinned at the mother. "I think Janice is still hungry though."

Everybody laughed together at the linguist's joke that fell on the blushing archeologist. Eventually the large group of friends filled in chairs around the table except Cyrene, who'd picked up plenty of food in the market today and was making a classic fish dish for them. Melinda sat beside Janice, who was flanked by Ephiny, Gabrielle, and then the Conqueror. On Janice's lap sat the excited Melpomene, who couldn't be pried or bribed from Janice.

The Amazons sat lumped together and occasionally helped fill in the holes of Gabrielle's story about the trial and the battle against Darphus. She only left out the details about the Conqueror's trials through Tartarus as that was something just between her and the Conqueror. By the time she finished, Cyrene was putting the food down with Ephiny and Joxer's help. The meal itself was rather quiet as everybody was thoroughly absorbed in the home cooked dinner that was enough to feed an army. And despite some of the underlying tension Cyrene's meal that was filled with her love seemed to ease that tension. For the first time in countless moons, Cyrene had most of her family together that seemed to be growing, which made her a glowing mother inside and out.

Janice shoved her cleared plate aside and happily moaned at her filled belly. "Damn... I think that totally beats the food back in the fortress," she remarked and grinned up at her lover.

Melinda chuckled and shook her head.

"Now who do you think ate more?" brought up Ephiny, who was grinning from ear to ear. "Gabrielle or Janice?"

"Hey," shot back Janice, "be nice, Eph. I'm in a good mood right now."

Ephiny folded her arms over her chest but she didn't lose her gloating expression.

Callisto now got up and started to clear the plates around the table. Cyrene joined her as did Solari. Once the dishes were removed Cyrene was busy warming up water for tea for whoever wanted any, which she suspected would be everybody but Melpomene. In the meantime, Janice and Melinda were prompted by Gabrielle to tell what'd happened in Corinth while they were away.

The Conqueror at this moment listened the most as this information confirmed much of what she saw in the astral projection. She'd stayed relatively quiet the entire time, which was obvious to everybody but it seemed to bother the bard out of anybody. Gabrielle understood the uncomfortable situation between the Conqueror, Janice, and Melinda too. She knew it wasn't something that would be corrected tonight or tomorrow but hopefully it would ease overtime.

"Toris is in the dungeons?" finally spoke up the Conqueror.

Melinda took the question so her lover wouldn't do it. "Yes and he's quite comfortable."

"He isn't hurt?" questioned Cyrene, who stood besides Ephiny and filling up a mug with steaming water from her bronze kettle.

"He had a shoulder wound," replied Janice, "but Mel had a healer take care of it."

Gabrielle was biting her lower lip as her dinner in her stomach turned. "He's just going to have to wait until after you deal with Alti huh?" Her view centered on the Conqueror next to her.

The ruler slowly nodded. "It's the safest place for him right now." Nor was she quite prepared to face her only living brother, who had clearly been plotting for moons to seek revenge for all her wrong doings.

"And everybody else," muttered the sighing archeologist.

Melinda secretly touched her lover's side to assure her.

"I don't understand what he was thinking," murmured the confused bard.

"That's the problem, he wasn't," remarked the ruler.

Gabrielle peered up at her friend. "But why would he... he just disappeared without telling Cyrene or me. That's not like him."

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow but murmured, "I'm sure he and mother could have said the same thing about me."

The rebel leader's mouth closed as she didn't consider that.

"Hatred changes people," sadly reminded the ruler.

Gabrielle shook her head but Cyrene's kiss to her temple calmed her a degree or two. She watched as her adopted mother filled her mug with the steaming water that mixed her tea. "Thanks, Cyrene."

"So now what's the game plan?" brought up Janice.

"I need to retake my place as the Conqueror," answered the ruler.

Melinda wasn't completely comfortable with this as she was going to argue it but Janice's hand on her thigh stopped her.

"I think the question here is what's going to happen to Alti?" challenged the archeologist and she locked on the ruler.

"I am going to rid of her," declared the ruler, "with or without anybody's help."

Janice Covington raised her face up to meet Melinda.

Melinda read her lover's concerns and questions in her honey green eyes. She wondered too if they could trust the Conqueror however when she saw how Gabrielle seemed to stand beside the ruler she knew she couldn't argue any points. If the rebel leader highly trusted her long time ruthless enemy then there wasn't much left to question. "What do you need us to do?"

The Conqueror inwardly relaxed at now receiving the support. She'd been working out her plans since she arrived back from Tartarus. She didn't plan on anybody truly facing Alti other than her and Lao Ma would be the key to Alti's soul being locked away. She just hoped she could get everybody to agree to letting her do this alone.

Quite later that night, Gabrielle had changed into a nightshift after saying goodnight to Janice and Melinda, who left for the fortress. Gabrielle was rather weary after what felt like an endless argument with the Conqueror and she failed to win. It seemed lately her bard skills were just failing her whenever she tried to argue her points, which caused her a headache tonight.

The Conqueror came into the bedroom after changing in the washroom that was across from the bedroom. She recognized how the rebel leader was trying to ignore her but she let it go for right now. She set her leathers down beside her boots and Amazon sword she'd been burrowing. She sat on the edge of the bed and remarked, "We've been through too much for a silent game."

The bard's shoulder slumped but her back was still to the ruler. She was fishing around in her small dress but gave up. She faced the ruler however didn't reply as she first took a seat on her bed. "Why do you have to do this?"

"I've already told you," answered the cold ruler.

Gabrielle sighed then leaned to her right. She propped her cane against her nightstand that was between the beds. "Why can't I help or Janice and Melinda? You can't do this alone."

"Yes I can," rebuked the Conqueror, "and I'm not endangering anymore lives but my own. This is my fight, Gabrielle."

"It's mine too," refused the bard.

"No." The Conqueror's face hardened as she coldly stated, "Alti made me and I made her... its time she's undone."

"This could kill you," hotly whispered the upset bard.

The Conqueror shrugged as if she didn't care. "As long as I can take her with me then who does it matter to?"

"It matters to me," shot back Gabrielle. Her eyes burned with her resolve. "It matters

to Cyrene."

The Conqueror got up and knelt down in front of her friend. "And did you see mother fighting me about this?"

The bard turned her head away and swallowed. "She knows you'll do what you want... but that doesn't mean she agrees with it."

"Mother understands what I have to do... that for me to begin fixing all that I've done has to start with Alti."

Gabrielle dropped her head down then whispered, "You're not going to be able to fix much if you end up dead."

"I can't fix much with Alti in my path," reminded the Conqueror. "And it won't stop with me... she'll be after mother, Toris... you."

Gabrielle swallowed against the hard lump in her throat as she met the ruler's stare again. "I know. I'm just..." She shook her head and suddenly stared up at the plaster ceiling that flickered from the candlelight. Her eyes filled with the tears that wanted to be shed from her emotions. "I just scared... scared for you." She lowered her head and found a concerned expression watching her. "What if she's able to reestablish the link between you two?"

The Conqueror understood the root of the bard's fears. "Do you really believe that link of Alti's controls me?"

"I don't know," murmured the rebel. "I do know you started to change after Yakut severed it."

"Did I really change after she did that?" argued the ruler.

Gabrielle sighed and shook her head. "I know... I just... Alti is so dangerous."

"So am I," reminded the Conqueror, which she knew caught the bard off guard.

Gabrielle bit her lower lip. Her right hand stretched out and clutched the unusual bronze charm around the ruler's neck. She tightly held it while whispering, "Promise me you won't become that monster again." Her voice pitched with emotions but her gaze stayed true on the Conqueror.

The Conqueror wanted to escape at that point because it was a guarantee she could never make in life. She'd been that monster most her life and it was often all she knew especially at the darkest points in her life.

"Cyrene was right," urged Gabrielle, "this cycle of hatred and revenge won't end until we learn to love and forgive again. And not just each other... but ourselves too."

Xena turned back to the bard and revealed herself in another rare display. "If I do that then I will become that monster again, Gabrielle."

"No," argued the bard, who gently tugged on the charm. "You'll become that monster because you can't forgive and can't love... isn't that what got you here in the first place?"

Xena lowered her head some because she knew the bard was right. Her entire life had been driven by hatred and revenge while love never found a place in her or even around her. She faintly nodded then whispered, "I don't know what love is, Gabrielle."

"Yes you do," argued the bard. "You knew as a child. You've just forgotten."

"It's not easy teaching an old warlord new tricks, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle sadly grinned at her friend's joke. "Neither is it easy to teach an old bard how to hold her tongue but I'm going to put my faith into you facing Alti alone." She lowered her head closer and murmured, "You promise me, Xena that you won't become that monster again."

Xena knew it was a trade on some level and she slowly nodded. She huskily whispered, "I promise." When Gabrielle released her Gaelic necklace, she quickly decided it was time to recoil so she softly ordered, "Get some sleep." Then she stood up.

The rebel leader allowed her friend the retreat because it'd been a hard conversation for them both. She slinked up the bed some, pulled the sheets back, and blew out the candles on the nightstand. She curled up in the cool bed but it slowly warmed up, which put her to sleep eventually.

The following day was spent getting prepared but the preparations were mostly made by Melinda. Janice kept up the regular duty of running the squad through the city. Melinda however went to Lao Ma and delivered a sealed message to her from the Conqueror. Lao Ma was also updated on the plans to stop Alti, which she carefully listened to but she didn't read the scroll until Melinda left her chambers.

Melinda then ordered her sentries to bring in a dozen bodies back from the cross field where prisoners were often sentenced. She knew this would keep Alti very busy as the shaman would feed off the souls of the dead prisoners. By early afternoon, she went to the Conqueror's bedchambers and collected the ruler's requested leathers, armor, and boots with leather greaves that had bronze support. She left the items near the door in leather satchels then disappeared to carry out her next item on the check list.

The fortress sentries were given an order by the Conqueror that their duty shift would be extended late tonight. The sentries were curious as to the reasoning, which the Conqueror never specified nor did their superior, Iolaus. Finally Melinda returned to the office and did her daily work so that suspicions wouldn't arise throughout the fortress. She only stopped her work when Janice arrived with concerns.

"Is everything ready?" questioned the archeologist, who closed the office door.

"I reckon so," agreed Melinda. "Alti has been rather busy today."

"So I heard," remarked Janice and she took a seat in one of the chairs. "The squad was talking about how many crucified prisoners the Conqueror ordered to be removed

from the fields. You don't think Alti will wonder?"

"She will," agreed Melinda, "but not before it's too late. She's too busy with them."

Janice slightly nodded. "You want me to head over to Gabrielle's?" She stretched out her legs some. "Are the Conqueror's things ready?"

"Yes." Melinda sat back in her chair then added, "Can you take a pack with you?"

"Does it matter which one?"

The translator shook her head. "Just take one and I'll be over a candlemark after dark or so."

Janice tilted her head and asked, "How did you sneak out of the fortress anyway?"

Melinda smirked and smugly replied, "I have many skills."

Janice groaned and rolled her eyes then stood up. "I personally like your skills in-

"Jaaaanice," drew out the linguist, her blue orbs twinkling.

The archeologist smirked. "You started it."

Melinda laughed at how her lover always reverted to that kid like remark just to poke at her. She stood up and neared her lover with a tender expression. "Will ya be okay going by yaself?"

"Christ, Mel I know I pretend to act like a kid but-

"I know," cut in the linguist, "but I'm talkin' about the Conqueror."

"I'll be fine," assured the archeologist. Then she was on her tiptoes for a tender kiss. She brushed her hand across Melinda's face and whispered, "You be careful too, Mel."

"I'll see ya in a bit," promised the translator.

Janice went to the Conqueror's bedchambers and picked up one of the satchels. She also grabbed three more oranges from the fruit bowl and tucked them away. It wasn't long before she found herself knocking on the door to Gabrielle and Cyrene's home. Joxer let her in and she smiled to see Ephiny sipping on some tea at the dinner table with Solari. "I brought you feather heads some more."

Solari put her tea down and grinned. "You brought those... round ones right? I liked those better than the yellow things."

"Bananas," clarified the archeologist. She chuckled and swung her pack off then popped an orange out of the bag. "I brought only oranges." She tossed one orange to Ephiny then the last one to Solari.

"I love these things," murmured Solari and she started to peel off the skin as Janice

showed her and Ephiny last night.

"Gabrielle and the Conqueror are upstairs," informed Ephiny, who was busy peeling her orange too.

"Thanks." Janice slung the pack over her shoulder and marched up the steps to find the Conqueror alone in the bedroom. Janice was tense but she curtly remarked, "I brought some of the things you asked for. Mel is bringing the rest."

The Conqueror only moved her head in understanding and received the heavy pack from the small woman. She set the bag down on the bed she'd slept in the past two nights. She returned her focus to Janice. "Janice-"

"I really don't want to hear it," argued the archeologist. "I'm not like Gabrielle... I'm not a forgiver like her." She folded her arms over her chest. "You tortured me for six damn days and you would have probably killed me at the end. Just because you did a hundred eighty degree switch doesn't mean I'm going to rollover and forgive you."

"First, I didn't just rollover and forgive her," came the bard's hard voice.

Janice turned her head to the bard and a sigh escape her.

"Second," continued the annoyed bard, "nobody is expecting you to forgive the Conqueror for what she did because that's your choice."

"And third?" urged the archeologist.

"Third that damn stubbornness of yours won't help anybody, especially you," remarked Gabrielle. She limped closer to her descendant. "I understand how you feel, Janice."

Janice did realize that as her ancestor suffered far more than her between her family lost and her legs. It did make her wonder how the bard was able to forgive the Conqueror.

"You were right, Janice." Gabrielle saw the confusion written on her descendant's face. "Without the Conqueror here the realm will crumble and there will be chaos."

The archeologist glimpsed at the silent ruler then back at Gabrielle. "And as you reminded me there are no tyrants that reform."

Gabrielle sighed as her words were thrown back in her face.

"There's always a first," remarked the Conqueror. She stepped closer to the archeologist. "Tell me, Janice who am I in your world?"

Janice narrowed her eyes then shook her head at her dark thoughts. She was rarely the persecuting type but for some reason she was in this case; she was with the Conqueror. Maybe she was trying hard to separate the Conqueror from Xena the Warrior Princess and even from Melinda Pappas. She didn't want to believe that this monster could lie within Melinda Pappas yet she had to face the light of truth.

"Melinda told me that the Conqueror is a hero in her world?" tried the bard.

The archeologist faintly nodded then whispered, "Before she was a hero she was a warlord."

Gabrielle stepped closer to her descendant and gently questioned, "How is this any different in the end?"

Janice angry resolve crumbled and she met her ancestor's determination. "It's probably better... this way," she sadly mentioned. "This way the Conqueror can lift a finger to bring peace to the entire realm... Xena and Gabrielle sacrificed everything for nothing."

"They wouldn't have tried so hard if they thought it was nothing," argued the bard.

"No... they wouldn't," finally agreed the archeologist. Unexpectedly she released hidden tears but Gabrielle grabbed her up into a warm hug.

Gabrielle held onto her descendant in a strong embrace that she knew she needed too.

The Conqueror tilted her head when she heard the door downstairs open and close. She lightly touched the bard's back to let her know she was leaving and she silently disappeared.

Gabrielle pulled back from the hug but used Janice's body for balance. Now that the Conqueror was gone she mentioned, "She's been through a lot too and she's trying hard. If we don't try and move forward together then we'll only end up falling apart."

"I know," agreed Janice. "It's just easier said than done."

"If it was so easy then would life be worth living?" Gabrielle didn't wait for an answer and instead guided her distant family member out of the bedroom.

Janice Covington was relieved to see her lover downstairs. She followed her ancestor down the steps then greeted Melinda.

Everybody conversed while the Conqueror took Melinda's pack and disappeared upstairs. While everybody talked the Conqueror was changing into the clothes that Melinda and Janice had provided her. When her heavy boots with her bronze and leather greaves announced her approach at the top of the steps everybody stopped talking and gazed up.

Gabrielle realized she was staring at her friend, who was now truly the Conqueror again. Her stomach pitched briefly yet she reminded herself that this was a change Conqueror and she had to have faith.

The Conqueror's black cape had a purple interior and it flowed behind and it was fastened by the large claw like pads over her shoulders. Her leathers were as dark as her hair then there was the gold that stood out from the rest. The thin wire armor twisted around her breasts then over top but the golden chain across her chest

reflected the candlelight the most along with the few gold plated skirt tassels. Last her arms displayed dark leather bracers and the black gauntlets had gold weaving a Gaelic like design to match her outfit. The top of her right hand was covered by bronze chain mail while she wore a black leather glove on her left.

Gabrielle stood up and approached her friend. "Well... that's a change."

The Conqueror slyly grinned as she felt more in control than ever. Her eyes honed in on Melinda Pappas. "It's time to switch, Melinda."

Melinda Pappas stood up from the table and she removed her cloak. Her armor echoed that of the Conqueror's except it was the armor and leathers the Conqueror had specially made in honor of M'Lila. It was the same ensemble that Xena the Warrior Princess wore according to Gabrielle's descriptions in the scrolls.

The Conqueror admired the attire her descendant had worn mostly. She'd never tried on the armor, leathers, boots, and matching sword because she'd never felt right in doing it. Since Melinda was her mirror she could see that the outfit gave Melinda a completely different light.

Melinda Pappas reached to her back and unclipped the sword and sheath. She tossed them to the ruler.

The Conqueror easily clipped the sheathed sword to her side so that it was slightly tucked within her cape.

Melinda took a step closer and lifted her right hand with the chakram firmly gripped.

The Conqueror stretched out her right hand and held the other side of her infamous weapon. She fixed eyes with her descendant and conveyed a promise that she knew Melinda would understand.

Melinda finally released the weapon and bent down to retrieve a few daggers from her boots. She held out the handles to the ruler.

The Conqueror tucked them away then reminded, "The breast dagger and key too."

"We need that key," cut in Janice, who stood up beside her lover.

"You'll have the scepter," promised the Conqueror.

"What do you need it for?" argued the archeologist.

Melinda touched her lover's shoulder then whispered, "Its okay, Janice." She removed the breast dagger along with the key.

The ruler slipped the dagger away and the key into her cleavage with a simply blurring motion. Without another word, she marched to the door that Joxer guarded.

"Wait," called Gabrielle, who limped up to the ruler. "How will we know if you succeeded?"

The Conqueror knew the rebel was stalling but she relented for a few beats. "You'll know."

Cyrene appeared beside her daughter and Gabrielle but she was focused on her child. "Please be careful, Xena."

The Conqueror made no promises as she could only nod.

The mother stepped forward and made her daughter hug her goodbye. She was relieved when her child hugged her back fiercely and she whispered, "I love you, little one."

The Conqueror closed her eyes then murmured back, "I love you too, mother."

Cyrene withdrew and touched her daughter's cheek then without another word she slipped away.

Gabrielle opened the door and followed the ruler out of the home. She closed the door then found the ruler facing her. "Don't stake your life on this."

The Conqueror stepped up to the worried bard and sadly smiled. "Now I never thought I'd heard those words from you."

"Neither would I but things change."

"Things only change because people change," remarked the ruler. "I need to go." She turned to leave but a nimble, small hand caught her leather wrist and stopped her.

"Thank you, Xena." Gabrielle viewed the misunderstanding from the ruler. "You helped me see the Light when I've been so blind to it."

"I didn't do that," argued the ruler, "you did that yourself." She came back to her friend and whispered, "Thank you for believing in me when nobody else could."

"I didn't do that," mimicked the bard, "you had to see it in yourself first." She started to release her friend while reminding, "Don't forget your promise to me, Xena."

The Conqueror started to move away as her hand grazed over Gabrielle's. She vanished into the darkness of the alley but her voice called, "I won't ever forget."

Gabrielle wanted to fold her arms over her chest even though she couldn't do it. She caught a brief glimpse of the Conqueror at the end of the alley then she was gone around the building. She opened the door and entered to a small argument between Janice and Melinda.

"Mel, we needed that damn key."

"Janice-"

"No," snapped the archeologist, "we don't know if she'll win against Alti or not."

"She'll make it," argued the nearing bard. "Just have some faith, Janice."

Janice sighed then stated, "I do but I don't like this... something just doesn't feel right."

"And if ya listened to me instead of barkin' at me I could show ya something."

Janice rested her hands on her hips and bit off her remarks.

Melinda extracted a small sterling box that she opened and turned it to her lover.

The archeologist's eyes widened and she snapped, "Why didn't you tell me! Christ, Mel." She almost touched the Cronos Ring that was tucked in the box but she stopped.

"Well if ya let me talk then I could have," reminded the southerner.

"Way to go, Janny," chided Ephiny.

The archeologist glared at her feathery friend but lifted an apologetic look to her lover. "Sorry, Mel."

"Mmmm," replied the linguist.

Janice sighed at her lover's unforgiving tone so her shoulders slumped. "I am sorry... I'm just really...."

"Tense," finished the translator. "I reckon we all are, Janice."

Janice took a seat beside Ephiny and murmured, "Something just doesn't seem quite right."

Gabrielle sat on the opposite side of the table. "I don't like much sitting around and waiting."

Melinda remained standing and she folded her arms over her chest. "It is odd that she wanted to do this alone."

"Maybe the Conqueror knows something we don't," brought up Callisto, "She's great at being devious."

Gabrielle glanced at the Amazon and she knew Callisto hadn't said it with hatred but with open observation.

"Well did she say anything that makes you think that, Janice?" probed Ephiny.

Janice shook her head and slumped back in her chair with her legs stretching out. "It's not the Conqueror that makes me wonder. It's something else and I can't put my finger on it."

Melinda watched as Cyrene took a seat at the table.

"Did somebody else say something?" questioned Solari.

Janice's features twisted tighter then she stopped staring at the floor. "Wait, wasn't there a leak in the Amazon Nation? You said Velasca was, right?"

Gabrielle nodded at the archeologist's question. "Yes, she was teamed up with Darphus."

"Mel, did you know before last night that Velasca had been the leak?"

The southerner was confused by her lover's questioning but she shook her head. "No, Janice... why?"

Janice suddenly popped out of her chair, which made everybody jump in their skin. "Holy shit!"

"What is it?" urged Melinda.

"Alti... shit... why didn't I see it before!" Janice threw up her hands then faced Melinda. "Last night before I left to come here, I bumped into Alti."

"You didn't mention this," remarked the southerner.

"It wasn't a big deal," argued Janice, who shook her head then continued her explanation. "She said something that I just realized she couldn't have known."

"What?" demanded the translator.

Janice grabbed her lover's hands and repeated what Alti had said. "There are plenty of others that follow in Darphus and Velasca's wake."

"By the gods," rasped Gabrielle, "Alti was helping Darphus and Velasca."

"I bet that's how they got that army built so fast," suggested Callisto, she then laughed and reminded, "If Alti knew the Conqueror was in the Amazon Nation then she knew who Melinda was too. What a clever little shaman."

Janice's jaw snapped shut as she realized this too.

"She's setting up the Conqueror," whispered the bard in fear. She quickly got to her feet and announced, "We have to warn the Conqueror." She scanned her friend's faces.

Janice peered up at her lover and whispered, "Mel?"

Melinda saw the plea on Gabrielle's face and in Janice's too. She nodded then stated, "Let's go."

Chapter 24 - Et Tu?

Alti swept down the torch lit hallway after two sentries reported to her that the Conqueror requested her audience in the courtroom. She approached the courtroom and expected there to be some masses there but it was quiet. Her black eyes centered off to the right where the Conqueror was seated at her throne.

"Come in, Alti," greeted the ruler's cold voice. She waved the shaman into her court while she slumped in her throne. Her legs were stretched out and sprawled open while her arms now rested on the chair arms, her hands curled over the ends.

The shaman glided into the empty courtroom and stood before the ruler, who was flanked by two guards. She slipped her hands into her robe and respectfully bowed. When she straightened up she realized that to the right of the throne stood the golden scepter that shined the Cronos Stone. "Welcome home, my liege."

The Conqueror's lips curled into a vicious smile. "The mice will play when the tiger is away," she remarked. She tilted her head and her eyes slotted. "I've already killed two of the mice... now you're all that remains, Alti."

The shaman's full lips eased into a ruthless smile. "My liege, I do not know what you speak of."

The Conqueror laughed with her head dropping back. She shook her head as her laughs echoed away in the courtroom. "The games are over, Alti." She sat up in her throne then gave a piercing whistle.

Alti stiffened when doors in each of the columns of the courtroom that usually remained locked suddenly opened. Two sentries each stepped out of the doors, closed them, and unsheathed their swords and made sure to lock the doors back up.

The Conqueror grew smugger when the main doors that led outside threw open and six soldiers armed with spears and swords marched into the court. She waved them to close and lock the doors from outside. Then her eyes lowered to the dark shaman. "I would offer you the easier way out of this, Alti but I know your answer already."

The shaman's upper lip twitched from her mounting anger. "You owe me everything... I made you the Destroyer of Nations."

The Conqueror's eyes lit up with such a challenge. "No, Alti I made myself the Destroyer of Nations and I will continue doing so without you." She drummed her right fingers on her throne's arm. "I do not require any shamanism to conqueror the world." She slowly stood up and plucked her scepter up into her right hand.

"Do not fool yourself," whispered the shaman. "That little warlord rebellion has already caused unrest in the realm."

"And I've almost put that rebellion down." The Conqueror stood poised at the top of her dais and her eyes fixed on the evil shaman.

Alti body trembled with her rage. "Did the rebellion not show you how weak you've become? You've lost your destiny, Conqueror but I can return you to it."

The Conqueror slammed her scepter onto the dais's floor, which loudly echoed through the court. "I make my own destiny, shaman and it's time we've parted destines."

Alti growled then hotly questioned, "And what happened to our agreement to conquer the world, my liege?" Her pupils shrunk from fury, which made her eyes grow blacker.

The Conqueror recalled her mortal enemy's impacting words from her past as she lifted her chin. "There was never an us, Alti... there is only the realm." Her hungry smile developed as she definably declared, "And I am the realm." She proudly descended the throne while casually mentioning, "But don't think what we've shared was meaningless. I'll always remember it... remember you." The Conqueror lifted her scepter so that the Cronos Stone tilted the shaman's head back. "You'll have a special place of honor among..." She leaned in and huskily finished, "my conquered."

Alti snarled as her right hand whipped out of her robe and her swiftly obscured hand rammed into the Conqueror's left side. She snidely whispered, "Long live the Conqueror." She twisted the dagger then ripped it from the Conqueror's side, which dripped the ruler's blood.

The Conqueror didn't flinch despite the hot pain flashing up her side.

Alti lifted the dagger up between their faces and it hummed a bright green. "If I can't have your soul here then I will find it another time." She laughed as the ruler's blood trickled over the handle and over her hand.

The Conqueror hastily tried to take a swipe at the Cronos Dagger but she was too late as the shaman vanished in a green light. She scanned the soldiers while barking out, "Nobody passes through any doors!" Her left hand quickly came up and touched the Cronos Stone, which flashed green and the ruler vanished.

The Conqueror's body felt like it was being torn apart as the Cronos Stone linked to her mind. It read her destination she had in mind then suddenly the dark world exploded green so that her eyes felt burned. She then suddenly sensed a firm grounding under her boots as she remained hunched over and gasping for air. She slowly stood up while clenching the scepter in her right hand. She rose up to her feet gradually as she stared at her hometown of Amphipolis nestled in the base of the valley and sprawling along side the Strymon River. It was just as she recalled it- the village that was growing into the focal city of the Macedonian Providence before it was attack by Cortese.

Suddenly a sharp scream pierced the peacefulness on the hilltop that the Conqueror resided and she immediately recognized the cry. Her heart wildly beat as she broke into a powerful sprint away from her village. Her bleeding wound protested the energetic run up a hillside but the ruler ignored it. She erupted over the side and discovered the dark shaman towering over a young, fallen girl in the tall grass with her hands up.

The Conqueror put the scepter into her left hand while she extracted her sword from

her side. She didn't wait another beat as she quickly ran the rest of the distance, gave her powerful war cry, and leaped into the air with her right leg stretching out.

Alti heard the echoing cry that she didn't expect. She looked up too late and was slammed by a hard boot to her chest. She yelled when she went flying into the air across the hill top and landed in front of some shrubs. She growled and lifted her head.

The Conqueror stood between the young girl and the shaman but her back was to the child.

The girl of about seven winters old sat up with her hands behind her back. She was awed by the woman that'd just saved her from the darker woman that'd attacked her.

Alti rose up to her full height and held out her hand with her fingers pointing at the Conqueror. "Time to relive some of your past, my liege." She called on her shamanism powers and her wild eyes centered on the Conqueror's soul. She clenched her hand, which sent out her power after the Conqueror to relive her past when she was attacked in previous battles.

The Conqueror braced herself because she knew of the shaman's abilities. Her teeth clenched and showed while her muscles tensed and protruded from under her skin. Then the pain never shocked her body as she anticipated and instead M'Lila's Gaelic necklace brightly shined a beautiful gold. She peered down at the glowing charm that obviously repelled Alti's shamanism.

Alti lowered her hand and stared at the charm with rage. "The eternity emblem of Danu," she hissed hotly. "It makes no difference." She aimed her shamanism for the girl behind the Conqueror.

The Conqueror hastily acted as she charged the shaman.

The young girl's scream expelled from her lips that vibrated all her pain. She fell to the grass and balled up as her mind flashed with images of some warrior's life in a battle. The corner of her lip trickled out with blood.

The ruler slammed her hilted fist across the shaman's head.

Alti's shamanism broke from torturing the girl. She swiftly grabbed the Conqueror's protecting necklace but she growled when the charm blazed against her palm in protest. Alti released the ember hot charm when she couldn't hold it anymore. She went for her only weapon and took a swipe.

The Conqueror easily leaned back as her enemy missed her face. She then did a fast roundhouse kick, which sent her opponent reeling into the air again. She then saw that the shaman was preparing to use her dagger to transport off. She leapt into the air and landed next to the shaman. She kicked the Cronos Dagger out of her hand then knelt down beside Alti. "Ah ah aaaah, Alti... no more time travel for you." She slammed her fist into the shaman's face to knock her unconscious.

The Conqueror climbed to her feet while Alti moaned and her head slumped to the

right. She turned her head to the young girl curled up on the ground. She hastily went to her and knelt beside her; her right hand carefully touched the child's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

The girl's watery blue eyes met the older woman's. "I... I think so," she rasped and furiously wiped her tears away.

"Try to sit up," offered the Conqueror. She steadied her voice to be even while she helped the girl sit up. She inspected the girl's face and wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth. "You'll be fine, Xena."

The girl's eyes widened at her mysterious savior. "How do you know my name?" She shook her head then hastily asked, "Who are you? Are you a goddess?"

The Conqueror's lips curled into a grin as childhood memories floated back to her. She leaned in and whispered, "No, I'm not a goddess... I'm mortal just like you." She then stood up with her golden scepter in her left hand and her right hand was her sword. She tried not to chuckle at the girl's worshipping trance that was locked on her. There was so much she could tell her younger self however she knew the risks that were involved too.

Instead the Conqueror turned her back on the girl and went back to the Cronos Dagger. She picked it up then tucked it away in her belt. She marched over to the moaning shaman that would wake any heartbeat. She placed her sword hand on the shaman so that her skin met the shaman's but she paused and peered over her shoulder at her young self.

Young Xena was sitting up and stared in amazement as the raven haired god-like warrior vanished with the unconscious woman. She whispered, "Ly will never believe this." She then heard her mother frantically yelling for her so she tried to get up.

"Open the damn gates!" furiously demanded Melinda when she raced up to the gates of the fortress. Just behind her were the Amazons and her lover was at her side.

"M-m-my liege, we thought you were-"

"Hurry, fools," snapped Melinda then when the gates were open wide enough she raced through it.

Janice slipped through then waited for the Amazons to come too. She then turned to the gate guards and waited for her ancestor to move through the gate. She knew Melinda would race ahead with the Amazons so she focused on the sentry guards. She noticed how they were gawking at her and Gabrielle but she hotly ordered, "Lock up the gates and don't let anybody in or out."

The guards wavered because they still gaped at Gabrielle and Janice.

"Now," clipped the archeologist, which got their attention.

"Yes, dekarchos," replied a sentry. He shoved his partner to hurry with the heavy iron gates, which were merely the first layer of the gates.

Janice turned back to her ancestor and whispered, "Come on." Up ahead, she heard her lover in a heated argument with the three guards in front of the heavy doors to the courtroom. When she and Gabrielle ascended the steps the soldiers were opening the doors for them.

Melinda and the Amazons poured into the courtroom just past the six soldiers that stood inside. Her eyes swept the courtroom that was only occupied by lined up soldiers. She instantly noticed the guards all became confused at seeing her presence plus three Amazons behind her.

Janice and Gabrielle ambled in last and also were shocked to see only sentries. Then a bright green light flashed in the center of the courtroom and two bodies slowly materialized.

"Close the doors and lock them!" demanded Melinda to the sentries outside.

The sentries hastily acted and threw the doors shut then slipped the heavy wood bolt that required two to work.

The linguist turned her head back as she witnessed the return of the Conqueror and the shaman.

Alti was awake that instant and she brought her fist into the Conqueror's jaw.

The Conqueror growled but she was thrown onto her back when the shaman kicked her off. Her scepter was thrown from her left hand thanks to the extra shot of pain from her wound.

The gold scepter rolled several paces away from her fingertips.

Alti tried to chase after it but the Conqueror's long legs moved and made her stumble away.

The ruler snarled and flipped onto her feet but she staggered from side to side as her bleeding wound was affecting her more. She glimpsed to her left and saw the newcomers. "I told you to stay behind!" she furiously yelled at the group.

Alti's features lit up at seeing the prospect of new casualties. "My liege, you've allied with the enemy?" She laughed in amusement and tormented, "I'm so glad they've decided to join the fun." She stepped back twice then lifted her arms. "You're all just in time to see what a few thousand souls gives." Her grin widened and her feet started to hover over the marble floor.

The Conqueror's features darkened dangerously as she knew Alti had grown powerful. Her stomach knotted at the concept of having to fight a super powerful shaman and especially with everybody now in the courtroom. She didn't mind sacrificing her soldiers but this was far more risky.

Alti yelled and her shamanism allowed her to quickly fly at an alarming speed.

The Conqueror was abruptly slammed by Alti's brute hit that made her airborne. She smashed hard into the floor and moaned from all the pain coursing through her body. She forced her body to get up.

Janice snapped out of her awestruck stare and grabbed Melinda's arm. "You and the Amazons distract her. I've got six bullets so move when I tell you to do it."

Melinda glanced at the Amazons, who all unsheathed their swords in agreement. She had the Amazon sword that'd been the Conqueror's earlier. She and the Amazons hastily joined the Conqueror in fighting the dark shaman.

Janice Covington knelt and swiftly ripped her revolver from her holster. She cocked the hammer then turned to Gabrielle. "Whatever you do, don't make yourself a target to Alti." She didn't say anything else as she approached the ensuing fight. She lifted her gun and carefully aimed it at the flying shaman that was attacking her friends.

Melinda slashed at Alti and caught her on the leg.

Alti growled then quickly flew up higher away from the four women that were trying to attack her.

Janice smirked as she lifted her gun and had perfect aim. Her index finger started to pull back on the trigger.

"Janice!" yelled Gabrielle however the bard's warning was too late.

The Conqueror had already lunged and slammed the archeologist to the ground.

Janice was on her back, her body crushed by the powerful body over hers. She peered up as her revolver was mere inches from her grasp but she hotly growled, "What the Hell are you doing?"

"I won't let you kill her," the ruler hissed back.

Alti's cold eyes flickered to the Conqueror wrestling with the archeologist then her sights centered on the shiny metal weapon that Janice Covington had since the beginning.

Melinda followed the shaman's gaze. "No," she breathed when Alti dove for the gun. She gave a warcry then sprinted after the gun and shaman.

Gabrielle turned to the sentry next to her, who stood stiff. She ripped his spear from his grasp and took aim at the swooping shaman. She tossed the spear with amazing precision thanks to her strengthened arms.

Alti's fingers curled around the barrel of the gun but the spear pierced through the top of her palm. She dropped the weapon as she soared back up into the air and ripped the spear from her hand. She screamed in pain then turned her angry eyes onto the rebel leader.

Melinda scooped up the revolver as it dropped from the air. She backed pedaled so

she could get a better aim at her flying target.

Alti heft the spear towards the rebel and prepared to hurl it.

The Conqueror sprung to her feet while yelling, "Chaaaayaaaaa!" She rocketed straight up into the air with her right hand reaching up and her fingers wrapping around the shaft of the flying spear that was aimed at Gabrielle. She spotted Melinda's actions and in midair she spun the spear around then when her feet hit the ground she threw it at her descendant.

The linguist's face broke with shock when the revolver was ripped from her hands by the spear.

The revolver flew in the air then resounded on the floor with the spear rolling over top of it.

"Spears, now!" yelled the Conqueror.

The soldiers with the spears all pulled their arms back simultaneously then aimed at the flying shaman. They hurled the spears at the dark shaman flying high above.

Melinda quickly backed flipped across the court and landed beside the Amazons so she wouldn't be caught in the rain of spears.

Alti dodged the spears with ease thanks to her incredible speed.

Janice Covington climbed to her feet and unsheathed her sword but she tried to inch for her revolver without rousing the shaman's suspicions.

"Come down here and fight us, Alti!" shouted the ruler.

Alti laughed and replied, "I don't think so, my liege." She then set her eyes on Gabrielle because she knew the Conqueror would protect her above all.

The Conqueror sneered that Alti was targeting her shamanism on Gabrielle. She reached for her chakram but she knew she was too late when Gabrielle painfully cried out behind her.

The rebel leader's mind filled with the images of her legs being broken when she was lashed to the cross. She lost her grip on her cane and started to tumble down the steps.

The Conqueror jumped up the few steps and caught her friend with her left arm with her sword falling to the ground. She held the crying bard while taking aim with her chakram then something caught her eye on the balcony.

Alti knew that leering look of the Conqueror, which broke her concentration on attacking the bard. She followed the ruler's line of view and when she turned around her eyes filled with the view of a flying tiger with his claws and teeth out.

Hu's powerful roar resounded through the courtroom.

Alti's painful scream followed as she was sent crashing onto the ground. Her shoulder screamed in pain when claws entered through her shoulder and ripped her skin open. She grabbed the tiger by his face and held him back from ripping into her throat. She focused her shamanism on the tiger and flashed images of Toris's sword ripping his gut open.

Hu howled then fell off the shaman.

Alti slowly staggered to her feet but when she was standing a hard fist slammed into her face. She hissed and went stumbling back but a kick to her stomach landed her on her back.

The Conqueror towered over her enemy and in her left gloved hand was her chakram.

Janice Covington cocked the hammer on her revolver and aimed it at Alti, who was trying to stand up again. Her aim though wasn't true as the Conqueror's body was in the way. She growled in annoyance so she took a side step.

Melinda waved at the Amazons to move.

Ephiny, Solari, and Callisto hastily encircled the shaman with their blade tips pointed at the bleeding shaman.

Melinda stood behind Alti with her dark face mirroring that of the Conqueror. "Move, Alti and we'll run you through," she snarled dangerously.

Gabrielle was finally on her feet again with her cane. She was breathing heavily but she glimpsed up when she spotted the beautiful Chin woman standing on the wrap around balcony high above.

Lao Ma pointed her index and middle finger at Janice Covington.

The archeologist's gun was mysteriously pried from her hands and it floated across the court.

The Conqueror lifted her chakram and placed the blade under the shaman's chin. She leaned into Alti and huskily whispered, "This is your destiny, Alti... death by the Conqueror." Her right hand was behind her and her fingers wrapped around cold steel.

Alti wanted to move but the sword blades all reacted to her slight motion. She now trembled in fear but she angrily promised, "If you kill me then the Amazons will never be able to enter Eternity."

Ephiny shifted her grip on her sword hilt when she heard this.

"Here's a riddle for you, Alti." The Conqueror's right hand slipped between their bodies and she moved her face into Alti's; her lips almost brushing the shaman's. "What are you destined never to find in any of your lifetimes?"

Alti's features twisted in anger. "You can't kill me, Xena... you need me like I need you."

"If she doesn't then I will," promised Melinda from behind.

Alti ignored the remark as she held the Conqueror's gaze. She stared deep into the Conqueror's eyes until she read into her soul. Then her astral projection abilities suddenly pinpointed a moment in the Conqueror's life and she huskily rasped, "No, you knew all this time!" She inhaled sharply when something pressed up against her gut. "Our destiny is to rule the world, Xena don't betray it."

The Conqueror slowly pulled back from Alti's space while murmuring, "The betrayals end here... with you."

The courtroom echoed with a loud shot then there was silence.

Alti peered down at her stomach when the immense pain ravaged her body. She stared in shock as the smoking revolver remained in the Conqueror's hand and her blood oozed from the wound the bullet made in her stomach. The bullet had traveled up through her ribs and just grazed her heart then buried itself into her left shoulder.

The Conqueror lowered the gun to her side. Her blue eyes remained steely as she watched the shaman slowly die from the bullet.

Alti grasped the Conqueror's forearm and rasped, "Et tu, meus leodium?"

The Conqueror's upper lip curled and she replied, "Yes, Alti." Then she stepped back twice. "Enjoy Avici."

Alti collapsed on the floor and her crimson blood pooled around her body.

The Amazons lowered their swords simultaneously and stared at the dead shaman.

Melinda read the ruler, who was shaking some but nobody could tell but her.

The Conqueror twisted her head and called, "Lao Ma, where is she now?"

Lao Ma had her eyes closed but her eyes were flickering under her eyelids. "She is in the Chamber of Blood," she gently answered. "She is still descending to the Chamber of Avici."

Janice was knelt beside Hu and was relieved to see he was okay after all. She stood up as Hu carefully tried to get up onto all fours.

Gabrielle limped to her descendant.

Ephiny shook her head then questioned aloud, "How will our sisters enter Eternity?"

The Conqueror's brow was covered in sweat and her body burned hotter than normal even for a battle. "The new Holy Word that Yakut must give the Amazon dead is Love." She then rapidly fell to her knees and her head rolled as her eyes spun uncontrollably.

"Conqueror!" cried the scared bard, who hastily limped towards the ruler.

Melinda Pappas made it over to the ruler just as she pitched forward. She turned the moaning ruler over in her arms found the source of her pain; the wound was bleeding profusely now from the continuous fighting.

"What's happened?" demanded the rebel leader.

"She's been injured," answered the southerner. She turned her head to the sentries and furiously ordered, "Get the damn healer!" She worked her arms under the Conqueror and with gritted teeth she stood up with the ruler cradled in her arms.

Everybody stared in amazement at the display of strength from Melinda Pappas. Gabrielle broke from the trance first and quickly followed along side the linguist.

The sentry opened the door and stepped aside when the two seeming Conquerors stepped past. He was absolutely confused by two rulers that he didn't have time to question anything.

Melinda carried the ruler up to the bedchambers. She carefully deposited the wounded ruler onto the bed then she quickly inspected the wound. Behind her she heard Solari, Callisto, and Gabrielle following after her. "Solari, get the fireplace started."

The Amazon jumped at the barking order but she hastily went to the fireplace across the chambers. She stole a few heartbeats as she assessed how to start the fire.

"Callisto, I need a bowl of water and some towels from the washroom."

Callisto quickly crossed the bedchambers and disappeared into candlelit bathroom.

Gabrielle stood at the side of the bed near the Conqueror's head. She gently touched and ruler's moist forehead and whispered, "Conqueror?"

The ruler's eyes were closed; her breathing heavy but she clasped her hand through Gabrielle's. "Xena," she reminded in a hoarse tone.

The bard's tears reached the edge of her eyes yet she contained them. She peered up at Melinda, who was ripping a dagger out of the Conqueror's boot. "Is she....?"

The translator rolled the ruler onto her right side while saying, "She's lost a lot of blood." She knew time would be wasted by removing the armor and leathers so instead she used the dagger to efficiently cut away the blood soaked leathers around the wound. "Where's that damn healer?" she hotly complained.

Janice Covington quickly entered the bedchambers with Hu behind her then Ephiny following up. "I took care of the men in the courtroom. The healer is coming now, Mel."

"Janice, help Solari with the fire and put the poker into the fire."

The archeologist slightly grimaced but she quickly went to help Solari.

"Ephiny, I need you to balance the Conqueror."

The Amazon came up to the right of Melinda and carefully held the ruler still.

Callisto finally appeared with a soaked towel then another dried one.

Melinda picked up the wet towel and carefully dabbed it along the bloody wound to clean it up. She was able to assess the wound better and realized it would require more than just a few stitches. It looked as if Alti had twisted the blade in the ruler's side making it a lot worse.

"What's the fire for?" murmured the bard.

"The wound can't be stitched closed," answered the Conqueror.

Melinda sighed and nodded. "It has to be burned closed before she loses anymore blood." Then from the corner of her eye she saw the healer rushing into the bedchambers.

The healer stopped short after he scanned the room that had two rulers, the rebel leader, the prisoner, and three mythical Amazons not to mention a tiger. His eyes were wider than Helios and his chest still.

"Get over here, Cadmus before the next thing you see is Elysia."

The healer snapped out of it when he processed the threat from the ruler's voice but he didn't know which had spoken. He raced over to the bedside and setup his medical kit on the nearby nightstand. He mentally switched into his healer mind state and clipped, "What happened?"

"A dagger wound to the left side. It'll have to be burned closed," informed Melinda.

Cadmus turned around and inspected the bleeding wound then nodded his agreement.

Janice yanked out the poker from the fire and saw it was indeed red and white. She hurried over to her lover and carefully handed the poker to her lover.

"Hold her down," ordered the translator. She placed her left hand on the ruler's upper ribs then lowered the poker close to the wound.

"Do it," snapped the Conqueror.

Gabrielle closed her eyes when the poker descended the small space. She tightly held onto her friend's slick hand but the Conqueror didn't squeeze any harder. There was a sizzling sound then Gabrielle smelled burning skin, which almost made her nauseas.

The Conqueror growled lowly and her right hand clawed into the bronze bedside. The coursing pain ripped even harder when the burning poker turned over her skin and her eyes rolled up into the back of her head. The pain was instantly gone and her world went black.

The Conqueror lifted her right hand to her forehead and moved her moist bangs back. Her forehead was blazing hot but she disregarded it as she inhaled the all too familiar smell of salve. When she opened her eyes, she was met by darkness so she remained still and let her eyes adjust. She soon realized she was staring up at the ceiling of her bedchambers but with the right turn of her head she focused on a slumped form in a chair.

"Deja-vu," murmured the Conqueror and she must have been slightly too loud.

Gabrielle stirred awake and lifted her head off the wall. She sadly smiled and leaned forward in the chair so she could inspect the injured ruler. "How you feel?"

"Like I just was-"

"Don't say it," cut off the rebel. She stretched out her left hand and touched the burning forehead. "Melinda mentioned you'd have a fever tonight."

The ruler noticed how Gabrielle kept her voice down. She squinted and focused her view beyond the rebel then she spotted the two forms lying on the sofa and Lao Ma's tiger sprawled out on the floor by the sofa.

Gabrielle twisted her head and studied how Janice was securely held in Melinda's arms. She sadly smiled at the new couple on the sofa then turned her head back to the Conqueror. "They refused to leave."

"I see you did too," remarked the ruler.

The bard shrugged. "I was worried." She picked up the wet cloth from the water bowl on the nightstand. She squeezed out the water while saying, "Janice told Cyrene what'd happened and of course she refused to stay in the house. She came here to check on you."

"Where is she now?" whispered the ruler. She closed her eyes when the cool, wet cloth was moving over her brow.

"She took one of the bedchambers with Melpomene. The Amazons also took rooms... I hope you don't mind?"

The Conqueror softly laughed. "Not at all. I'm glad some people are smart enough."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes yet she had a smile. "How do you feel?"

The Conqueror studied the rebel after the cloth was gone and she asked, "Honestly?" After the rebel's nod, she answered, "I've had worse."

"I didn't ask that," reminded the bard.

"I'm fine," simply stated the ruler. "Why don't you take one of the bedchambers?"

"I'm fine too," argued Gabrielle and she enjoyed the ruler's scowl after she threw the

words back at the ruler. "I'm not leaving."

The Conqueror knew she wasn't going to win especially when she was so worn down. "Listen, I need to get my armor and leathers off."

"Alright," agreed the bard, who started to move her hands but the ruler stopped her.

"You can only help if you lay down in this bed. It's big enough for three and you need some rest." The Conqueror's ice blue eyes caught the few candles' light and shined with determination.

"Alright," relented the rebel. She was sitting close enough, which allowed her to use both her hands versus standing and having one hand.

The Conqueror sat up very carefully but she needed the help because her body strength was much weaker. Between her and Gabrielle, she was quickly out of her armor and then her leathers. Her boots, greaves, and cape had been removed earlier, which was a relief. The last to go were the bracers since the gauntlets were long gone too. She was only left in her black nightshift that she wore under her leathers for the colder seasons. "Come on," she quietly ordered.

Gabrielle picked up her cane from the floor then steady her body weight as she stood up. She limped over to the other side of the bed, sat, put her cane down, and took her boots off next. She sighed in relief when her back met the incredibly soft bed and she had to be an arm length away from her friend. "This bed is huge," she commented. "Why in the world do you need such a huge bed?"

The Conqueror turned her head to the bard and her right eyebrow hiked up her brow.

Gabrielle turned her head and saw the look then there was the seductive grin that appeared. She blushed in response when she realized the answer to her question. "Well..." She cleared her throat in hopes it would remove her flush but it wasn't working.

The Conqueror knew her friend was uncomfortable so her grin disappeared and she changed the topic. "What happened to Alti's body?"

"Melinda ordered the sentries to have her cremated down in the dungeons." Gabrielle was confused and quietly asked, "Why'd she do that?"

"Alti could be reborn," mentioned the ruler, "but without a body... there's not much to come back to."

"Huh," muttered the thoughtful bard. "Janice picked up the scepter and your weapons."

"Good." The ruler closed her eyes. "Go to sleep, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle couldn't argue that order at all. "Sleep well, Xena." Then it wasn't long before she drifted off into a more peaceful state knowing that her friend would be okay.

Chapter 25 (Conclusion) - Family is Forever

It wasn't until the afternoon of the following day that Janice and Melinda had disappeared into a bedchamber. They soaked in a warm bath and worked off the stress from the months. While they were cleaning up, the Conqueror was easing out of bed then donning her finest Chin attire of red and black. She then met with Lao Ma later to discuss the fate of Alti's soul in the afterlife. The Amazons kept busy by searching through Corinth's endless marketplace where they were highly amused by one merchant selling Conqueror merchandise. Gabrielle spent time with Cyrene and Melpomene and told them what'd happened last night.

Gabrielle was startled from her story when there was a knock on the bedchambers door. She was seated at the table by the window with Melpomene in her lap and Cyrene sitting across from her. "Come in," she called.

The Conqueror opened the door and glided into the room.

Cyrene smiled as her daughter approached them. She'd seen her daughter dressed this regal but never so up close. She'd come to realize her daughter had a fascination with Chin by the way much of the cultural was here in the fortress. One day soon she'd speak to her daughter about it. "How do you feel?"

The Conqueror softly smiled and replied, "I am better, mother."

"Just don't push yourself," reminded the mother, who realized exactly who she was talking to but this was still her child.

The Conqueror had an arched eyebrow but her smile wasn't lost. This would certainly take some adjusting but she wouldn't have it any other way. "Gabrielle?" Her eyes lowered to the bard, who was inquisitively looking at her. "I need you to come with me. Are you free?"

The bard could tell it was important so she dipped her head down to Melpomene. "I'll finish the story later," she promised.

"You promise, Auntie Gabby?"

The bard grinned while lifting the child. "Double promise." She lowered the girl to her feet then she picked up her walking stick from the table. She gradually stood up then limped over to her friend.

The Conqueror glanced at Melpomene, who was still cautious with her but she would address that when it was time. Instead she focused on the limping rebel and together they silently left the bedchambers.

"Is something wrong?" questioned the bard.

"Not at all," answered the ruler. "I want you to meet my Chin counterpart since you

will be the advisor of state soon."

Gabrielle faintly smiled at her future title in the ruler's court. She peered up and carefully asked, "Lao Ma, right?"

"Yes," answered the ruler, "but go by Lady Lao unless she tells you otherwise."

"Got it," softly agreed the bard.

The Conqueror stopped in front of another bedchambers and opened the door to a larger bedchambers that had the sun streaming through the open balcony. She walked in then closed the door after the rebel entered.

Gabrielle grew still when the beautiful oriental woman from the balcony last night floated up to her. She was dazzled by the matching Chin style dress to the Conqueror's and her lips were ruby red. From her ears dangled golden chandlers and across the chest of her robe was the design of a dog in gold trim.

The Conqueror bowed her head to the Chin ruler then held out her hand to Gabrielle. "Lao Ma, this is Gabrielle. Gabrielle will soon be taking over the position as state advisor in my court." She turned her attention to Gabrielle. "Lady Lao has reined over Chin for many moons now and we've been allied with the House of Lao for twelve moons."

Gabrielle realized she was getting her first taste of politics but she sensed too that the Conqueror had other intents. "It's an honor to meet you, Lady Lao." She mimicked the ruler's custom by bowing down as much as she could with her cane in hand.

Lao Ma returned the bow then straightened up simultaneously with Gabrielle. "The Conqueror has informed me that you and she were once enemies." At the bard's nod she mentioned, "I too was once her enemy."

Gabrielle glanced up at the silent Conqueror but returned her attention to the Chin ruler. "I think the Conqueror and I have moved beyond that point now."

"Yes, we have," softly agreed the Conqueror.

Lao Ma thinly smiled at the pair but she centered on Gabrielle again. "I wish to give you a gift, Gabrielle." She saw how the bard was about to protest so she ceased it with her next words. "It was a gift I gave the Conqueror when I first met her."

Gabrielle wasn't sure what to say so she peered up at her friend for help.

The Conqueror bent over and murmured, "It is rude to refuse any gift in Chin culture."

The bard trusted the ruler's wisdom and she smiled at Lao Ma. "I'd be honored... thank you."

Lao Ma returned the smile then bowed her head slightly. She peered up at her counterpart and informed, "She must lie down for this."

The Conqueror understood so she signaled for Gabrielle to take the nearby sofa.

Gabrielle was confused but the Conqueror guided her over to the sofa. She sat on the sofa first then propped her walking stick against the sofa. She painfully lifted her legs onto the sofa then rested flat on her back.

The Conqueror stood beside the bard's head while Lao Ma came around her. "This may hurt briefly, Gabrielle but don't fear it."

Gabrielle tried to calm her twisting stomach. She nodded then focused on the Chin ruler.

Lao Ma raised her hands up in the air then pulled back her heavy sleeves. She closed her eyes and her hands glided over the bard's stomach and came lower to her thighs. She slowly grazed her hands down the bard's marred legs hidden by the long, brown skirt. Then when her hands were at Gabrielle's ankles, she heard a sharp intake of breath from the bard and she slowly glided her hands back up.

Gabrielle sensed some strange pain in her legs then something moving under her skin. She squeezed her eyes shut tighter and then the pain was quickly gone, completely from her legs. She sharply exhaled then breathed in an exhilarating breath that derived from some unknown source.

The Conqueror pleasingly observed then when Lao Ma pulled away, she gently ordered, "Sit up, Gabrielle."

The rebel's eyes fluttered open then she had an unknown burst of strength in her legs. She slid her legs off the couch and pressed her hands into the sofa. She reached for the walking stick first but the Conqueror snatched it.

"Stand on your own," softly urged the ruler.

Gabrielle was confused yet she commanded her normally weak legs to lift her up. Her rear thigh muscles responded and raised her up with simple pleasure. Then her feet went flat against the inside of her boots as her calves lifted her completely up and perfectly straight. "By the gods," she gasped and her face suddenly mixed over with excitement and astonishment.

The Conqueror revealed a beautiful smile at her friend's happiness.

Lao Ma had gentle features as she stepped back.

Gabrielle tested her legs with a step forward. She stared down at her legs that seemed to return to her like the shattering never happened on the cross.

Simultaneously the rulers stepped aside and made room for the rebel leader.

Gabrielle took another step and her smile grew. She made a third step then a fourth and walked past the rulers until she was across the room. She turned around with an amazed expression.

Lao Ma neared the bard and explained, "I hope by healing your legs that your memories will also begin to heal."

Gabrielle suddenly cried at the Chin ruler's words. She abruptly pulled the oriental woman into a strong embrace. "Thank you so much."

Lao Ma eased into the hug as her smile revealed. She hugged the younger woman, who released tears of joy.

The Conqueror's head slightly hung then she lifted and sadly smiled at the bard's peaceful face nestled between Lao Ma's shoulder and neck. She slowly inhaled and her chest gradually fell as another weight lifted off her shoulders.

Gabrielle opened her eyes as she withdrew from the hug but Lao Ma held her hands. "Thank you again, Lady Lao. You don't know... I..." She shook her head as her bittersweet face was moist from tears.

Lao Ma freed her right hand and wiped the tears away. "Please call me by my first name, Ma."

The bard's tears returned and she whispered, "I can never repay you for this."

"You already have," murmured the Chin ruler, who would not elaborate on her words. She sensed the Conqueror beside her and she peered up. "I must return to Chin soon, Xena."

"I understand," agreed the ruler, "you have been here for almost a moon."

Lao Ma released the bard completely then turned to her counterpart. "Now that I know you have finally found peace then I am no longer needed."

"I wouldn't quite put it like that," argued the Conqueror.

Gabrielle was wondering how her friend would reword it but by Lao Ma's revealing smile she knew it was good. She then found the Conqueror switching her attention to her.

"We must speak to Toris soon."

"With Cyrene?" urged the rebel.

The Conqueror nodded then said to Lao Ma. "When will you leave?"

"Perhaps tomorrow at first light," answered the Chin ruler.

The Conqueror moved her head with understanding then whispered, "We'll leave you to prepare." She then collapsed Lao Ma's hands into hers and whispered, "Thank you, Ma." She released her then glided out of the room.

Gabrielle thanked the Chin ruler again then trailed behind the ruler.

Lao Ma quietly watched the new friends leave her chambers. Her eyes wondered over to Gabrielle's walking stick that she left behind in all the excitement; it made her smile in content.

Gabrielle walked along side the ruler and she gently questioned, "Did you ask her to do that?"

The Conqueror considered the question then honestly replied, "It was actually the reverse. She asked me." She went silent though when Melinda and Janice's chambers opened up just a few paces ahead. She and Gabrielle came to stop as the strangers from another world slipped out of the room. Her eyebrow slowly rose up when she saw the strange attire on the women.

Janice Covington tipped her fedora back with a flick of her finger, her brim allowing her to see the Conqueror's face. "I had enough of those damn Amazon leathers," she remarked gruffly.

Melinda Pappas was in her attire she first wore when arriving in this world. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and her black glasses on again. "Well good afternoon, y'all." She pleasantly smiled at them.

"Where are the Amazons?" probed the archeologist.

"They went to the market," answered Gabrielle.

"Shit," muttered Janice, "I should have been on patrol with my squad." She sheepishly laughed as she realized this.

The Conqueror waved her off. "I had my tetrarchès take care of them." She tilted her head then mentioned, "He was rather complimentary of you, Janice."

Janice acted cocky as her hands went to her hips and she joked, "You should hire more female dekarchos like me."

Melinda rolled her eyes from behind her lover's back. "What of Toris?"

"We were getting ready to take care of him now," informed Gabrielle.

"We'll help out." Janice dropped her hands from her hips. "Besides I wanna see that dumb look on his face when he sees double."

Gabrielle quietly laughed and shook her head. "Melinda, how do you do it?"

"She does it very well," quipped Janice Covington.

The rebel leader flushed at this innuendo of the joke. She wasn't absolutely naïve to sex but she was naïve to two women being together.

Melinda decided to cut into the uncomfortable conversation for the bard. "Can we help, Conqueror?"

The Conqueror thought it over then nodded her head. "Gabrielle, can you get mother?"

Gabrielle answered by stepping around the ruler and quickly heading down the hallway to her shared bedchambers with her adopted mother.

Melinda tilted her head then stared in awe at Gabrielle's receding back.

Janice blinked and she loudly voiced, "Holy shit! She's walking without the limp."

Gabrielle paused in front of the door, turned her head, and teasingly called, "It's not polite to talk about somebody in third person when they're here." She opened the door then disappeared into the chambers.

Janice's jaw snapped shut and she muttered, "She's been waiting all this time to say that too." She shook her head then peered up at the ruler. She asked the question that Melinda already knew the answer. "How were her legs healed?"

"Lao Ma," simply supplied the ruler.

The archeologist blinked then peered up at her lover. "The qi?"

"Yes, I reckon so," agreed the southerner.

Gabrielle and Cyrene crept out of the bedchambers then quietly closed the door. Unexpectedly the bard was enveloped in a hug from Cyrene and Gabrielle pulled back while murmuring some promise to explain it later. She and Cyrene wondered down to the group and Gabrielle mentioned, "Melpomene is sleeping."

"She's worn out huh?" questioned the archeologist.

"Exhausted," agreed Cyrene.

Melinda slipped her hand through Janice's and followed behind the Conqueror for the dungeons. She listened to the idly chitchat between Gabrielle, Janice, and Cyrene yet her thoughts wandered off to her and Janice's soon voyage back to their world and time. She noticed how the Conqueror seemed to know exactly which cell to go to despite the Conqueror hadn't been around for the Toris incident.

The guard at the door pulled out his ring of keys and fidgeted with them. He was taken aback by the doubles before him but he could tell if he didn't hurry up that the real Conqueror would have his hide. He finally unlocked the door then stepped aside.

Cyrene decided to go first so she carefully entered the cell.

Toris stood up from the bedded pallet and gawked at Cyrene. "Mother?"

"Hello, Toris."

Toris's grey-blue eyes rose up when his sister emerged in the cell next. His face dimmed and he seemed as if he would have lunged if his mother hadn't been there.

Then he lost that look when he saw Gabrielle, who'd often filled his heart that his sister had held. "What's going on?" He narrowed his eyes at his sister. "What've you done, Xena?"

The Conqueror tilted her head but she didn't reply.

Cyrene stepped up to her son and asked, "Is this what you've been doing?"

"We thought something happened to you," piped up the bard.

Toris glanced between his family members then he stiffened when two more women filled the dungeon. He stared dumbfounded at the two strangely dressed women that were mirror images of his sister and Gabrielle.

Janice Covington folded her arms over her chest then leaned towards her lover and muttered, "Told you he'd have a dumb look on his face."

"What in Ha.... " Toris touched his forehead.

Gabrielle understood her adopted brother's confusion so she simply explained, "This is Janice." She directed at her twin then pointed at the tall linguist. "And this is Melinda. They're our descendants... sort of but it's a long story."

Toris stared at Melinda and Janice as he quickly realized he'd almost killed the wrong people. He slightly paled, which caused his mother to come closer.

"What were you thinking, Toris?" urged the upset mother. "Gabrielle and I were convinced something happened to you. We haven't heard from you in moons."

Toris faltered under his mother's onslaught plus he was still stunned by the doppelgangers. "I... I... mother, I'm sorry." He tried to regain control then stated, "I was trying to...."

"Get somebody killed?" remarked Cyrene.

Toris scowled at his mother's defense of his sister. "That is not my sister!" He pointed at the Conqueror.

"Incase ya forget," mentioned Melinda, "ya tried to kill me and Janice."

"I thought you were Xena," shot back the annoyed brother.

Gabrielle cleared her voice to grab everybody's attention. She peered up at her tall friend, who'd remained silent but assessing her brother. "You know, my sister and I use to argue. Yeah, yeah we would go for hours without talking to each other." She noticed the Conqueror wasn't budging from her judgmental evaluation of Toris and Toris was returning the look. "Come on," argued the bard, "A brother and sister, who haven't seen each other for ages should have more to say to each other than just...."

"So, you're an assassin now, hmm?" The Conqueror's tone was deep and husky.

"It's... a start," muttered the bard.

"You're a monster, Xena and it's about time you paid for it."

The Conqueror stepped forward so that she was next to her mother. "By assassinating me? I learned the hard way about justice since-

"That hard way?" interjected Toris sarcastically. "Are you bragging? What I saw of you when we left our village, Xena was not something to be proud of."

The Conqueror's temper flared quickly. "And what did you see with your back to it all? Someone had to step forward. Cortese would have killed us all if we hadn't fought."

"If our people would have followed me into the hills-

"Cortese would have hunted us down like dogs," hotly spat the Conqueror, "I had to make a stand, and I wasn't the only one who believed that."

"That's right," chided Toris. He stepped forward so that he matched his sister's stance. "Our brother believed it. Lyceus stood by you 'til the end, and it was his end. Remember?"

"I said fight," chewed out the furious ruler, "because it was our village. Lyceus believed that and I will say it again."

Toris prepared to come at his sister but then he stopped short when his mother stepped between them. "Now you're protecting her?" he snapped.

Cyrene's temper matched her son's and she hotly warned, "I'm protecting you from each other. This family has been torn apart long enough. If you're so much behind your baby brother then tell me this is what he would have wanted, right?"

Toris faltered when the table was turned on him. He shook his head then angrily reminded, "I'm sure Xena was thinking that too when she took over Greece and Rome... Gaul... Britannia," he spat, "and now the Norselands."

"Stop it," snapped Gabrielle, who neared her family. "You're so damn lucky, Toris." Her green eyes were on fire. "You have your mother and now Xena is trying to make amends." She shook her head then sadly whispered, "I have no family left so stop squandering it."

Toris's anger slowly died at the bard's upsetting confession. He'd always adored Gabrielle for everything she represented, which was much of what inspired him to face his sister. He could no longer sit in Amphipolis and watch Gabrielle fight her life long tormenter when he thought he could swiftly solve it... for everybody.

Janice stepped forward and touched her ancestor's shoulder. "You have family, Gabrielle... me and Mel included whether or not we're from different worlds."

Gabrielle touched her descendant's hand on her shoulder as her pain slightly eased.

"And we are your family too," reminded Cyrene. Her eyes fell on Toris first. "Right?" Her gaze flickered up to her tall daughter.

The Conqueror faintly nodded then touched her friend's forearm. "We all are family." Her stare settled on her brother. "Whether some of us recognize it or not family is forever."

Gabrielle sadly smiled at the echo of her words she reminded her friend of back in the Amazon Nation.

Melinda silently came behind her lover and lightly placed her hands on Janice's hips, her fingertips grazing the strapped on gun holster.

Toris released a deep breath when his mother stepped aside from between him and the Conqueror. He slightly nodded then murmured, "You're right."

Janice Covington grinned at finally witnessing things piece together again and it made her miss her mother and father. Well I wonder if we should all say 'hike, hike go team' right now, inwardly joked the archeologist. Janice though decided her smartass remark would certainly be lost on everybody but Melinda, who probably wouldn't appreciate it.

When Helios touched the western horizon the red and orange colors washed over the clouds then spilled over the dark woman standing in the tall, open window in the fortress that jutted out of the rocky hillside. The flock of seagulls swooped past then made a straight line for the meeting seas far beyond Corinth's lands.

The Conqueror broke away from her musing when there was a knock at her office. She called the person in and she greeted the rebel leader.

Gabrielle scanned the large office and mentioned, "Wow. It's almost as large as your bedchambers." She noticed how the Conqueror was silent and went back to staring out the window. She joined her at the window and figured out what had her friend's attention.

The gates of the fortress were creaking open and Toris was hugging Cyrene back. He withdrew some then his lips were moving while Cyrene's head was tilted to the side to show her listening.

"Did you say goodbye to him?" probed the ruler.

"Yes," answered the bard. She then solemnly peered up at the ruler. "He's just going to need some time."

The Conqueror didn't respond but she kept observing as her brother started through the gates.

Toris sensed somebody watching him so he stopped and partially turned. His grey-blue eyes met his sister's distant stare. He felt uneasy about staying in Corinth let alone in the fortress; he needed space to work this out. However before he stepped

through the gates, he lifted his hand up in a wave.

The Conqueror hesitated but she unlocked her right hand and waved back at him. She lowered her hand when her brother turned his back and disappeared out of the gates.

Gabrielle sadly sighed and rested her hands behind her back. "He'll come around," she promised.

"I can't blame him," muttered the ruler. She dropped her head against the frame of the window but her stare rested on her friend.

"Are you sure about this dinner party tonight?" Gabrielle tried to read the ruler yet had very little luck. "I'm sure Lao Ma won't mind."

"It's traditional," reminded the ruler, "I don't plan on changing it."

Gabrielle relented as she knew the limitations between them right now. She just hoped overtime their relationship would strengthen and she could gain more insight about what made her friend tick. "Melinda and Janice seem excited to be going home tomorrow."

"Mmmm," merely replied the Conqueror.

The bard sighed then quietly offered, "I'll see you later tonight, Conqueror." She dipped her head then moved away to leave the office. She hesitated at the door though when the Conqueror's voice floated to her.

"Thank you, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle paused with her hand on the door ring as she looked at the ruler.

"For trying," elaborated the tall, dark woman.

"Always," softly promised the bard, who pulled the heavy, creaky door open and disappeared out of it.

The Conqueror peacefully watched the remaining streams of red and orange disappear over the horizon then high above the black sky was painted by stars. She slowly drew in a deep breath then studied her capital city that she'd fought so hard for. Her memory flashed of her siege against the Corinthians so long ago, which was her hardest battle next to taking over Sparta but she accomplished what the philosophers and bards called impossible.

At the same time as last night, the Conqueror discovered herself seated back at her throne but this time she didn't celebrate death but life in her realm and with her allies, masses, and her newly acquired family. Her expression was passive as she displayed herself as the ruler of her amazing realm. She wore a purple Chin robe tonight that had gold etching of a typical Chin design around it but a tiger on the front. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun behind her head then a dragon hair clip kept it all in place while a few strands in the front framed her face. She wore a gold ring on her right hand that sparkled a beautiful deep ruby.

Lao Ma was positioned at the base of the dais just like the evening Melinda Pappas, posed as the Conqueror, held a feast.

The Conqueror repeated much the same events of that feast as tradition called for it. The realm celebrated the arrival and departure of their allies in such fashion to always keep in good graces with the ally. It certainly wasn't that the Conqueror was a socialite yet she knew the importance of politics, especially with her allies. Yet tonight did not feel like politics as this feast was very much the celebration of her family that she'd lost and now reclaimed her as much as she reclaimed. For the Conqueror, this was a celebration of change for her, for her realm.

The feast went into full swing when the Conqueror sat at the head of the main table. She had Cyrene to her right while Gabrielle was to the left then followed by Janice, Melinda, Melpomene, the Amazons, and Lao Ma sat at the head at the other end of the table. The table was filled with chatter among the friends and family except for the Conqueror, who merely carefully listened. The rebel leader noted the ruler's continued silence but she contributed it to her being worn out and especially her side wound. Gabrielle remained concerned that the Conqueror was pushing too hard yet she knew it wouldn't be her place to ask and certainly at the table with all the ears.

Janice leaned closer to her lover and muttered, "You think she'll ask you know who to dance?"

Melinda pushed her glasses up onto her bridge then she peered over the rim of her glasses at the Conqueror. "I reckon she is tired... she may have the dancing started without her."

The archeologist huffed but didn't reply as she took a drink of wine from her bronze goblet.

The Conqueror leaned back into her regal wood chair after finishing her meal. She calculated that everybody in the court was mostly finished which meant the entertainment would be required. She folded her hands in her lap then she decided whether to ask Lao Ma to begin the dancing. She knew however that Lao Ma wasn't one to dance and she didn't want to make the Chin ruler uncomfortable or lose face.

Cyrene leaned over to her daughter and softly asked, "What's next on the agenda?"

The Conqueror softened at her mother, who was well dressed thanks to the Conqueror's personal assistant's help. She leaned forward then quietly answered, "The entertainment, which is dancing. I usually start it."

Cyrene smiled at this prospect as it'd been along time since she'd done any dancing. Her eyes darted to the chatting bard, who was in the throws of a wild tale that was captivating everybody's attention at the table. She returned her focus to her daughter and suggested, "Ask Gabrielle. I think she'd like that since her legs are healed now."

The Conqueror had considered this already so she murmured, "Perhaps." She leaned back into her chair.

Cyrene knew she planted the seed so she wouldn't press the topic. She stole a drink of the sweet wine she'd been poured earlier.

Gabrielle laughed then kept talking, her hands waving around and her eyes bright. She finished her tale with a punch line and the table erupted into laughs, which made her smile happily.

The Conqueror had been listening too and she grinned at the bard's talent that she secretively admired. She breathed deeply then her husky voice called, "Gabrielle?"

The bard's laughter was already into chuckles then they stopped. Gabrielle smiled at her friend and centered her attention on the ruler.

The Conqueror observed that the bard's cheeks were flushed red from the wine tonight. She quickly theorized that the bard would most likely grow silly and relaxed from the wine.

Gabrielle cleared her throat then respectfully asked, "Yes, my liege?"

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at hearing her title drawn from the bard. She suddenly stood up with her chair's legs scraping over the marble floor. The court went silent and the Conqueror became the focal point.

Gabrielle's stomach knotted and she briefly feared she'd done something wrong however when the Conqueror held out her hand her stomach unknotted and instead filled with butterflies.

"I would be honored if you began tonight's dancing with me," spoke the ruler's deep voice.

Gabrielle sensed her cheeks burning and her eyes dropped under the piercing blue stare above her. "I'm really, really bad at dancing. I have two left feet facing backwards."

The Conqueror leaned over and her whispered words were only heard by the bard. "I promise if you dance with me that you'll only enjoy it." She straightened up with her hand still poised in the air.

Gabrielle slowly lifted up her hand and slipped hers into the ruler's much larger hand. She then climbed to her feet while the Conqueror pulled her chair back for her.

Janice nudged her lover and teasingly whispered, "Bingo."

"Hush," warned the southerner although she started to wonder if her lover wasn't a hopeless romantic secretly.

When Gabrielle stepped around her chair, her beautiful solid emerald dress made of silk flowed down to her ankles. The dress hugged her curves and emphasized her breasts with a slight v-cut then it finished off with a straps that covered her shoulders.

"Time to dance, bard," hooted Solari, who gave a wave of good luck.

Gabrielle was walking past the table with the Conqueror and announcing, "They wouldn't let me dance at the crop festival because I brought a bad harvest." Her joked earned her a round of laughs at the table but once Gabrielle was away from the group, her stomach nervously tightened.

The Conqueror guided her dancing partner to the dance floor then she signaled the musicians to begin the tune. She then focused on her dance partner, who cautiously neared her. "Slip your arms around my waist," she quietly instructed.

Gabrielle did so but murmured, "What about your wound?"

"I'll be fine," promised the ruler. She encircled the bard while whispering, "Do you recall the syrto pyleas dance?"

The bard chuckled and answered, "How couldn't I? It's classic to our providence." She saw that hidden smile on the ruler's face, which warmed her.

The Conqueror heard the lyre begin the classic song to the dance so she led her dance partner. "Feet together," she murmured, "Right foot to the right, left foot to the right behind your right."

Gabrielle carefully listened and followed her partner.

"Right foot to the right, left foot to the right in front of your right," softly reminded the ruler. She then sensed that Gabrielle was picking up the steps as the dance came from her childhood memory. She smiled up at her friend as the dance flowed from her naturally.

The Conqueror mirrored the smile then she dipped her head some. "What's with the 'my liege' tonight?"

Gabrielle broke away from her focus on the dance steps as she let her body naturally move with the ruler. "I thought I'd practice for when I become the state advisor."

"So are you already thinking up proposals for the court?" The Conqueror devilishly grinned.

The bard matched the grin then murmured, "How long do I have 'til the next court?"

"I hold court every new and full moon," answered the ruler.

"I think I can be ready by then," teased the rebel leader. "Thank you again for having Lao Ma heal my legs."

The Conqueror waited a beat before replying as her and Gabrielle's bodies brushed together during the reverse steps. "She spoke to me about it... I didn't force her to do it."

"Yes but I have a feeling you had every intent in seeing her carry it out if she hadn't offered," mentioned the bard.

The Conqueror didn't respond to the probing statement, which was answer enough between them but instead she stated, "Well hopefully it will heal some other wounds."

"A lot of those wounds were healed prior to Lao Ma's gift." Gabrielle recognized the fact that her friend wouldn't dip into the topic so she let it go by softly declaring, "It's so wonderful to move like this again."

The Conqueror completely understood. "Yes, I know." Her body then detected the faster rhythm of the song as it was coming to a close. She and Gabrielle swiftly moved across the dance floor with the beat.

"Gods I can't believe I'm dancing," breathed the stunned bard. She then scanned the intent faces of the masses, which made her blush. "I guess we'll be the talk of the realm huh?" She never considered the fact that very few knew her, the rebel leader, and the Conqueror, ruler of the realm, were now friends and allies. "Wait 'til the next court," she joked.

The Conqueror realized that the wine also promoted the bard's chatty side if that was possible.

Gabrielle must have realized this as she went quiet and just enjoyed the last steps of the classic dance from her and the Conqueror's providence. She then was dazzled by the Conqueror's conclusion of the dance as she was spun away and the Conqueror's hand grazed down her bare arm and linked their hands.

Gabrielle's expression was so soft and she glowed as the Conqueror pulled their bodies back together then the music went silent. She remained staring up into a warm, sapphire gaze.

"Thank you for the dance, Gabrielle," whispered the ruler.

The rebel flushed for the second time and softly replied, "Thank you too, Xena... it was wonderful."

The Conqueror broke away but still held the rebel's small hand into hers. "Let us finish the night in song and dance," she announced to the masses. When her voice died the masses quickly filled the silence with clamor and moving about to get on the dance floor. She ordered the musicians to begin rather upbeat music to commence the night's entertainment.

Gabrielle released her friend's hand as her group of family and friends joined her and the Conqueror. She was lit up by her smiles and her laughter occasionally filled the court. The Conqueror joined Lao Ma and conversed with her for some time while promising a nice supply of feta cheese to accompany her back to Chin.

Solari, who was the socialite above all, called for everybody to gather in a circle. She announced the large group that they were going to learn a traditional Amazon dance. She instructed her group to link together by slipping arms over shoulders until the circle was locked.

Ephiny laughed as she watched her friend demo the steps.

Solari smirked and ordered, "Your turn, Eph."

Ephiny lifted her chin proudly and mimicked Solari's steps then called, "Janny, come on."

"Shit," grumbled the archeologist, who'd been forced into this and agreed with Gabrielle about dancing skills or lack there of.

Melinda detected her lover's uneasiness and she already had the steps down. She murmured the steps to her lover, who easily displayed them thanks to her.

"All together now!" Solari led the circle's movement and the dancing circle moved across the floor without hitting other dancers.

The Conqueror tilted her head and watched the dancing circle of friends. She shook her head as she'd never seen this done in her realm. Typically everybody danced in pairs but leave it to the Amazons to form a collective dance in her court.

Lao Ma leaned closer to her counterpart. "The realm will now fair well, Xena."

The Conqueror slipped her hands into the large sleeves of her robed dress.

"The changes in you will reflect in the realm," further added the Chin ruler. She peered up at the silent ruler. "Perhaps this will bind the realm and Chin closer."

The Conqueror met Lao Ma's view with a serious expression. She knew it was a silent offer from her ally. "I believe it will bring the House of Lao and the realm closer." She returned her attention to the dance floor. "What will you do when Lao dies?"

"He is aging," quietly relented the Chin ruler.

"A woman cannot rule in the Kingdom of Chin without their husband," whispered the Conqueror.

"Yes," solemnly agreed Lao Ma.

The Conqueror lowered her head but didn't look at her counterpart. "We will devise a plan for you to remain the ruler of Chin."

Lao Ma studied the ruler's profile and she saw no thirst for power but merely a ruler wanting another ruler to stay in power for the good of the people. "Perhaps yet tens of thousands of bones will become ashes when one ruler achieves his or her fame."

The Conqueror understood her former mentor's proverb. "There's more than one way to win a war," she softly reminded, "and without blood. The Kingdom of Chin will follow the House that is most just once they look beyond the source of that wisdom."

Lao Ma was silent as she considered her ally's words. She quickly realized that the Conqueror had grown since the moons back when they first met. "Indigo is derived

from blue but is more pleasing than blue; ice is formed out of water but is colder than water."

The Conqueror took a beat to translate the proverb that spoke that a student can surpass their mentor. She was inwardly surprised by Lao Ma's indirect praises of her yet she didn't show it except within her eyes. "Thank you, Ma."

The Chin ruler merely bowed her head in response yet her face was soft and eloquent.

The Conqueror had a thin smile then she glimpsed over the dancing masses. Something or rather somebody caught her attention so she whispered, "Please excuse me, Ma."

Lao Ma nodded then watched her counterpart glide off. She turned her head to the left and ran her fingers through Hu's fur.

The Conqueror came over to the steps to the main entrance doors of the court. She took seat beside the young girl, who barely acknowledged her. She found this quite amusing seeing as she could capture the entire masses' attention by merely lifting a finger or eyebrow. "You're not joining the dancing?"

Melpomene kept staring at the dancers. "I don't know how to," she quietly admitted. "My sister was going to teach me but...."

The ruler sighed because she understood the exception. She leaned over and whispered, "I am sorry about your sister, Melpomene." When Melpomene's confused eyes were transfixed on her, she gently added, "I can never return her to you but I hope to give you something back in life."

Melpomene turned her head away. "Grandmother loves you even though you've done so many evil things."

The Conqueror's anger didn't react like most would expect instead her emotions surfaced. "Yes, I have and I'm lucky to have my mother."

"She and Auntie Gabby say you're changing... that you're like your old self."

The Conqueror tilted her head at hearing this news. "Well I don't completely agree." She saw how Melpomene now leaned in as if waiting for some secret, which made the Conqueror sadly smile. "I'm still the Conqueror but you know what's different than before?"

Melpomene only shook her head while holding her breath for the truth.

"I'm also Xena too," answered the Conqueror.

"What's the difference? I thought that was your name?"

"It is," confirmed the ruler, "but I forgot what it was like to be Xena... to be myself."

"How could you forget?" argued the thoughtful child.

Yes, the Conqueror wondered, how could I forget? She inwardly discovered the answer and whispered, "I forgot because I let myself become consumed by anger and hatred."

"Because your brother died," theorized the child.

The Conqueror was surprised Melpomene knew her history but then again there was Gabrielle and her stories. "Yes."

Melpomene shook her head then challenged, "But wouldn't your brother be upset that you did that? I know my sister would be if I reacted that way."

The Conqueror slowly dipped her head in acknowledgement of the question and statement. "Yes, now I'm going to try and fix that." She rested her arms on her propped up knees then asked, "Do you think you can help me, Melpomene?"

Melpomene's eyes grew wide at the request for help from the great and powerful ruler. "Like Auntie Gabby and grandmother are helping?"

"Yes," answered the ruler.

"Auntie Gabby says you're family." Melpomene tilted her head in consideration and her thoughts carefully worked it out. "That means you're family to me and family helps each other."

"Yes they do," huskily agreed the ruler.

Melpomene revealed a smile and her eyes harbored no malice for the ruler. "Then I want to help too, Conqueror."

The ruler's lips curled into a warm smile. "And family calls me Xena... not Conqueror."

Melpomene's small smile grew brighter at this declaration. "You can call me Mel if you want," she shyly offered as her smile went coy.

"Alright, Mel." The ruler then rose up with her robe cascading down and flashing gold. She came down the steps and held out her hand, palm up. "Let me teach you a dance, Mel."

Melpomene was shy but she took the strong hand after a beat of hesitation. She was lifted onto her feet and she hurried down the steps then was guided to a clear spot on the dance floor.

The Conqueror positioned herself beside the child. "Have you heard of the tsamiko dance?"

Melpomene became enthralled and hastily gushed, "Yes, I saw it performed in my village once."

"Do you know who created the tsamiko dance?" At the girl's frantic head shake, the Conqueror explained, "It's a warrior dance that they perform before battle."

"Are you going to do the real tsamiko? The leader has to do the back flips," recalled the girl.

"Is there any other ways to do the tsamiko?" queried the grinning ruler.

Melpomene grew even more excited at this prospect. "What are the steps?"

"They're very simple," instructed the ruler. "You step to your right eight times first." She lifted her robe to show her feet while moving.

Melpomene mimicked the dance steps then stopped and watched the next set the ruler performed. She followed them too.

"Those are the steps," proclaimed the ruler.

"That's easy!" Melpomene and the Conqueror continued the steps until the dance fit the beat of the music. She had her head down watching her feet move in sync with the Conqueror's. When she lifted her head she realized a circle of dancers formed around her and the Conqueror and they started to clap with the beat. "What about the flips?" excitedly urged the child.

The Conqueror quietly chuckled at the girl's enthusiasm. "Any... heartbeat." She took the last two back steps then gave her incredibly warcry and leapt into the air, tucked, flipped, and opened as she hit the floor with her feet and continued the dance.

The crowd cheered wildly at the Conqueror's rare display. Then several people from the crowd jumped into the circle's center and dance beside the Conqueror and Melpomene. The Conqueror kept her position as leader of the dance.

"What's that dance?" inquired Melinda to her lover.

The archeologist grinned and answered, "It's an ancient warrior dance called the tsamiko. I've seen it done before in Athens but never this traditional with the back flips." She peered up at the linguist. "They perform the dance before battles... sorta a ceremonial thing for good luck in battle."

Melinda filed that away for later consideration and reference. She paused in her clapping and quietly asked, "Ya reckon they'd like to learn the Carolina Shag?"

Janice couldn't help but laugh at the concept of Ancient Greeks learning a swing dance traditional to the Carolinas. "I'll be your partner but you'll have to be patient," she agreed.

"I've already been using plenty of that with ya."

Before the archeologist could banter back the Conqueror's warcry resounded and she watched the amazing skills of the Conqueror.

The Conqueror landed and went still as the song ended. She took Melpomene's hand and bowed her head.

Melpomene followed suit and saw the other dancers repeated the bow. She grinned when everybody cheered.

Melinda dragged her lover into the circle and announced, "Since Janice and I will be leaving soon we wanted to give y'all something to remember us by. Janice and I would like to show y'all a dance from our time period. It is native to where I am from."

"Hey, I didn't pick this dance," announced Janice Covington with her hands up in defense but a grin on her face.

The crowd laughed.

"Don't fall on your butt, Janny," teased Ephiny.

The Conqueror tilted her head and asked, "What is the dance?"

"It's called the Carolina Shag," answered Melinda Pappas, who eased a grin into her expression, "And it's uh style of dance we call swing." She saw everybody was curious and backed away to make room.

The Conqueror took a spot beside the rebel and her mother. She signaled the musicians to begin playing.

"This is a partner dance," explained the southerner, who faced her lover.

Janice's hands grew slightly wet from nervousness, her body already warm. She took off her hat and tossed it at Ephiny.

Ephiny snatched it in mid air and put it on for the fun of it. She then was smacked in the face by the leather jacket.

Janice met her partner halfway then quietly mentioned, "This won't be easy with this music."

"It ain't jazz," agreed the linguist, "but it'll do. Jus' follow my body."

The archeologist smirked and teased, "That's easy."

The translator held out her right hand. "I'll start it." When Janice took it, she slowly moved her feet on the floor that would have been the man's moves. She pointed at Janice with her freehand.

The archeologist mirrored the moves slowly; right back, left, right forward, slide to the left and continue. She stopped then grinned at her partner.

Melinda repeated the steps faster and then she stepped back twice for some space and quickly spun in place with her right leg up then ascending to the floor as she twirled. She danced back up to her partner and took her hand again before spinning her with

their locked hands overhead.

Janice laughed and repeated the steps before her lover backed up but kept their hands together. She mirrored her lover's steps for several beats then Melinda pulled their bodies together and spun them in a circle.

The masses hooted at the couple demonstrating the shag dance.

"Come on, Ephiny." Solari grabbed her friend's hand and hauled her onto the dance floor. Solari took the man's assumed role as she stood beside Melinda and copied her.

Ephiny watched Janice while tilting the fedora back on her head. She mimicked the archeologist's booted feet.

Melpomene happened to be standing by Callisto, who'd remain still and quiet most of the evening. "I bet you can do that dance."

Callisto's brown eyes lit up at the child that reminded her of her lost little sister. She slowly grinned.

Melpomene chuckled and grabbed the tall woman's wrist then guided her to the floor.

Callisto copied Melinda and Solari's move then she paused to see Melpomene take the woman's mirroring moves. She laughed at how ridiculous she felt yet as she kept going she started to relax and enjoy it.

Janice met her partner halfway and as they held hands and danced, she whispered, "Nice job, Mel."

The translator winked and molded their bodies for a long spun but she took her lover's lips in a quick kiss. Melinda's plan to teach the Ancient Greeks a wild, new form of dance paid off as the masses all tried the dance.

The night's entertainment continued into the late night and much later than a feast would normal go in the realm. However the feast and court broke apart when it became too late. The rich masses left the fortress while the Conqueror and her guests retired to their respective chambers. When Helios was kissing the eastern horizon the fortress was buzzing with life again and the Amazons were first up as they knew they needed to return to the Nation. Not only was the queen waiting on them but so was Yakut and the answer to the riddle for entrance to Eternity. The Amazons said goodbye to everybody and made sure to thank the Conqueror for her hospitality. Much to Ephiny's surprise the Conqueror informed her to tell Queen Cyane to send a representative in the near future for an alliance.

Solari finished hugging Janice and was mounting her horse near the open gates.

Ephiny stepped up to her friend and her expression dimmed. "You won't ever come back here, will you?"

The archeologist sighed then tipped her hat back for a better view. "No, it's not safe for Mel and me to be here to begin with."

The Amazon nodded her understanding yet she didn't like it. "I'll miss you, Janice Covington," she quietly admitted.

Janice pulled her friend into a long embrace while whispering, "I'll miss you too, Ephiny." When she withdrew from the hug she was rather choked up and trying not to get anymore upset. "Thank you for everything."

Ephiny touched her friend's cheek and gently teased, "It was my pleasure, Janny. Take care and don't forget me." She moved away before it grew anymore emotional for her. She climbed onto her horse. "I hope to see you in the Nation soon, Gabrielle."

The bard grinned. "You can count on it."

Ephiny ordered her comrades out of the gates and she tapped her mare's sides. She saw that Callisto had the reins for the other mare that the Conqueror had burrowed. She turned in her saddle and waved at Janice, Melinda, Gabrielle, and Melpomene.

Janice waved back then when her hand fell to her side; she dropped her head and pushed her fedora forward to hide her face. She then felt strong hands massaged her shoulders to ease her emotions.

Melpomene grabbed Janice's hand and stated, "Family is forever, Janice... don't forget."

The archeologist sadly smiled at the child's words then knelt down and picked up the girl. "You're right about that, Mel."

Gabrielle swallowed against her own emotions then she announced, "I think its time for you and Melinda to get home."

Melpomene rested her head on Janice's shoulder and closed her eyes at the words she didn't want to hear. She clung tightly to Janice's opposite shoulder.

"The Conqueror is waiting in her office with the scepter." Gabrielle started walking with her friends. As she climbed through the fortress's levels her happiness from last night descended. She had to remind herself that Janice and Melinda had made it possible for her and Cyrene to achieve the impossible. Melinda and Janice had gifted her and Cyrene with the changes in the Conqueror; with the return of Xena.

The Conqueror rose up to her feet from the sofa when the group entered her office. She felt her mother stand up behind her.

"Are you two ready?" questioned Cyrene, who stepped around her daughter.

The Conqueror saw Melinda's nod so she went to her desk where her scepter leaned against her desk. She picked it up and strolled over to the group.

Melinda and Janice went through the rhythms of saying goodbye to everybody but it felt surreal to the couple. Janice still held Melpomene in her left arm. She felt warm tears now trickling down her neck so she turned her head and kissed the child's head.

She then knelt down and set Melpomene on her feet but she stayed kneeling and sadly smiling.

"Do you really have to go?"

The archeologist frowned and brushed the girl's hair out of her face. "I have to go home." She wiped the tears from the child's cheek.

Melpomene choked out, "This is home now too."

Janice bitter sweetly smiled because the child's words rang true. "It is, Mel but Melinda and me have to go back to our time. There are people there that miss us too."

Melpomene dropped her head and stretched out her hands to play with Janice's hands and fingers. "Will you forget about me?"

Janice's heart broke and her eyes stung. "No, never... will you forget me?"

Melpomene quickly shook her head then she threw herself into Janice's body.

Janice wrapped the child up into her arms and held tightly.

Melinda removed her glasses from her face when her tears started to spill. She wiped them away then touched her lover's shoulder in comfort.

"I love ya, Mel," promised the archeologist.

Melpomene tightened her arms and whispered, "I love you too, Janice."

Janice slowly withdrew but as she stood up, her hand laced through Melpomene's. She and Melinda gave a round of hugs to Gabrielle and Cyrene then they paused at the standoffish Conqueror.

The Conqueror held the scepter in her left hand but she extended her hand to Melinda first. "Thank you, Melinda."

Melinda Pappas took the matching hand and reminded, "I reckon ya found what ya've been missing... don't lose it again."

The Conqueror thoroughly agreed with a nod. "I pray my descendant in your time is at least half of who you are." She then shifted to the uncomfortable archeologist and held out her hand again.

Janice bit her lower lip as she read the Conqueror's face. She knew that the Conqueror was so different compared to Melinda yet when she studied those blue crystals above her she saw the tenderness of her lover deep down. She slowly extended her hand and collapsed the large hand in a strong shake.

The Conqueror had no words yet she and Janice let understanding pass between them. She released the archeologist's hand then held out the scepter to Melinda Pappas. "Its all yours."

The translator accepted the scepter as her eyes reflected the glowing green stone. She and Janice with Melpomene stepped away from everybody. She let the scepter's base touch the floor so that it was level with Janice's chest.

The archeologist knelt down one last time, hugged Melpomene, and whispered a promise before releasing her completely.

Melpomene separated from the woman she considered her sister. She went over to her aunt, who took her hand to comfort her.

Janice stepped up to scepter that was between her and Melinda. Her right hand touched the scepter's shaft, just above Melinda's left hand.

Melinda sadly smiled at her lover. "Ready?"

"I'm ready," agreed the archeologist.

Melinda lifted her right hand with her palm facing down. She watched as Janice lifted her left hand and laced their fingers together. She lowered their hands close to the brightly humming stone.

"Mel," came the archeologist's teasing voice, "click your heels and say three times 'there's no place like home.'"

Melinda quietly chuckled as the joke helped lightened the mood. She lowered their hands down the remaining quarter inch while she did think there was no place like home.

Instantly the Cronos Stone flared a bright green in the room and took the strangers away. It traveled through space and time then snapped brightly green again then calmed again.

Janice lifted their hands away from the Cronos Stone and she gasped for air. "Wow."

"Wow is right," murmured the aching southerner. She then glanced about their location.

The archeologist mimicked her lover's scan and she easily realized that they were in a museum's backroom where artifacts were stored. Then the table to her left caught her eye as she spotted the same stone like that on the scepter.

"Janice," spoke the linguist, "I reckon we outta let go of the scepter."

The archeologist nodded then together she and Melinda lowered the scepter to the floor. She let go first then Melinda relinquished her hold on the scepter last. She and Melinda watched in amazement at the scepter's vanishing act. Janice's head though snapped up when she heard voices on the other side of the door of the room. She narrowed her eyes when the voices became clearer and silhouettes formed on the opposite side of the door's small smoky window.

There came a knock on the door then a man opening it up while saying, "Miss Pappas, I'm sorry but there's...." He was caught off guard when he spotted the small woman beside the southern belle. "I...uh...." He touched his bald head and stared confusingly at the archeologist.

Melinda Pappas cleared her throat then introduced, "Doctor Timothy, I'd like you to meet Doctor Janice Covington."

The archeologist instantly processed the man's name; he was the curator of the Archeological Museum of Corinth so now she knew where she was. "Great to finally meet you, Doctor Timothy."

Doctor Timothy remained in the half open doorway with his perplexed expression. "You as well, Doctor Covington... I didn't hear you come in."

"Sorry about that," properly apologized the southerner, "I let Doctor Covington in only a moment ago."

Doctor Timothy faintly nodded as he relaxed. "Well... actually this works out perfect." He opened the door more, which allowed the woman behind him to take shape. "There's somebody here looking for Doctor Covington."

Janice's eyes slotted because it was never good news when somebody was on the hunt for her.

Melinda stepped closer to her lover then she stiffened when the unknown woman entered the storage room.

Doctor Timothy was puzzled again as he realized he hadn't caught this woman's name.

The woman must have noticed, which made her roll her brown eyes. She stepped up to the archeologist with her hand coming out. "I am Doctor Erin Alexander," she formally introduced.

Janice stared dumbfounded at the curly dirty-blond woman that was about her age. She shoved aside her astonishment before she appeared anymore silly looking. She quickly took the woman's hand and stated, "Doctor Janice Covington." She then turned on her heels some and held her hand out to Melinda. "This is my partner, Melinda Pappas."

Melinda stepped around the table to meet this familiar woman. "It's uh pleasure, Doctor Alexander." She held out her hand.

Erin smiled warmly at the southern accent. "Wait... are you related to Doctor Mel Pappas?" She asked after the hand shake.

"Yes." Melinda pushed her glassed up onto her face then properly informed, "Mel Pappas was my father."

"I heard rumor that you were here in Greece," spoke Doctor Alexander. "I just didn't realize you and Doctor Covington were working together."

Janice rested her hands on her hips. "It only happened recently."

"Is there something we can help you with, Doctor Alexander?" probed the linguist.

Erin worked past her excitement at having found the archeologist and linguist together. "Yes, I believe so." She revealed a pleased smile and informed, "I am a professor at the University of Pennsylvania but I've taken a sabbatical." She brushed back her curly locks. "I'm rather interested in doing some research on the mythical Amazons." She glanced between the silent women then further added, "I have reason to believe they really existed and I was hoping I could get some help with my research. I'm afraid I do not have much archeological experience." She steadied herself as she carefully asked, "Do you think you could help?"

Janice Covington shifted her weight onto her right foot as she peered up at her lover.

The translator peered down while saying to her partner, "Do we have time to fit this into our schedule?" She already knew the answer to Erin's question but she wasn't going to voice it when it had to be Janice.

"I also believe that the Amazons are somehow linked to Xena," suggested Doctor Alexander. "I've been following your work, Doctor Covington... call me a fan."

Janice slightly grinned as she returned her attention to Doctor Erin Alexander, who was truly Ephiny's descendant. "I believe we can help, Doctor Alexander."

"Momma?" called a small, puzzled girl's voice.

Doctor Erin Alexander spun around and saw her daughter wandering into the room through the open door. "Sweetie, I told you to wait in the car for momma." She hastily came over and took her child's hand then brought her over to the women. "I'm sorry." She indicted her child while saying, "This is my daughter... Melissa." She bent over and said, "Can you say hello to Doctor Covington and Miss Pappas?"

Melissa blinked and studied the archeologist's softening expression and for some strange reason, Melissa smiled at the archeologist. She instantly liked the archeologist then when she looked at the linguist she too seemed so familiar.

Janice Covington melted at seeing the descendant of Little Melpomene and she felt so happy. She knelt down and smiled at the child. "Hello, Melissa. How are you?"

"I'm good, Doctor Covington," properly answered the child.

The archeologist grinned at Melissa's formality obviously taught to her by her mother. "You can call me Janice if you'd like." She then twisted and pointed at the tall translator. "This is Miss Melinda Pappas but I'm sure she won't mind you calling her Melinda."

Melissa peered up at the tall southerner for that confirmation.

Melinda smiled while kneeling down too. "Hi, Melissa... you can call me Melinda."

Melissa beamed at her new friends and announced, "I like being called Mel... my friends call me that." She then tilted her head and asked, "Are you going to help my momma find the Amazons?"

Janice Covington adjusted her fedora then peered up at the carefully listening Doctor Alexander. She smiled warmly back at the girl. "You bet we are." She and her partner stood up simultaneously and she came to Doctor Alexander's left side with her arm going around the professor's shoulders. "You don't mind Er do you?"

Doctor Alexander opened her mouth for a protest as the archeologist turned her and her daughter around. Before she could get her protest out the archeologist cut her off.

"Great. I like it too." Janice guided the curly blond out of the backroom to the door. "So do you know much real history on the Amazons, Er?"

Doctor Alexander was having an odd feeling of deja-vu yet she tried to keep up. When she opened her mouth to respond the archeologist about how she knew the Amazonian myths she was cut short again.

"You see the Amazon philosophy," started Janice, "was that it was a man's world at the time and not because it should be but because women let it be. So the Amazon world is based on...." Janice continued her rant right out of the storage room and into the museum.

Melinda Pappas was shaking her head and was highly amused. She approached Doctor Timothy with a polite smile. "Thank you, Doctor Timothy for your help."

The curator smiled and held out his hand for a shake. "Did you find the answers you were looking for, Miss Pappas?"

"I reckon so," replied the southerner.

Doctor Timothy led the translator out of the storage room then wished her goodbye and safe travels.

Melinda Pappas met up her lover, the professor, and Melissa just outside in the gravel parking lot. She stood next to the trunk of a beautiful black sedan with chrome trim; it was most likely a 1937 Pontiac De Luxe.

"If neither of you have plans I would be a pleasure to have you come to my hotel room," politely offered Erin. "I understand though if you do not have time."

Janice Covington wanted to reply right away but she couldn't speak for her lover. She instead answered, "If I could have a minute with Melinda I'd appreciate that."

"Of course," agreed Erin. She then told Melissa, "Get in the car, sweetie." She released her daughter's hand, who went around to the passenger side. Erin then climbed into the car to give the archeologist and linguist some sense of privacy.

Janice turned to her lover and stated, "Mel, can you believe this?" She then corrected

herself when Melinda gave her a funny look. "Okay, don't answer that but... I mean if Ephiny's descendant is here... then that means the Amazons are real too."

"We don't know if Ephiny was an Amazon in our world," reminded the southerner.

The archeologist grinned and joked, "I'm willing to bet my cigars that her ancestor was also an Amazon."

Melinda chuckled and replied, "Keep ya cigars, Janice."

"Mel..." Janice stepped closer to her lover and wanted desperately to take the southerner's hands into hers but she couldn't in the public eye. "You know what this could mean if the Amazons were real? What if they are connected to Xena and Gabrielle somehow?"

"Oh my, the havoc it could cause on the social standards today," joked the prim southerner.

Janice snickered then went serious. "Melinda, I understand if you don't want to do this with me. I mean home is in the Carolinas for you. I'm not exactly the safest person to associate with these days... being a Covington and all. Then there's always the problem with-" She was silence by Melinda's fingertips over her lips.

"Ya just need to learn when to quit while you're ahead, Janice." Melinda removed her touch from the soft lips that she loved to kiss. "I told ya we're in this together. Where ya go, I go."

Janice wanted so badly to wrap the amazing woman into her arms and show her happiness and appreciation for this beautiful southerner. She revealed a wide smile and her eyes lit up at the prospect of the adventure ahead of them. "What about Jack?"

"I reckon he's still in the hotel I left him in. We outta get the Xena Scrolls before going."

Janice nodded her agreement then turned and tapped on the driver's window.

Erin Alexander hastily cranked the window down then had a hopefully expression on her face.

"You got room in this De Luxe for an archeologist and linguist?"

Erin's expression broke into a thrilled expression. "Hop in, Doctor Covington and Miss Pappas."

The archeologist faced the car, opened the back door and grinned up at her lover. "You ready for this, sweetheart?"

Melinda smirked then answered, "Like I was made for it, Janny." She then shoved her lover into the car by her hips. She listened to Janice's excited laugh echo back to her.

Melissa twisted in her seat and peered over the front bench seat. "Buckle up 'cause my momma is a wild driver."

"Hush, Mel," ordered the professor.

Melinda bit her lower lip from laughing and kept busy by buckling up.

Janice however couldn't resist a poke. "Do you need me to drive then, Doctor Alexander?"

The professor's response was reversing the car in the parking lot then saying, "I prefer to return this car in one piece, Doctor Covington."

Melinda smirked but her hand slid across the bench seat and slipped into the archeologist's small hand.

Janice laced their hands together then flashed a tender smile at her lover. That's when Janice truly believed that family was forever, even through time and across realities.

The Extra Long Epilogue - Beauty and the Beast

The Conqueror remained rigid in her throne while she listened to the tail end of the advisor's report. "Then the canal will be complete in four moons?"

The advisor nodded then replied, "Yes, my liege as we are ahead of schedule due to your promotion of keeping the slaves' healthy."

The ruler made no visible reaction to the advisor's praises. "See that things stay on track so that the Isthmian Games will celebrate the completion of the canal."

"Of course, my liege. The Isthmian Games and the Corinth Canal will be a testament to your rein and the realm's power." Cyd bowed to the Conqueror to show he'd completed his speech.

The Conqueror's eyes scanned the masses of her court when nobody else stepped forward to bring up a political issue. She then felt inwardly disappointed at one particular possibility. "There is nothing from my advisor of state?"

Gabrielle, the new advisor of state, sifted through the masses until she was in the front. She bowed her head then lifted it again and replied, "I am only saving the best for last, my liege."

The ruler's lips curled into a pleased grin. "What do you have for the realm this new moon, Gabrielle?" She waved for the new advisor of three moons to speak to her. How she'd come to enjoy the court now that her friend proudly took the position as advisor of state. She looked forward to the ideas and debates she held with the former rebel leader and especially because she and Gabrielle would pretend to get into heated fights, which made the court squirm.

The bard observed her friend regally poised in her throne and dressed in her leathers, armor, greaves, and cape cascading over the chair. The shining chakram always fascinated the bard the most. She knew that meant the Conqueror had been training the squads this morning. "My liege, I believe the realm could do with a major social overhaul."

"Oh?" prompted the ruler.

"Yes." Gabrielle mentally unfiled her reasons then swiftly claimed, "The polis should require that every citizen in the realm to have a second name or rather a family name."

The Conqueror had seen this before so she questioned, "Like the Roman naming convention?" Her eyes narrowed in warning at the advisor.

Gabrielle didn't back away from the threat since she knew better. She could tell the air in the court though grew thick. She lifted her chin then she carefully chose her next words. "Similar, my liege however the Greeks, under your rein, always surpass anything the Romans fumble to do." She stopped and listened to the silence ringing back in her ears but she held the ruler's powerful stare.

The Conqueror's hard face abruptly broke by a grin. "Tell me why I should bother with such an endeavor, Gabrielle."

"Well, my liege," began the bard, her hands moving with her words. "How many Hectors would you guess reside here in Corinth?"

The Conqueror pretended to calculate then with a wave of her hand she guessed, "At least six."

"Try a dozen," remarked the bard, "And not to mention seven in Sparta then would you believe there are twenty-one in Thebes?" She cocked her head as she could see her friend was waiting for her point. "A little confusing isn't it?" She then turned on her boot's heels and called, "Jericho, do you receive complaints from your collectors about keeping these Hectors straight?"

The advisor of finance stepped forward some as he knew Gabrielle meant his tax collectors. "Yes, actually... it's rather frustrating."

Gabrielle faced the ruler then continued her explanation. "My liege, if the realm was to require the citizens to have a second name then a lot of things will run smoother in the systems." She lifted her left hand and grabbed one finger as she verbally ticked off the list, "The military's conscription and pays, the taxation, the deeds of land ownership, crime will lower, and we'll be able to take a proper census." Gabrielle saw the ruler's resolve was starting to waver as the ruler reverted to her thinking position where her right elbow rest on the chair arm and her chin in her palm.

"This will be exceedingly costly, my liege" spoke up an advisor.

The Conqueror's ice eyes flickered to the advisor. Recently she'd disclosed to her advisors that they may now speak out during court and it took awhile for the advisors

to grow accustomed to this new freedom. Of course they unknowingly owed this new freedom to the advisor of state, who'd privately suggested to the Conqueror to open the floor. Sometimes the Conqueror wondered if Gabrielle had suggested it just so Gabrielle could debate with the other advisors and wipe the marble floor with them. It was rare that any advisor bested the state advisor when she had such bardic skills for her armor and weaponry.

"Yes, this would be quite costly," agreed the Conqueror, her statement falling on the state advisor. She waited for Gabrielle's expected retaliation.

"It would be definitely," agreed the bard, "but think how costly it is to the realm right now without a second name? This is causing such trouble for the realm that there's some unrest... especially in the cities where there are more people with same names."

"My liege," spoke up the advisor of finance, "because we cannot properly identify who is who my collectors become frustrated and improperly tax the people. We do not know what lands they own, the family size, or their income because they can easily dodge us. Our records are poor."

"Why have you not corrected those records, Jericho?" questioned the annoyed ruler.

"My liege, you have not authorized the proper funds to take on such an undertaking. My collectors do not have the manpower or resource to correct this."

Gabrielle bit back her grin as the financial advisor easily supported her points. "My liege, the poor are being taxed like they are the rich while the rich dodge the proper taxes for their income level. Much of this derives from the fact that the polis has kept improper records and that we cannot discern who is who." She lifted her hands and factually stated, "And the realm is growing? How am I or the other departments to keep up with this?" Her hands fell to her side.

The Conqueror drummed her fingers on her chair arm's edge. She straightened up from leaning against her other arm. "Commander Meleager, this unrest that Gabrielle speaks of have you heard of it?"

The commander stood out from the rest of the court due to his silver plated chest, black leathers, and his helmet while the rest of the court wore togas, except for Gabrielle. He respectfully removed his traditional Greek helmet then answered, "Yes, my liege. There is some unrest across the realm but it is only minor... nothing to cause alarm."

"Yet unrest has a way of growing into rebellions," reminded the Conqueror.

The commander said nothing but dipped his head in agreement to the truth.

The Conqueror studied her advisor of state while she considered this incredibly endeavor that Gabrielle was asking of her and the realm. She knew that Gabrielle's solution may just calm this aged unrest going on in her realm because she knew that her old use of fear wouldn't work here. "And have you already selected a second name, Gabrielle?"

The state advisor's eyes glinted and her lips showed a faint grin. "My liege, I would only select such a second name after you have chosen yours."

The Conqueror's hard expression broke by an amused grin at how the bard could stroke her ego. By the gods she hadn't realized how well Gabrielle had come to know her. Her expectations and hopes of Gabrielle being a decent advisor had been far exceeded. "And I assume you have written the proposal?"

"My liege, would I do any less?" Gabrielle placed her hands behind her back. She stood straight with her brown skirt slightly fluttering and her blue peasant top made her blond hair stand out along with her rich green eyes. She'd claimed her traditional clothes despite the court masses wore togas but she liked representing her stock plus she loved annoying the masses by not fitting in.

"I will further consider this after I've read your proposal, Gabrielle. See that you bring it to my office." The Conqueror straightened up in her throne while her hands rested on the arms of her chair. "I will say that I am pleased with this concept."

"Thank you, my liege." Gabrielle bowed while promising, "I will bring it by this afternoon." She straightened up then stepped away from the base of the dais.

The Conqueror glimpsed over her court and loudly questioned, "Is there anything else?" When nobody answered her call she stood up and stated, "Then we are dismissed until the full moon."

The masses broke apart and the courtroom filled with the din of chatter. Groups of people pocketed into various spots around the huge courtroom.

The Conqueror descended her dais and was greeted by her advisor of state.

"How were the squads this morning?" inquired the bard.

The Conqueror slid her arms back so that her hands rested between her backside and cape. "They were lacking," she complained.

"I'm sure you corrected them," remarked the grinning bard.

The Conqueror displayed a half grin. "Walk with me to the stables... I have riding lessons with Melpomene today."

Gabrielle chuckled and mentioned, "So I heard. Melpomene has been looking forward to this since you offered." She and the Conqueror easily passed through the busy courtroom as the people moved out of the way for them.

"So I can't interest you in joining us?" tormented the ruler.

The bard grinned at their growing, friendly banter in recent moons. "Oooh no... I leave that to you and Melpomene." She chuckled and joked, "They don't make those things low enough for me to ride."

"Then perhaps this spring I will purchase a pony for your birthday."

Gabrielle scowled at the smug ruler. "Oh yeah I can see that now. The galloping pony will fall several Roman miles behind a trotting horse." She then did a mental image of herself mounted on a pony, which brought on a fit of giggles.

The Conqueror was amused too but she went a bit serious at a thought. "What are you doing tonight?" She let Gabrielle walk through the partially opened entrance doors then followed.

Gabrielle paused just outside the doors until her friend was beside her again. "I'm actually going over to Cyrene's taverna. Are you free tonight to come?" She quickly added, "I think mom wants me to do the bard thing tonight so she promised a free dinner." She then smirked and teased, "I'm sure I can convince her to throw one in for you."

The Conqueror's body shook with a silent laugh while she went down the steps to the grounds. "Seeing as I couldn't afford it otherwise?"

"Well with this new proposal of mine," jested the bard, "you'll need every drachma you can get."

"I believe so." The Conqueror sighed dramatically then turned to her left to head to the stables that were attached to the barrack.

"So, about dinner?" tried the bard.

The Conqueror walked closer to the bard and quietly answered, "I'd love to join you. What time are you going?"

Gabrielle's eyes were lit up happily as she smiled at the ruler. "Whenever you're free... Cyrene didn't have a set time."

"A candlemark after sunset?" prompted the ruler. "Melpomene and I should be finished by then."

The state advisor nodded her head then quickly asked, "Just meet me there?" She came to a stop just outside the entrance of the stables.

The Conqueror nodded then rested her hands on her hips. "Be sure to drop your proposal off in my office."

"I'll put it on your desk," agreed the bard, who was one of two people authorized to enter the ruler's office.

"You will lose face among the aristos kratein," mentioned the ruler. She knew that lately Gabrielle had been gaining favor by the court then the two lower classes approved immensely that the Conqueror appointed the rebel leader as the state advisor. The two upper classes however were weary of the rebel leader filling the position but they held their breath.

"Screw them," muttered the bard, "if they paid their taxes properly to the polis then we

wouldn't be here." She huffed but she noted that amused look on the ruler's face. Both she and the Conqueror knew how disgusted the bard could get with the aristocracy of the realm especially since the Romans influenced the division of classes. "It shouldn't take you long to read it and approve it."

"If I approve it," reminded the ruler.

Gabrielle mocked glare at her friend then folded her arms over her chest in a defiant stance. "If you don't then you can find yourself another state advisor and good luck finding somebody as good as me."

"Is that blackmail, Gabrielle?"

The former rebel leader let her nose crinkle up to give her that innocent look. "Never, my liege." She then dropped her arms and started to walk off while saying, "I'll see you tonight."

The Conqueror was left shaking her head and watching the bard stroll off. She certainly had come to realize that Gabrielle's punishment for being the rebel leader was truly her bittersweet punishment. She thoroughly enjoyed working along side the bard despite at times it was very frustrating when they truly had opposite views.

The Conqueror was soon met by Melpomene in the stables and she spent the first candlemark showing the child how to tack up a horse properly. Then her next lessons were how to mount the horse and what commands a rider could give a horse.

Gabrielle however returned to the fortress and went to her office. She was the state advisor and running the polis required her to have her own office. Her office was by no means the size of the Conqueror's however it was on the same floor as the Conqueror's and only a few doors away. The only other allowed offices on this level was the commander and the Conqueror's assistant, Galen, who Gabrielle had become rather fond of lately. Galen would often lend a hand to the bard and he especially did when Gabrielle first started her position.

Gabrielle picked up her proposal first from her office and dropped it off in the Conqueror's. She then returned to her office to work out her proposal for the next court meeting as she would push it along side her last name proposal. She had a feeling though that this proposal would get shot down; she was actually expecting it to however she hoped it would at least plant a seed and cause a stir in the court.

Just after sunset, Gabrielle finished off her scrollwork that was regularly required of her from moon to moon for the daily activities of the polis. She put her quill into the inkwell then she picked up her wool and leather cloak from the back of her chair. After she shrugged on her long cloak, she blew out the few candles in the room and silently left to head to Cyrene's taverna.

While Gabrielle worked her way out of the fortress, she checked to make sure she had her Amazon dagger that Terreis had given her. She never liked carrying it but that was one of the dire arguments that her and the Conqueror hit only a moon and half ago. The Conqueror insisted on some small form of protection and when Gabrielle refused to have sentry shadows then the Conqueror told her to carry a small weapon. Finally

the bard realized if she didn't conceal a dagger on her body then the Conqueror would put the sentries on her heels whether she liked it or not.

Finally the bard made it across the city and stepped into Cyrene's taverna that she was the proprietor of for two moons now. Cyrene didn't own the taverna or its small square land it was built on but she ran the show and paid rent. Cyrene's business had started out slow in the city then she became well established for her amazing food and atmosphere. Also Gabrielle's occasional drop ins and story telling helped to promote the business.

Cyrene peered up from wiping her bar clean of some spilled wine. She smiled at seeing the blond beauty come through the door. She set her rag down and came around her bar then hugged her adopted daughter. "How was your day?"

Gabrielle pulled back and smiled at the older woman. "Well I took the proposal before the court and Xena."

"How'd she handle it?" Cyrene raised an eyebrow much like her daughter would have done.

"Really well," answered the amazed bard. "I think she's figured out I'm hard to tell no."

Cyrene laughed then nodded her head. "It only took me twelve moons... hopefully she's quicker to figure it out." She then saw her barmaid coming to her with an order already spewing from her lips. She promised the barmaid to get the drink order and the hastily told the bard, "Eat first or story first?"

"Xena is coming so I'll sit down and have dinner with her first."

Cyrene smiled at the idea of her daughter coming tonight. "There's a small table over in the corner." She then started to go around the bar while saying, "I'll have Sara bring the drinks over."

"Thanks, mom." Gabrielle smiled then weaved through the busy taverna to the table indicated. She chuckled because Cyrene knew how the Conqueror preferred the tables in corners so that she could not only hide from prying eyes but also keep an eye out for trouble. The bard took the seat that faced the wall instead of the taverna but she turned her chair around some. She got her cloak off then sat comfortably in the chair. She then tilted her head when the taverna's patrons went silent as a tall, dark woman entered. Suddenly the chatter picked up after the woman walked into the taverna more.

Cyrene greeted her daughter quickly then pointed at Gabrielle waiting for her.

The Conqueror quickly came through the tables, chairs, and people to sit with her friend. "Were you waiting long?"

"No, not at all." Gabrielle smiled at the ruler. "How was the ride with Melpomene?"

"She's a fast learner," admitted the ruler. "She seems to have knack for it."

"Hmmm," muttered the bard, "sounds like somebody else I know."

The Conqueror grunted but she peered up when the barmaid dropped off their drinks then left. She shook her head because the mug was filled with the special port her mother made.

"Your mother is a mind reader, I swear." Gabrielle had cider as she didn't need any alcoholic drinks before her story telling. "I'm not sure what she's making tonight."

"It'll be good either way," murmured the ruler, who adored her mother's home cooking.

Gabrielle fell into idle conversation with her friend and as normal Gabrielle had the longer sentences while the Conqueror had shorter words but meaningful ones. Eventually the bard took her position in front of the patrons and reeled into a story about the god, Zeus, coming to the mortal world dressed as a mere mortal and stole away in a woman's bed for one night. Then a demi-god was born, who was named Alcides and his first summers of growth included discovery of his strength that matched ten men. It was an ongoing saga that Gabrielle had composed with her muses and she'd only recently started writing the tales down about this young demi-god. She planned to expand it into his adulthood and the trials he faced to help mankind.

After the bard finished her tale of the young demi-god she bowed and absorbed the loud praises and applauds. Her eyes though settled on the Conqueror, who she always wondered whether or not listened to her stories. She knew the Conqueror read her reforms, satirical play, and poetries back when she was the rebel leader but this was truly a bardic right. And honestly, the bard was amazed that the Conqueror even allowed her to do this in Cyrene's taverna as the ruler long ago demolished the Athens Academy of Performing Bards just to stop stories such as this.

The Conqueror had her chair leaning back against the wall and the mug of port in her lap. She settled the chair's front legs onto the floor when her friend sat back down with her after fending off her loyal fans. She didn't mention how much she enjoyed the story about this fictional demi-god however she did mention, "You've acquired quite a fan base, Gabrielle."

The bard slightly blushed but first she stole a drink to ease her parched throat. She set the mug down after having a few beats to compose her response. "The only reason I do is because there are no other bards."

The ruler slightly grinned. "Don't fool yourself because I certainly don't... there are other bards out there despite my laws."

Gabrielle knew this was a dangerous topic to tread with the ruler but she thought she'd try for once. "I use to be apart of the underground theatre society."

The Conqueror didn't respond but finished off her port first. She set the mug down. "Yes, if I recall correctly you almost were caught for that play you tried to put on."

Gabrielle stared in shock at the ruler because the ruler knew her half cocked play she

tried to perform despite the risks. She'd tried to do it so many seasons ago and much to Cyrene's chagrin. "How do you know all this?"

The Conqueror was smug as she huskily declared, "I have many skills."

The bard glared but her face broke by a grin. "I think you were as obsessed about me as I was about you." She then realized that probably wasn't far from the truth either.

The ruler stretched her legs out then shrugged. "I know my enemy."

Gabrielle huffed then leaned back in her chair. "Can I ask you about something?" At the ruler's prompting eyebrow, she quietly added, "About Alti?"

The Conqueror discretely nodded for her friend to continue.

"You knew the entire time that Alti was going to betray you, didn't you? That's what she meant just before she died, right?"

The Conqueror inhaled then slowly released her breath. "Yes. I remembered from my childhood when Alti attacked me as a girl. When I grew older it struck me blindly that it was myself that saved...."

"Saved yourself," finished the bard with a silly grin. "That meant you already knew you'd stop Alti... otherwise none of us would be here already."

The Conqueror nodded her head. "When I first met Alti I decided it was safer to keep her closer to me than fight against her or lose sight of her."

"Keep your friends close but your enemies closer," whispered the bard, who brightened with understanding. "By the gods...." She shook her head and asked, "When did you realize what was going on?"

"I suspected it when Janice showed up in the fortress. It was impossible for you to have a twin unless something was fishy. Then you confirmed it when you told me what the Cronos Stone could do."

Gabrielle had carefully listened to the mouthful of words from the quiet ruler. She chuckled at how her friend was quite good at being able to step out of situations and figure out the overall picture. She composed another question but she stopped when somebody entering the tavern captivated her.

The Conqueror already had her head turned and straightened up in her chair as the dekarchos of a squad marched over to her and Gabrielle.

The dekarchos clapped her fist across her bare chest. "My liege, I bring news from the fortress."

Gabrielle leaned over the table to listen since she was the advisor of state. She'd come to admire the new dekarchos that the Conqueror had employed after Janice left a spot open.

"What is it, Najara?" questioned the ruler.

Najara rested her hands behind her back then answered, "Queen Terreis has arrived along with her escort."

"What?" piped up the bard, "She wasn't due here for another day or so."

Najara turned to the state advisor then informed, "It seems with this mild weather this winter they made it sooner."

Gabrielle shrugged but she agreed with the dekarchos. Her stare wandered over to the Conqueror to see what she'd say.

The Conqueror sighed at losing her quiet night but she met her friend's gaze. "Did you want to come back with me?" She then saw the bard's smile, which was answer enough. "When did they arrive?"

"Not long ago, my liege." Najara stepped back when the women stood up from the table. "I will escort you back."

The Conqueror decided not to argue even though she wanted to because lately she'd noticed the dekarchos's personal interest in Gabrielle. She knew that Gabrielle would want the dekarchos to escort them so she could talk to Najara on the way. At that thought, she side stepped the squad leader and hurried out of the taverna. She paused in the middle of the taverna and told her mother goodnight and thank you.

Cyrene said goodnight back to the ruler and the bard before they left.

"Go ahead, Gabrielle," insisted Najara with a warm smile.

The former rebel leader returned the smile as she put on her cloak and walked ahead of the dekarchos to leave the taverna. She caught up to the ruler however her focus was on the dekarchos. She considered Najara a rare creature because she was a female warrior not of the Amazon Nation. The only other like that, in the bard's eyes, was the Conqueror. Gabrielle had spent some time with the dekarchos and learned she was from Phoenicia, which was an eastern providence in the realm along the Mediterranean Sea. This seemed to explain Najara's unusual dress that consisted of thin light brown leather mixed with a blue shade, a belt with a buckle's design traditional to Phoenicia. She wore leather gloves of blue and brown then half arm bracers and carried her sheathed sword on her back. Yet what Gabrielle really liked about Najara's style was that she had short blond hair and that was viewed as unusual in Greek society. When Najara first arrived she wore a headdress that matched her outfit but Gabrielle convinced her to not wear it anymore and that revealed the silver hoop earrings.

It wasn't long before the Conqueror's strides carried her into the fortress then as she climbed the steps of the fortress, the sentries opened the doors. Right behind her was the chatting bard and dekarchos and they went quiet once they entered the courtroom.

Queen Terreis had been glancing over the courtroom until she heard the Conqueror's arrival. She smiled at seeing Gabrielle when she didn't expect to see her until

tomorrow.

The Conqueror stepped up to the Amazon Queen and held out her arm. "Welcome to the Corinth, Queen Terreis."

The Amazon took the ruler's forearm in a firm grip. "Thank you, Conqueror." She released the ruler's arm then side stepped to introduce her escorts. "This is Eponin the Nation's weapons master."

The weapons master stepped up and held out her arm for a strong grip. She stepped back after meeting the ruler even though she'd seen her previously.

"And of course you remember Ephiny and Solari," mentioned the queen.

The Conqueror nodded but took arms and greeted the Amazons back to Corinth. She then allowed Gabrielle to greet the Amazon escorts while she talked to the queen. Gabrielle also made sure to introduce Najara to the Amazons as well. The Conqueror though could tell the Amazons were weary from their long trip down to Corinth. She interrupted her friend from the chatter to get her attention.

Gabrielle cocked her head at the ruler as she knew she was about to say something.

"Can you escort Queen Terreis and her Amazons up to the third level?"

The bard nodded and asked, "Which rooms, my liege?"

"The queen may take the Thessaly bedchambers," informed the ruler, "And the Amazons whichever rooms they'd like."

Gabrielle nodded and smiled at her friends. "Follow me." She guided the Amazons across the quiet, torch lit courtroom and through the side door near the throne.

The Conqueror turned to the dekarchos. "Did you instruct the stable hands to take care of their things?"

"Yes, my liege," answered Najara. "Is there anything else?"

The ruler slowly lifted her right eyebrow and her eyes slightly darkened. "Yes, actually."

As soon as Gabrielle was out of the courtroom with the door shut, she turned to the queen and enveloped her into a hug. She was happy she wasn't under political scrutiny now. "It's so great to see you, Terreis."

Terreis smiled when she pulled back in the hug and rested her hands on the bard's shoulders. "You look great, Gabrielle. Ephiny mentioned your legs had been healed." She tilted her head then asked, "You'll have to tell me...?"

"Definitely." The bard's nose crinkled up then she turned to Ephiny, Solari, and Eponin for hugs. She finally guided the Amazons through the fortress to the third level. She admitted she didn't know Eponin that well but maybe this would be a

chance to do that. As they climbed through the fortress, she mentioned, "I think the Conqueror planned for the meeting when you arrived in a couple of days."

"Yes," agreed the queen, "the weather has been mild so we made it sooner than expected."

"It has been rather mild." Gabrielle shrugged at this as she strolled down the hallway lined with doors to bedchambers and at the end was the Conqueror's. "Most likely she'll make the meeting tomorrow." She stopped in front of one door but faced Terreis. "I'll be there too."

"The Conqueror mentioned that in her message." Queen Terreis tilted her head. "How is the position of state advisor?"

Gabrielle noted the other Amazons were carefully listening too. "It's a lot of work but I'm learning quite a bit."

Queen Terreis let it go there as she would pry later when they were in private.

"Oh this is your room." Gabrielle's cheeks flushed but she quickly opened the door. "This is the Thessaly bedchambers... the Conqueror reserves it only for her allied leaders."

Queen Terreis stepped into the room and scanned the large space. "I can see why. Impressive."

Eponin grunted then remarked, "The taxes at work."

Gabrielle sighed at the jab towards the ruler but she held her tongue because she was in a sticky position. "I'm sure your things will be up shortly, Terreis."

The queen nodded after facing the bard again. "Stop by before you leave, Gabrielle."

"I will," promised the state advisor. She then backed out of the room and shut the door. She escorted her friends to the other rooms that were smaller by comparison but still large. "Did you each want separate rooms... um...." She flushed.

Ephiny chuckled and informed the bard she and Solari would share, which said plenty to Gabrielle. Eponin took her own bedchambers though. Gabrielle told Ephiny to stop by tomorrow at her office for a visit. The bard then decided it was best to tell the ruler what rooms the Amazons took for security reasons. Repeatedly the bard received lectures from the ruler about how important security was in the fortress. She sometimes wondered if the Conqueror's security insecurities weren't prompted by Toris's infiltration.

The Conqueror held out the long scroll and scanned over the writing.

"I apologize for disturbing you so late, my liege." Galen set a rolled up scroll on the corner of the ruler's desk. "But I know you've been waiting on this for a moon now."

The ruler paused in her scrutiny of what was obviously a list. "No, Galen I'm glad you

caught me." She lowered the long scroll and started to roll it up. "Did you hear how long it would take to compile the resources?"

Galen's lips puckered and his brown eyes fuzzed over from his thoughts. "I believe the timbers from Gaul will not take long. The transportation time is the lengthiest part."

The Conqueror set the scroll down beside the other one. "Legio IX in Eastern Gaul should make quick work of this."

"I agree, my liege however with the rainfall there it may make it a sticky situation to haul the timbers here." Galen shook his head then added, "The commander is quite irritated by your plans to build this."

The ruler grinned at this news. "Is he now?" She folded her arms over her armored chest. "What of Egypt?"

"Queen Cleopatra is prepared to begin query however...." The assistant peered up and saw the ruler's curious look so he sighed and informed, "Queen Cleopatra has only agreed to do this if you come to Egypt to inspect the limestone prior."

"By the gods," complained the ruler, "She is relentless."

"My liege, the project will not be successful without the limestone, hydraulic cement, granite--"

"Galen, I know." The Conqueror lowered her hand after silencing her assistant. "What about the Kingdom of Chin?"

"Lady Lao has agreed to send her resources."

The Conqueror nodded then asked, "And does she require a visit first?"

Galen actually grinned at the ruler's joke. "No, my liege." He was growing accustomed to the ruler's bantering side that'd been developing lately. It was a welcomed change that made it easier to serve the ruler. "When will you order the resources to be allocated?"

"At least not for several moons," decided the Conqueror, "I expect the canal not to be completed for another four moons. Only one project at a time."

Galen thoroughly agreed but he was distracted by the knock at the door. He pivoted to his left when the Conqueror called the visitor in and he couldn't hide his thin smile at seeing the state advisor. "Good evening, Gabrielle."

The Conqueror briefly glanced down at the assistant and filed away the note about how he seemed to be taken with the bard. She was quickly realizing that Gabrielle had a profound affect on everybody; her included in that list.

"I stopped by to let you know that the Amazons took rooms three and five," offered the bard.

"Just two?" questioned the ruler, her right eyebrow going up and it went higher at Gabrielle's blush.

"Solari and Ephiny," merely elaborated the bard. She was glad when the Conqueror easily pieced it together.

"Are you going home now?"

"I think I'm going to visit with Queen Terreis." Gabrielle shrugged. "It's been awhile since we visited." She tied her fingers together in a nervous habit but her voice stayed strong when she spoke again. "Do you want me to...."

The ruler tilted her head. "Stop by my chambers before you go."

The bard gladly agreed and mostly because her friend understood her unfinished question. "Yes, my liege." She dipped her head in respect then quietly excused herself.

Gabrielle made her way back to Terreis's bedchambers and spent over a candlemark talking to her friend. She and the Amazon Queen traded stories about what'd been happened recently. Gabrielle had heard how Cyane stepped down from the throne and passed the queen's caste to Terreis. The news had surprised the bard however Cyane believed it was time for Terreis to take power so that the Nation could move forward. Cyane realized that the Amazons were entering a new era now that the Conqueror was changing and allying with the Nation. Or so everybody was hoping and why Queen Terreis journeyed to Corinth. Gabrielle was even stunned to learn that the Amazon Nation was recruiting new Amazons at an alarming rate due to word about their success against Darphus. Suddenly the Amazon Nation took on life again in the realm and they no longer were fantasy tales or a brief Greek history lesson.

After her visit, Gabrielle kept to her word and traveled down the hallway. She entered the Conqueror's bedchambers after she was called to enter. She spotted the ruler straightening up with a kettle that had steam rising from it.

"Perfect timing," mentioned the ruler. She stepped over to her small table and poured the hot water into tea cups.

Gabrielle neared her friend, who was only clothed in a silk robe. She admired how the Conqueror's hair was pulled up into a loose bun then a few strands in the front fell around her face. "What kind of tea?"

"The Jie tea," answered the ruler. She straightened up with the warm mugs in her hand.

Gabrielle was dubious because of her tea lessons with the ruler she knew this was an expensive tea from Chin. "Any particular reason?" She gratefully took the tea.

"Do I need a reason?" challenged the slightly grinning ruler. "Come out on the balcony with me." She glided across the bedchambers towards the balcony, which was already open of its heavy curtains.

The bard slowly followed because she was busy sipping the Jie tea, which was a green

tea. She softly moaned at the pleasing taste that slid across her tongue and down her throat. The tea she made at home could never match what the Conqueror offered her.

The Conqueror arrived on the balcony and leaned against the marble rail with her arms stretched out and the mug wrapped between her hands. "How was Queen Terreis?"

The bard stood near her friend but not against the rail. "She was tired but we had plenty to talk about."

The Conqueror glimpsed at her friend and she had that entertained expression.

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. "Just don't say it."

The Conqueror silenced her comments by taking a sip of her tea. Her eyes lowered to the fortress grounds when she heard the iron gates open and a file of soldiers marched in then towards the barrack. She knew it was time for some of the squads to rotate.

Gabrielle had spied the squad returning too, which was the topic of her next question. "Why do you have so many squads lately?" She tore away from the soldiers below and stared at her friend's profile.

The Conqueror peered into her mug then casually replied, "Security."

The bard shook her head at the simple answer and it engaged her into a rant. "Ever since Toris you've increased security by double. You had four squads and now you've double it. Plus you have them on duty around the clock, Xena." Gabrielle sighed and remarked, "I mean are you getting ready for some attack on the fortress? You're starting to make me paranoid." She went silent when she realized her friend was growing aggravated by the way the ruler's grip tightened on the mug then her jaw was set tightly. Gabrielle bit her lower lip when she considered she may have crossed a line here. She dipped her head then murmured, "I'm sorry, Xena."

The Conqueror's head turned and her ghostly expression settled on the bard.

Gabrielle's stomach sank and her heart pounded harder. "I guess I just don't understand why you've grown so concerned about security when you're... well you're you." She waved her hand up and down the tall woman's length. "You're the-"

"Destroyer of Nations?" cut in the ruler.

Gabrielle's hand fell to her side and she let out a sigh. "I was going to say the Warrior Princess."

The Conqueror turned her head away and stared at her capitol city. "It's not security for me."

"Then..." Gabrielle's features were pressed together by puzzlement then it struck her blindly. "It's about Cyrene, Melpomene...."

"And you," uttered the ruler.

The bard sighed but she stole a drink of her tea so she would have time to mull this over carefully. The tea warmed her body back up considering she was standing out in the chilly night. "I'm really sorry, Xena. I didn't mean to go on like that when you're trying to protect us."

"Its fine," brushed off the ruler. She took a long drink of her tea and almost finished it off.

Gabrielle leaned her side against the rail and watched her friend's dark profile. "Is it really that serious? I mean eight squads, who patrol day and night?"

"Yes," softly replied the ruler. "I have plenty of enemies and my family is a target for them." She finished tea and balanced the empty mug on the rail to her right.

Gabrielle body warmed more from the ruler's words than the tea could manage. She knew the ruler considered her family just as she considered the ruler her family yet it was different hearing the ruler say it. "I know you're doing this to protect us but... I have to say I can't walk around in fear like that, Xena." She moved her head with disagreement on her face. "I can't be scared about what lays ahead in the shadows or around the next block."

"I know," uttered the ruler, "and I wouldn't want you to live life like that."

"That's why you've strengthened the security," concluded the bard. The only response she received was the Conqueror's faint nod, which told the bard it was time to switch topics. "Thanks for coming out to dinner with me." She drank the last swallow of tea then also placed the mug on the rail but to her left.

The Conqueror's cold eyes flickered to her friend then back at the city. "Do you plan to scribe those stories about this demi-god Alcides?"

Gabrielle nervously nibbled on her lower lip but she knew to answer truthfully. "Yes, I've been planning to as soon as I get a break from my work with the polis." She tilted her head then dared to ask, "Is that okay?"

"Yes."

The bard quietly sighed but not out of relief but because something was going on in that ruler's head. She faced the view of the city then gently asked, "What's wrong?" She inhaled then she uttered, "And don't tell me there isn't anything."

The Conqueror glanced at her friend briefly before responding. "There are a lot of changes going on, Gabrielle."

The bard silently conceded but she waited to see if the ruler would say more or if she required prodding for this.

"And maybe too much change at once," murmured the ruler. She quickly noticed the bard grew slightly alarmed because something was wrong.

"But it's good change, right?" argued the concerned state advisor.

"Whether or not it is good," explained the ruler, "too much of it can be dangerous. Everything in life must have a balance."

Gabrielle carefully tossed the idea around in her head then she accepted it too. "Then is the last name proposal too much?"

"Yes and no," murmured the ruler. "It's a needed change as far as the polis is concerned. When it comes to the people it will be too much."

"The aristocracy," muttered the realizing bard. "Will they react that badly? I mean the taxation system isn't fair on the lower classes and favoring the upper classes."

"Life isn't fair," reminded the ruler. "Money is power, Gabrielle and for them to lose that power... they won't take kindly to it."

"Xena, it's not the realm has a senate where they can buy politics and such." Gabrielle shook her head then argued, "We're not like Rome."

"The realm is what Rome would have become if I hadn't conquered it." The Conqueror now studied her curious friend. "Julius Caesar was well on his way to destroying the senate and taking full dictatorship." She then dropped her head to the left side some. "The upper classes can buy political power just not at this level. There are still the legions, the hoplites, cavalries, the polis positions, and so on for them to gain power in the polis."

"But highest authority, you, can't be tainted by that, which is important," debated the bard.

"To some degree," relented the ruler, "however my realm is only loyal as my most corrupt polis agent."

Gabrielle hadn't considered this and her head drooped then her right hand massaged her now aching eyes. "That means I need to weed out my corrupt agents, don't I?" She let out a heavy sigh then glanced at her friend. "I wouldn't even know where to begin, Xena."

"You start your way at the top and work your way down," suggested the ruler.

"Then what do I do if I find somebody that's taking bribery?"

The Conqueror smirked. "Tell me."

Gabrielle put her hands on her hips as she faced the ruler. "So let me get this right. I find out who's corrupt then run to you and tell you." She dropped her hands from her waist. "Now why does that sound like... maybe a tad-tail?" She leaned her side against the rail. "If I plan to be a respected state advisor I have to handle the corrupt agents myself." Her head dipped forward.

The Conqueror shifted on her feet silently then quietly asked, "Are you prepared to do

that?" She turned her head and studied her friend's distant stare. "You'll make a lot of enemies and keep only a couple of friends."

"It's definitely not a popularity contest," sarcastically joked the bard. She turned and mimicked her friend's stance of leaning against the rail. Her thoughts wandered off to this major problem ahead of her. She truly wasn't sure if she was mentally prepared to weed out corruption in the realm then punish them because being harsh was never in her nature. Hades she didn't even know what that punishments could consist of for a particular corruption. Would she have to sentence somebody to death because of bribery?

The Conqueror could tell her friend was deep in dark thoughts, which she instantly disliked. She straightened up while saying, "Come on... it's late and we both have a long day tomorrow."

Gabrielle's thoughts broke apart and she returned to the present. She picked up her empty mug and headed into the bedchambers. She thanked her friend for the tea and the evening then made her way out of the fortress. Gabrielle knew that tomorrow would be extremely busy between her regular work plus her meeting between Queen Terreis and the Conqueror. That particular meeting did come and quite quickly as the Conqueror decided to do it a candlemark after Helios high. Gabrielle found herself tiredly sitting in a wood chair, next to Queen Terreis, and the Conqueror behind her desk in a formal mode.

Queen Terreis's head was down and she was scanning over an open scroll in her lap. She finished reading it, lifted her head, and shook it. Her face showed she was astonished and she rasped, "Is this real?" She glanced between the state advisor and the ruler because it seemed impossible.

"It's real," confirmed the Conqueror. She finally leaned back into her chair and laced her hands in her lap. "You need to read through all the details then we can come to a full agreement before signing it." She glanced at the bard, who'd remained silent but carefully watching and listening.

Queen Terreis's lowered her head, her right elbow now propped up on the chair arm, and her cheek sunk into her palm. She stared at the main highlights of the alliance between the Amazon Nation and the realm. "By Artemis," she uttered, "I don't know what to think much less say."

Gabrielle faintly smiled and her features softened. "It's a lot to take in, I agree." She crossed her legs at her ankles then gently offered, "I think it shows the realm is serious about this." When Terreis's amazed green eyes met Gabrielle's she promised, "The realm wants to join an alliance with the Amazon Nation... a real alliance."

The Conqueror tilted her head as she interrupted the Amazon Queen's reactions to this alliance.

The queen's fingertips grazed over one particular line as she questioned the words there. "All of former Athens's lands?" She glanced between the bard and the ruler.

"Yes," answered Gabrielle, "you said the Nation is growing... you'll need the land to

develop on too."

"What about our current lands?" questioned the concerned queen.

"You may remain on them," answered the ruler, "however I do not wish the Amazons to keep it as their official capitol." She held out a hand to indicate the alliance scroll. "Athens will be rebuilt and it will be the Amazon Nation's capitol." She lowered her hand back to her lap. "In return for every five hundred Amazon warriors the realm reserves the right to take a hundred."

"And the port?" Queen Terreis noticed in the scroll that the port was also a highlight of this alliance.

The Conqueror inhaled slowly as she worked out her explanation for the port aspect of the treaty. "There is no major port city on the Attica peninsula and this is a way to correct that problem." The Conqueror didn't care to admit to her error about destroying the city of Athens so long ago however she figured this may pay off better than she hoped if the Amazon Nation agreed.

Queen Terreis was slowly piecing the plans together. "Isn't that the purpose of the Corinth Canal? So you can bolster the trade here?"

"Yes and no," answered Gabrielle. "It's also about a better naval port."

Queen Terreis read that the port would have to authorize the Greek and Egyptian navies in and out plus incorporate plans to build naval shipyards.

"Corinth has plenty of triremes however the distance from Corinth to the mouth of the Saronic Gulf is great. By having a naval port reestablished in Athens's location then this could prevent enemy attacks sooner." The Conqueror watched as Queen Terreis seemed to take in this information.

Queen Terreis's eyebrows furrowed and she theorized, "Plus it gives the realm a chance to produce shipyards that can push out a Roman style navy."

"The Byzantine navy as well," informed the ruler. She inwardly enjoyed the astonished features of the Amazon Queen.

"Greek fire," murmured the shocked queen, "you're after the Greek fire from the Byzantine Empire." She shook her head then dangerously asked, "Is the realm building a navy to surpass the Byzantine's?"

Gabrielle's eyes flickered to the ruler as she wondered if the Conqueror would honestly answer.

The Conqueror was quiet then she leaned to her left in the chair. "Yes." Her lips slightly puckered from her thoughts. "There is no shipyard in the realm that can construct all types of ships from the various parts of the realm." The Conqueror straightened up then spoke again. "The realm is also dependent on the Egyptian navy for further support."

Queen Terreis peered down at the alliance scroll then back up at the ruler. "So you plan to surpass both Egypt and Byzantine's navies?" She shook her head then asked, "Why the Amazons? Why wouldn't you do this yourself?"

"It's rather simple," replied the ruler, "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. If the Amazons make Athens their capitol then that gives me a better defense than any legio or phalanx could provide."

"We'll be more determined to protect our capital," agreed the Amazon.

The Conqueror slightly grinned at the queen's intelligence about this so far. "I will provide a legio and phalanx for a solid twelve moons to help the Amazons reconstruct the city. They will also provide protection until the Amazon Nation can support itself enough."

"What about laws?" inquired the queen.

"The Amazon Nation will act as its own internal polis," explained the ruler, "but must cooperate with the realm's polis. If the realm goes to war then so must the Amazon Nation. If the realm is in search of a traitor that resides in the Amazon Nation then they must hand them over. If the realm declares no trade with another empire then so must the Amazon Nation. And so on...."

"You'll be independent," promised Gabrielle, "but the cooperation of the Amazon Nation as well as the realm's will be essential. It's a co-dependent relationship."

Queen Terreis faintly nodded. "What about religion?"

Gabrielle glanced at the ruler, who took the question.

"The realm has always had a free religion policy. You may worship Artemis or...." The Conqueror held up her hands and stated, "Anubis." Her hands lowered. "You may even produce your own monetary system however I would advise it'll be expensive and most likely will not be as strong against the drachma."

Queen Terreis leaned back against her chair then mentioned, "Exactly how can the Amazon Nation afford to build this city?" She stared puzzled at the scroll and considered the size of city before it was demolished. "We don't have the money or the supplies to take on such an undertaking."

"The realm will provide resources and money," explained the bard. "I already have the financial advisor working out some numbers."

The Amazon Queen didn't hear any rebukes from the Conqueror so it must be true. She stared down at the scroll again as if it wasn't real then she lifted her gaze to the ruler. "Why are you doing this?" Her eyes narrowed because of her perplexity to understand this riddle. "You wanted to destroy the Amazons and now... this...." She signaled the alliance scroll.

The Conqueror was about to speak but then she was cut off by her state advisor.

"I know right? It's too good to be true," summarized the bard. "I kept wondering too what the Conqueror had up her gauntlets for this one... as if she hasn't toyed with the Amazon Nation enough." Gabrielle paused then glanced at the carefully listening ruler but she turned back to Queen Terreis. "Then I figure out something about this entire deal." She pointed at the scroll then honestly stated, "If the realm politically shows allegiance to the Conqueror's long time enemy, the Amazon Nation, then the other empires will follow suit."

Queen Terreis stared at the Conqueror and tried to read anything hidden behind those usually cold blue eyes yet she found nothing.

"I owe so much to the Amazons." The Conqueror held up her chin then declared, "I took so much from them. I took their lands, their people, and almost their faith. I want to return those things to the Amazons and the best place I can think of starting that is by giving them lands they can grow on and allying to the Amazon's polis."

Queen Terreis slowly inhaled as she tried to absorb all the surprises thrown at her.

Gabrielle noticed this so she carefully informed, "You have plenty of time to consider this, Terreis. I know it's a lot to take in."

"Carefully read over the scroll," ordered the ruler, "and stay here in Corinth as the realm's guests until you've decided."

Queen Terreis slowly rolled up the scroll while she spoke, "I will consider it." She nodded at the ruler then she stood up because she needed to get out of this office. She held out her hand when the Conqueror stood and sidestepped her desk.

The Conqueror firmly took the queen's arm and shook. "I'll have Galen check on you regularly to take care of your needs. Enjoy your afternoon, Queen Terreis."

The queen dipped her head then stated, "You as well, Conqueror." She then quickly left the office with scroll in hand.

"Well," murmured the bard, "that went...."

"Just as expected," finished the ruler. "She doesn't trust it."

Gabrielle folded her arms over her chest. "And can you blame her?" She shrugged. "How long have the Amazons and you been enemies? Now you're suddenly offering a chance in... history for them to either survive or lay in ruins." She sighed and uttered, "It's a big decision... especially for Terreis."

"And had she agreed to it immediately I may have declined." The Conqueror went around her desk and took her seat.

"Huh," mumbled the thoughtful bard. She shook her head then decided to take her leave too. Gabrielle spent the rest of her day going through her scrollwork that was regularly required of her. Her late afternoon was happily disrupted by Ephiny coming in for a visit. She and Ephiny chatted for a solid candlemark and caught up on stories and life. Ephiny was surprised to hear how close the Conqueror and Gabriele were

growing considering their history. Ephiny did wonder if maybe the Conqueror had changed because she never thought it was possible for the Conqueror and Gabrielle to get along much less become friends.

Gabrielle's last few candlemarks of work after sunset dragged past but she was relieved to go home and rest. Cyrene wasn't home yet but Melpomene was just finishing up with her tutor. The tutor had been hired by the Conqueror to provide the child with an education so that her future would open wider. Gabrielle had argued against the ruler paying for the tutor but she gave in when the ruler stated it was one of her few opportunities to give back the child something in her life that she'd taken. The bard could only wonder what other ideas the ruler had thought out to fix the things she'd done so wrong. Just maybe the ruler would allow the arts again in the realm however that still seemed like such a joke to the bard.

The following day Gabrielle was surprisingly visited by Queen Terreis, who seemed to have very concerned features. Gabrielle offered her friend a seat in front of her desk but Gabrielle got up and sat in the chair next to her friend. She wasn't much for staying behind her desk when it came to her friends.

"Gabrielle, I've thought a lot about the Conqueror's offer." The Amazon Queen remained rigid in her chair but slightly turned to face her friend. "I'm shocked by it but I really like the possibilities and opportunity for the Amazons. It's a way for us to secure our future and with the realm there to protect us."

The bard however could tell there was some exception to this so she asked, "But what is it?"

"I just... I have one stipulation though before I could accept it." Terreis wavered as she debated whether to bring this up yet when she met the bard's caring gaze she knew she had to try this. "I will only accept it if you will take a caste as queen."

Gabrielle stared at the Amazon then her eyebrows slowly started to push inwards. "Terreis... I... but I..."

"I know." Terreis leaned closer to her friend. "Just hear me out first." She saw the bard's distraught nod so she reeled into her explanation. "If I accept this alliance then that means there'll essentially be two tribes on a very simplistic level. The capitol would rein while the current tribe would become more of a colony or outpost tribe." Terreis stopped so she could formulate her next words and take an inhale of air. "I believe if you take rein over the capitol that it would be very important to the Amazons' future. Not only because of your strong relations with the Conqueror but also because I can see that you're meant for this." Terreis grabbed up the bard's hands into hers. "It wasn't Cyane, it wasn't me,... not even my sister, Melosa, that made the Nation believe again that they were destined for so much more. It was you, Gabrielle."

"I just said 'believe'... that was all," argued the bard. "How does that make me the one to... to guide the Amazons forward?"

"Because when you told the Amazons to believe... they did without question and you were the outsider." Queen Terreis shook her head then quickly added, "You convinced Cyane to kidnap the Conqueror, you represented the Conqueror when none else

would, and you convinced her to fight for us. And now...." Terreis squeezed the bard's hand and murmured, "And now because of you the Conqueror is giving us these lands."

"She wanted to do this though," argued the state advisor.

"Yet if it wasn't for you, she wouldn't even be at this point, Gabrielle." Queen Terreis smiled and declared, "You have been the Amazons' savior... whether or not you accept it. You are truly an Amazon." She released her right hand and touched the bard's cheek. "I think its time you finally joined the Amazons and took your place as queen."

Gabrielle suddenly jumped up from the chair and separated from her friend. She started to pace, muttered words spilling from her lips, and her head down.

Terreis climbed up to her feet and stopped her friend in her tracks. "Gabrielle?" She grasped the smaller shoulders in front of her and peered into perplexed green eyes.

"Terreis, this is... a lot." Gabrielle shook her head and reminded, "I just took my position as the Conqueror's advisor." She touched her forehead with her freehand. "I don't... I can't...."

"Gabrielle," murmured the Amazon Queen, "please?" She searched the bard's softening face. "You feel the draw to the Amazons too... don't you?"

Gabrielle's jaw was flexing then she hoarsely murmured, "Yes." And she did ever since her childhood, which was suddenly sparked to life again after her time in the Amazon Nation. She wanted more than anything to follow that mysterious feeling and discover where it would take her. Yet at the same time there were other influences in her life that she refused to lose and some she wanted to shake loose.

"What is here for you?" urged the queen. She half turned and pointed her left hand at the desk. "A desk and a chair... a mountain of scrollwork?" She shook her head. "I refuse to believe that this is you. You have such spirit, Gabrielle and anybody can fair as the Conqueror's advisor of state. They're a drachma a dozen, Gabrielle but you are not." She brought out her confident smile and declared, "You are meant for the Amazons."

"But... I wasn't even born Amazon," weakly argued the bard.

"And that doesn't matter, Gabrielle." Queen Terreis finally released her hold. "The first Amazon wasn't Amazon because she was born as such but her spirit was Amazon. There are some born Amazons that don't even have the Amazon spirit... like Velasca. Then there are Amazons, who aren't born Amazon and have the spirit." She nodded at Gabrielle's calming features. "And that, my friend is what makes you a real Amazon."

Gabrielle read the confident and proud face of her friend, who was a born Amazon and now the queen. Her gaze focused beyond the Amazon and locked on the desk covered in scrollwork. Could the Conqueror find another state advisor so easily? Yes, the Conqueror certainly could do just that within a few days' time. Then there were

her ideas about the changes that the realm could make and from her discussion with the Conqueror the other night she'd come to realize maybe that they were too radical. Her next proposal in mind was to introduce the idea of abolishing slavery in the realm yet it would be ludicrous in the eyes of the court. Would she even be laughed at by the Conqueror considering the Conqueror kept slaves too? The realm's court wasn't meant for her and she wasn't meant for the realm's court because maybe a dreamy bard could find her niche in a Nation of women that demanded high hopes and dramatic changes.

Gabrielle shifted out of her deep thoughts and centered on the Amazon Queen. And then very slowly, Gabrielle of Potidaea nodded her head.

The next couple of days were agonizing for the bard as she worked along side Queen Terreis and the Conqueror. She helped with finalizing the details of the alliance between the Amazon Nation and the realm. When the final copy was written and read over, Gabrielle found relief to watch the Conqueror and Queen Terreis dip quills in ink and sign their names across the bottom. Then the last step was the seal of the realm and the seal of Amazon Nation pressed into the red wax blotch at the bottom.

The real root of her frustrations and pure nervousness rested with her future explanation to the Conqueror about why she was going to drop her position as the state advisor. Most her nights were spent laying in bed with no sleep and several scenarios and words rolling across her mind's eye. Her muses berated her and her fears made her worry. She wanted to take on this challenge as the Amazon Queen and she found a great sense of meaning in bringing the Amazons forward. That meaning brought depth to her life and she believed purpose in life unlike what the state of advisor could provide her. From the start, Gabrielle was leery of the polis's position however she'd agreed upon it because she thought she could make a difference to the realm. Now those chances seemed rather slim and her ideals extreme. So what was left for her?

About two days after the signing of the treaty and alliance, Gabrielle decided it was the day to face the ruler... her friend. She wasn't getting any scrollwork done at her desk because her stomach kept knotting up. She put her quill in its inkwell then got to her feet and went out of her office. As she drew closer to the Conqueror's office she tried to silence her fears and she found strength in knowing she would find her place with the Amazons.

Gabrielle gently knocked on the Conqueror's office door and waited. She was finally called in so she slipped into the office to find the Conqueror speaking to the commander.

The Conqueror had one eyebrow lifted and her passive expression showing. "What is it, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle steadied her nerves and calmly replied, "I need to speak to you about a personal matter." She paused then added, "A family matter is some regards too."

The Conqueror's mannerism shifted enough for Gabrielle to notice it but not the commander. She switched back to Commander Meleager. "Will you excuse us, commander?"

"Of course, my liege." He crossed his chest with a fisted hand clap, slightly bowed, and turned on his heels. He stopped beside the state advisor. "How are you today, Gabrielle?"

"I'm fine, commander. Yourself?"

"Well," answered the commander with a smile. He then quietly left after a word of goodbye.

The Conqueror wandered behind her desk and sat down for her talk with Gabrielle. "What's going on, Gabrielle?"

The bard neared the ruler and decided it was best to sit too. She remained somewhat ridged in the chair, which was a giveaway about her anxiety. "Several days ago Terreis came to my office to talk to me." She hesitated and glanced at her friend, who was leaning back comfortably in her chair and carefully listening so she pressed forward. "She explained to me that she would only agree to the alliance with the realm under a certain condition."

The Conqueror straightened up at this as she hadn't heard anything of such. She prepared for it to be anything as her fast mind worked out the possibilities. "What was her stipulation?"

Gabrielle inwardly winced at the Conqueror using the same word that the Amazon Queen had used with her too. "Terreis asked me to become the Amazon Queen for the new capitol."

The Conqueror held her breath as she repeated the bard's words in her head. That possibility surely did not come to mind whatsoever and she was rather blind sided. She then realized a key factor to this since Queen Terreis accepted the alliance. "You took her offer."

Gabrielle's skin chilled by the Conqueror's cut tone that she hadn't heard is so long. "Yes, I accepted it. I plan to leave with the Amazons when they depart for the Nation."

The ruler sarcastically laughed then shook her head as a dark smile broke her angry expression. "Well you're not going, Gabrielle. You have your role as the advisor of state to uphold."

"I am going to resign," informed the bard.

"You misunderstood me." The Conqueror climbed to her feet, laid her hands flat on the desk, and leaned towards the prone, small woman. "You... are... not... going," dangerously ordered the ruler.

Gabrielle's anger instantly retaliated and she was swiftly on her feet to meet the Conqueror's furious glare. "I'm not a gods-be-demand prisoner here nor will I put up with such centaur shit."

The Conqueror's upper lip on the right side slightly lifted to show her clenched teeth. "You agreed to a term as my state advisor as your punishment for your rebel faction. If

you can't uphold that agreement then I'll find another one that I can make you... uphold."

Gabrielle's mind flashed with the threat of the cross at how the ruler drew out her last word. She instantly reacted by coldly snapping, "With family like you, who the Hades needs enemies?" She quickly walked away from desk towards the door but she stopped and turned to the Conqueror again. "It's comforting to know that you truly see my role as a punishment. I thought maybe it really was my job that you offered me... I was pretty stupid to think otherwise." She held her hand out at the ruler. "Thank you for being that understanding friend... as if you really care." She turned and walked the rest of the way to the door but the Conqueror's voice made her stop.

The Conqueror was coldly cut by the bard's honest words yet she wouldn't show it. Her heartbeat was wild and almost frantic as if it was screaming at her but she shoved it all away. "Don't you turn your back on me, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle did just that and grabbed the door's handle. "Why?" She turned her head to the ruler. "I'm just returning the favor... my liege."

"If you walk out that door," menacingly threatened the ruler, "then keep going down that hallway. Don't stop until you walk out the gates of this fortress." The Conqueror waited for the bard to make her decision and every pulsing fiber in her wanted to grab Gabrielle, stop her and yet she forced her body to remain still. The only movement she made was her nails digging into her wood desk in hopes to still her raging and confusing emotions.

Gabrielle stared for longer than she knew at the strange woman that truly reverted back to the old ruler she stood against so long ago. She wondered if she'd fooled herself into thinking that the Conqueror had changed and yet this old ruler was back and attacking her again. She closed her eyes, pulled the door open, and made her legs carry her out. She silently closed the door and walked down the hallway in a complete daze. She didn't think about the Conqueror, about her life, or even her future but she just became hollow on her journey out of the fortress. She passed the staring sentries that were blank faces to her. She went out of the gates without ever realizing that the Conqueror was by the window and watching her leave until she was a speck in the city. Gabrielle just followed her body's habitual walk to her house.

Gabrielle was truly proud of herself that she made it all the way into her house before she broke apart. She just made it into the quiet house, closed the door, and leaned her back against the rough wood. She slid down it and her tears spilled because now everything felt so wrong in her. This change in her life had to be the right choice because for once she wanted to believe that she had a purpose in life.

The following moons passed by so swiftly for the bard. After her incident with the Conqueror, Cyrene first tried to convince her adopted daughter that the Conqueror would come around and to wait it out. Gabrielle refused to listen after what she'd heard from the Conqueror's lips and she wanted to move on with her life. It wasn't long before she left Corinth, packed, and with the Amazons to return to the Amazon Nation.

Queen Terreis announced the amazing alliance made with the realm. Gabrielle

couldn't recall much during these moons however she recalled the party that took place after Queen Terreis's announcement. The celebration was gigantic and the Nation spared no wine for it. Gabrielle also recalled the pounding headache the next morning because of the wickedly strong wine she'd indulged for most the night.

It was only a moon after Gabrielle's departure from Corinth that she found herself ascending a dais very slowly in the Amazon Nation. Queen Terreis smiled proudly and held a newly made queen's mask that would be bestowed on the bard. Gabrielle though already wore a mask of hollow happiness when she received the beautiful mask from the queen. What was astonishing was the cheer from the Amazon Nation when Gabrielle accepted the mask and became the second queen of the Amazons since the days of Queen Melosa and Queen Cyane. Together with laced hands, Queen Terreis and Queen Gabrielle embraced the growing Amazon Nation and celebrated under Artemis's watchful eye the future of the Amazons.

Then it wasn't long after Solstice that Gabrielle found herself in a temporary hut in the Nation and writing a formal letter to the Conqueror. She put in the required request for the legion, phalanx, workers, tools, and money to aid her and her Amazons in the ruins of Athens. She wrote out a rough date of when her and her selected Amazons would arrive there to begin the rigorous work of building the Amazon capitol. Last, she signed her name with her royal title as an Amazon Queen and her signature bore the Amazon seal along side.

Just before the heliacal rising of the Sirius star, Queen Gabrielle and Queen Terreis heavily debated with the council about what to name the Amazon capitol that would be built. After the heated debate and a selection, Queen Gabrielle was rounding up her split of the Amazons that would make up her Nation and she marched her Nation south to the capitol of Artemisia.

It was a solid seven days before Queen Gabrielle and her Nation arrived just at the ridge of the mountains that embraced what was once Athens. She and her second in command, Ephiny, climbed what was known as Mount Lykavittos in former Athens.

Gabrielle scanned the rubble of the former glorious city and tried to imagine what rage the Conqueror felt when she leveled the great city. This was a stark reminder to the bard about the Conqueror's dark side and it stared back at her in the setting sun.

Ephiny rested her hands on her hips and stared at the Acropolis hill that only bared the remains of what once were the temples to some famous goddesses such as Nike and Athena. She tilted her head at the crumbled pillars, jutting and broken walls, and then the disfigured yet weathered statues in the distance.

Gabrielle too was taking in the ruined Acropolis and she slightly turned to Ephiny. "The Sacred Rock will be the perfect place to erect a temple to Artemis."

Ephiny brightened in realization and her imagination widely built the temple on the Sacred Rock. How glorious would it demonstrate as the center piece of Artemisia. "We can reconstruct the Temple of Artemis from Ephesus," uttered the awestruck Amazon. "We still have the original design from the building of the temple."

Gabrielle smiled at this thought. "I think that would be perfect." She then went back to

studying the ruined city.

Former Athens was nothing but half temple columns, cracked and burned homes, the theatres blown apart by siege weapons and then there were the walls or what was left of them.

"Where will we begin?" questioned the second in command, who stared at her new queen. She stole a silent moment to admire the Amazon Queen because she was beautiful garbed in her Amazon leathers that were a soft brown and golden, swirling pattern caught anybody's eye. Her feather necklace made of bronze reflected the sunset's rays and made her straightened blond hair glow. Gabrielle wore leather gauntlets and bracers that had matching designs to her leather top and skirt. Ephiny though tilted her head when Queen Gabrielle slowly leaned her head against the Amazon quarter staff in her left hand. The brightly colored feathers and straw of the Amazon mask on her head ruffled in protest.

"We'll start in the north portion of the city," softly spoke the bard, "and work south." She inhaled and let out her breath slowly while already working out her plans. "We need to remove the rubble." Gabrielle lifted her head off the staff that Ephiny had gifted her not too long ago when she took the new queen caste. The staff originally had a bird head on the top but under Ephiny's recommendation she'd removed it as it was for decoration purposes. Gabrielle usually had a wool cloak on, which she would need soon but since she didn't her Amazon sword at her left side was visible. She honestly couldn't use the weapon since her staff was her choice however the sword was carried out of tradition.

"Perhaps we can reuse the rubble," mentioned the Amazon. Ephiny felt her words were lost on the queen since Gabrielle didn't reply and kept staring sadly at the ruins.

Gabrielle swallowed and uttered, "Maybe she can't really change... it's just a temporary thing until something sets her off."

Ephiny grew solemn because she knew her friend had greatly struggled with the Conqueror and the friendship. At first Ephiny hadn't heard the details about how the Conqueror and the bard parted ways but one emotional night the bard caved in and told Ephiny everything. That was one of Ephiny's hardest nights yet she was grateful to be there beside her friend.

"It's so sad to see this," solemnly added the bard. "Athens was such a beautiful city and she... rolled across it like it was an ant hill."

"And yet she's giving us these lands, Gabrielle."

"For her benefit," reminded the queen.

"I don't know," murmured the second in command. Ephiny folded her arms against her chest and continued to make a point. "If she really wanted Athens rebuilt she would have done it herself and not trust her old enemies to do it." She then glanced at her friend. "Plus if she really was back to her old self then she would have renegged on her offer to the Nation." She shook her head then held out her hands at the dead city. "Yet here we are and we're going to rebuild it with all her money, supplies, and

men."

Gabrielle really hadn't considered that perspective and maybe she didn't want to admit it. The old and ruthless Conqueror would have made the alliance null yet she hadn't and stood beside it despite their ugly argument. "Am I being too hard on her?"

"I think the question is how do you perceive her, Gabrielle?" Ephiny shook her head and asked, "Do you accept that she's changing? Can you accept that she's changing?" She tilted her head when Gabrielle had that longing look. "Just maybe you've seen her as the Conqueror for all your life that trying to perceive her any other way is almost impossible for you."

The Amazon Queen swallowed against her surging emotions and her stare floated off to the beautiful sunset. "I've dedicated my life to stop her and now...."

"Now there's nothing to stop," uttered the Amazon. "It would seem that she's not the only one that requires changes."

Gabrielle rested her head against the staff. Ephiny's words slipped deep into her mind and would heavily be considered for many candlemarks and days. "Ephiny, I think this is a new beginning... and not just for the Nation." She wouldn't look at her friend as she spoke her last words. "The ashes of Athens will bring life to the Amazon Nation... to Artemisia."

Ephiny lifted her eyes up to the heavens and mentally repeated the queen's words in a prayer to Artemis.

Gabrielle straightened up and touched her friend's forearm lightly. "Come on... we better get back." When she arrived back at the camp her hundred fifty Amazons had hastily built this afternoon she was happy to see everybody settling down.

"Queen Gabrielle!" called a rushing voice.

The Amazon Queen and her second in command turned to the running Amazon, who was Solari. "What is it, Solari?"

Solari stopped beside her superiors and gulped a deep breath then finally answered, "The Conqueror's phalanx is here... well the phalanx commander is here. He wishes to see you, my queen."

Gabrielle nodded her agreement and signaled Solari to lead the way. She and Ephiny followed Solari through the camp and to the other side where there was a heavily armored and regal hoplite dismounting a warhorse. Gabrielle was certainly able to tell that the hoplite was the commander of the phalanx because of his steel chest that reflected the last rays of sun. He also wore steel greaves, a bronze helmet with cheekplates, and his xiphos sword sheathed to his left side. When his sandaled feet hit the dirt his red cape swooped up then settled around his body. "Queen Gabrielle?" As he approached the Amazon Queen he removed his helmet to reveal his striking features. He tucked his helmet under his left arm and extended his right.

Queen Gabrielle smiled warmly and held out her right arm to take the hoplite's arm. "I

am Queen Gabrielle." She briefly observed the two other hoplites dismounting horses along with another man that seemed to be a civilian.

"I am the hégemoon of Phalanx V from Thebes." The hégemoon clapped his fistful hand across his chest, bowed, and lifted his head again then declared, "Commander Nikolai at your service, Queen Gabrielle."

Queen Gabrielle had a warm smile then held out her hand to Ephiny. "This is my second in command Ephiny, commander."

The hégemoon instantly took the second in command's arm for a powerful grip.

"And this is my weapons master, Solari." Gabrielle directed to the proud Amazon to her left side.

Again the hégemoon repeated his arm clasp but with the weapons master. He then stepped back and waved the civilian man forward to stand beside him. "I would like for you to meet Eupalinos of Megara, Queen Gabrielle."

Eupalinos stepped forward with his sandals scrapping the dirt underneath. He took the bard's small hand into a proper handshake. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Queen Gabrielle." He released her hand then stepped back next to Commander Nikolai. "Your legend precedes you."

The Amazon Queen was perplexed because she swore she'd heard the man's name somewhere but she couldn't place it yet. Instead she introduced Ephiny and Solari to Eupalinos then hoped the man would explain why he was here.

Eupalinos adjusted his wool cloak then informed, "I was hired by the Conqueror to help design the new capitol of the Amazon Nation." He formally put his hands behind his back. "I am a highly regarded engineer from Megara. I engineered the Corinth Canal."

Queen Gabrielle's eyes widened as she realized why his name was so familiar. "I apologize," she swiftly started, "I recognized your name however I wasn't sure where I had heard it."

Eupalinos dipped his head in understanding. "I am a legend in my own sector as you are in yours, Queen Gabrielle." He then tilted his head. "An architect will be joining us as well... his name is Polykleitos. Perhaps you know him, Queen Gabrielle as he once was a famous sculptor?"

The Amazon Queen had furrowed eyebrows then she softly questioned, "Polykleitos the Younger?" At the engineer's simple nod, her expression became somewhat dazzled because she knew Polykleitos had also designed the Tholos theatre in Epidauros many moons back before the Destroyer of Nations. "Um...." She tried to shake away her astonishment about receiving a highly regarded engineer and architect. "When is he due here?"

"Any day now," answered the phalanx commander.

Eupalinos nodded his agreement then focused back on the Amazon Queen. "When he arrives it would be best to begin the plans for your capitol."

"Of course," agreed the bard.

"Also," continued the engineer, "Commander Nikolai, his phalanx, and I have already begun construction of an aqueduct from Lake Vouliagmeni, which is only a quarter of a candlemark ride from here. The Conqueror recommended and authorized that the lake should be used to supply the capitol of its fresh water supply." The engineer slowly grinned then proclaimed, "The Conqueror is not an engineer however she is very worthy of being one. I expect the aqueduct to reach here in about a moon." He paused to take a breath then proclaimed, "We will also be able to incorporate the aqueduct into a sewer system for the capitol."

Gabrielle exhaled in an amazed breath as she stared at the engineer. "Well... I would say that is a start."

The engineer's grin grew and how dipped his head. "I apologize." He then straightened up again. "My life is guided by the Conqueror's dreams however my passion is engineering."

The Amazon Queen quickly concluded that Eupalinos had spent much time with the Conqueror. She could only guess what his relations were like with the Conqueror but obviously they were on excellent terms as the engineer thought highly of her. It wasn't much longer until she said goodbye to the phalanx commander and the engineer.

Within a few days after arriving at the capitol, she heard word that Legio VII from the Macedonia providence was marching south to former Athens. Gabrielle learned that Legio VII was bringing down supplies of hydraulic cement leftover from making the walls around Amphipolis. She couldn't imagine it being much however she discovered just how much when the Roman legion arrived.

Queen Gabrielle, Ephiny, Solari, Eupalinos, Polykleitos, and the commanders from the phalanx and legion worked out plans for the first steps to cleaning up the city. Polykleitos and the engineer encouraged that they could recycle much of the leftover stones and materials from the city. What Eupalinos believed would take more time would be running the aqueduct and sewer system through Artemisia then dumping it into the Sardonian Gulf. The phalanx, legion, and Amazons worked hard to remove the rubble from the north end of the city and worked back to the gulf.

In the meantime, the Amazons also setup a temporary village just north of the city over the mountainous ridge that they trekked down each day and up each evening. The phalanx and legion also made temporary camps known as castra stativa where they would reside for the twelve moons. The castra stativa held barracks, a few public buildings, and a small stone wall.

By the early spring, Queen Gabrielle was excited to learn that within a moon to two moons they would be able to move into Artemisia at the north side. The first villas had been constructed and were hooked up to the aqueducts but not yet to the sewer system. The sewer system had been run through most of the city and was growing closer to the gulf. Despite the continuous work, Gabrielle often found her thoughts

wandering off to the Conqueror. The only time her mind was at peace was when she was practicing her quarter staff with either Ephiny or Solari. Her practices were releases of frustrations as much as her thoughts because all her senses, her body, and her focus were centered on her opponent. Ephiny grew proud of her best friend's ability to learn the quarter staff so quickly.

When the queen was allowed some free time she usually spent it scribing and remembering the one part of her that'd never changed in her life. She kept up on messages to several important people in her life namely Cyrene and Melpomene then Queen Terreis. Gabrielle's sleep remained fairly restless though because of hydra thoughts that would make her toss and turn. She couldn't recall feeling this lonely yet she was surrounded constantly by friends and her Nation.

Then around the Spring Equinox, Ephiny caught up with the queen as they were climbing up the path that wrapped up the mountain to the village above. She could tell the queen was rather weary today and most likely not so much from the physical labor today but more from lack of sleep. She noted that the Amazons following behind or ahead were far enough yet she came closer. "We covered a lot today."

Gabrielle faintly smiled and nodded. "It won't be long before we can move into the city." She paused briefly and gazed over Artemisia, which was barren of the wreckage from the Conqueror's siege. The city's western edge harbored several piles of stone, cement, wood, and mix of metals that would be recycled in the construction of the new city. The soils were exposed and from a distant view one could see veins of disturbed soil running through the cleared lands, which were the underground aqueducts and sewer system. Down by the gulf, where the port once had been, there was much more heavy construction going on for the last piece of the sewage dumping into the gulf, which would wash it away into the sea.

"Just under a moon," softly agreed Ephiny. "We've worked so hard." She saw the queen's worn smile so she stepped closer and touched her midback. She and Gabrielle continued climbing the worn path up the ridge. "We will have to celebrate when we move."

Gabrielle laughed and shook her head, which caused her tired face to be broken by amusement. "I thought we were going to celebrate when the sewage system is dumping into the gulf...?"

"That too," agreed the Amazon.

The bard smirked and thoroughly teased, "Any excuse for a party, Eph."

"Now, Queen Gabby we do have traditions to keep up." Ephiny smirked at that dangerous glint in her friend's eyes because of the nickname. "All work and no play makes for a featherless Amazon."

The queen thoroughly laughed and shook her head. She slowly lost her grin then gently asked, "How are you and Solari doing?"

Ephiny smiled at her friend's caring question. "We're really well." She put her hands behind her back as she strolled up the incline. "You haven't found anybody yet huh?"

Gabrielle shrugged then tugged her cloak against her body for warmth. "No, Ephiny... you know me." She peered up into concern amber eyes. "I just...." She shook her head then mentioned, "For most my life I always thought I'd marry my friend, Perdicus." She frowned as her thoughts darkened. "I still can't believe he's gone."

"I'm sorry." Ephiny touched her friend's back and rubbed it for a few beats. "You loved him a lot huh?"

Gabrielle shrugged and replied, "It wasn't so much about love... honestly. I was betrothed to him when I was a child but when Potidaea was attacked that just changed everything." She came around the bend then started the next incline slope. "I guess because I spent most my childhood envisioning my life with him... I never thought about anybody else. He would have made a wonderful husband unlike most men."

"I didn't really get a chance to meet him," sadly admitted the Amazon.

"He was a gentle soul," softly admitted Gabrielle, "but I think the time in the Conqueror's army hardened him."

"The Conqueror has hardened many people," reminded the Amazon, "in many ways."

"Yes." The queen inhaled then slowly let the air trickle out with her chest falling.

"Have you spoken with her?" tried the second in command.

Gabrielle's head dipped after she shook it. "I send her messages to keep her updated on the city's production but... nothing personal."

"Does she respond?"

The Amazon Queen peered up to Ephiny.

Ephiny quickly figured out the response by Gabrielle's passive features and emotional eyes.

"No." Gabrielle turned her head away.

Ephiny remained silent for awhile as she watched her friend's profile. She'd come to admire Gabrielle for her strength and persistence in life then there were Gabrielle's beliefs like not taking a life, which she greatly admired. She understood now why Gabrielle had chosen the staff over the sword and despite it was a tightrope act Gabrielle seemed to balance well on it. "Have you tried writing a personal message to her?"

"I've tried a hundred times... and in a hundred different ways," uttered the bard, "but I just keep throwing my scrolls into the fireplace." She unknowingly walked closer to her friend. "I never know what to say... or where to start. I don't feel like I did anything wrong and she should answer to me." She stopped, shook her head, and murmured, "Then other times I feel that I betrayed her by walking out of her life like that." She studied Ephiny's features and emotionally asked, "How can I be of any help

to her, Ephiny? She and I were enemies so that doesn't make any of it easy. All I've ever known was this ruthless, heartless woman and isn't that how I'm always going to see her?"

"Sometimes, Gabrielle your best friend was once your worst enemy." Ephiny came around the last bend and they were at the top. She glanced off to her right where the village was only several paces away. "I think maybe you're not moving forward because you've been too focused on her... on her evil image. You just need to let that go now then you'll find your answers."

"Do you think I betrayed her?" Gabrielle's head was hung down but she knew where she was walking, towards the village.

"I think you betrayed each other," admitted the second in command. "I don't think you'll have this resolved ever until you talk to her... face to face. You both have your paths to follow." Ephiny tilted her head so she could gaze at Gabrielle better. "Whether those paths are intertwined I couldn't tell you... I'm not one of the Fates but I think you two will be seeing a lot of each other. Mind you, you're sharing the same mother and brother now plus there are the politics."

"Just whether or not we'll keep our friendship," muttered the bard. She shook her head and softly admitted, "I know what she said to me that day and now I wonder if maybe she said those things for another reason."

Ephiny shrugged and offered, "Maybe she didn't want you to leave and her old habits of handling such a situation took over. The Conqueror isn't exactly the most emotional forthcoming person in the realm."

Gabrielle laughed yet she knew it was very true. She settled down then lifted her head up when she saw the dining hut up ahead. "I guess she's the only one that really knows that truth. I do wonder the same thing though. Cyrene I think was trying to explain that to me but I just... I couldn't listen to it. I was too worried believing that the Conqueror was still the Destroyer of Nations." She huffed and muttered, "And they say I'm so forgiving and understanding."

"You are," argued Ephiny, "but you're not perfect, my queen." She touched Gabrielle's shoulder, smiled, and strolled into the hut first.

Gabrielle paused in front of the open door, watching Ephiny's back recede, and she sighed rather contently. "I guess I have plenty to still learn too," she murmured to nobody but herself. She then followed suit into the dining hut because her appetite made itself apparent.

Queen Gabrielle remained in the dining hut for about a candlemark until she found herself saying goodnight to Ephiny, Solari, and Karis. She then strolled across the small village that was lit by torches tonight. She entered her dark hut except one candle was lit at her desk thanks to somebody stopping in to do that for her. She stopped after closing the hut's door and she worked her cloak off then hung it on the peg board to her left. As she ambled over to her desk, she lifted her sheathed sword from her back by lifting the strap across her chest. She set her sword down on the far left side of her desk and sat in her pulled out chair.

The bard glanced once at her staff that was propped up against the wall next to her desk yet her eyes switched to staring at the open scroll on her desk. It was a personal scroll to the Conqueror about her thoughts and feelings from the fight so many moons ago. She questioned whether the ruler would even clearly recall the heated fight or not.

Gabrielle lifted her hand and her fingertips grazed over her handwriting that was etched into the parchment. She felt the Conqueror's title at the start of the scroll then her fingertips followed several sentences but she stopped. Gabrielle propped her right elbow onto the desk and leaned the side of her head against her open palm. "Gods," she muttered. She shook her head and her eyes stung. She often hurt whenever she thought about the Conqueror and the recent memories they'd made together after they'd returned from the trial. She never realized just how much she gave up in Corinth until she made it to the Amazons. Her life tasted to sickening sweet because the Amazons provided her with meaning yet inside she felt so empty. How could this have happened?

Gabrielle closed her eyes against her dark emotions. Her lower lip quivered and her eyes stung harder however she refused to cry for the countless time again. Just for one night couldn't she have a peaceful night? She bit her lower lip then horsy murmured, "I don't know how much more of this I can take." She clenched her free hand into a tight ball but it remained in her lap. Then her memories with the Conqueror grew thicker and she heard the ruler's deep yet drawing voice speak to her again.

"I've been saying the same thing."

The bard's moist eyes gradually drew open then focused and from the corner of her left eye she saw a dark outline in the shadows of her hut. She instantly realized she really heard a voice in her hut so she abruptly shot up from her desk and faced the shadowy figure in the corner. Her eyebrows drew together tightly as her heart pounded wildly against her chest; her breathing heavy. "Conqueror?" Gabrielle's lips parted and her eyes grew more amazed over confused when the shadowy form stepped into the ring of the candlelight from the desk.

The cloaked silhouette shaped into a tall woman, who when she pulled her hood back her raven hair washed over her shoulders and her piercing ice eyes flickered the candlelight. "Hello, Gabrielle."

"Oh... my gods," uttered the shocked bard. She slightly trembled between being awestruck, shocked, and purely happy at seeing her friend. "How did you... when did youuu... why are...." She couldn't finish a single question and her right hand touched her forehead as if checking for reality.

"Through the hut's front door. About half a candlemark ago." The Conqueror tilted her head and then quietly added, "And because I needed to see you."

Gabrielle's hand fell to her side then she took a hesitant step forward, her left hand now rested on the back of the desk chair. She took a deep calming breath while still gaping at the ruler as if she were a dream. Then Gabrielle's marvel wore off and she didn't care anymore about titles, pasts, and fights. She hastily crossed the short

distance then threw her arms around the ruler for an emotional hug.

The Conqueror now exchanged shocked features because she didn't expect such a warm welcome from her friend. She hesitated for a few beats then slowly her arms came up around the small woman and she drew Gabrielle in closer to her body. This was the first time she and Gabrielle had ever hugged and she secretly admitted it was beautiful to her.

Gabrielle soaked in the feeling of the Conqueror's strong presences against hers. Then the protective arms around her upper and lower back that held her solidly. She hadn't cared originally if the Conqueror had intended to refuse the hug but she was relieved that it was returned in full strength of need. Gabrielle closed her eyes then rested the side of her right head against the broad chest before her. Her emotions choked her throat up as she rasped, "I really missed you." Gabrielle didn't receive a verbal return of the sentiment yet instead she received a physical one from the ruler.

The Conqueror lifted her right arm and wrapped across the bard's shoulders. Then her left arm tightened to completely mold their bodies. Finally she lowered her head until her face just touched the soft blond hair below her.

Gabrielle remained unmoving from her position for a long time. She memorized the entire embrace to her memory. How the ruler's body felt against hers and the way the bronze armor that she'd barely seen earlier was now warming between them. Her right temple rested on top of the Gaelic necklace and she smiled from the old memories that charm brought to mind. And Gabrielle was surrounded by the intense smell of sandalwood and leather that made it feel so real. Yet what made Gabrielle feel alive was the constant heartbeat under her right ear that she'd never forgotten since first hearing it.

Very slowly, Gabrielle first drew from the long embraced and lifted her head however she didn't move out of the ruler's arms.

The Conqueror still had her head dipped down and she carefully studied the bard's face.

Gabrielle's eyes were intent and she waited for something that she could tell the Conqueror wanted to say. She kept her hands resting on the ruler's hips, which she gave a reassuring squeeze. Then she saw the Conqueror's ruler mask slowly crumble and those icy eyes were a crisp blue.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle," whispered Xena; her features reflecting her turmoil.

Gabrielle's tears from tonight broke free but for an entirely different reason. "I'm sorry too, Xena... I really made a mess of everything."

Xena sighed and shook her head as she freed a hand from Gabrielle's back. She carefully wiped her friend's tears away while softly speaking. "We both did, I think and I want to fix it." She stole away the last tear then urged, "I need to fix this."

Gabrielle smiled through her tears and took her friend's hand into hers. "We will," she promised, "Together. That's what friends do."

Xena squeezed the small hand in hers as she mirrored the smile back. Her stomach unknotted after several days from when it first started, when she first left Corinth in pursuit of the bard.

"Did you ride here?" asked the Amazon Queen.

The Conqueror answered by nodding.

"Where's your horse?"

"I left Argo tied to a tree just outside the village. I need to get my gear off her."

Gabrielle had a lopsided grin and teased, "Is she as big as the ship Argo?"

Xena playfully glowered then gruffly replied, "Just as fast too."

Gabrielle chuckled then seriously spoke again. "We better get her and stable her up." She urged her body to move out of the embrace, which was hard to do but she eventually made it over to the door. She grabbed her heavy cloak, swung it on, and waited for her friend to come over. "Have you eaten?"

Xena inwardly grinned at the bard's endless care for her. "Yes at sunset I stopped for dinner." She didn't mention though that she could barely eat or keep it down from being so nervous at the thought of seeing the bard tonight. She followed Gabrielle out of the hut and into the torch lit village where there were only a few Amazons moving.

The Amazon Queen strolled closely to the ruler as if she feared her vanishing already. "I can't believe you're here."

"It was a long ride," admitted the ruler, "but worth it."

Gabrielle smiled up at her friend. She then considered where she would put the ruler for the night then it struck her blindly. "Oooh Hades... we don't have any guest huts built." She sheepishly peered up at the ruler. "Um... are you comfortable with staying in my hut? I mean if you're not, I can always find another Amazon that doesn't mind having me over. Or I could-"

"Gabrielle," cut in Xena, "I'll be fine staying with you."

"Uhhh... well we'll have to stay in the same bed," rambled on the bard. "It's a big bed though... even for us both." She saw that arched eyebrow look coming from her friend so she flushed red hot. The old reference to big beds just didn't help her at all.

"Yes," agreed Xena, "I realize this." She quietly chuckled at the queen's increased flush. For a young woman, who stood against a ruthless tyrant now turned Amazon Queen, Gabrielle could be easily flustered under the right circumstances. She then threw her right arm across the bard's shoulders quite playfully. "You don't mind, do you?"

Gabrielle swallowed and smiled up at her friend. "Nope... plenty of room to spare."

"You're such an accommodating host, Queen Gabrielle," toyed the ruler, who had a sly grin.

Gabrielle shook her slumped head as her blush stayed rather fixed. She was guided out of the village and into the nearby woods where she spotted a large palomino not too far ahead. "You ride... that tall thing?" She then glanced up and down the ruler's lengthy as she made a decision. "Then again...." She shrugged.

The Conqueror chuckled yet she came up to her horse. She untied the reins, patted Argo's side, and led her back to the village. "I promised an apple when we got here, didn't I?"

Gabrielle walked along side but she had a perplexed look as she listened.

Argo whined and threw up her head.

The ruler smiled and promised, "As soon as I get you untucked, girl."

Gabrielle opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again then at last she was able to ask, "Do you always talk to Argo this much?"

The Conqueror darkly glanced at her friend yet her twitching grin at the corner of her lips gave her away. "She listens well."

"Hmmm." Queen Gabrielle's lips puckered and then she tried another poke. "So if I... just keep my mouth shut then you'll talk to me a lot too?"

"Theoretical speaking yes," agreed Xena, "however that's impossible for you to do, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle stopped, put her hands on her hips and watched the ruler take a few more paces away. When her friend slightly turned to her, she saw that smug expression on Xena's face. "I have you know I'm an excellent listener."

Xena shrugged. "I didn't argue that... I just agreed you couldn't keep your mouth shut." She smirked then continued walking while directing her next words to somebody else. "So girl, you want honey with those apples?"

Queen Gabrielle's jaw dropped and she was quite offended. She hastily marched up to her friend's side. "I think you came down here just to torment me, Xena."

"Possibly." The Conqueror's expression was teasing and her eyes soft. "It does make me feel better though."

Gabrielle was inwardly surprised by the off handish admission to the ruler's feelings. Although Gabrielle thoroughly agreed because she felt calmer but she knew they had plenty to discuss later when it was time. "I'm glad you came down."

The Conqueror faintly smiled as she whispered, "Me too." She and Gabrielle steered into the small stables where she untacked her mare. She decided to brush Argo down

tomorrow as she knew Argo's top priority was that apple then she put out some feed with water. After she hefted her saddlebags onto her right shoulder, she followed her small friend out of the stables and back to the hut. "How has the construction gone? From what I've been hearing it sounds like you're moving fast."

"Thanks to your legion and phalanx," admitted the bard.

"Hmmm." Xena shifted her saddlebags some then remarked, "For once they're building a city instead of destroying one."

Gabrielle peered up and knew that her friend was being sarcastic. "They seem to be enjoying the work... I don't know why though."

"Its good physical labor for them that doesn't involve risking their life and they still get paid." The Conqueror shrugged. "What's there not to like?"

"Hmmm... never considered that angle." Gabrielle pushed open the door and let Xena through before closing it up tight. "I need to get the matt over the window and the fireplace started." She slightly shivered from the thought of sleeping in a cold bed tonight.

"I'll get the fireplace," offered the ruler, "you take care of the windows and the candles."

"Deal." Gabrielle went to work while her friend took care of getting the fire going to warm the hut. It wasn't long before she found the chill down her back gone and she could take her cloak off.

The Conqueror mimicked the bard by taking her black cloak off and tossing it on top of her saddlebags by the fireplace. She crouched down beside the fireplace and let the growing flames warm her up. Her curious gaze though went over to the bard, who stood beside her desk.

Gabrielle was rolling up the scroll on her desk but staring at her Amazon sword.

Xena memorized her friend's newly shaped body that basked gold in the firelight. The fire's light flickered across Gabrielle's body and revealed her toning muscles over her stomach, arms, and her legs seemed to be solid muscle. Xena was amazed as she never envisioned the former rebel leader being anything other than a bard only outfitted with words. This was certainly a different woman before her and Xena enjoyed how the Amazon leathers accented the Amazon Queen's shaping body. Xena was abruptly shaken when she realized she'd been staring heatedly at her friend's attractive body. "So you carry a sword now?"

Gabrielle set her scroll down then pulled away from staring at the said sword. "Yes but I really don't use it." She sidestepped her desk, grabbed her Amazon staff gifted by Ephiny, and came over to the ruler. "I use the quarter staff actually."

The Conqueror climbed up to her feet and held out her hand in request for the weapon. When the wood entered her palm, she hoisted it some and felt the weight that would most certainly fit to Gabrielle. She held it by both hands at either end and gave

it a hard bend so that the middle bowed out yet resisted from snapping. "It's a good staff for you." She returned it to her friend.

"I've been practicing since I received my right of caste as queen." Gabrielle tapped the staff on the floor but walked over to the wall it claimed as home when it wasn't in its owner's hands.

Xena did a hasty calculation and figured that Gabrielle most likely had developed some skills then. She made note to ask for a challenge tomorrow or so. "How do you enjoy being an Amazon Queen?" She knelt back down in front of the fire.

The Amazon Queen didn't answer right away but she came next to her friend and knelt down too. She stared into the fire for awhile then honestly replied, "I really enjoy it."

Xena could feel the hesitation in the words so she studied her friend's profile.

Slowly Gabrielle met her friend's gaze. "I just... I don't know how to explain it other than I feel really empty. It brings a lot of satisfaction and meaning into my life but it just doesn't stop this loneliness." She turned away and bit the inside of her mouth.

The ruler of the realm stretched out her hand and touched the bard's hand that rested on the small knee. "I know... I really know, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle swallowed and stopped nibbling on her lower lip. "Yeah... I guess you do huh?" She turned her hand up and squeezed the larger one. She was silent then eventually asked, "How about some tea?"

"You read my mind," murmured the ruler.

Gabrielle chuckled and released her friend's hand. She got to her feet and wondered into the washroom while rambling on about some things. "Normally I'd take a bath around now but it's so much hassle to get the water in here and out of here. Plus by this time I'm usually exhausted from all the hard work down in the city."

Xena chuckled at her friend's chatter and not just because of the topic but at the fact she knew she'd missed it. "So you take one in the morning huh?"

"Pretty much," agreed the bard. Gabrielle materialized out of the washroom with a kettle that had few droplets rolling down its side. She set it near the fireplace and let it hang by the small metal hook. "I only have some... well blah tea," she sadly admitted.

The Conqueror climbed to her feet and her bronze armor grew golden thanks to the fire. "I brought some of mine... if you'd like that instead."

The bard narrowed her eyes then questioned, "The Chin tea?"

"What else would I bring?" challenged the ruler.

Gabrielle laughed and asked, "What ones?"

"There was only one to bring," remarked Xena, who went to her saddlebags and weeded through her belongings. She came up with a small leather pouch of tea and held it open to her friend.

The bard squealed and declared, "My favorite... I missed this so much!" She plucked the pouch up and dashed into the washroom where she kept her clean mugs.

"I'll take that as a thank you," muttered the ruler, who chuckled and sat on the floor. Her left leg went flat on the floor while she propped up her right leg and leaned against it for support. "Don't tell me you forgot how much to put in there?"

"After that lecture you gave me," chided the bard from the washroom. She came back out with two mugs full of Chin green tea leaves and the small pouch. She set the mugs beside the tall woman then quickly stashed the tea pouch into the side of the saddlebag. Gabrielle crossed over to her dresser that was near her bed and she pulled out the bottom drawer. She soon came back with a fur in her hands and she unrolled it by the fire.

The Conqueror heard the sounding kettle so she stood up with the mugs.

Gabrielle grabbed for the kettle's wood handle and smiled at seeing Xena already up on her feet with the mugs. She poured the hot water for them then placed the kettle back on the floor near the fireplace.

Xena handed her friend a mug then together they sat on the fur and slowly enjoyed the Chin tea.

Gabrielle smiled happily as the green tea she'd missed filled her senses again. She absolutely loved this tea. She then turned her smile to her friend and mentioned, "You look good in that." Her eyes swept over the ruler's armor and leathers.

The Conqueror peered down at the attire in comment then grinned at the bard. "I thought a new look would be good."

"It's kind of the same... design as M'Lila's necklace." Gabrielle grew quite puzzled. "I just realized that."

"Mmmm." Xena finished sipping her tea then mentioned, "That's because it is." She knew Gabrielle would want more details so she explained, "M'Lila wore this top that had this exact design as my armor. I had the armor specially made a long time ago."

"I've never seen it... well since Melinda wore it that night in Corinth." The Amazon Queen shook her head while shifting around on the fur more comfortably. "It really gives you a different feel, I think than what you usually wear."

"Oh?" Xena further prompted her friend by arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah." Gabrielle nodded then waved her left hand between them. "A good feel. You have less of a... ruler thing going on." She watched that dark eyebrow's curve deepen and Xena's blue eyes glow. "Come on, you have to agree. You have no cape and your armor is bronze plus you're not flashy with all this gold."

The ruler snorted but went silent by drinking her tea. "I guess I'll have to show you my hoplite uniform one day."

Gabrielle laughed then slowly revealed a grin. "Hoplite uniform huh? Do you always play dress up?"

Xena's eyes slotted and she gave a dark warning. "You know the stories already from mother."

The bard bit the inside of her mouth because she just recalled those stories about Xena and Lyceus. She'd heard often how those two would dress up as soldiers and run around with wood swords. They would play hoplite against Roman or hoplite against Persian then at times Xena would pretend to be an Amazon Queen while Lyceus was a Greek king. Those were the stories Gabrielle adored about her friend and she believed them too where as before she'd wondered if they were just stories. "So do you have a Roman legion outfit too?"

"Ha. Ha." Xena ignored her friend by drinking her tea. "You wouldn't catch me dead in a Roman legion uniform... I'm not pig material."

"And yet you have how many Roman legions?" argued the bard.

The Conqueror sipped her tea as the number forty-seven passed through her thoughts.

"Isn't it almost fifty now?" Gabrielle heard no disagreement so she knew she was on target. "Plus all the phalanx units then the cavalry... ooo the naval league too."

"Is there a point to this?"

Gabrielle stopped now then grinned at the annoyed ruler. "I'm just... noticing how many ways you could... dress up."

The Conqueror rolled her eyes then muttered, "I'm so glad I came down." While she sipped on her tea Gabrielle bumped their shoulders together. When she lowered the mug, she saw that soft smile on Gabrielle's face and that settled her down.

"So..." Gabrielle faltered at her next words yet she mentally took a step forward for this pending conversation. She would have to ease into it carefully. "Mom in her last letter mentioned you're on your seventh advisor of state now." She played with her half full mug. "That's almost an advisor per moon."

"Mmm," simply agreed the ruler.

The bard second guessed herself about treading this topic but she would try because it was needed for them both. "What's the problem with them?"

"They're idiots," clipped the ruler.

Gabrielle cleared her throat quietly then scratched her nose to buy another few heartbeats. "Any... reason why?" She drank her warm tea then set it down on the

floor. "I mean they must be doing something wrong to set you off."

Xena sighed and her head slightly lowered. "All of them so far have tried to press for your proposal to become null." She shrugged. "So I fire them."

The bard opened her mouth yet nothing was forthcoming. She slowly closed her mouth when the blue gaze came at her.

"Your family name proposal I approved a moon after you left," mentioned the ruler. "I plan to make it law in the polis near the Summer Solstice."

Gabrielle remained silent. She didn't believe it because she was convinced after the argument that the ruler would destroy any shape of Gabrielle's work. She couldn't understand why she felt that way about the situation yet here she was proved completely wrong. "Wow." She shook her head then stared into her mug.

"Do you really thing I'm that petty?"

The bard lifted her head to answer the question. She tasted no malice in the ruler's words and she knew Xena was truly asking her. "I guess some part of me did," she honestly replied. She saw the hurt deep in Xena's eyes and she spoke what she felt too. "Thank you for proving me wrong."

The Conqueror could only nod as she gracefully accepted that because she had little room to be angry. After as much as she'd done to Gabrielle, she knew it would still take time to earn the bard's complete trust.

"You really came here to see me?" urged the bard, who really needed to hear that.

Xena finished off her tea first then set the mug aside. "Yes." She leaned back on her hands then further mentioned, "I had excuses incase you wouldn't accept the reason."

That perked the bard's curiosity so she hastily finished off her tea and as she put the mug aside she asked, "What were the excuses?"

The ruler shrugged then casually went down the list in mind. "That I wanted to see Artemisia, check on the legion and phalanx, and ask you about going to Egypt with me."

"Oh." Gabrielle's head bobbed but she stopped and turned her head to the ruler. "Going to Egypt? What?"

Xena chuckled at grabbing the bard's attention. She slyly grinned when her friend demanded her to tell her more. She remained casually while she explained, "I have to go to Egypt for some foreign affairs." She shrugged then mentioned, "I thought maybe you haven't been there and you may want to meet Cleopatra."

The Amazon Queen gaped as her imagination tried to take her to Egypt however she had no idea what the magical lands were like. She'd always admired the Egyptian culture from what she'd heard and wanted to visit the lands but never seen it possible. "You're... joking right?" When Xena gave her that arched eyebrow she knew better. "I

just... wow. I..."

"It would be an excellent opportunity to establish relations with Egypt," mentioned the ruler. "For trade when Artemisia's port is developed."

Queen Gabrielle tilted her head to show her consideration of the idea. "You think Cleopatra would really set up a trade agreement with the Amazon Nation?"

The Conqueror gradually felt a sly grin shape her lips. "I can guarantee it, Gabrielle."

"Huh." Gabrielle rested her hands on her knees since her legs were crossed. "I'm not sure I could leave Artemisia though. There's just so much work that has to be done and it wouldn't look right if the queen just shuffles off to the Egypt."

"For important foreign relations," reminded the ruler. "Besides I'm sure Ephiny could handle things perfectly fine."

The bard's lips were puckered and her eyes glossy from thoughts. She drummed her fingertips on her kneecap then stopped and decided, "I'll think about it."

Xena bit back her grin because she knew she pretty much won the bard over. "You do that." She uncrossed her legs and stretched them out, which made the soles of her boots pretty close to the fireplace. "We need to talk about what happened, Gabrielle."

The bard bit the side of her mouth but she knew her friend was right. She was surprised to hear Xena's persistence to go to the topic so she questioned herself about how hard she'd been on the ruler. "We do," she softly agreed.

The Conqueror quickly sat up straight and drew her legs back into her body. She slightly turned her body towards the smaller woman. "I was wrong to threaten you like I did, Gabrielle and you were right to walk out like that. You were right about everything you said that day."

Gabrielle's head drooped down because she'd never felt right about it. It made sense logically to her but it just never felt right to do it. "I just snapped when you said that you'd find a different agreement that I could uphold." She saw the ruler's flinch however she kept talking. "All I saw was that damn cross. I thought we were pass that point."

"We are pass that point," argued the ruler. She read the doubt in Gabrielle so she pressed forward. "I'm not going back to that place, Gabrielle but it doesn't mean I won't have my moments."

"What if one of those moments costs me heavily?"

Xena grimaced at the honest question. She didn't react angrily at the question because she wondered the same too.

Gabrielle studied her friend's revealing eyes and she whispered, "I recognize the fact now that inside of you that dark side still lurks. I accept that you'll always have a dark side about you and that at times you may even need it too. What I don't know that I

can accept is that it won't turn on me... again."

"No," hotly whispered Xena. She pulled the bard's hands into hers then clutched them tightly. "You're right about my dark side. I will never lose it and at times it may be of use to me. What you don't realize is how you affect me."

"Xena," murmured the bard, "I can't be paranoid like this. I can't wonder what I may say or do will set you off. That's not how it should be." Gabrielle freed a hand and pressed her palm against the ruler's cheek. "I really like this woman you've become but I have the ability to provoke the wrong things from you. Call it old history between us but maybe we're olive oil and water."

Xena grabbed the bard's hand from her cheek and laced their fingers together. "No you listen to me for once, Gabrielle. The day you walked out of my office I wanted more than anything to tell you to stay because I needed you by my side. I couldn't say those words because I didn't know how so I reacted the only way I knew how to and for that I am sorry. It's taken me these four... five long moons to realize what'd happened because I thought too maybe I could never be anybody else but this monster. I made a promise... I won't break it."

Gabrielle had listened to each word carefully and understood what her friend was saying to her now. Never had she expected such a speech from the ruler but it made sense to her when she replayed that fight in her head. Her features tightened up from constricted emotions on the surface.

"Gabrielle, you're the only person that saw the good in me... don't tell me you don't see it anymore?" Xena's voice quaked and her need for any answer showed clearly.

And Gabrielle knew she'd almost betrayed her friend that day. Maybe she had done the right thing otherwise Xena may have never considered her reaction to the fight. Gabrielle's long guilt these past moons finally released from her as she started to cry. "I was scared I lost you that day." She shook her head then she hoarsely whispered, "I'll never stop believing in you, Xena."

Xena quickly pulled the small woman into her and held her in a long hug as the emotions swept through them both. She held onto Gabrielle while that emptiness that Gabrielle had spoken about earlier slowly faded away from the gut of her stomach and the recesses of her mind. She'd grown accustomed to that feeling much her life and she didn't know it could be rid of until Gabrielle had gradually and unknowingly made it disappear. It'd only recently returned when Gabrielle walked out of her life back on that day.

Gabrielle emotions ebbed after some time and she eased out of the warm embrace. "Okay instead of me crying on you and getting your armor rusty we should get some sleep."

"Armor is easy to come by," reminded the ruler, "but sleep however...."

The bard sighed and poked the leather stomach between them. "I know... sleep keeps a bard telling stories."

"Particularly this bard," muttered the ruler. She extracted her body from Gabrielle's and got to her feet.

Gabrielle stood up too and gave a small stretch, which made her muscles strain against her skin and shine in the firelight.

Xena briefly observed then decided on a safer view by going to her saddlebags and hunting for her nightshift. She quietly sighed when the Amazon Queen was going into the washroom with the mugs. Could Xena really keep to herself tonight when this well developed woman would be resting beside her? She knew it'd been more moons than she cared to count since her last satisfaction in bed. It was one of her many personal resolutions she'd made to herself after a ruined night of trying to bed her slave, Nakia, after coming back from the Amazon Nation. She recalled that night quite well.

The Conqueror had found herself, one night, in the throws of unexpected lust just after the bard had left her bedchambers. She couldn't understand the source of it but she always understood the urgency of it so she called Nakia to her chambers. When the slave was stripped of her clothes and prone on the ruler's bed, the Conqueror had demandingly started the pursuit with a rough kiss. It had been Nakia's moans from the kiss that shattered her lust and she'd hotly ordered Nakia to dress and leave her.

The Conqueror's lust raged into anger because she couldn't correct it let alone understand it. She also hated how she'd been so willing to take Nakia because it was something she knew Gabrielle would have been disgusted by. It was the following morning that the ruler secretly promised not to indulge in sex for the satisfaction of lust and especially expecting her slave's agreement.

It'd been a harder resolution at the start for the ruler but each day seemed to make it easier. She was too use to instantly getting and taking what she wanted to the action of being still when her sexual desires peaked was not simple. The Conqueror often tried pleasing herself such as when she took bathes but that often half worked yet it was enough to still the hunger for awhile.

Now though as the Conqueror rested in the bed beside her friend, she quickly recognized that mysterious lust that'd she'd felt on certain nights after the bard's visit. Gabrielle's revealed and changed body in those accenting Amazon leathers easily confirmed her suspicions. The Conqueror was unmistakably attracted to Gabrielle and Xena wasn't sure if she liked that about herself.

The following morning, Gabrielle and Xena found themselves in the sparring field by dawn and sparring together. Gabrielle typically sparred in the early mornings before she went to work on Artemisia because it was the best way to get herself awake and exhilarated for the day. She discovered though that she was more than exhilarated when she practicing with the Conqueror. The sparring had started off slow as they each picked out one another's movements then it became a dance form.

The Conqueror's sword could be heard echoing against the Amazon Queen's staff. Her known laugh of amusement rang in the field as she parried or dodged the bard's excellent attacks. She was quite impressed by Gabrielle's skills with the staff but she knew there was still much Gabrielle could learn.

"You know, I'm really... getting hungry," commented the heavily breathing queen.

The Conqueror smirked at the comment too. She back stepped after the staff just missed her. "Better think about other things than your stomach." She suddenly dropped and swept Gabrielle's feet out from under her.

The Amazon Queen yelped and went on her back with an audible moan. Her hand touched her forehead as her eyes refocused on the gloating face above her. "You think you're funny huh?"

"I know I am," tormented the ruler.

Gabrielle growled and unexpectedly swept her feet at the ruler's that were so near by. She realized she'd made a mistake as her friend came falling down towards her.

Xena had dropped her sword next to the bard as she fell. She hastily put her hands under her and her palms met the dirt first and her heavily armored body just hovered over the bard's. "I could have hurt you if I fell on you," she hotly reminded.

The bard crinkled up her nose innocently at the angry face only a hand length away from hers. "I knew you'd catch yourself... besides you need to think about other things than my body."

The Conqueror's eyes narrowed at being completely caught by the bard. How in Hades had Gabrielle known this? Just maybe the bard had grown experienced in other matters or else Gabrielle just knew her well enough these days.

Gabrielle seemed to sense the battle in the ruler so she smugly answered the internal debate. "I see how you keep staring at me. I might be naïve at times but I'm not blind."

The Conqueror kept her body from touching the bards because she wouldn't know what'd happen otherwise. Her body was already enjoying the fact she was over top of the bard but she refused to take advantage of it or Gabrielle. "Am I really that obvious?"

"Just to me," softly promised the bard. She then lost her smug expression as she played innocent again. "I'm really hungry... come on." She patted the broad shoulder in front of her.

Xena really debated whether Gabrielle was talking about food or not. She sighed then relented by standing up but she made sure to get her sword. "So you will give me a tour of Artemisia today?"

The Amazon Queen got up with her staff in hand. She patted the ruler's leather stomach and teased, "Would I do any less, my liege?" She started off in the direction of the food hut. She and Xena ate their breakfast without much incident until just at the end.

Ephiny had come casually strolling into the food hut, waved and smiled at Gabrielle,

and called, "Good morning, my queen." She received the greeting back so she kept walking then something registered with her. She stopped then backed peddled several paces and gawked at the queen's breakfast mate.

The Conqueror nudged her friend when she saw the Amazon coming over to them.

Gabrielle sweetly smiled at her second in command when she was upon her and Xena. "Yes, Ephiny?"

Ephiny snapped her jaw shut then pointed at the ruler. "When did she... how did she... why is she-"

"Last night, by horse, and to see me," hastily answered the bard. "Any other questions?"

Ephiny dropped her hand to her side then settled her perplexed face onto the ruler. "Well... you couldn't send word ahead of time?"

"I prefer surprise visits," clipped the Conqueror.

Ephiny grunted.

"She just wanted to skip the... royal stuff," waved off the bard with her hand. "So, care to join us?"

The second in command put her hands on her hips and despite she saw both women had already eaten she ordered, "Don't disappear on me." She quickly headed for the buffet table.

Gabrielle muffled a fit of giggles and grinned at her friend. "Boy am I going to hear it now."

"You obviously need to learn one thing about being queen," commented the ruler. When Gabrielle leaned closer she grinned and explained, "You're always right, Queen Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen barked with laughter then nodded a few times. "I'll see what Ephiny's opinion is on that concept."

By late morning, the Conqueror received a tour of Artemisia that started at the top of the ridge so she could get the overview of the plans. Gabrielle then escorted her down into the valley of what would be the city and showed her the north end where most of the work had been done. The Conqueror was impressed by the progress but very pleased her legion and phalanx had been assisting so well. She then sought out her commanders of each army as well as the engineer and architect she'd hired for the project. She made sure to make the engineer, Eupalinos, sweat out his plans for the city because she knew if she didn't he'd get overzealous and especially with Queen Gabrielle.

When Helios sunk over the horizon, Queen Gabrielle entered her quiet hut and she stood still by the closed door; she stared with a lopsided grin at the Conqueror's

saddelbags. She then considered when her friend would leave the Nation and it wasn't a comforting feeling either. The knock at her door jarred her from her thoughts so she opened the door to find the ruler filling her view. "Hey, you didn't need to knock just come in next time."

The Conqueror came in but didn't comment on the bard's words.

"How was your meeting with everybody?"

"It went well," answered Xena. "I'm pleased with their performance so far." She then went over to the made bed and sat on the foot of it. "You look like you've been thinking about something."

Gabrielle shook her head then came over to her friend. She sat next to Xena yet her focus was on her hands. "I was just thinking about you going back to Corinth."

"Ready to get rid of me huh?" teased the ruler but she quickly realized her joke didn't pay off. "What is it, Gabrielle?"

"It's not easy admitting your wrong, is it?" Gabrielle lifted her head and watched her friend's changing expression.

"No," softly agreed the ruler, "but it makes things easier."

The bard's head bobbed as she now stared mindlessly across the room. Her thoughts though were very centered. "I was wrong to walk out of your life like that... especially when I said I was a friend."

"If you hadn't done it, Gabrielle then it wouldn't have made me stop and think. I reacted instead of acting."

Gabrielle released a low sigh. "I could have handled it differently." She saw that Xena had been hurt by her actions because those beautiful blue eyes showed it to her. "I said I was going to be there for you but I failed. My excuse was that I figured you could go on without my help."

Xena jaw clenched then she relaxed her tension because she would take this step. "I'll tell you a secret, Gabrielle."

"Oh another secret?" gently bantered the bard, who fell silent and listened.

Xena leaned closer then whispered, "I may have the largest empire in the known-world, which makes me the most powerful ruler. The truth though is that around you, I feel absolutely powerless and... I really like that because it means I can be myself with you."

Gabrielle sadly smiled and stretched her hand up to lightly caress her friend's cheek. "I think we're both learning, Xena." She watched the flicker of emotions above her then she softly asked, "Can we learn together?"

"I couldn't think of a better way," softly agreed the ruler.

The bard's eyes brightened and her cheeks plumped thanks to her huge smile. "Is your offer to Egypt still good?"

The Conqueror nodded.

"When will you leave?"

"Not for another moon or so... I need to get a few things inline before I can leave." Xena tilted her head. "I could... use your help with the polis and getting your proposal more cemented before the Summer Solstice."

Gabrielle shook her head then questioned, "Can't your advisor do that now?"

"I'm sure he could," agreed Xena, "but he won't do it right. Its yours, Gabrielle and I'd prefer it set in motion by you." She hesitated then reminded, "If you have to decide though if you have time. I know you're busy here."

"Let me talk to Ephiny first," murmured the bard however she had a rather set feeling that she'd follow the ruler anywhere at this point. She knew she couldn't return to how she felt without her friend.

The ruler licked her lips as she turned her head away. "By the way...." She swallowed then quietly continued speaking. "I read your unfinished proposal about abolishing slavery." Gabrielle flinched at her words, which she somewhat expected. "It's not half bad really."

Gabrielle shook her head. "I think it's too radical... and too personal."

The Conqueror almost replied to that statement but she stopped and mulled over Gabrielle's use of personal. "Because of Lila."

"Yeah," whispered the bard, "I don't know where she is... who she is... Hades she could be dead."

The Conqueror had long ago considered the bard's younger sister. She'd also secretly ordered Iolaus to her office one day and set him off on a secret mission where he could use any means necessary to find the information she wanted. She just hoped it would pay off well for her... for Gabrielle. "I'm sorry for what happened that day, Gabrielle." Her anger for her past increased and crashed into her. "If I had known...." Old memories of her sword running through a soldier's stomach couldn't even ebb her anger.

"Known what?" Gabrielle huffed. "That we'd be here? Now? Today?" She worked her fingers through her bangs.

"That too," murmured the ruler.

The Amazon Queen lowered her hand back to her lap then throatily questioned, "Why did you kill Draco not long after he enslaved my village? I always heard how great of a warrior he was."

"He was a great warrior... and a terrible follower." Xena slipped off the bed while saying, "He disobeyed my orders at Potidaea." She ambled over to the left side of the fireplace, bent over, and loaded up some wood.

"What you mean?" urged the puzzled bard.

Xena was busy tossing the wood into the fireplace but she stopped and turned her head sidelong at her friend. "I ordered him to make an alliance with Potidaea... not ransack it and enslave it." She plucked the flint stones off the small mantle then bent over the fireplace. "By the time I received word about the women being sold to slavery it was too late for me to do anything." She angrily cracked the stones under the larger logs where the leaves and twigs were located. "I should have run him through sooner."

Gabrielle's face grew blank as her mind reeled at this news. She'd never known that the Conqueror had ordered the alliance and that it was Draco that chose to enslave Potidaea. It made sense to her though because no other Macedonian towns were enslaved besides Cirra and that happened to be done by Draco too. Towns like Amphipolis, Mani, Stagira, Therma and the like were all brought under the growing realm by alliances and pacts. Why hadn't she seen that earlier?

Xena stood up when the fire was lapping against the wood happily. She turned to see the distant bard far away in her thoughts. "Gabrielle?" When she received no answer, she came up to her friend and knelt beside her. "Gabrielle, no matter how you look at it I am still responsible for what happened that day. I put Draco in charge so that means I was responsible for whatever he did."

"That's what makes you a better leader too, Xena." Gabrielle sadly smiled but gently reminded, "He still made the final choice though."

The ruler patted her friend's knee and whispered, "Don't change too much on me, Gabrielle. How about dinner?"

Queen Gabrielle dropped her head then spoke to her belly. "How about it?"

Xena rolled her eyes yet a lopsided grin found her. She and her friend were soon migrating across the small village and enjoying a hot, delicious meal that was freshly caught from the gulf. Of course the Conqueror didn't forget to smartly remark that she hoped the fish wasn't caught by the sewer system's dumping area in the gulf. Gabrielle had let out a sigh and quickly reminded her friend that the sewer system wasn't active yet.

The next days move by rather swiftly Gabrielle concluded compared to her previous days before the Conqueror's surprise visit. The third day since the Conqueror's arrival, Gabrielle finally dragged her second in command away from prying eyes and well listening ears. She ended up in her friend's hut and was thankful Solari was rather busy.

"So what's going on?" urged Ephiny, who took a seat at her desk.

Gabrielle blew a deep breath straight up, which ruffled her bangs. "I'm not sure exactly."

"Don't give me that." Ephiny pointed at the chairs to the left and ordered, "Get a chair. Bring it here. And talk to me."

The Amazon Queen put her hands on her hips and saucily declared, "Yes, my second in command." She sashayed over to the table that had a couple of chairs. She grabbed one and plopped it down in front of her friend then she flopped into it. "I'm not sure what's going on, Ephiny... seriously." She dropped her head back and covered her face with her hands. "It's really confusing."

"Well what would you like to do if you could do anything?"

Gabrielle dropped her hands then stared dumbly at her friend. "You really want me to answer that?"

The Amazon held up a finger for silence. "Let me rephrase that then." She lowered her hand to her lap. "If you had no obligations right now, what would you do?"

"If I was just a regular ole Amazon instead of Queen Gabrielle of Artemisia?"

Ephiny nodded.

"Hmmm." Gabrielle patted her knee with her palm then fairly answered, "I'd run away to Corinth."

"Back to the Conqueror?"

"With the Conqueror," corrected the bard. "Remember, I was once a famous rebel leader... there's no back to the Conqueror for me."

Ephiny chuckled at her friend's attempt to ease the mood.

Gabrielle eased back into her seriousness after an audible exhale. "The Conqueror invited me to come with her to Egypt... to meet Queen Cleopatra. She seems to think it'll be an excellent way to setup trade relations for Artemisia."

"Especially when we have such a large port," mocked the Amazon.

The queen shrugged and reminded, "It's never too early to think about relations, Ephiny."

The second in command gave in because there was a lot of truth behind that fact. She sometimes figured that was the downfall of the Amazons because they never built outside relations so maybe it was a good idea. "Do you want to stay in Corinth?"

"I think so, honestly." Gabrielle licked her lips then her head was down for a beat. When she looked up again, her emotions shined in her eyes. "I enjoy being the queen and I want this but I also want to be beside her, Ephiny. I just don't know how to handle it."

"Why is she so special to you, Gabrielle?" Ephiny needed an answer yet she questioned whether Gabrielle had that answer for herself.

"I don't know yet why... but I need to find out, Ephiny. I feel like if I let her slip... that if I let whatever is between her and I slip then I'll be missing out on the greatest thing in my life." Gabrielle leaned closer to her friend. "It doesn't make sense does it?"

Ephiny dipped her head then quietly whispered, "It makes sense." She lifted her head. "I ignored Solari for the longest time because I was scared to try. I didn't really think about it until Janice was here and I saw her situation... how she may never make it home but she tried against the odds."

"She had a lot of faith," murmured the bard, "she demonstrated that to all of us." She sighed and quietly begged, "What should I do, Ephiny? I don't want to betray my Nation and I don't want to lose her."

"Who said you had to choose, Gabrielle?" Ephiny gathered up her friend's small hands into hers. "I think you can find a balance between both especially when the realm and the Nation are so integrated now. Maybe that's the key to the Amazons' success... because of your relationship to the Conqueror."

"Maybe," whispered the queen. "I don't want to disappoint the Nation... my Amazons. They believe so much in me and I can tell that they're so happy about the progress we've made so far with Artemisia."

"And they are." Ephiny smiled proudly to her queen then she steadily went serious. "Just remember this key factor about the Nation... how goes the queen so goes the Nation. If you're not happy then neither is your Nation."

"Ephin-"

"Don't even argue my point," cut off the Amazon. "I know you've been down and mostly due to what happened between you and the Conqueror. Can you honestly tell me how you'll be once she goes back to Corinth?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I understand what you're saying." She then emotionally smiled at her friend. "Where would I be without you, Ephiny?"

"You probably wouldn't be here because nobody else would have let you in the Conqueror's jail hut."

The Amazon Queen laughed and her emotions settled thanks to her friend's joke. She released her anxiety through a deep sigh. "What now?"

"Well," started the thoughtful second in command, "what size is your mask?" She thoroughly enjoyed the queen's shocked face.

The Conqueror patted her mare down then gingerly led her out of the stall. "You ready, girl? I promise we won't ride as fast as last time."

Argo threw up her head gratefully but she whined.

"Yes, the blond is coming too."

Argo inhaled until her girdle was tight then she exhaled very loudly but she still followed her master out of the stables. She then saw that little blond that she knew her master was growing fond of lately.

"Are you sure about this, Gabrielle?" questioned the Conqueror.

Gabrielle lifted her head after having it rested against her staff. "I'm positive." She had on a heavy leather and wool jacket, her regal Amazon leathers on, a pack on her back, mask on her head, and a hilt protruded from her back under her jacket. "The sooner we get out of here the sooner we can get to Corinth."

"My kind of woman," teased the ruler, who threw her arm around the bard and jerked her close. She guided her friend through the village towards the north side where a few Amazons waited. After Gabrielle had a chance to say goodbye to everybody she and Gabrielle continued the trek through the hilly terrain until they met the slightly overgrown road that led north out of the Attica Providence.

Xena eventually found herself astride Argo while her friend remained walking beside or sometimes ahead depending on whether they were talking or not. She'd offered Gabrielle a spot on Argo however the bard laughed and quickly picked up her pace as her refusal. She muttered something about beastly horse then passed by the huffing mare.

The Conqueror continued to sway to Argo's rhythmic motions yet her senses were always alive. She tasted the air, heard life far beyond the surrounding forest, and felt the world's movements around her. It wasn't until mid afternoon that something prickled her senses. "Gabrielle?" she called hastily.

The bard was slightly dazed but she broke away and stopped until the horse and rider were beside her. "What is it?" She read the urgency and tension rippling off her friend.

"We're about to have company," uttered the ruler, "so be ready."

"For what?" asked the perplexed bard.

The Conqueror had no time to explain when six armed bandits formed on the road. She freed one hand from Argo's reins.

"Well hello, ladies," greeted a smiling bandit in the front. "You happen to be using our little road and we have a tax for that too."

Queen Gabrielle rested her left hand on her hip while she leaned against her staff. "I didn't realize the Conqueror was now collecting road tax."

The same bandit smile to show his yellow and missing teeth. "Well she's a little clueless at times."

The Conqueror's right eyebrow arched up at this remark. Oh yeah she would have fun with this particular bandit out of the six.

"You really don't want to start this," warned the bard because she knew what was about to happen but hey it was worth a try to give them a notice.

"Oh yes they do," drew out the ruler in a seductive tone.

Gabrielle sighed and lifted her staff. She sent a prayer to whatever god would protect these poor fools.

The leader bandit unsheathed his sword and he was about to order his men to attack. He hesitated when the tall woman on the mare gave a piercing cry and went flying into the air.

The Conqueror vaulted from her horse, spun, and landed on her boots in front of the bandits. Somehow she'd magical unsheathed her sword during her jump. "Come and get some, boys," she hissed and bent her knees.

The Amazon Queen shook her head when all the bandits lunged at her friend. "I almost pity them but they asked for it," she commented to Argo.

The horse huffed and nodded.

Gabrielle then spotted two men breaking away from the fight so she hurried past Argo and met the pair. She mentally prepared for her first real fight against an opponent and it charged her body. Gabrielle parried away the first sword swipe as the second enemy came at her with his mace. She dodged him then came back at her first enemy.

The Conqueror easily manipulated her enemies and managed to get one bandit to accidentally skewer one of his comrades. She set her sights on the leader bandit, who was rather persistent on his attacks. She gave a resounding kick to one bandit and knocked him out against a nearby tree. She then refocused on her last two opponents with a sneering expression and anticipation to have them.

The Amazon Queen took her right opponent's feet out from under him, which disorientated him. She then came at her remaining opponent with renewed effort. She managed to land a snapping hit to the bandit's hand and his mace hit the ground. Gabrielle lifted her staff higher and gave a furious glare since she'd been taught that half the battle was intimidation.

The bandit back stepped once, then twice when the compact woman advance on him, and he turned and ran off into the woods.

Gabrielle sighed in relief then lowered her staff to her side. She studied her friend just finishing off her last opponent, who happened to be the leader.

The Conqueror gave her warcry and swiftly flipped over the bandit. She brought her blade around yet at the last beat before her blade would have met the bandit's throat, she rammed her hilt into his head. She completely turned around and stared disgustedly at the unconscious bandit at her feet. She kicked him in the side, which

caused him to moan. "I should kill you for this, pig." She knew why she wasn't though as her gaze met her friend's.

Gabrielle smiled proudly at the ruler's ability to resist the urge to kill. She knew it wasn't easy for Xena but it was doable when the ruler set her mind to it.

Then Xena's calmer expression grew fearful without reason and she surged towards Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen already heard the bandit getting up to his feet and his sword scraping across the dirt. She raised her staff for any attack while she turned to him.

The bandit was wild with anger as he lunged for Gabrielle.

Gabrielle's scream when she was slammed so hard. She fell onto her back and lost her staff but the bandit hadn't lost his sword because his blade was across her throat. Before the bandit could cut through her skin she spotted the furious Conqueror over them.

The Conqueror was so swift in her motions. Her hands blurredly came down and clenched the bandit's hand. There was a loud snap then she watched in satisfaction as he slumped lifelessly before he could harm his friend. She then grabbed the dead bandit by his clothes, lifted him up, and tossed him off the small woman.

Gabrielle groaned and slowly opened her eyes to find Xena's face a mix of anger and fear. The adrenaline rush from nearness of death still quaked the bard's body but she tried to focus. Then it felt like so many hands were on her body at once as the Conqueror hastily checked over her.

"Are you okay?" Xena's hand finally came down to Gabrielle's legs where she was squeezing every spot. When she got the bard's right ankle there was an audible hiss.

"My ankle... I think I twisted it." The Amazon Queen bit her lower lip to stop the wedding tears from the pain. She now tried to sit up and inspect her leg not that her boots allowed her to see much.

"Damn." Xena acted quickly by untying the boot then loosening the laces. She opened the flap of the boot and peered around where the developing color was forming.

"You know, this really figures," complained the bard. She was irate about how blind she'd been to that bandit's movements.

"Let's just worry about this right now." Xena scanned around the road and saw there were two bandits that would most likely be up soon. She didn't feel too keen on fighting them and protecting the bard. "Let's get out of here first. Just stay right here." She grabbed the bard's staff while whistling for Argo.

The mare trotted over, stopped and waited while her master tied the staff to the saddlebags.

The Conqueror came back over and knelt beside her friend; she then worked her arms

under the bard.

Gabrielle yelped when she was airborne then adjusted comfortably in her friend's arms. "Wow... you really can see a lot up here."

"Glad to see you didn't lose your sense of humor." Xena clicked her tongue to get Argo's attention then she walked towards the forest with her cargo in her arms.

Argo followed behind, her head bobbing up and down then side to side. She wanted badly to grab some grass but she knew her master was worried about that silly blond in her arms so she followed behind.

Gabrielle rested her head against her friend's shoulders and mumbled, "What is it with me and my legs?"

"What is it with you and trouble?" chided the ruler, who at last spotted a clearing.

"You think those bandits will follow us?"

"No." The Conqueror entered the clearing and lowered her friend beside a log. "Let me get the medical kit."

The bard could only imagine what the Conqueror had that could help with swelling.

"Can you get your boot off?"

Gabrielle bent forward and loosened her laces better. She then tried to work her boot off but it was very pain staking; she was just barely able to hold in her hisses between clenched teeth.

Xena slowly came over while mixing something in a small bowl with a pestle. She bent down next to the bard's outstretched leg and settled the bowl nearby. She dipped her fingers into the slightly green tainted paste then carefully tried to work it over the bruising and swelling ankle.

The bard dug her nails into the ground, her eyes closed.

The Conqueror listened to the labored breathing from her friend and she tried to keep her touch gentle. "Almost finished." She'd used most of the paste but left enough for tomorrow morning. "There's a stream nearby... it should have cold water." She left the mortar and pestle by the bard, went to Argo, and unlashed the staff and grabbed a waterskin. She returned the weapon to her friend while saying, "Stay here. Yell if you need me." Before Gabrielle could say a word, Xena was gone through the woods.

Gabrielle unclenched her hand and tried to asses her ankle that was darkening. Then she considered how the Conqueror left the camp with so much tension written in her mannerism. She decided she'd have to work it out of the ruler in hopes to keep the mood light tonight.

The Conqueror hurried back into the camp and came to a kneeling position beside her friend. Her chilled hands pressed the cold waterskin against her friend's sprained ankle

in hopes the cold water would calm the swelling. "Keep it there. I'm going to get the camp setup."

The bard let her friend go. She watched her friend quickly setup the camp with such ease but occasionally she checked her ankle to see the swelling was stalling. The bruising however was another story that didn't bolster well. It wasn't long before the bard grew warm from the intensifying fire beside her that the Conqueror had started. She was grateful for it considering the red sun rays in the western horizon.

The Conqueror was almost finished brushing her mare down, her back to the bard. "Do you feel like rabbit or quail tonight?"

Very slowly Gabrielle had a wicked grin. "I was hoping for fish from the stream." She carefully watched how her friend's brush stopped on Argo's rump. She knew despite the Conqueror couldn't see her smirk that it was laced in her tone.

The Conqueror turned her head sidelong then retorted, "At that rate you won't be eating tonight." There wasn't any common sense reason she could think of to go into that freezing stream to fish out dinner.

"You don't want to see me when I miss a meal," joked the bard. She became happy when she saw that faint grin spread over the ruler's features and break apart the sour mood from earlier. "There's that grin."

The Conqueror shook her head then finished up with Argo. She patted her horse's side while whispering only something the horse could hear. She then strolled over to the sitting, prone woman by the fire. She rested her hands on her hips and inquired. "This is your last chance... quail or rabbit?"

The bard thoughtfully stared up at her friend. She drummed her right fingers on her kneecap. "Such a wide variety to choose from here... it's like dining in Cyrene's taverna."

The Conqueror rolled her eyes, turned, and marched off into the darkening woods.

"Surprise me!" called the Amazon Queen but the only response she received was a hoot from an owl. "Tough nut to crack, sheesh." She settled her view on the mare. "How do you put up with her, Argo?"

The mare turned her head to the chatty blond then she flicked her tail and huffed. She lowered her head and munched on the nearby grass.

The bard sighed then peered down at her ankle. "Damn bandit." She shook her head but she kept her annoyance away since she decided it wouldn't do her any good to be moody like the ruler. Two wrongs never make a right, she mentally reminded herself, or is that two grumpy asses never make a party?

Gabrielle then received the largest scare when the ruler suddenly materialized in the camp. After her gasp, she was raggedly breathing and touched her chest with her freed left hand. "Gods... do you have to do that?" She then caught the smug features of her friend so she glowered at her. "Yes you do, don't you?"

The ruler said nothing as she went to the supplies she'd back for this trip. In her left hand she had a skinned rabbit that was quite plumped and she knew it'd feed them both. She worked on getting some herbs spread over the bloody meat then she pushed a skewer through the rabbit for the fire.

Gabrielle intently observed the ruler setting up a small spit over the fire, which kept the rabbit high enough above the fire put low enough to cook right. She was inwardly stunned. "So, did mom teach you how to cook?"

The Conqueror glanced at her friend and arched a questioning eyebrow.

The bard smirked. "I guess not."

The ruler returned her attention to the cooking rabbit and she gave the rabbit a turn over the fire. "I learned while in the army." She was kneeling so she stood up and went to her saddlebags. She washed her hands with clean water from a waterskin, dried them, and fished out for some other food items.

The Amazon Queen was pleasantly surprised when her friend came over with a small wood board that held bread and feta cheese. She tried so hard not to chuckle at the small bowl of herbed olive oil for dipping the bread into it but she failed.

The ruler sighed and set the wood plate beside her friend. She then went back to the spit and gave it a turn. She returned to the munching bard's side and sat beside her. She placed the board on her lap then broke a piece of bread free.

"I didn't think you could be such a hostess," teased the bard.

The Conqueror had slightly slotted eyes. "Is this pick on the Conqueror night?"

Gabrielle's gloating features broke apart by her compassion for the ruler. "I'm sorry... it's just that..." She held out her freehand to the cooking rabbit over the fire. "I would have never guessed you could cook."

"When you're surviving on your own you learn quickly and how to make the food taste half decent." The ruler picked up a small cube of feta and popped it into her mouth.

"I don't know how to cook," secretly admitted the bard. "I never learned because Cyrene always cooked for me."

The Conqueror softly laughed and nodded her head. "I know exactly what you mean. I never learned because mother cooked all my meals and she didn't have the time to teach me." She shrugged. "Plus I was always playing around with Lyceus so I doubt I would have taken interest in it anyway."

Gabrielle's head was bobbing before she spoke again. "Mother was getting ready to teach me but of course with Draco and everything it never happened." She tilted her head and muttered, "I'll have to ask Cyrene to teach me although that could be dangerous." She noted her friend's perplexed look. "If I know how to cook I may be

my own best customer." She enjoyed the grin playing the ruler's lips now.

"How do you like your rabbit?" inquired the ruler. "Cooked all the way through?"

"Mmmm yeah... I don't want it hopping out of my stomach tonight." Gabrielle giggled at the ruler's quick disgusted features. "This is really good feta." She shot a cube into her mouth. "Is it from the fortress?"

The Conqueror smirked. "You can take the Conqueror out of Corinth but you can't take Corinth's food out of the Conqueror."

"I bet you'd hire mom to be your cook if you could."

The Conqueror gave a knowing smirk but she set the board aside and got up. She checked on the rabbit then came back over to her spot beside her friend.

Gabrielle broke more flatbread apart and dipped it into the herb oil. "How is Cyrene and Melpomene?"

"They're well," answered the ruler. She swirled a piece of flatbread in the oil but held it still over the wood bowl as she spoke. "I'm sure you haven't heard yet but mother plans to buy the taverna she's been renting these past moons."

"Really?" Gabrielle grew ecstatic. "I didn't hear. When did she decide this?"

"Only a few days ago," answered the ruler, "She's been saving up money from working the taverna. She seems to think she'll have enough soon to buy it from the owner." She swallowed the small morsel of bread. "I tried to offer her money but...."

"Trust me, I know how your mother is," agreed the bard. "The olive didn't fall far from the tree," she admitted.

"Sometimes I think it did," argued the ruler, "I think the olive rolled down a hill."

The bard touched her friend's nearby knee that protruded from under the smooth board. "I've been around your mother long enough to know her qualities. I see a lot of the same ones in you too."

Xena turned her head to her friend. "Sometimes I see it and sometimes I don't at all."

"And that's exactly true," agreed the bard. "I don't know your father but I think you're a mix of the two of them."

The ruler silently agreed because she knew her father and her mother so she had her days when she was more like her mother and others when she was like her father. She wasn't perfect but she certainly was a blend of them. She often considered Lyceus mostly like mother while Toris... well he was just an odd ball most the time. She had yet to figure out where her eldest brother fit into the family. She broke away from her thinking and set the board down between them while saying, "Let me get the rabbit ready so finish up the cheese."

Gabrielle peered down at the board and grinned at the two cubes left. She took one and swirled it around in the last bit of olive oil. She happily moaned at the flavor as she ate it. It wasn't long though before she was dining with her friend on a nicely cooked rabbit that had a thyme flavor. She complimented her friend at the excellent flavor.

The Conqueror realized she enjoyed the compliment coming from her friend. She and Gabrielle quietly ate their meals but at the end she mentioned she had a surprise for the bard. After cleaning things up, she came to a squatting position beside the Amazon Queen and in her right hand she presented a clothed wrapped item.

Gabrielle eyed the ruler but she slowly grinned while she pulled the cloth away. She beamed at the loaf of nutbread.

"Mother sent it," mentioned the Conqueror.

"Oh my gods," breathed the excited bard. "I have been dying for some of her nutbread."

The ruler softly laughed and set the bread into the bard's hungry care. She retrieved a knife, came back over, and sat with the loaf now in her possession. She sliced up a piece and handed it to the bard. She amusingly watched as the bard became a wolf with the bread.

Gabrielle paused after her first bite and asked, "What is that?" She'd broken a piece off so she looked at the whole slice that rested in her palm. "I've never tasted that."

The Conqueror shrugged and noticed that the loaf's swirled filling held poppyseeds. "Poppyseeds?"

The Amazon Queen shook her head and inspected the slice better but Hades if she could figure out anything in the firelight. "No, taste it." She broke a piece free and slipped it between the ruler's lips. She drew her fingers away after they were moistened by the ruler's lips. She was surprised to receive a shock of excitement from the ruler's touch. She cleared her throat and hoarsely asked, "Do you taste that like... sharp sour-ish flavor?"

The Conqueror's eyes brightened from enjoyment of the flavor. "Lemon."

"Lemon?" asked the puzzled bard. "What's lemon?"

The ruler softly laughed and explained, "It's a yellow fruit from the Chin Empire. It's a very tart taste like most citrus fruits."

"You mean like those oranges you have in your bedchambers?" tried the bard. At the ruler's nod, she brightened and inspected the remains of her slice as she finally noticed the slightly yellow tint to the bread. "No wonder," she muttered. She broke another piece off and popped it into her mouth but this time she hummed happily as the lemon flavor mixed with the poppyseed. After her true tasting of the new fruit, she decided it was a delicious mix of tart, poppy, and dough all in one. "This is really good. Where would mom get the idea to use this fruit?" She shook her head while the ruler was

cutting her another slice. "You can't just pick up lemons anywhere."

"No, you can't," agreed the ruler. She held out the next slice to her friend.

Gabrielle carefully considered her friend's words then it dawned on her. She hastily swallowed down her morsel and accused the ruler, "You gave her the lemons!"

The Conqueror shrugged and remained passive.

"You did, didn't you?" urged the shocked Amazon Queen. "Admit it."

"It was a lucky guess that you'd like it," informed Xena, who had a glint in her eyes.

The bard warmed at the ruler's consideration for the idea for a new flavor in the bread. "Thank you." She finished off her slice then asked, "You're not having any?"

"Mother made it for you." The Conqueror had just finished cutting another slice, which she guessed would probably be her friend's last slice considering how heavy the nutbread was but then there was Gabrielle's bottomless appetite.

The bard broke a piece off then grinned as she lifted to the ruler's lips. "And I can share."

The Conqueror accepted the nutbread being fed to her, which she wasn't accustomed to having done. The nutbread's lemon flavor erupted in her mouth then her lips were brushed by the bard's nimble, soft fingertips.

The Amazon Queen couldn't hide her grin as her face was lit up by the warm fire. She pulled back and ate more of the nutbread herself. The lemon flavor was truly growing on her. "Has mom done any other new baking?"

"Mmmm." The ruler leaned back against the log comfortably. "You remember those bananas you don't like?"

The former rebel let her nose crinkle up as she recalled the odd flavor of that yellow fruit. "I just couldn't get into that taste."

The Conqueror smirked then teased, "That's because the first one you tried you ate the skin with it on."

Gabrielle laughed but she blushed at her mishap from that day. "I didn't realize you weren't suppose to eat that. I mean you eat apples, strawberries, and grapes without peeling anything off." She inwardly squirmed at the odd flavor of the banana that her friend had given her to try that day. "So mom made a bread with banana in it huh?"

"Mmmm... it's very good. I think you might like it though because she's added cinnamon to it."

The Amazon Queen considered this mix and she was a woman that would try any food at least once. "Yea but you love bananas."

"You have to try it," argued the ruler. "Mother is a great baker."

"She is that," agreed the bard hastily. "This lemon nutbread is the best."

The ruler chuckled and started to wrap the bread up. "When Summer Solstice is close then I'll be receiving shipments in from Chin on this other fruit that's my favorite."

The bard had a curious face. "What's that?"

"In Chin it is called míhóu táo."

Gabrielle chuckled and shook her head. "There's no way I'm going to try and say that word." She tilted her head then asked, "Does it translate into Greek at all?"

"Not exactly," argued the ruler. "It's an unusual fruit that Lao Ma said Chin developed recently."

"Really?" Gabrielle became intrigued at the idea of a fruit being made.

Xena grinned at her friend's curiosity. "There is one nickname I've heard for it. Lao Ma sometimes calls it a Chin gooseberry." She held up her right hand and made an oval shape by connecting her thumb and index finger. "It's about the size of a hen's egg but it has a brown skin and a hairy texture."

Gabrielle's face wrinkled instantly. "That doesn't sound pleasant, Xena."

The ruler chuckled and lowered her hand to her lap again. "Like the banana you don't eat the skin."

"Then what's inside of it?" inquired the bard. "Brown fruit? That doesn't sound very tasteful."

Another soft laugh escaped the ruler but she explained, "It's not a brown fruit inside but a green color with black seeds and white center. You cut the skin away and then eat it. The part you eat is soft like a banana but very juicy like a grape."

Gabrielle tilted her head and thought this new fruit out. "How do they taste? Like a grape?"

"Not at all," answered the ruler, "more like a cross between a banana and strawberry."

"When do you get them in from Chin?"

Xena shrugged then answered, "In a few moons. I think you'll like it." She got to her feet and stowed away the last half of the bread for tomorrow night. She then sifted through it to get the bedrolls and furs. Luckily the Amazon Nation had given their queen another set of furs and bedrolls for her since the ruler only came with a set for herself.

Gabrielle took the silent time to removed her other boot and set them off to her left side. She inspected her ankle and saw it was finished swelling and the bruising was

proudly displayed. She sighed at it while setting the warmed waterskin aside. She lightly prodded her ankle to see how it felt.

The ruler glanced over when she heard the bard's sharp intake of air. "It's going to hurt for a few days."

"I know." Gabrielle head was drooped down, eyes set on the ankle. "Should I put more of this paste on it tonight?"

"Yes." The Conqueror caught Gabrielle's motions to get the paste filled bowl off to the left. She took the time to set her bedroll further from the fire while setting Gabrielle's closer to the fire so that she'd be warmer. "I'm going to check things out."

When the Amazon Queen lifted her head to say something her friend was already gone. She shook her head then muttered, "Just like a ghost. How's she do that?" She huffed then went back to rubbing the paste carefully into her skin. After she was finished, she set the bowl aside then noted the bedrolls' positions. She figured hers was closer to the fire plus it was quite far from the ruler's.

The Conqueror reappeared in the camp to find the bard just staring into the campfire. She came over and knelt beside her friend. "Are you tired?"

"A little," admitted the bard. "I think I'm still catching up on my rest." She sadly smiled at her friend. "Do you need to do anything else?"

"No, everything is set and it was quiet." The ruler took a seat claimed her seat beside the young woman. She observed Gabrielle's outstretched legs from afar. "Did you use the rest of the paste?"

"Yes... thank you." Gabrielle smiled at the ruler. "Thank you for saving my life back there. I didn't see that bandit at all." She shook her head. "That was my first time."

The Conqueror understood what Gabrielle meant by her last words. The situation was always much different when fighting in a real scenario versus from training because nobody could calculate life perfectly. "I will have to increase patrol in this area of Attica."

"I'm surprised they're around here with the legion and phalanx just in Artemisia."

"It doesn't matter," debated the ruler. "Once Artemisia begins heavy activity with a market then the roads will require security again."

Gabrielle thought this out then mentioned, "You do keep heavy patrols on the roads throughout Greece."

"It serves a dual purpose... the people are protected from thugs like that and the patrols have a better chance of giving out warnings of more serious problems."

"Like invasions," theorized the bard.

"Or rebellions."

Gabrielle released a sigh at her friend's words. "Do you think the realm will have any rebellions?"

The Conqueror glanced at her concerned friend. She often worried about those things in her waking candlemarks and they haunted her late at night. She knew her empire was the largest in the known-world however the problem was that she only had two sets of eyes, ears, and hands to deal with the numerous issues in the realm. When she was younger she never imagined all these hardships of being such a powerful ruler. Just maybe if she'd known at an earlier age it would have curbed her hunger for power. Finally she answered the bard's question in the only way she felt necessary. "Don't lose any sleep over it, Gabrielle." She stared at the fire then murmured, "We're quite safe."

The bard quieted for awhile as she mulled over the entire empire and she wondered how such a large empire could fit on one woman's shoulders. "Do you sometimes think you bit off more than you can chew?"

The Conqueror was quiet.

Gabrielle didn't think her friend would respond because the question was overstepping but she didn't detect any tension coming from her friend. She was glad for that much.

"Some days I think so," softly confided the ruler, "especially more so these days."

The bard turned her head and studied the ruler's solemn face. "Well... you could sell the realm to the highest bidder but keep Crete. Then we can all move there, take the navy, and we'll just build paradise there." She grinned and further teased, "That way you still have a little kingdom and a navy so nobody can bother us."

Xena quietly laughed and it caused her to relax from the earlier conversation. "If there was a drachma for every time I've considered that idea I would be richer than the realm by now."

Gabrielle was remotely shocked the ruler admitted to having considered the idea in past times. "Do you really tire of the rulership?"

"I tire of being a ruler but I never tire of taking over."

The Amazon Queen carefully turned this idea over in her head and digested it. "You were a warrior before you were a ruler."

"Mmhmmm." Xena hated to admit it to her friend but she knew it was apart of who she was despite she rarely was able to partake in her warrior persona anymore. "There's nothing like the thrill of battle... figuring out your enemy's tactics, breaking them, and finally defeating them."

Gabrielle couldn't understand the desire behind it because she was only a bard. What she could appreciate was the fact it was apart of who Xena was no matter what. "There is nobody like you, Xena."

The ruler softly laughed and teased, "You're stroking my ego, Gabrielle."

"No, not really." Gabrielle shrugged. "I mean how many people have tried to accomplish what you've done? Not even Alexander the Great accomplished what you've done."

"Yet I'll be remembered as the Destroyer of Nations," clipped the ruler.

"You don't know that yet," argued the bard, "You still have so much time ahead of you to change all of that."

"Tyrants like me, Gabrielle do not live that long."

Gabrielle shook her head quickly. "You're not that tyrant anymore though and you're showing that to the people. Just give it time and the stories... titles will change. How goes the Conqueror so goes the realm."

The ruler grinned at the bard's analogy to a captain and his ship. She then lost her grin then seriously stated, "Let's get some rest. I want to be up early."

"Before or after the sunrise?"

The Conqueror heard Gabrielle's warning tone in the words so she carefully chose her response. "After sunrise."

Gabrielle laughed and nodded her head. "Good." She then sought help from her friend on getting up and slowly limping over to the bedroll. She was gradually lowered into the soft furs and she took the time to get most of extras off such as her soft gauntlets, arm bracers, and necklace.

The Conqueror brought her friend the staff and set it beside her bed. She then cleaned up the remnants from the mortar bowl then she tucked it away with her medical supplies. She then tossed the skin Gabrielle had been using back with the saddle. Finally, she fished out her sharpening stone then took a seat on the log this time.

Gabrielle had most of her gear off except for her leather top and skirt. She combed her fingers through her hair after just getting the mask off. She studied the ruler setting up to sharpen her sword. "Goodnight, Xena."

The Conqueror tapped the whet stone at the end of her horizontal blade in her lap. "Sleep well, Gabrielle." She listened to the Amazon wiggle under the furs then sigh contently. She fell into an old habit she used to do during her campaigns. Her whet stone ran down the blade then she lifted it back to the top and repeated the cycle. The rhythmic sound filtered down to her subconscious and soothed her greatly. She hadn't realized how much she missed this process until now.

About a candlemark after Gabrielle had fallen asleep, the Conqueror was finished with her sword by wiping it clean. She sheathed the blade at her back then balled up the dirty rag in her hands. Her attention was drawn by the muffled cries from the bard. She could only guess what nightmares were troubling her friend. She debated whether to wake Gabrielle or wait it out. Her decision was made for her when Gabrielle

abruptly sat up with damp features.

The Amazon Queen threw her boiling furs aside then her head fell forward.

The Conqueror had a tilted head and she observed her friend from across the camp. "A bad nightmare huh?"

The bard wiped her brow of the sweat then she forced her legs to get her up. She slowly limped over to the ruler and sat on the log beside the ruler. "It's an old, repeating dream."

The Conqueror set the rag down beside her whetstone on the ground. "What's it about?"

Gabrielle sighed out her frustrations from the dream. "Just something from my childhood, I guess." She wrapped her arms against her body since her wet skin was now cooling against the night. She was hunched forward but she lifted her head and stared at the slightly cloud covered starry sky. "I'm... I'm funny about sleeping in the woods... or just being in the woods at night time." She scanned the dark forest that surrounded them since the crescent, low moon provided very little light. "I really hate when I hear wolf cries." She involuntarily shivered.

Several thoughts passed through the ruler but she quietly asked, "Why is that?"

"It's kind silly really," murmured the bard. She peered up at her friend, who was a feared ruler and here was Gabrielle confessing her fears to the ruler. It seemed so odd. She could tell that Xena was truly interested and deeper in those blue eyes she read the concern. "I don't remember everything from journey between Potidaea to Amphipolis when I escaped. I don't think I want to remember," she admitted. "What I do recall were a lot of wolf cries at night. I was so scared that they were hunting me because the cries kept getting closer to me. I traveled the road all night... I didn't stop until I made it to Amphipolis. The thing was I was scared if I traveled on the road that I'd be caught so I traveled in the woods but close to the road so that I knew I was headed in the right direction." Gabrielle stopped and her stare went deep into the fire. "I just remember how dark it was and how badly I hurt from the wounds... and the blood."

Xena's face was dark at the image drawn for her. She brought her left arm across the bard's shoulders and tugged her closer. She placed a kiss to the bard's sunny hair and murmured, "I'm sorry, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle slipped her right arm around the ruler's back and rested the side of her head against her friend's shoulder. "It was so long ago... I'm just glad I'm here now though." She felt the ruler's chin touched the top of her head and it gave her a bittersweet smile. "I'm glad we're here now." She then extracted herself from the ruler then ordered, "Come on. We both need to get some sleep. You're not staying up tonight."

"I didn't put out two bedrolls for you," jokingly reminded the ruler.

The Amazon Queen grumbled then pointed out, "That doesn't mean anything when it

comes to you." She then carefully got to her feet without putting too much weight on her sprained ankle. She held out her hands then commanded, "Come on."

Xena's lips curled into a soft grin at her friend's demand. She then lost the grin as she absorbed the beautiful sculpting body that glowed from the firelight. She closed her eyes and turned her head away while saying, "Go on, Gabrielle... I'll get ready in a beat after I check the perimeter."

Gabrielle didn't like the instant mood change. She also knew the brush off was something else especially when she saw her friend's very consuming gaze on her. She knelt down in front of the ruler until she was on her knees and fairly eye level with Xena. "Hey." When she received no response, she placed her right palm against Xena's cheek and drew her face back to her. "You think I don't know what you're dealing with?"

The Conqueror clasped her friend's hand into hers and explained, "You wouldn't understand what this is, Gabrielle."

"I don't think you understand what this is either," rebuked the bard.

"Oh I think I do." Suddenly the agitated ruler got to her feet swiftly. "Now get back to bed." She began moving away while saying, "I'll be-"

"I don't think so." Gabrielle was on her feet but her weight on her good foot. She wrapped her strong hand around the ruler's gauntlet covered wrist. "We're not finished this conversation."

The ruler turned back and hotly snapped, "Yes we are finished." Again she tried to move away but the relentless bard jerked her back. "Gabrielle-"

"Stop," harshly ordered Gabrielle. She was steeled and her determination made the Conqueror's temper deflate. "You're not escaping this one, Xena."

"I'm not escaping it," argued the Conqueror, "I'm keeping myself from making a mistake."

"What mistake is that?" urged the Amazon Queen. "Taking me?"

The Conqueror turned her head away and wanted to free from the bard's grasp but she was rooted by the piercing green gaze set on her. "You don't understand this, Gabrielle."

"And like I said, I don't think you do either but you wouldn't know that unless you hear me out." Gabrielle saw the blue eyes open but Xena wouldn't look at her yet. "You know, my ankle is really hurting me like this. Can I just sit down and talk this out?"

The ruler agreed by moving back to the log with her friend. She was completely uneasy and kept a certain space from the bard.

"Usually when people agree to talk things out it requires both to speak," pointed out

the bard.

Xena sighed but made no response.

Gabrielle wanted to growl in frustration at the gap between them. She knew sometimes her words were fairly fruitless against the ruler's armor. She decided the next best weapon was action and especially in the ruler's mindset. She quickly leaned forward and brought her lips against the Conqueror's.

The Conqueror's desire for Gabrielle instantly flared to life by the feel of Gabrielle's moist lips against hers. She moaned from the sensation then hungrily responded for the kiss to deepen.

Gabrielle firmed her lips against the ruler's and she found her mouth opening to invite the ruler. Her tongue soon met the Conqueror's and she whimpered from the amazing feeling. Her stomach quivered from excitement and she forgot much of the world around her.

The Conqueror slowly retreated from the kiss when her thoughts confronted her again. She withdrew then hoarsely whispered, "We can't do this, Gabrielle."

"Xena, we both want this." Gabrielle leaned her forehead against the fighting ruler. "I've seen how you look at me."

Xena had her eyes closed and her breathing was heavy from the battle between her emotions and feelings. She lifted her right hand and pressed her palm against the bard's cheek. "You can't understand this, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle lifted her head from the ruler's and opened her eyes. She met the ruler's now open eyes and she didn't refuse the ruler's hand on her cheek. "You don't think I haven't heard the stories about your sex life, Xena? Come on." She grabbed up Xena's hand into hers. "Sometimes I wonder if half that stuff isn't exaggerated."

"Some of it may be," admitted the ruler, "but not too much of it." She shook her head then stated, "I promised myself I wouldn't do this anymore."

"Do what?" argued the Amazon. "Have consenting sex?"

"I won't have sex out of lust, Gabrielle... or just to have it."

Gabrielle sweetly smiled at this resolution the ruler had resided herself to now. "Xena, that's really...." She decided it was safer not to finish that thought aloud and moved onto her tactic. "This isn't about lust."

The Conqueror withdrew further so she could gain better control of the situation.

Gabrielle didn't buy it as she moved on the log so that she straddled it and fully faced the Conqueror. "Don't do this, Xena. I know this isn't about lust... it something else and Hades if I know what it is because I'm not going to pull out my bardic tricks and whip something up. I don't completely understand what's between us but I know enough to know it isn't something as shallow as lust. Do you think I'd press this so

hard if it was just about lust?"

The Conqueror knew it was true what Gabrielle spoke but it was hard to accept in her position. "I do want you, Gabrielle." She steadied her gaze on the concerned bard. "Whatever is between us I just don't trust because you're right that we don't understand what it is."

Gabrielle scooted closer to her friend and gathered the larger hands into hers. "I know you don't trust it, Xena and I understand but if you don't trust it then trust me." She tried to bring Xena down closer by tugging her. "I really do want to be with you and on several levels. I don't want to go back there." She freed a hand and pointed in the direction of Artemisia. "I don't want to be that far from you." She lowered her hand. "I thought I did because I thought I could find some meaning with the Amazons. I only realized I lost that meaning when we separated and I don't want to do that again."

"This won't be simple, Gabrielle."

"Gods forbid it was too," rebuked the bard. "I don't mind complications in my life when it's something I want so bad." She squeezed the ruler's hands. "And I want you... I want to find out what this is... together."

"I don't want you to end up hurt in this," confessed the Conqueror. She leaned closer to Gabrielle finally. "Not again."

"Well I can pretty much guarantee we're both going to hurt each other," reminded the bard. "Just comes with the territory but its different when it's done with intent."

Xena agreed with Gabrielle's words. She sighed but said nothing as she read the determination painted in Gabrielle's eyes and across her face.

Gabrielle took the offense by straightening for some height and leaned in again. She captured the Conqueror in a soft, tender kiss in hopes it'd draw her out. She pulled back with her fingertips grazing over Xena's cheek. "Please, Xena."

The Conqueror closed her eyes and whispered, "If we're together then there can't be anybody else for either of us so long as we're together."

Gabrielle softly smiled because she knew it was more Xena's declaration than anything else. She then discovered intent blue eyes reading her.

"Promise me if this gets too much for you, Gabrielle that you tell me?"

"I will," promised the bard. "I trust you."

The Conqueror finally responded by leaning in for a kiss that started soft then pressed harder. Gabrielle easily met her back and she moaned at the end of the feverish kiss. She then grinned at the bard's darkened features after the kiss but as excited as she was to be with Gabrielle she couldn't hide from the nervousness. Never had anybody in her life made her nervous but this younger woman and that fact reeked havoc on her thoughts now. Xena was hard press to set her fears aside about how this would go between them. She tried to remain focused on her coursing sensations while helping

Gabrielle sit in her lap.

Gabrielle enjoyed her advantage from straddling the ruler's lap. She grasped Xena's broad, padded shoulders and leaned in for another kiss. She was excited by the sensations and her skin meeting the ruler's skin or her leathers. She tried to remain balance in Xena's lap but her focus was diverted by the searing kiss.

An alarming realization about being with Gabrielle came to mind at the end of the kiss. The Conqueror unexpectedly broke the kiss, which caused Gabrielle to lose her equilibrium then without warning the pair lost their narrow stability on the log. The Conqueror landed flat on her back off the log then the air was shot out of by the bard's body slamming against hers.

Gabrielle remained still then unexpectedly she started to laugh and she buried her tear streaked face into the ruler's neck. "Oh... my gods," she rasped between the fit of laughter.

Xena didn't know what else to do beside join in at the unpredictable moment. She wrapped her arms around the small woman on top of her and tried to untangle their legs as not to hurt the bard's ankle.

Gabrielle tried to settle down but the fact that they just had such a terrible episode was beyond her. Here she was about to sleep with the rumored ruler, who was known for her sexual appetite that matched a predator and yet they ended up falling off a log. It would take her awhile to figure out why it'd happened.

Xena breathed deeply then quietly asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm great," muttered the giggling bard. She lifted her head then her amused features met the ruler's. "We better not tell anybody about this one, my liege."

The Conqueror sighed and rolled her eyes. "Let's try the bedrolls."

"Maybe that would be safer," joked the bard.

"Don't ruin my reputation, bard," teased the Conqueror.

Gabrielle got to her feet carefully with her friend's help. She then was slowly led to the bedrolls and she let the Conqueror moved them together for a more comfortable situation.

Xena straightened up but came closer to the bard.

Gabrielle read the underlying tension in the Conqueror's body. She slipped her arms around Xena's waist and whispered, "You're nervous."

The ruler knew it was a keen observation but she couldn't admit it out loud.

Gabrielle softly smiled at how precious she found that about the Conqueror. "I'm nervous too," she admitted in hopes it'd ease Xena on some level. "Come on, turn around." She kept her weight on her other foot while she helped with the armor after

getting the sheathed sword off.

Xena dropped her heavy armor away from the bedroll but in her left hand was her sword. She quickly placed her sword and chakram then breast dagger close by the bedrolls yet not in a dangerous spot. She saw that Gabrielle sat down on the bedrolls, which gave her an opportunity to remove her boots and greaves. She put those aside with her armor then finally sat on the bedroll beside the bard. "You're sure about this?"

"Very sure," answered the nearing bard. Gabrielle lured the ruler in for another kiss to warm them back up. She sensed the tension streaming through the Conqueror but she was set to work it out of her. "Come on," she whispered after the kiss, "I know you can't normally be like this."

"I'm not," agreed the ruler. "I just...."

Gabrielle stroked the Conqueror's cheek and smiled warmly. "It's okay. It's just us and it's not perfect but... it is to me." She leaned in for another kiss to persuade the ruler.

Xena's response grew as she let go of the control. Gabrielle's words having helped settle her self arguing. She warmed up by the third kiss and was pushing Gabrielle down on her back. She lay on top of the bard but kept her weight off of her mostly.

The bard smiled up at the now calmer ruler. "Xena?"

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow but her eyes were rather smoldering.

"Not to... um...." Gabrielle started to blush. "Not to add any pressure to this situation but I thought this deserves warning."

The Conqueror's eyebrow hiked up even further if it was possible. "Gaaabrielle," she drew out in a sultry tone.

The bard shivered at the tone but she sheepishly smiled then muttered, "I know I'm the Amazon Queen and all but I haven't really...." She waved her hand at their current position and situation. "I've just never...."

The Conqueror audibly groaned, her eyes now closed and her head slumped. "Don't tell me you could still join Hestia, Gabrielle?"

"Yes," squeaked the bard. "I always told Perdicus we were going to wait until he and I were married. I... uh...." She stopped and just groaned with her eyes shutting.

Xena lifted her head and gazed at the distraught bard below her. She lowered her head and kissed the bard lightly while whispering, "I don't want me to be your first experience, Gabrielle. You deserve-"

"Let me decide that," cut off the bard. "It is my choice and I've made it." She waited a beat then pulled out her trumpet card. "Please, Xena I want it to be with you."

The Conqueror couldn't help a soft laugh at the ego stroking technique. "You're

relentless, Gabrielle."

"I like to have my way when it comes to you."

"You're very good at it too," admitted the ruler.

"I'll keep it a secret between us," teased the bard. She then was kept quiet by a light kiss. Then she tensed up sharply when Xena's lips lowered to her neck. She wasn't a hundred percent sure what to expect tonight but she was educated enough to know the general process. She wasn't an expert on male-female sex and two women, well that was slightly beyond her but she had to guess it would be somewhat similar.

The Conqueror came back up to capture Gabrielle's lips in a longer kiss. At the end of the kiss, she softly instructed, "Relax, Gabrielle."

The bard nodded but she was still somewhat tense.

The Conqueror could understand why and she didn't take it personal. She would go slow so it would ease Gabrielle into everything. She also had no idea what Gabrielle would enjoy so she began testing the waters. After a kiss, she tried the bard's left ear, which made the bard respond well.

Gabrielle's moans filtered in the air and her left hand dug into the furs while her right arm was around the ruler's back.

Xena moved and tried the bard's right ear with the same repeating patterns with her tongue and sucking.

Gabrielle couldn't help her reaction and she started to giggle. When Xena slightly pulled back she quietly explained, "It tickles... don't ask me why."

The Conqueror's frame shook from a silent laugh but she decided to bring back the mood swiftly. She gently nipped the bard's ear knowing that wouldn't tickle a bit.

Gabrielle sucked in her breath and her nails dug into the ruler's back.

Xena still sensed the tension in the younger woman but she continued to work at it. She came to Gabrielle's neck and placed a few soft kisses in calculated spots. She then took bites more to the sides, which brought moans out of the bard.

The bard felt her body burn all over but it was centered between her legs and her desire heightened. Xena's hot lips left her upper chest then suddenly appeared against her bare stomach. She softly moaned and her back somewhat arched into Xena's kisses. Then Xena's hand was sliding up the outside of her thigh, which enticed the bard.

The Conqueror brought her lips brushing over the bard's navel then her tongue lightly touched over the soft skin. She didn't expect the light giggle from the bard again. She lifted her head and smirked when Gabrielle lifted her flushed face. "Another ticklish spot?"

The Amazon Queen showed a coy smile and groaned while dropping her head down. She threaded her hands through Xena's hair and managed to pull the cascading raven hair back so that it would tickle her stomach as badly.

The Conqueror moved back up to Gabrielle to steal a kiss. She sensed Gabrielle's hands going to the back of her neck instead. She lifted up some to study Gabrielle's passionate face and it made her grin. She huskily whispered, "Sit up for me." Xena rocked back some until she was more upright.

Gabrielle sat up then captured Xena's lips for another kiss.

The Conqueror busied her hands behind Gabrielle's back. She tried to work the leather halter's clasp in the back but wasn't succeeding. She ended the kiss.

Gabrielle determined the agitated features of the ruler because of the top. "Wait." Her imagination already predicted the ruler going for her dagger to solve the problem of the disagreeing top. "There's a trick to it." She reached behind and her fingers mixed with Xena's around the metal clasp.

The Conqueror bared her teeth and growled from frustration. "This is ridiculous." She was surprisingly breathing heavily.

The bard helped Xena get the clasp but she noted something interesting; Xena's hands were shaking. "You're still nervous?" Her features showed her compassion and she thought it was enduring of the ruler.

"I'm not," lied the ruler. She released an annoyed sigh when the clasp freed and she was able to slip the top off Gabrielle. Together they set the top aside and Xena lowered Gabrielle back down.

Gabrielle closed her eyes then she took a sharp intake of air when Xena's leather brushed over her hardening nipples. She was entranced by another searching kiss. Then her breathing escalated as Xena's lips made the slow journey down her neck, across her chest, and pausing beside her right nipple. Her muscle tightened against her skin around her arms and legs when Xena's hot hand slid up her left side and closer to her other breast but not too close.

Xena toyed with Gabrielle by running the tip of her tongue around the tanned ring of the nipple but never touching. She nipped just beside, which caused Gabrielle to growl between frustration and desire. Then finally her tongue lightly grazed across the waiting nipple but she lifted her head and lightly blew across the moist nipple.

Gabrielle followed her instincts to correct the torment. She arched her back and was pleased by the silky lips going around her throbbing nipple. She groaned while she clung to her partner's stronger body.

The Conqueror tested the bard's pleasures by first rolling her tongue over the nipple then flickering it. She was met by digging nails on her back followed by moans. She then pulled back slightly so that her teeth clamped the nipple then she increased the bite. She tensed at the extra sharp hiss from the bard and she knew it was too hard. Xena eased her pressure and brought her tongue back over the nipple to sooth any

previous pain.

The bard freed her left hand and placed it over Xena's right hand by her other breast. She urged Xena's hand closer to her breast then overtop.

The Conqueror grinned at Gabrielle's silent instruction to knead her other breast. She did so while Gabrielle's hand stayed on top of hers. She kept her lips over the other nipple and her tongue working it. After several more heartbeats, Xena paused and freed from the left breast. She came back up for a kiss.

Gabrielle opened her eyes at the end of the kiss. "Don't stop this."

"I'm not... just switching sides," murmured the grinning ruler. True to her word, she kissed her way down to the other breast and repeated much of what she discovered Gabrielle enjoyed. Xena kept moving slowly through the rhythms and at first it was increasing awkward as she didn't know Gabrielle's body. The slow pleasure led her to certain conclusions about what Gabrielle really enjoyed, somewhat enjoyed, and what was her limitations. She even discovered yet another ticklish spot just at the lowest point of her abdomen and Gabrielle almost squirmed right out of the bedrolls.

This first time together wasn't perfect as most poetic bards would write as each move was new and unknown for the couple. The Conqueror had never once been nervous during sex but tonight was different when she discovered Gabrielle's body. She was slow, cautious, and for the first time she felt pleased by giving to her partner and that new experience was precious to the ruler. Gabrielle, at a few moments, felt rather embarrassed by all her ticklish spots that came to light between them. She then was convinced that Xena would rip the Amazon skirt apart when another clasp refused to agree but Gabrielle hastily solved the problem.

Xena then demonstrated how easily her leathers slipped free. Then when her skin met Gabrielle's, their moans of pleasure and desire mixed in the air. Gabrielle felt amazed by the feeling of her moist skin gliding across Xena's but she grew tense when Xena's fingers came closer to her center.

The Conqueror was resting partially on her left side, next to Gabrielle, but her legs tangled with the bard's right. She observed how Gabrielle had her legs open in anticipation yet the strain coursing through the small body was evident. She somewhat lifted her body up by her left arm and gently gazed into Gabrielle's nervous face. "If you relax it'll be easier."

Gabrielle nodded then lifted her head some for a soft kiss. The kiss kept her attention and coaxed her while Xena traced her fingers through Gabrielle's moist, warm folds. She deeply inhaled at the end of the kiss but peered up into the dark blue eyes above her.

Xena offered a smile to settle the bard. She lowered her head and whispered, "Are you sure?"

"More than anything," assured Gabrielle. She received a quick kiss but when Xena lifted away some she felt the longer fingers slowly ease into her. Gabrielle slowly lowered back down into the furs but her gaze kept on Xena's watching face.

The Conqueror carefully moved her fingers forward and observed Gabrielle's face for any indication of pain. She then paused when there was an abrupt stopping point so she lowered her head closer to Gabrielle's. "You truly are beautiful, Gabrielle... thank you."

Gabrielle instantly had a smile and her eyes burned but she laced her fingers through Xena's tresses when Xena's fingers moved forward. Her eyes closed and a brief display of pain flashed past followed by a sharp breath. Her body tensed all over but she didn't tighten her grip on Xena.

The Conqueror watched intently but stayed her movements for a beat. She let her younger lover get use to the sensations because Gabrielle was extremely stiff and any sudden moving could worsen it. She lowered her head and gave slow kisses to ease the bard.

Gabrielle settled against the furs and her shoulders lowered back down. She left fingers didn't dig into the furs as much while her right hand massaged the ruler's neck. Her stomach muscle hid back under her skin and her body focused on the beautiful feeling of Xena inside of her.

Gradually Xena pulled her fingers back closer to the entrance, paused for a beat, and moved them back deeper. She kept the slow pace and was relieved to detect Gabrielle's inside muscles accepting her better.

Gabrielle partially opened her eyes but they were heavy from desire again. She smirked and huskily whispered, "I'm repeating myself but... does this thing go faster?"

The Conqueror chuckled and grinned at the smart remark. She kept her slow tempo just to frustrate her partner; her vibrating voice asked, "What's it worth to you?"

The bard figured she could play too as she quipped, "What's it worth to you later?" She quickly received an answer when the rhythm doubled and her thought process shattered by pleasure.

Xena grew smug at seeing Gabrielle lifted her hips into the motions. She enjoyed seeing the bard widening her legs in a demand. Xena took an advantage by capturing the nearby nipple and teasing it.

"Oh gods," whimpered the excited bard. She clawed her right hand into the furs while her left hand slipped to Xena's shoulder and her nails dug into muscles.

The Conqueror's pace grew faster and faster to match the bard's hungry desire. She pulled back from teasing the nipple, which allowed Gabrielle to lift her head. Xena enjoyed seeing how Gabrielle actually watched Xena thrust her fingers in and out. Xena realized it seemed to bring Gabrielle an extra wave of pleasure. Together, she and Gabrielle watched Xena pump the bard faster and harder.

Then one of the deep thrusts sent Gabrielle past her highest point. She gave a cry and Xena's fingers stilled inside of her from the sudden tightness. Gabrielle slumped into

the hot furs while her body flashed with more than she currently understood. Her mind was blank of thoughts and her emotions quiet for several heartbeats.

The Conqueror very carefully withdrew her fingers so that nothing would hurt. She knew Gabrielle may be sore later but right now that wasn't something Gabrielle felt in this moment. She felt both of Gabrielle's legs tangling with hers then short arms coming around her waist.

Nothing at first seemed perfect during their first time but it was beautiful as Xena learned Gabrielle's innocence and Gabrielle experienced Xena's most hidden side. It wasn't until Gabrielle felt Xena completely in her that her tension had faded away and something else passed into her, which she didn't understand yet but she knew it was beautiful. The bard couldn't imagine any other experience being so perfect to her; it was her sweet memory for life.

The Conqueror held tight to the fact this felt like her first time because she found pleasure by giving it. It was her personal secret. Yet it showed because she normal would separate from her sex partners after being with them and instead she pulled Gabrielle into her body.

Gabrielle's breathing started to regulate and she nuzzled her face into her lover's sticky neck. She turned onto her right side and was able to snuggle deeper. "Thank you, Xena."

The Conqueror ran her fingertips up and down Gabrielle's back lightly just to soothe her. "Thank you too, Gabrielle." She closed her eyes as the words, you don't know how thankful either, passed through her head.

It wasn't long before the couple faded into sleep. Xena was amazed she was fairly spent like Gabrielle because typically afterwards she found herself more energized and needy. It seemed like a mystery to the ruler but she accepted it happily as a few candlemarks claimed her. She was awoken by nimble fingers playing with certain parts of her body.

Gabrielle followed her partner's earlier demonstrations yet she realized Xena's enjoyments were different compared to hers. Where Gabrielle would prefer lighter nips Xena found pleasure in harder ones. The bard was quite intrigued that her lover seemed to find gratification from having her stomach given attention. Gabrielle also counted at least a dozen various scars of different lengths, depths, and widths from old battles and she made notes to ask later. She also slowed on the newer scar on the ruler's left side, made by Alti, and she kissed it in gratification for it healing.

When Gabrielle came close to entering Xena, she moved more on top of the ruler. She sought Xena's support on how to please her properly and at first she was uneasy in being able to do it. Under the Conqueror's confidence, Gabrielle quickly learned the right pace and somehow Xena showed her how to use her thumb over her clit. Gabrielle grinned wildly at the immediate response this technique brought out of the ruler.

The Conqueror fell silent in her instructions when she couldn't possible think anymore. Gabrielle's quick fingers stroked her well while her clit was being rolled. A

few moments Xena grew closer to the top but when Gabrielle's thumb lost position it made her growl out of frustration.

Gabrielle steady her self frustration from what she thought was messing up. She calmed her lover by kissing her then centered her focus on Xena's moving hips. She followed the consistent beat and learned it quickly. She returned to the faster pace and she found her grin again when Xena moaned in pleasure. The Conqueror's pleasure set Gabrielle forward and she tried faster.

The Conqueror released her right hand from the furs and laced her fingers through Gabrielle's freehand. She opened her eyes and locked on the beautiful features of the bard above her.

Gabrielle's earlier grin was coaxed into a smile because of Xena's exposed emotions. She read the mix of emotions clearly slipping through the ruler's brilliant eyes. It made Gabrielle feel incredible to see the real Xena before her.

Xena bit her lower lip, her eyes shutting, and her body arching ever higher. She didn't overly squeeze Gabrielle's hand but held tight while her passions over threw her senses. She was shocked by one last jolt from Gabrielle's unexpected thrust then it all calmed. Her breath held for a few beats then her chest fell quickly as her labored breathing returned.

Gabrielle mimicked Xena's earlier administrations of removing her fingers from the tight swell of Xena's center. She then kissed Xena's cheek and rubbed her cheek against Xena's in an affectionate manner.

The Conqueror combed her left hand through the bard's hair and turned her head to place a kiss on Gabrielle's temple. She then murmured, "Thank you."

Gabrielle nervously asked, "It was okay?" She then started to toy with the Conqueror's Gaelic necklace.

Xena slightly grinned at the worries. The sex she'd had in her life had always been the same but this was different than all of it. It was that difference that brought her to a more satisfying climax than previous times. "Very okay."

The bard rested her face against the ruler's so that they couldn't see each other but their lips were a brush away from their ears. "I've heard it gets better when the partners get to know each other's bodies....?"

"Mmmm." The Conqueror slipped her left hand across the bard's back while Gabrielle's hand clung to her shoulder. They still held hands at her right side. "It does over time... as we learn more."

Gabrielle gently chuckled and whispered, "I learned a lot tonight."

"You're a quick study too," teased the Conqueror.

Gabrielle kissed the side of Xena's neck then remarked, "It's a bard thing... being good with my hands."

Xena heartedly laughed after she twisted her head away. She turned back when Gabrielle lifted her head.

The bard mirrored the smile that showed on her lover's face. "I like this."

"What's that?"

Gabrielle shrugged and answered, "You and me... nothing and nobody else here."

"Ah." The Conqueror understood what her young partner meant, her features slightly dark at the thought of returning to the duties of the realm.

"I know," muttered the bard, "duty will call soon." She tilted her head then decided on a certain truth. "That's what made this so special... to me."

Xena completely agreed. She ran circles over the bard's bare back. "To me too." She then freed both her hands and reached around for the furs to cover them. With a quick glance to the fire, she decided it would last the rest of the night and the now warming furs would keep them warm tonight. Her cooling skin warmed back up from her body heat and Gabrielle's trapped under the furs.

Gabrielle curled up against her lover and rested her head against the broad shoulder. "It's okay?"

The Conqueror understood the Amazon's underlying question since they were snuggled up together. "Yes. Go to sleep because dawn will be here soon."

Gabrielle yawned some then settled in comfortably then sleepily muttered, "Sleep well... my liege."

The Conqueror's lips thinned from her consideration at how the bard said her title. She tasted a very different tone in the title as if it was more of an endearment than just her title. Her response was a kiss to Gabrielle's head then she quieted down until her dreamscape came for her.

Helios's wakening wasn't too far away from when the new lovers fell asleep. Apollo mounted his chariot and started his daily journey across the sky. The sun's rays streamed through the darkness and chased Artemis's moon away. The gentle red hues washed over the new lovers curled up under the furs and beside an almost dead fire.

The Conqueror, of her great realm, carefully slipped out from the tangle of arms and legs. She silently put on her leathers, boots, and greaves but she left the rest for later. She ran her fingers through her messy hair while unknowingly smiling down at her younger lover. She actually felt stumped by all the changes her life had seen in these past moons but she welcomed them all. She decided Gabrielle would sleep for awhile longer and this gave her time to prepare a quick breakfast and warm up water in the renewed fire.

Gabrielle slowly sat up but her right arm clamped the fur over her bare chest. She blinked a few times so that the fuzziness worked out of her eyes. She tilted her head at

seeing the Conqueror knelt beside the fire and pouring steaming water into mugs.

Xena slightly grinned at the young woman then greeted, "Good morning." She got to her feet with the brewing mugs and took a seat on the furs beside Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen just bit back her yawn then she grinned. "Good morning too." She accepted the very warm mug from her lover. She happily groaned at the tea flavor.

The ruler sat cross legged and quietly sipping on her Chin tea. She cupped her mug with both hands when she settled it into her lap. "How's your ankle feel?"

Gabrielle stared down at her fur covered ankle in question. She wiggled her foot under the fur and it didn't bother her yet she knew it could be a different story once she stood on it. "It doesn't hurt to move it around."

"That's a good sign," agreed the ruler. She then set her mind when she stated, "You're going to ride Argo today."

"Ugh," grumbled the Amazon. "And I can't complain my way out of that one either."

Xena chuckled but lost her amusement. "Afraid not, bard."

Gabrielle peered up into vivid blue eyes that were more alive than Gabrielle could ever recall. She went still in the moment and Gabrielle enjoyed how her lover called her a bard in an affectionate manner. She sighed contently then asked, "Will we make it to Corinth tonight?"

The Conqueror considered the question as her eyebrow slowly climbed up. "We can be."

The bard's lips puckered as she carefully calculated what was being said to her. She sipped on her tea to give her an extra beat then she asked, "We don't need to rush back, do we? Or do you have to be back for... something?"

The ruler took another swallow of her warm tea before answering, "I just have scrollwork waiting me and it's not going anywhere." She saw that hope written in the bard's eyes so she made her decision. "We'll get there tomorrow morning or so."

Gabrielle agreed by her smile. She then wiggled out of the furs to get dressed.

The Conqueror passed the time by getting the breakfast together and she quickly ate with Gabrielle. Afterwards she hastily walked down to the stream to clean the dishes. She knelt beside the shore and submerged the mugs in the chilled water.

The water was slowly moving through the stream but it rippled when the mugs broke the surface. When the mugs came back out the ripples faded away.

The Conqueror instincts heightened abruptly and she saw the smiling face reflecting in the water. She jumped to her feet with the mugs forgotten on the bank. She held up her hands in defense but she visibly relaxed and murmured, "M'Lila?"

M'Lila's smile brightened and she silently stepped closer to her friend. "How are you, my friend?"

The Conqueror was dumbfounded but she stepped closer as her hands went back to her sides. "I'm well. Why are you here? How are you here?"

The Gaelic warrior signaled the necklace around the ruler's neck.

Xena peered down and saw that it was glowing much like it had against Alti. She returned her focus to her friend. "What kind of magic is this?"

M'Lila stepped closer then quietly answered, "It is not magic, Xena but power from the earth mother."

"You mean Danu?" At M'Lila's nod, Xena stated, "You knew the emblem would protect me from Alti."

"I could not let you face her completely alone," urged the Gaelic. "You and Alti would have killed each other if you had no protection against her shamanism."

The Conqueror was solemnly but she sincerely offered, "Thank you, M'Lila... I owe you my life again."

M'Lila felt her friend's compassion and she instinctively reached out to touch Xena but her hand passed through the ruler's shoulder.

Xena saw it and the even sadder expression on M'Lila's face afterwards. "Why did you come?"

"I came to thank you," answered the Gaelic. At seeing Xena's perplexed features she explained everything. "Borias, Chuang, and I have been rejudged because you defeated Alti. Originally Hades had been furious we helped you escape but when Alti was defeated the souls she'd taken were released. Hades and the judges decided that our motives in saving you were good and just."

The Conqueror became stunned but she was relieved too. "Where are you now?"

M'Lila softly smiled and answered, "We have been moved to the meadows. It will not be long before our karmas will be granted life again."

"What of Lyceus?"

"Lyceus has found peace in Elysia now... I hear he spends time with Gabrielle's family." M'Lila enjoyed her friend's further shocked features. "Lyceus visits me on occasions and tells me such."

A thought occurred to the ruler so she hastily asked, "Did Lyceus mention which of Gabrielle's family members he sees?"

"Her mother and father," replied the Gaelic.

The Conqueror felt hope for Gabrielle's sister at that point but she wouldn't rest faith in it yet.

"I have heard your thoughts often," mentioned M'Lila, "I am happy you have found Gabrielle."

Xena glanced back towards the camp then to her friend. "So am I."

M'Lila tilted her head then observed a hidden aspect about the ruler. "It has been a long time since you've been this scared, my friend."

The Conqueror's head drooped but she rose it up again. "I have so much I could lose now, M'Lila... and I don't want to risk it."

"You will find your balance, Xena... and Gabrielle will help you do such." The Gaelic read the tension softening in the ruler.

The Conqueror's attention snapped to the left when she heard somebody approaching.

M'Lila turned her head to the right and her smile showed at seeing the young, small blond only several paces away.

Gabrielle stopped and stared very confusing at the darkly tanned woman standing next to her lover. "I... I was concerned... when you didn't return sooner." She adjusted her staff in her right hand but her eyes flickered between Xena and the stranger.

Xena signaled for the bard to come closer and when she stood beside her she held out her hand to M'Lila. "Gabrielle, this is M'Lila."

The Amazon Queen smiled warmly and out of habit she held up her right hand. "I've heard so much about you. I'm sorry we didn't get to meet before you were... killed... you're dead."

M'Lila's smile went into an amused grin. She saw the outstretched hand that went back to the bard's side so she peered up at her tall friend. "You did not mention she was so cute, Xena?"

The bard's mouth was wide and she glimpsed up at her lover for help. That's when Gabrielle first noticed that the Gaelic necklace was quite lively by a golden aura.

The Conqueror lifted her right hand and rested it on Gabrielle's closest shoulder. "M'Lila came to tell me that she, Borias, Chuang, and my brother have been rejudged for better afterlives."

"By the gods," murmured the Amazon, who returned her attention to the Gaelic. "Why?"

M'Lila rested her hands on her hips. "It is because Xena has defeated Alti for the Greater Good."

"You were rewarded for helping then," concluded the bard. After M'Lila's nod Gabrielle's anxiety eased about the ghost of M'Lila being here. "That's wonderful."

M'Lila smiled at those simple words. "I owe you as well, Gabrielle for standing beside Xena when she was at her darkest." Her focus was on Gabrielle but she felt Xena watching her. "Xena has been lost much of her life but you have guided her back."

Gabrielle shook her head then claimed, "I only pointed her in the right direction... Xena found her way home." Her shoulder was squeezed gently so she peered up at her partner.

"I didn't do it alone," murmured the ruler.

"You never will have to," quietly promised the bard.

M'Lila sadly smiled at the growing bond between the women. She'd always hoped to create such a bond with her friend yet she was happy seeing her friend discover her life again. "I must return to meadows, my friend." She tilted her head then spoke to the bard. "It was a pleasure to finally meet you, Gabrielle."

"You as well, M'Lila." The Amazon Queen flashed a smile.

M'Lila nodded then gave Xena a tender smile. "Stay well, my friend... our paths will cross again." She held up her left hand.

The Conqueror lifted her right hand and she almost felt her palm touch M'Lila's but then her fingers passed through M'Lila's smaller fingers. Then she sadly watched as the smiling Gaelic vanished like steam. "Goodbye, my friend," she emotionally murmured.

Gabrielle watched the ruler's arm lower then she slowly turned around. "You okay?"

The Conqueror's chest no longer radiated yellow from the necklace but she tried to smile. "Yes. We need to break camp."

"Right behind you," promised the bard, who leaned onto her good ankle.

It wasn't long before the pair found themselves about to depart the now empty camp. Gabrielle was already on Argo and she was about to slip her boots into the stirrups but then she felt a solid hand on her thigh.

"Keep your feet out of the stirrups."

"I'll fall out," argued the bard.

The Conqueror faintly grinned but patted the warm thigh under her hand. It only took her three beats to haul her armored body into the saddle, behind the smaller woman.

"Oh," murmured the bard.

The ruler's grin widened as she settled into the saddle. "Comfortable?"

"Mmm," agreed Gabrielle. She then was about to lean into her partner but she stopped. "Can you tie this to the saddlebags?" she questioned as she removed her mask.

The Conqueror did so without hesitation. She then twisted back in the saddle, gathered up the reins, and gave Argo the signal to begin the walk towards the road. "We'll camp about two candlemarks south of Corinth."

Gabrielle mutely agreed. She grasped the saddle to anchor her but then she caught sight of the ruler jumbling up the reins into her right hand. Next she felt the ruler's strong arm snake across her waist and hold her tightly. It made a smile shape her lips. "You know, we should just not go to Corinth."

The Conqueror could tell her lover was playing the bard; a wistful dream was on the horizon and she decided to indulge it. "Oh?"

"Melinda told me that you and I were partners in her world... that we fought for the Greater Good." The bard tilted her head and she spotted the road not far away. "We just roamed the countryside and helped people."

Xena tilted her head and was provided with a profile view of the younger woman. "So I was a do-gooder huh?"

The Amazon Queen tasted the witticism in the ruler's voice. "Not exactly... she mentioned that Xena, in her world, followed much of the same path as you did here."

"Oh?" Xena straightened up in the saddle. "What changed me?"

"Who changed you," corrected the bard, "some man by the name of Hercules." She noted her lover's quietness so she filled the air again. "We could do a lot of good."

"And have we not already?" countered the ruler.

Gabrielle smiled at the memories of her and the Conqueror working together back at the fortress during those moons. "We have already... its just different." She shook her head then mentioned, "In Corinth we must adhere to certain rules. We are watched there. We have deadlines to maintain." She shook her head. "To be on the road is to be...."

"Free," finished the Conqueror in a low voice. "A long time ago I realized my throne to the realm meant my life long servitude. I am a slave to the polis."

"Do you really see it as such?" argued the queen.

"Sometimes." Xena went silent as she carefully considered it more. Unknowingly she ran her thumb up and down her lover's taut stomach in sync to her thoughts. "I am bound to the polis by my throne but I am committed to Greece by my will."

A thought occurred to the bard and she gently asked, "If you could descend the throne, knowing it would go in good hands, would you do it?"

The Conqueror was quiet for some time.

Gabrielle waited patiently as she knew she'd receive an answer. She gazed down the road they'd just rode onto and it was fairly quiet.

"No," definitely answered the ruler.

The Amazon Queen twisted and peered up into her friend's determined features. "The power?"

"At one point in my life, yes." Xena saw the confusion written in her lover so she finally answered, "The peace."

"But if the realm is left in capable-"

"You can't know how the enemies are, Gabrielle," softly reminded the ruler. "You cannot trade one ruler for another and not expect change either within the realm or outside of it."

Gabrielle shook her head then she challenged, "If it's about the peace then... then why the Norselands?"

The Conqueror knew the bard was questioning her motives and typically she wouldn't allow such from anybody. She wasn't pricked or defensive by the question because Gabriele clearly was trying to understand her. "I plan to move my legions to the east... there are invasions from the Germanics."

"You're not taking the Norselands?"

"No," murmured the ruler, "and I want peace from the Germanics but it won't happen anytime soon."

"What changed your mind?"

Xena sensed the bard relaxing into her body, which she took as a good sign. "You changed my mind."

Gabrielle was stunned by the honest confession. She rested her hand on the top of the saddle horn and she let out a long exhale.

"I am only one woman, Gabrielle... I cannot rule the entire known-world from my throne in Corinth."

"Then what do you mean to do?"

The Conqueror wasn't sure her route yet but she knew she'd find a new way to do it. "I don't know yet but... I could use your help on it."

The Amazon Queen was silent for awhile. She sensed the ruler tensing against her because she was taking so long to reply to the offer. She moved her hand off the

saddle horn and covered Xena's with hers. "As your advisor of state?"

The ruler conceded that it would be the best starting point for them. "Yes." She lowered her head then whispered, "I cannot speak for all of the realm's future but I can speak for Greece's. Greece will remain in internal peace so long as I stay in power."

"You love Greece," whispered the bard.

"How can I not?" argued the ruler. "I will not abandon my Grecian polis. I will not allow Greece to fall under the plunder of petty kings and warlords." She shook her head then promised, "Nor will I allow the tyrant to return."

Gabrielle squeezed her lover's hand. "When we return from Egypt I will return as your state advisor... my liege."

Xena lowered her head then placed a grateful kiss to her lover's shoulder. She felt a smile touch her. "Thank you." Her smile grew as she felt how Gabrielle had made an endearment of her title compared to anybody else that spoke it.

The day quietly passed without any trouble on the roads. Xena made sure to divert from any populated areas as she knew that may prove the opportunity for her to be identify. When they were roughly two candelmarks from Corinth she veered Argo off the road and stopped only when she discovered a nice clearing. The rest of the late afternoon kept the ruler busy as she prepared camp. Gabrielle tried to help as much as she could but her ankle kept her slow moving. The pain had subsided quite a bit however she was too fearful it'd be easy to encourage it to heal slower if she wasn't careful.

When they finally settled down for dinner, they shared gentle banter and remained relax compared to what many would expect from the Conqueror. After cleaning up from dinner, Gabrielle happily reclined beside her lover in the furs and together they star gazed for the first time. The bard recalled doing this as a child with her sister much like Xena recalled doing this with her brother. Now they shared stars together.

"Look, it's a dipper there, Xena." The Amazon Queen extended her right arm and drew the constellations together with her index finger. "See?"

The Conqueror chuckled and replied, "What the Hades is a dipper?"

The bard dropped her arm to her stomach. "Yeah, you know, like one of those cups you use to draw water out of a bucket."

Xena's features crinkled together. "It looks like a bear to me."

"A bear?" Gabrielle turned her head to her lover. "Where do you get a bear?"

The ruler sighed, lifted her left arm, and carefully traced the stars to form the bear she saw up there. "There's the body." She stopped and moved her hand further. "See its little ears?"

The bard's lips puckered. "No." Her imagination just wasn't capturing this bear in the

heavens. Abruptly she laughed but tried to weakly get out, "I'm the bard and I can't even see this bear."

The Conqueror sighed as her arm went back over her leather clad stomach. She was bare of her armor and weapons plus her boots were already off. She'd just taken her gauntlets off but she kept her arm bracers on for now. "I see a bear." She glowered at her friend. "Tomato... Tamoto."

Gabrielle went into a fit of giggles again and shook her head. She covered her reddened face with her right hand then whispered, "And you said 'little ears'. By the gods." Her body was racked by more giggles.

"I think I may go sleep on the other side of the fire." Xena started to sit up then was working to get onto her feet. Just as she suspected a small hand shot out and yanked her back onto the furs.

"I'm sorry." Gabrielle's tone though showed she was far from serious.

"Nope... that's okay," protested the ruler. She tried again to get up. "I try to be imaginative and I get poked at."

The bard giggled again but not as much. She still held her lover's wrist but she needed to act quickly. She used her best card and sweetly asked, "You're not going to make me get up on my bad ankle to stop you, are you?"

"You're rotten, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle smiled innocently.

The Conqueror was stern as her eyes narrowed. She relented after a deep sigh then she sunk back into the bedroll and furs. "Happy now?"

"Very." The bard had her head turn to her partner. Her eyes glowed brightly.

The Conqueror softly smiled at the younger woman beside her. Gabrielle's small hand still held her wrist but slowly moved up and their fingers laced together. But then it was Gabrielle's longing in her eyes that made her worry. "What is it?" She squeezed the bard's hand.

The Amazon Queen drove away her deep thoughts. "I guess... I... what are we... what we doing, Xena?" She signaled their linked hands by lifting them. "I'm not complaining or anything but... I mean I want to be with you but when we hit Corinth...."

Xena slowly exhaled because she'd been considering the same things. "We're going to take it a day at a time, Gabrielle."

The bard's lips creased into a smile. "I know we will." She turned back to the starry sky and softly spoke again. "I still have to be the Amazon Queen... I have to balance this along with being your state advisor."

"Are you up to it?" carefully asked the ruler. "It will be a lot of work."

"Just keep your current advisor until we get back from Egypt," urged the bard.

"I will try," teased the Conqueror.

Gabrielle chuckled but went sober again. "I want to do this... together."

Xena turned her head and showed a smile. "We can do this together."

"There's so much we can do," murmured the bard, "together we'll be unlimited."

"It won't be easy, Gabrielle." The Conqueror grew serious and held the listening bard's gaze. "You will have many enemies... people will challenge you and the changes will take time."

"It's my choice," reminded the bard, "and it's what I want." She then rolled onto her right side so that her body faced the ruler. "Besides I know you'll be there by my side just like I will be at yours."

Xena studied the young woman that held so much faith in her and the dreams. She felt as if she was hearing Lyceus all over again as he'd spoken of doing such things together. Again Xena found the stakes high but she found herself repeating what she told Lyceus so long ago. "We'll make a stand, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle squeezed her lover's hand tightly and her smile broadened.

Xena mirrored the smile back. Her mind knew this dangerous game from her past but she believed this time she was better prepared for what trials may lie ahead. Her heart wanted this too much to refuse it. She hadn't felt this alive since her days with her brother and by the gods she wasn't going to lose this.

Gabrielle rolled onto her stomach, which brought her partially on the ruler.

Xena met her halfway and drew the bard's soft lips down for a warm kiss. The passions from last night were burning again and she would have Gabrielle again tonight. She couldn't be sure if every time they were together would be as tender as tonight and last night were but she tried to keep it that way. Xena knew though that her ravaging passions were only lurking below and the right occasion would bring it out; she just hoped it would be something her and Gabrielle could work out.

Tonight though the couple found themselves in another passionate night and they didn't feel as awkward as the first night. Gabrielle was still slightly nervous while Xena had worked past that point. Gabrielle was better familiar with her lover's body but she continued to test and added more to the list. Xena, for her part, couldn't recall having such a long night full of pleasure considering most of her sex partners barely lasted in her bed for two candlemarks. It wasn't until about two candlemarks before dawn that Xena found herself with her worn lover wrapped around her body. Her body was able to cool off, her breathing regulating, and the exhaustion filled her but it was a beautiful night. She fell asleep with a smile.

The road to Corinth grew closer as it went from a dirt road into a cobblestone road with every bump included. A tall mare carried her master and a sleeping blond in the front of the saddle. The Conqueror felt a smile tug at her lips at returning to Corinth with Gabrielle not only with her but in her arms. Also just beyond the city gates waited her mother and even little Melpomene, who favored her greatly now.

Gabrielle stirred when the constant swaying stopped. She groaned and rubbed her face with her hand. "Are we... 'ere?" she asked groggily.

The ruler shifted in the saddle some. "Yes but on the ridge. I want you to see something before we go into the city."

The bard tried to rid of her sleep then she nodded. She was carefully helped off the horse and her sore ankle didn't overly bother her.

Xena pulled the reins over Argo's face then tied them to a nearby tree. She then started forward while offering, "This way."

The Amazon Queen slowly followed while tugging her jacket closer to her body to keep her warm. She ducked under a low branch and came out onto the ledge that overlooked the beautiful city surrounded by two seas. "Gods," she whispered.

The Conqueror rested her hands on her hips while she scanned her capitol. "Come here... you can see it better from this spot." She held out her left hand receptively.

The bard limped over and Xena's hand went to the small of her back. The Conqueror then pointed for her towards the direction she should be observing. Her eyes widened then she breathless whispered, "By the gods."

"No," argued the ruler, "by the Conqueror."

Gabrielle blinked and peered up at her lover then the joke sunk in with her. She laughed and shook her head. "Xena, that's amazing... you accomplished it after so many could not do it."

"I didn't do much," debated the ruler, "a few hundred slaves did the work. I just signed the contract."

"Still." Gabrielle shook her head but she remained dazzled by the great canal being complete. The two seas now mixed together in the Corinth Canal that would become legendary in much of the known-world. She then noted a particular. "It looks like you're finishing the bridges?"

"Yes," agreed Xena, "the project isn't fully complete. We have to finish the three bridges but the temporary bridges have sufficed for now."

"When do you think you'll have the bridges complete?"

"I'd say in a moon or two... that's why I don't plan to rush off to Egypt."

Gabrielle smirked and teased, "Oh is that why? I thought you were just trying to

irritate Queen Cleopatra more... you've only been making her wait for several moons."

"The realm comes first then my allies," whispered the ruler. "When we come back from Egypt I will hold the Isthmian Games to celebrate the canal." She then turned her attention to the bard. "I plan to free the slaves that completed this canal."

The Amazon Queen went still but she locks eyes with her lover. She exhaled sharply then whispered, "You're serious?"

"Yes," answered the Conqueror. She turned back to the canal. "They have worked hard to build the canal for the realm. The project was not simple and many risked their lives for it." She held her chin up. "They've more than earned their freedom. I plan to give them all offers to work for the realm as constructors if they wish to continue." She already had her next construction plan in mind and it would require a lot of man power.

"Gods," rasped the bard. She touched her forehead to make sure this was real. "That's..." She shook her head. "I don't know what to say." She smiled as her hand lowered to her side. "That's a wonderful thing you're giving them."

"It's the least I or the realm could do," murmured the ruler. She then pulled away from her thoughts. "We should go." She then pulled her hand away from Gabrielle's back and started for Argo.

Gabrielle remained still at her spot and stared at the canal. She saw the hard working slaves on the three bridges and she smiled at thinking about them being free soon. She could no longer misjudge her faith that she'd been resting in Xena.

The Conqueror sensed the bard coming back. She partially turned and saw the contentment surrounding the bard. She held out her hand to Gabrielle. "We'll walk into Corinth... together."

The bard stretched out her hand and she locked it with Xena's. "Are we making a statement?"

Xena chuckled then grinned. "The Conqueror making a statement... impossible." She tugged on Argo's reins to draw her head up from the grass. She and Gabrielle marched through the woods back to the main road; her mare was in tow.

The Conqueror and the Amazon Queen slowly traveled down the busy road that led into Corinth. The citizens that passed by the dual rulers were either trying to pretend not to notice them or couldn't help but stare. The Corinthians were very familiar with their ruler as well as the former rebel leader but what they did not know was that the rebel had become an Amazon Queen. Then what made each citizen gape were the lock hands between the former enemies.

Gabrielle, for her part, had become beat red all the way into the marketplace. She couldn't believe she was doing this but when she studied Xena's stoic features she wondered how the ruler could be so calm. They were silently announcing the true nature of their relationship to anybody that passed them and it wasn't easy for

Gabrielle not to grow shy. Where she found her resolve was in Xena's ability to ignore the stares and whispers that floated around them. And if Gabrielle knew better she could easily win a wager that within three candelmarks everybody in Corinth would know about her and the Conqueror.

"I want to make a quick stop," prompted the ruler.

Gabrielle kept searching the faces in the marketplace. She heard her lover so she followed off to the right when Xena targeted a particular stall.

The Conqueror slyly grinned when the man behind the stall blanched at seeing her.

"Ooo proud empress!" gushed the merchant.

"Salmoneus," sharply greeted the ruler. She released her lover's hand but brought her closer by touching her back in a hidden signal.

Salmoneus was instantly drawn to the petite blond beside the formidable ruler. "By the gods... is this... no," he breathed and brought his sly grin to the ruler. "I guess I won the wager after all."

"What wager?" coldly questioned the ruler.

The merchant froze for a beat then quickly came out of it. "Just that... errr... well you see, my liege...."

Gabrielle decided it was best to save the poor man. "I hear you helped solve the mystery man," she interrupted.

Salmoneus beamed at the small woman's interjection. "Yes, I actually did... didn't I?"

The Conqueror rolled her eyes then sighed. "Salmoneus," dangerously drew out the ruler, "I brought Queen Gabrielle here so that you could meet her." She stepped closer to the stall and informed, "It seems that the queen will be retaking her position as the state advisor."

Salmoneus's eyes flickered between the ruler and Amazon Queen. "She did such a fine job last time too, my liege."

"She did," agreed the Conqueror. "I do, however, believe that Queen Gabrielle may require your assistance later down the road."

Gabrielle curiously peered up at her lover as she wondered where this would go.

The merchant leaned over his stall at this news. "Assistance with?" He looked between the bard and ruler.

"In a couple of moons or so the realm will be issuing a new decree and Queen Gabrielle will be handling this decree. She'll need somebody to help her get this decree... publicized so to speak." The Conqueror leaned closer to the merchant and sensual whispered, "I believe your... resources could be of assistance to my state

advisor."

Salmoneus smiled broadly at the ruler. "Indeed it could be, my liege." He then showed more of a devilish grin. "Are we talking employment to the realm?"

"Perhaps," granted the ruler. "Maybe we can strike a deal."

Salmoneus jumped back with his hands up. "That last deal almost cost me my life! Noooo thank you."

The Conqueror bit her lower lip at the deal that Melinda Pappas had struck with the merchant so long ago. "This one wouldn't be so sensitive."

Salmoneus narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Maybe some exclusive marketing rights would be more to your liking, Salmoneus," suggested the ruler and she saw the merchant was clearly interested. "Just come by the fortress soon." She stepped back to her spot beside her quiet lover.

"You said queen," prompted the Salmoneus but his attention went to the bard.

Gabrielle grinned and solved the riddle for the merchant. "I am a queen of the Amazons."

"Amazons?" Salmoneus stared stupidly at the bard. "I heard they were extinct."

The Amazon Queen held out her arms in demonstration. "You heard wrong." She dropped her arms to her side then peered up at her lover. "Ready, my liege?" She held out her hand.

The Conqueror's eyes glowed warmly and she took the bard's hand. She walked off while calling to Salmoneus. "Don't forget to stop in, Sal."

The merchant grew offended and he yelled, "That's Salmoneus, my liege!" Then it struck him that the Conqueror and the Amazon Queen were holding hands as they walked off together. "By the gods... I could market this... the Conqueror and the Amazon Queen...." He eyes grew larger from an onslaught of marketing ideas. "I can see it now... tales of beauty and the beast!"

Finally the couple was welcomed into the fortress grounds and the Conqueror went to the stables to care for Argo. She wouldn't allow many others touch her horse. Gabrielle decided to follow because she wasn't completely comfortable with entering the fortress without her lover at her side. She remained quiet as she watched the Conqueror deal with untacking the mare. She was tempted to ask Xena about her intent with Salmoneus but she fell short when a voice floated through the stables to them.

"Welcome back to Corinth, my liege."

The Conqueror offered her assistant a warm smile. "Hello, Galen."

Galena dipped his head respectfully to the ruler then he smiled at the bard. "It is great to see you again, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen smiled warmly at Galen because she was always fond of him and his warm disposition around her. "How have you been, Galen?"

"Excellent and yourself?"

Gabrielle glanced at her lover's back then to the assistant. "I'm well, Galen."

The Conqueror came over to the closed stall door and dropped her saddlebags there. "Is everything the way I left it, Galen?"

"Of course, my liege." Galen's eyes showed no deception otherwise. "You have been missed."

The ruler grunted and returned to her mare. "Now that is a lie, Galen."

"It is not," argued the assistant, "Melpomene has inquired each day about your return."

"Oh?" prompted the ruler.

"She wishes to continue her lessons."

The Conqueror chuckled as she listened to her assistant. "I'm sure she does."

"Your mother stopped in just yesterday to hear of your arrival or not."

"How was she?" questioned the Conqueror.

Galen waited a beat then truthfully replied, "I believe she is worn from her hard work at the taverna."

That made sense to the ruler as she knew her mother had been working towards buying the taverna from the current owner. "She was fine otherwise?"

"Yes, as well as can be." Galen put his hands behind his back then turned back the bard. "Will you be staying here, Gabrielle or with Cyrene?"

Gabrielle wasn't expecting the question so she turned her gaze to the Conqueror for assistance.

The Conqueror noted the prolonged silence and she knew it was meant for her. She filled the void with her final statement. "The choice is up to Queen Gabrielle, Galen."

Galen's lips puckered at hearing the title then he assessed the attire that Gabrielle wore now. He bowed his head then stated, "I apologize, Queen Gabrielle."

The former rebel sighed and her hands found their way to her hips. "Don't even start, Galen because you know I prefer my name."

Galen's lips curled into a grin but he knew he couldn't step over the lines with his ruler here. "Of course, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard rolled her eyes as her hands fell to her side again.

"And your answer, Queen Gabrielle?"

"I'll be staying with Cyrene, Galen." Gabrielle glanced over at her lover so that she could decipher something but she couldn't from the passive features.

The Conqueror came out of the stall with the saddlebags on her shoulder now. She stopped in front of Galen, glanced at Gabrielle, and back to Galen. "Queen Gabrielle will most likely be spending... late nights in the fortress."

Galen bowed his head, which helped him get rid of his knowing smirk then he washed it away with a serious look when he lifted his head again. "Of course, my liege... I'll be sure to pass word onto the tetrarchès."

"See that you do." The Conqueror then slipped between the pair and headed for the exit of the stables.

The Amazon Queen stared oddly at the ruler's receding back then she looked to Galen.

Galen chuckled at the still stunned bard. "The Conqueror walks with a bounce now, Gabrielle... it is obvious to anybody that's been around her long enough." Without another word he slipped out of the stables to find the ruler.

Gabrielle glanced to her right and saw that her lover had propped her Amazon staff against the stall door. She chuckled, grabbed it, and slowly limped out of the stable.

The moon slowly passed as the Conqueror prepared to ready for the trip to Egypt. Gabrielle had been given a temporary space for work in the Conqueror's office. She hadn't imagine sharing the office with her lover and at first didn't think it would work out but it was easy for them to find a certain rhythm like many other things in their life. The bard had written out the decree for the family name convention that would take immediate affect when she and the Conqueror returned from Egypt. After Gabrielle had written the decree she spent time working out a plan on how to begin this long winded process with few bumps as possible. Gabrielle continually teased the Conqueror by asking if she'd selected a last name yet. The Conqueror's consistent response was that she was waiting for the decree to be proclaimed and for Gabrielle to ask her then. Gabrielle knew though that her lover had most likely selected a last name by now and maybe even plotted it out with Cyrene since she'd be taking the same family name.

Gabrielle remained slumped over her desk, her head propped up by her hand, and her eyes scanning over the scroll in front of her. She sighed deeply while stretching her legs under the desk. Her attention was drawn away when she sensed the tall form of her partner beside her. Then large hands came over her shoulders and massaged her tension away. Gabrielle let out a low groan, dropped her head back into a leather stomach, and smiled up at the ruler.

Xena smiled down at the younger woman but kept kneading. "How about you come down to the sparring grounds soon and we'll work out some of that stress?"

The bard thoughtfully considered. "You have to train the patrols?"

"Mmmhmmmm." The Conqueror glanced at what Gabrielle was working on but she decided it was too much for even her right now. "The plans for the family name convention?"

"Yes," sighed out the Amazon Queen. "I think I was spoiled with all that grunt work I was doing in Artemisia." She waved her hand at the ink covered scroll. "This is just too much." Then she felt the ruler's tickling tresses brushing her shoulders and Xena's warm breath by her right ear.

"Take a break and come spar with me," sensually whispered the ruler.

Gabrielle's eyes closed and she murmured, "Start with the patrols... I'll be down soon."

Xena leaned in closer and her teeth touched the bard's outer earlobe. "Promise?"

The bard groaned but managed her words. "Yes, my liege."

The Conqueror grinned then pulled back from her lover.

Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open from the receding ruler. "Xena, we need to talk to Cyrene about us." She heard the Conqueror's chuckle so she twisted her head up.

"I'll bet you a drachma she already knows about us."

"You think so?" Gabrielle had a wrinkled up face.

The Conqueror slid her hands down Gabrielle's arms and over her Amazon arm bracers as she leaned back down again. She uttered, "How can she not when you return home late at night or not at all?"

"Good point," agreed the bard. "She never questions me about it."

The Conqueror softly laughed then she brought her lips down and against her lover's neck. "She knows." She gently nipped the lush skin under her lips. "We'll tell her... soon."

"Xena," warned the bard, "if you keep this up then you're not going to make it to the drills."

The Conqueror chuckled and purred, "I'm just getting my juices flowing for the drills."

Gabrielle responded with a laugh. "Go before you get mine started."

The Conqueror was quite smug as she withdrew and teasing, "As you wish, Queen

Gabrielle." She headed for her office door and she noted that her lover was watching her with a smoldering expression.

Gabrielle sighed after her lover left. She returned back to her parchment with a frustrated expression and not so much from the parchment but more so because of her body's desires for the Conqueror. "Come on, Gabrielle... it's been over two moons that you've been in her bed... you should be past this point." She kidded herself because she knew as time passed and she discovered not only Xena's body but her amazing mind and spirit she was falling deeper. She kept that as her personal secret and she'd never discussed it with the ruler because she was too afraid it was one-sided.

The Conqueror crossed the short distance over the fortress grounds to the sparring field. She spotted her tetrarchès already there along with one of the files. Relief filled her at finally seeing the tetrarchès after so long from when he was sent off on his mission. "Welcome back, Iolaus."

The tetrarchès bowed then clapped his right fist across his chest. "Thank you, my liege. I see you're in excellent spirits."

The Conqueror dared him with a dangerous look.

The tetrarchès chuckled because he was all use to it but he decided to get to the topic at hand. "I have much to report, my liege."

"Did you find her?"

Iolaus knew his ruler always cut to the chase. "Yes, my liege... she is alive."

The Conqueror exhaled a weight from her. "Where is she?"

Iolaus stepped closer to the ruler then quietly answered, "That part is a bit disheartening." He tilted his head, which caused his wavy blond hair to move. "Do you recall the raider Gurkhan?"

The Conqueror darkened and she hotly whispered, "I remember. He has her?"

"Yes, he purchased her from another slaver about twelve moons ago."

"Gurkhan escaped to Mogador," she murmured, "when I ascended the throne."

"And he's still there too," confirmed the tetrarchès. "My liege, I'm afraid this will be risky getting her back. I understand your... close relations to the Amazon Queen but this could endanger your relations with the Phoenicians."

The Conqueror knew that her tetrarchès had a point because her realm held key trade relations with the Phoenicians. "Let me worry about that, Iolaus."

"Perhaps you can buy her from Gurkhan with a handsome price," suggested the soldier.

"No." The Conqueror steeled and reminded, "If Gurkhan pieces together he has

something I want then he'll use that as leverage. See that word doesn't spread about Queen Gabrielle's sister being his slave."

"I have not spoken of it," agreed Iolaus. "However my liege, there is one... detail I haven't mentioned." At seeing the ruler's arched eyebrow he nervously explained, "There is no solid confirmation but I have heard that Lila is Gurkhan's first wife."

The Conqueror cursed under her breath. She glanced at the waiting squad but she collapsed the small man's shoulder tightly. "Do not speak about this... especially to Queen Gabrielle."

"I understand, my liege." Iolaus stepped closer then carefully questioned, "Will you discuss it with her?"

The Conqueror released her grasp then let out a heavy sigh. "When it is time, yes." She paused then gratefully stated, "Thank you, Iolaus."

The tetrarchès warmly smiled at his leader's praise. "Do you wish the spies to continue their work?"

"Yes, see that two of them take an extended trip to Mogador."

"I will have them do so," agreed the tetrarchès, "as I know you'll be inclined to have word of Gurkhan while you're in Egypt."

"Yes." The Conqueror considered it then grinned. "A detour to Mogador may be required." She then started to move away while saying, "See to it, Iolaus."

The tetrarchès grinned but didn't answer as he hurried off to take care of his new orders.

The Conqueror approached the waiting squad and her evil grin shaped when she saw that the dekarchos was Najara. She loved sparring with Najara second to her partner. She spent the next half candelmark working with the squad and Najara before she took on the second squad. It wasn't until the third squad that the Amazon Queen showed up with her staff in hand and her sword hanging from her back.

The Amazon Queen took her spot beside the Conqueror and she casually leaned against her staff. She listened to her lover brief the third squad about what today's practice would be. She made mental notes as she would work along side her lover to train them.

The Conqueror finished her orders then turned to the small Amazon. "Ready?"

Gabrielle had a glowing aurora as she hefted her staff to show she was prepared. "Five-five or six-four?"

The ruler tilted her head spun her sword then replied, "Five-five?" Her right eyebrow gradually lifted.

"You're on," agreed the queen but she grinned and teased, "Just watch my back."

"Always," promised the ruler, who winked then turned back to the waiting squad.
"Let's begin!"

Gabrielle stepped back once, slightly bent her knees, and lifted her staff as the squad swarmed her and the Conqueror. Her grin widened as she knew this would be a good training day not only for her and the Conqueror but for the squads. Together the Conqueror and the Amazon Queen were a team to be reckoned and every squad soldier knew it.

The drills eventually wound down to just the Conqueror and Gabrielle sparring together. The Conqueror continually was training the Amazon Queen with better techniques, defense, and offense. She found it increasingly important since Gabrielle kept refusing to submit to any security from the realm. The Conqueror couldn't force the security on her lover considering Gabrielle wasn't an official yet and she didn't want to anger her lover. The Conqueror was fairly confident though that Gabrielle had excellent staff skills and she calculated that in six to nine moons Gabrielle will have mostly mastered the art.

Gabrielle jumped back but kept her staff up at seeing her lover's leering features. She knew that look quite well now; it meant the Conqueror was toying with her.

"Come on, Gabrielle," taunted the ruler. She stretched out her hand and tapped her blade against the bard's staff.

The bard growled and hastily shoved the ruler's blade away with her staff push. "How are those juices now?"

The Conqueror laughed quite deeply. "Very... hot," she drew out in a husky voice.

The Amazon Queen shook her head then challenged, "Don't know what to do with all those juices?"

The ruler smirked. "I can think of something." She suddenly lunged for her partner.

Gabrielle parried the rapid attacks away but she started to back step because of the rush. She ducked just as the blade passed over her head then she hastily back peddled to give herself some space from her opponent.

The Conqueror spun her sword then tormented, "Is it too much for you, Queen Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle shot a dangerous look but she paced over to her right. She abruptly cried out and rushed her lover. She slammed the end of her staff into the dirt, lifted her body up, and stretched out her right leg for a perfect kick.

The Conqueror, completely surprised, took the blow and was knocked harshly onto her back and slid a ways.

Gabrielle fell to her feet and lifted her staff while she remained crouched. Her smugness was quite visible but then she lost it when her lover flipped onto her feet

with a furious expression. "Oooh... Hades," muttered the worried bard. Again she was suddenly rushed by her lover, who was in an attack rage. Gabrielle fully trusted her partner not to harm her but she knew this would be a lesson and a half.

Every part of the Conqueror was alive and she was beautiful as her dangerous attacks were blocked by the bard. The Conqueror doubled her speed, which she'd never shown to the bard and she easily broke the bard's defenses.

Gabrielle gasped when her staff was slammed from her hands and it sailed a few paces away. She stepped back once but held her defiant gaze against her opponent.

The Conqueror grinned as she lowered her sword in respect. She casually sauntered the short distance to her lover then murmured, "Nice technique, Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen inwardly sighed from the relief she felt. "I try to teach myself some tricks."

"Mmmm." The Conqueror closed the distance so that their bodies touched. "You're beautiful when you fight."

Gabrielle grinned but she was too entranced by the energy flowing off of her lover to make a comment. She discreetly pressed her hand against the hot leather stomach in front of her. She slipped her right hand around the Conqueror's neck then drew her down for a sensual kiss. Their public display was a rare scene.

The Conqueror ended the kiss by nipping at the bard's lower lip. She kept her head down and she breathed, "Go inside... I need some time to cool off." She started to back away but Gabrielle caught her by the hip.

"No," argued the Amazon Queen, "Come back inside with me."

"Gabrielle, I need-"

"Please," softly begged Gabrielle. "I trust you." She slid her hand down the taut stomach, which would send a thrill through her lover.

The Conqueror tried to clear out some of her battle lust. "Gabrielle, I could hurt you... it could be too much."

"I know the risks and I know you won't." Gabrielle lifted her head and met the hungry eyes above her. "Plus I'd be lying if I denied that this part of you didn't excite me on some level." She moved away, picked up her staff, and held out her hand. "My liege?"

The Conqueror took her partner's hand and followed her partner back to the fortress. She sheathed her sword when they came to the steps then she realized her and Gabrielle weren't going to the bedchambers but to their shared office. She didn't care at this point as she wanted the bard more than anything. Her passions won over her just as they reached the closed office doors.

Gabrielle hadn't expected it when she was spun around. She was transfixed by her lover's lust and ravaging blue eyes.

The Conqueror shoved her lover against the left door and her left hand came up to wrap around the staff. She pulled it from Gabrielle's hand and set it against the door, away from them. Her hips pressed hard against Gabrielle and she brought her head down. "If its too much then say my name. Do you understand me?"

Gabrielle moaned as her head fell against the door. She managed to whisper, "Yes." She closed her eyes just as her hands knotted through her lover's long tresses.

The Conqueror continued to bite deeply against her lover's neck and trailed down to her chest. She lifted her head and roughly kissed the bard.

Gabrielle pushed her lover back some at the end of the kiss in hopes it'd encourage her more so.

The Conqueror growled and pressed her body harder back against Gabrielle. "You want this, Gabrielle." She slammed her right hand against the door then her left hand was on Gabrielle's thigh.

The bard groaned because she realized it was true. She'd always been drawn to the ruler's darker side but she'd tried to ignore that aspect because she thought it was wrong. Now she speculated whether it could help their relationship grow because of her acceptance. She gave into that knowledge as she pulled Xena down for a passionate kiss. She then unexpectedly brought her legs around the ruler's waist.

The Conqueror moaned and slipped her left hand under the younger woman to hold her up. Gabrielle's hands wrapped around her neck and she knew the bard was safely held. She stepped back once then effectively kicked the right office door open and entered. She kicked it closed then she was drawn into a long kiss. She managed her way over to her desk.

Gabrielle now sat on the edge of the ruler's desk. She coaxed her lover's dominating side through her demanding kiss.

The Conqueror growled at the end of the kiss then she commanded her lover to open her legs.

Gabrielle easily followed then her Amazon skirt was pushed up. She quickly discovered how the Conqueror's lust could take not only her over but them both. Gabrielle's passions were excited and she matched her lover's every demand. Her thoughts were silent and she only felt what coursed in her body. After being taken once on the desk, the Conqueror lifted her off the desk and carried her to the sofa in the center of the office.

The Conqueror kept ravaging her young lover that accepted her this way. She stripped Gabrielle of her clothes finally but she didn't remove anything of hers.

Gabrielle clung to the ruler's broad shoulders, her skin burned, and her head was dropped back against the sofa. She felt the Conqueror owning her with each thrust. Her moans depended from the thrill of either the Conqueror's warm leathers touching her skin or the cold bronze. It was exhilarating. After Gabrielle reached her new

height that was only sensations, she was soon laying down on the long sofa.

The Conqueror slowly removed her armor, boots, and leathers until she was bare. She softly moaned when her burning skin slide over Gabrielle's. She met Gabrielle for a tender kiss.

Gabrielle was gaining back some strength but her breathing remained labored. She could see the returned tenderness in her lover by how Xena's eyes could match the skies. She smiled and drew her lover back in for another kiss. She and Xena silenced the last of their passions through slow and gentle touches. Her climax reached the top just as Xena's did the same, their fingers stilling inside of each other.

The Conqueror kept her weight mostly off her lover. When she gained some composure again, she adjusted them so that she rested on the sofa with her back sunk in and Gabrielle resting on top of her.

The bard sighed contently and her moist skin slightly goose bumped from the chill in the air. It was a wonder earlier to her whether or not her body would be able to ever cool off again. She closed her eyes and listened to her lover's steady heartbeat. "I can't believe I just did that."

The Conqueror had distant grin but she started running her fingertips up and down her partner's back. "The commander most likely heard you."

The Amazon Queen flushed as it dawned on her that his office was just across from the Conqueror's. "Oh gods." She moaned and buried her face into her lover's neck. She laughed at the situation and mentioned, "He'll be jealous."

The Conqueror thoroughly laughed. She quickly kissed Gabrielle's nearby head. "Indeed."

Gabrielle smiled then she moved her right hand up. Her index finger started to trace the Gaelic necklace that rested on Xena's rising and falling chest. "I noticed you have two triremes down by the Aegean Port."

"It is for the trip to Egypt. They're starting to take on supplies for the trip."

Gabrielle adjusted her head then inquired, "We going to leave in ten days?"

"Around there," agreed the ruler. "We'll be traveling in a cargo ship though."

The bard paused from tracing the necklace. "Why is that?"

The Conqueror chuckled and replied, "Do you want to travel across the Mediterranean with all those oar men?"

Gabrielle considered it then laughed. "That could be interesting."

"This is a vacation," reminded the ruler.

"I thought it was a working vacation," teased the Amazon Queen. "I have trade

relations to build while you have them to maintain."

"Mmmm," consented the ruler. "We seem to manage to mix pleasure and business together."

Gabrielle lifted her head at hearing the husky pitch from her lover. "We?" she challenged lightly then she teased, "You started this." She signaled their current situation.

"It takes two," coolly reminded the ruler.

Gabrielle smirked but didn't argue as she lowered her head again. She went back to following her fingertip over the necklace's design. "I need to return to Artemisia soon."

The Conqueror had suggested that her lover do such before they left for Egypt. She wanted Gabrielle to return with a handful of Amazons not to only protect their queen but also to display she was a serious queen in search of relations with Queen Cleopatra. Nor would it go well if Cleopatra thought that the Amazon Queen was under the Conqueror's full guidance and instructions. "Perhaps it'd be wise to go in a few days."

"I've already mentioned it to Joxer and Palamon."

The ruler sighed then carefully tried her next words. "I'd like it if you took a squad."

"Xena, I'll be fine with my faction guards going with me... they're more than capable and so am I."

"I don't argue that." The Conqueror sat up some on the sofa and peered down at her lover. "What you don't have though are enough numbers. Anything can happen to you on your trip down to Artemisia."

The bard sat up a bit. "You and I traveled together back from Artemisia... and you never had a problem with me going the last two times with my faction guards."

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow at her lover.

Gabrielle grumbled then relented, "Okay granted you're a walking armory but I was fine before. Why now?"

"I'm just concerned... each passing day, Gabrielle you become a bigger target." The Conqueror touched her lover's cheek and whispered, "Please do this."

The bard's eyes dropped and she stared at the Gaelic necklace. She slowly nodded. "Can I take Najara and her squad?"

The Conqueror tried not to visibly cringe but she knew she'd have to submit to the terms or else Gabrielle wouldn't agree to anything else. "Alright. I'll inform her." She then leaned forward to steal a kiss then she questioned, "You won't leave for Artemisia until after your birthday?"

The bard chuckled and teased, "Why? You have something big planned?"

"I don't but mother does," tormented the ruler.

"Oh gods." Gabrielle laughed as she lowered her head onto her partner's shoulder. Her right arm stretched across Xena's shoulders. "I'll leave the day after."

"Good," murmured, "because your pony should be here by then."

The Amazon Queen laughed and swatted her lover's stomach then returned her hand back to Xena's left shoulder. "I don't want any four-legged presents." She heard no response and she missed Xena's glowing features. She kissed Xena's chest then lifted her head to see now passive features. "We need to get moving... we both have a lot of scrollwork to do."

The ruler sighed as her thoughts about the realm returned. "I need to inspect the work on the bridges for the canal before sunset."

"And I need to complete my plans for this family name decree or else no trip to Egypt for me." Gabrielle patted the ruler's chest then moved about to get up onto her feet.

The Conqueror stood up but remained behind her lover. She slipped her arms around Gabrielle's waist, drew her in closely, and huskily whispered, "Thank you."

Gabrielle dropped her head back and smiled at the words that rarely came from the ruler yet held so much depth. She knew it meant that Xena was grateful for the acceptance and new dimension added to their relationship. "Thank you for trusting me," she murmured back then pulled Xena down for a warm kiss.

The next days swiftly passed before the eyes of the couple. Gabrielle though took a needed break when it was her birthday and mostly from the insistence from the Conqueror. The Conqueror was away most of the day and took care of various work that was required of her. This left Gabrielle to freely do things for herself all day. She started her relaxing morning by doing some needed writing; her scrolls had been sitting off to the wayside lately. She'd come home last night after spending a late night in the fortress with Xena but she wanted to be home that night. After she finished her writing, she wandered down stairs and realized Cyrene had already left to carry out her work at the taverna. Gabrielle was pleasantly surprised though to see that her adopted mother left her a prepared breakfast with a note about her birthday. Cyrene had planned out a small get together this evening in the taverna.

The bard smiled at the note, set it aside, and after her breakfast she dressed and decided to first visit somebody she missed greatly. She made a half of candelmark journey from her home to the graveyard where Perdicus now rested. She spent some time there, visiting his grave that was located in the common burial grounds. She knelt beside his grave and softly spoke to him despite she'd never receive a response. Gabrielle missed her childhood friend more than many suspected. She'd lost so many loved ones in her life and she had yet to understand why it had to be. After she said her prayers to her friend, she rose up and returned back to the city.

The rest of her day was relaxing and she eventually met up with the Conqueror just inside the empty courtroom. Sunset was fast approaching so she and the Conqueror made their way to Cyrene's taverna where many others were waiting for them. Cyrene had shut down her taverna early in the day in order to get the party together. She welcomed Gabrielle's friends that showed up then the entire group warmly received the bard when she entered the taverna.

The group mixed together and Gabrielle was dazzled that her former faction members and guards could so easily mix with the people from the fortress such as the Conqueror, Galen, and Najara. She was convinced there'd never be any peace between the groups but she realized she was the key link that brought the groups together now. The extreme sides were grateful that Gabrielle had eased the tension built up and ultimately changed the realm for the better. After the large meal and cake, Melpomene sweetly urged her aunt to tell a story. Gabrielle tried to ward off her adopted niece but she miserably failed when the Conqueror whispered to her to tell a story.

The bard took her usual front stage in the taverna then asked for any suggestions for a story. Finally everybody settled on something Gabrielle hadn't expected at all; the story about the Conqueror and her trial in the Amazon Nation. There were many known rumors about what'd happened over that moon back in the autumn but never had anybody heard the full story. Gabrielle was uneasy because she wasn't sure how her lover would feel about it.

The Conqueror gave a discreet nod to her partner followed by an assuring smile.

The Amazon Queen was relieved and inwardly surprised but she stole a beat to compose her story in her mind. She opened her story by telling about her descendant, who was kidnapped by a crazed shaman and had to battle the odds to seek help. Gabrielle didn't sugar coat the truth and the Conqueror's true form was revealed and she depicted the changes the Conqueror faced from when she first entered the Amazon Nation. Her audience was enthralled and many now understood what'd transcended not only in the realm but inside the Conqueror.

Gabrielle kept watch of her listener's faces. She caught sight of Cyrene's tears at some points. At other moments, Melpomene would gasp in excitement from the drama of the battle between Darphus and the Amazons. Then there was the Conqueror, who remained sitting in the back and intently listening to each word. When Gabrielle drew closer to the end of her story when Melinda and Janice would be sent home, she focused on her lover.

The Conqueror was drawn into Gabrielle's story. She saw it all happening again and she remembered why she was so determined to be this changed ruler for her realm. She then was taken away when Gabrielle's closing words seem to be focused solely for her.

"It was a small change at first then another soft bend and the Conqueror was unprepared while the rebel leader was slightly scared. Together they placed their faith into the changes just as the sun would rise every day. It was an unexpected tale for them. The truth was bittersweet but finding out they were wrong about each other was what bound them together. Now they face the sunrises just as ever sure that their faith will raise them above all the trials that lay ahead." Gabrielle lowered her hands to her

side after having them up. She was met by a long silence then all her friends warmly clapped about the amazing story and Gabrielle's beautiful words.

Melpomene secretly slipped past the people, who were warmly receiving the bard after her story. She went through the tables until she was upon the Conqueror.

The Conqueror brushed back her bangs and sat up in her chair at seeing the girl. Her movements made her bronze armor flash from the torchlight and candlelight. She tried to subdue her emotions from the story and she smiled at the girl. "Come here." She was secretly grateful for Melpomene coming to her.

Melpomene mirrored the smile and she was warmly taken in to the ruler's lap. She often tried to tell people how caring the ruler was with her but few people believed her. She didn't care as she focused on the emotional ruler. "Auntie Gabby is a great story teller."

The Conqueror softly grinned and gently teased, "You think so huh?" She adjusted the child on her right leg. "I think you're right, Mel."

"Have you ever told Auntie Gabby that you like her stories?"

The Conqueror leaned closer then murmured, "What makes you think I do like them?"

Melpomene tilted her head; she'd often heard her aunt chatting with Cyrene about how the Conqueror never brought up the bard's stories. She knew it frustrated her aunt because her aunt had no clue whether or not the Conqueror was accepting of it. Melpomene though had figured out something by observing the Conqueror tonight. "You wouldn't let her perform the stories otherwise if you didn't want to hear them."

The Conqueror grinned at the observant girl. "What else do you know, Mel?"

Melpomene smirked, leaned closer, and teased, "I know what grandma thinks about you and Auntie Gabby."

"Do tell," encouraged the ruler.

Melpomene giggled and leaned even closer so that she could tell her secret. "Grandma knows you and Auntie Gabby are together."

The Conqueror smirked wildly at this news. "Oh? How do you know that?"

"Just the other day I heard grandma ranting on about how you two can fight like a married couple." The girl's lips thinned together as her lips pressed. "I asked grandma what that meant and all she told me was that you and Auntie Gabby are a tale old as time and a song old as rhyme."

The Conqueror sighed but dared to ask, "You know what that means?"

"Sure," answered the girl, "You and Auntie Gabby are a couple... like a husband and wife." She stopped then her nose crinkled up tightly.

The Conqueror speculated whether or not the child learned that habit from her aunt.

"Xena, are you and Auntie Gabby a wife and wife?"

The Conqueror paled slightly at the thought of the marriage titles that were far from her and Gabrielle. "Not quite, Mel but we're a couple." She glanced up to see that her lover was still swarmed by her chatting friends. She glimpsed back at the girl. "Are you okay with your aunt and I being together?"

Melpomene brightened up and she nodded. "I think it's so cool."

"Cool huh?" teased the ruler. "Where'd you learn that word?"

"Janice taught me that word," beamed the child then she persisted, "you and Auntie Gabby match really well. Auntie Gabby is very happy and so are you."

The Conqueror couldn't argue that point.

Melpomene tilted her head then quietly inquired, "Are you going to marry Auntie Gabby?"

The Conqueror heavily breathed as if she was briefly in labor. She touched the girl's knee then carefully answered, "It's too early to tell yet, Mel but time will see."

"Can you and Auntie Gabby marry though?" Melpomene seriously considered this perspective. "I've never heard of two women joining."

The ruler chuckled because of the child's serious thoughts. "I'm sure I can get it approved, Melpomene."

The girl giggled as she realized whose lap she was sitting on right now. "I sometimes forget you're the ruler of the realm."

"That's good," approved the ruler. She poked the small nose in front of her. She then saw that her partner was starting to break away from the mass of friends. She quickly brought Melpomene's attention back by quietly asking, "Did grandma say what she thought of me and your aunt being together?"

Melpomene brightly smiled then leaned in and whispered, "Grandma complained that it took Gabrielle and Xena too damn long to get over their stubbornness but better late than never'."

"Those exact words?"

The girl's bobbed and she crossed her heart with her right hand. "I swear it."

"Good," muttered the Conqueror, who lifted her head with a smile for a greeting to her partner.

Gabrielle smiled but her attention flickered to Melpomene. She touched the child's closest shoulder. "Are you practicing for next Solstice, Melpomene?"

The girl's quick wit caught the humor and she glanced at the Conqueror then to her aunt. "Well Xena is the Conqueror and I bet she can get me more presents than Senticles."

Gabrielle laughed at the swift remark from the brilliant child. "Well I think Xena has to get approval from grandma."

Melpomene paled and glanced at her grandmother behind the bar. "Really, Auntie Gabby?"

The bard brought on a fake frown and bent lower to the child. "Xena maybe the Conqueror but in this family Cyrene rules."

Melpomene's mouth hung open and she turned her head to the ruler for that confirmation of what her aunt just divulged.

The Conqueror shrugged and patted the child's knee. "Have you upset your grandma lately, Mel?"

"No," squeaked the child.

Gabrielle leaned closer into the huddle. "Are you sure, Mel?"

The girl glanced between Xena and Gabrielle then mumbled, "Maybe... um... I've missed a few chores around the house."

Xena gave a few clicks with her tongue.

Gabrielle murmured, "You better say you're sorry, Mel or else Xena can't give you any presents next Solstice."

The Conqueror's eyes glinted then she whispered, "When I was your age, Mel and I forget to do my chores around the house... mother use to turn me over on her knee."

Melpomene gawked at the ruler, who had recently become her idol. "Grandma did that?" She could even begin to imagine not only her idol being her age but Cyrene punishing her idol.

"Mmmhmmm," confirmed the ruler, "until my cheeks were red." She cocked her head to the side. "She hasn't done that to you?"

"N-n-no," stuttered the girl.

Gabrielle was biting her lower lip to stop her laughs because she knew Cyrene wouldn't have laid a hand on her children. It was a bunch of horse stuff that her partner was feeding to the child. "You're lucky, Mel." When the girl's wide, brown eyes returned to her she kept talking. "You better do your chores for now on or else grandma might start doing that to you too."

"And I might get less presents for Solstice too," added the worried girl.

The Conqueror had a thoughtful expression as she casually mentioned, "To think what a waste the new horse I've been training would be if you were bad until Solstice." She shook her head then frowned at Melpomene. "I may have to give the horse to another child, who's been good."

"No way," argued the girl, "I'll be good, Xena."

"Well," started the ruler, who poked the child's nose again, "there's a difference between saying it and doing it."

Melpomene nodded twice then declared, "Actions speak louder than words."

Xena smiled at her advice she'd passed onto Melpomene some time ago. "Exactly. So are you going to do your chores for now on?"

Melpomene nodded then added, "And all my homework that my tutor gives me."

Gabrielle smiled at this news. "Your education is important, Mel... we all want you to grow up smart." She pointed at the Conqueror. "Xena isn't smart because she slouched around."

"No?" inquired the child.

The Conqueror shook her head. "Nope."

Melpomene tilted her head then asked, "How'd you learn so much? You didn't have a tutor like me, did you?"

Xena leaned back in the chair some then finally answered, "I taught myself everything I know... I wasn't as lucky as you, Mel."

"Wow," gasped the girl, "and you know a lot too."

"She sure does, Mel so you have a lot to live up to," reminded the bard.

Melpomene blinked and turned away from her idol. "You're smart too, Auntie Gabby... I hear people in the taverna say you are because you're the only state advisor that knows not only how to run the polis but the Conqueror too."

Gabrielle bit her lower lip then sweetly smiled at her lover.

Xena drummed her right fingers on her knee but she couldn't suppress her grin.

The Amazon cleared her throat then decided on another topic. "What'd you think of the story, Mel?"

"It was really cool, auntie," proclaimed the child.

"Cool?" repeated the confused bard.

"It means awesome," defined Melpomene, "Janice taught me that word."

Gabrielle rolled her eyes because she should have known that came from her descendant. She could only guess when Janice Covington found the time to teach Little Melpomene that word. "Why don't you go see if grandma needs your help huh?"

Melpomene nodded then slid off Xena's lap. When her feet connected with the floor she quickly pulled her aunt in for a hug. "Happy birthday again, Auntie Gabby."

The bard smiled as she wrapped her arms around the child. "Thank you, sweetie." She messed the child's hair up as she hurried off to help Cyrene. She then decided she'd take the girl's spot on the Conqueror's lap.

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow at Gabrielle's open display of their relationship.

"Come on," persisted the bard, "everybody knows already." She shrugged and leaned her side into the ruler with her arm going across the back of Xena's shoulders. "Besides you can't say no to the birthday girl."

Xena shook her head then she eased into it by teasing, "So what do you want for Solstice, Little Gabby?"

Gabrielle ran her tongue along the front of her teeth then she dangerously threatened, "I know what you won't get for Solstice, Little Xenny if you keep that up."

The Conqueror laughed but decided it was safer to say nothing else.

The bard brought her lips closer to the ruler's ear then whispered, "I know what I want for my birthday tonight."

"Oh?" prompted the ruler, her eyes darker. "Does that mean you'll be staying with me tonight?"

Gabrielle hummed for a beat then sensually whispered, "I thought you'd never ask."

"Hmmm." The Conqueror sucked in her breath sharply when Gabrielle nipped her neck. She cleared her throat then reminded, "We're not in my bedchambers yet, Gabrielle."

"Well you better get us there soon," taunted the bard. She then hopped off her lover's lap and went back to mingling with her friends and family.

The Conqueror sighed between contentment and frustration. She smiled at feeling so easy with her partner lately. She noted her mother's carefully watching eye on her and she got up to talk to her. She leaned against the bar near her mother.

"So when were you planning to tell me?" brought up the mother.

Xena shyly smiled at her mother. "Soon."

Cyrene rolled her eyes then flopped her wet rag onto the bar. "That's like saying the

weather is seasonal, daughter."

The Conqueror chuckled and slipped onto a bar stool but she lost her amusement. "Mother, Gabrielle and I are together."

Cyrene rested her hands on her hips and glared at her child.

"What?" Xena shrugged. "I told you."

"Sometimes I think I may have adopted you," teased the mother.

The ruler laughed then proudly reminded, "Oh no, mother you birthed me and I have your wicked streak to prove it."

"You already have." Cyrene grinned then she rested her arms on the bar and leaned against them. "She's very happy, Xena."

"I know," murmured the ruler.

"You're very happy," commented the mother.

"I am," agreed the ruler.

Cyrene smiled at this then stretched her right hand to collapse her daughter's. "And I couldn't be happier seeing you and Gabrielle together."

The ruler laced their hands neatly. "Are you?" She peered up at her mother.

Cyrene realized very little had changed between her and her daughter after all this time. She could still see her little girl seeking approval from her and it baffled her considering her daughter was the ruler of such a vast realm. "I am, Xena," she softly promised. "I was scared for some time that you two would end up dying because of your radical views and fights."

Xena's head dipped then she slowly nodded. "I know but that won't happen." She squeezed her mother's hand. "I... I don't think I am much without her. I wasn't before I opened up to her."

"Have you told her this?" murmured the mother.

Xena shook her head then turned her mother again after staring at her partner from across the room. "We've discussed it lightly back a couple of moons ago but nothing too serious." She thought it out more then mentioned, "We've just been taking it slowly and seeing how it goes."

"That's important," agreed Cyrene. "I know you've both faced a lot of changes pretty quickly."

"Mmm," softly murmured the ruler. "We're getting adjusted."

The tavern keeper smiled at this then squeezed her daughter's hand to get her attention

back. "When do you leave for Egypt?"

"As soon as Gabrielle returns from Artemisia," answered the ruler.

"Gabrielle's very excited to go," mentioned the mother.

Xena chuckled. "Trust me I've heard enough about it too." She swept her hair back with her freehand. "She pretty much has every day planned out while we're there."

Cyrene laughed and declared, "You don't have to tell me either, Xena... I've heard the ongoings too."

The ruler smirked then patted her mother's hand that was locked with hers. "I better save her so we can get back to the fortress."

"I guess I won't expect her home tonight...?" Cyrene freed her hand from her daughter's.

"If she does show up then worry, mother." Then Xena was gone as she immersed into the people to seek her lover. She first went to Galen and quietly distracted him from his chitchat with a former rebel member. "Galen?"

"Yes, my liege?" The assistant smiled up at the ruler.

"Is everything prepared?"

Galen nodded once. "As you requested, my liege."

"Excellent." The Conqueror glanced at Gabrielle that wasn't too far away. "See that Najara comes back with you when you two are ready."

"You're leaving?"

"Yes," answered the ruler. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Have a good night, my liege."

The Conqueror bittersweetly smiled at her assistant. "The gods willing it goes right." She patted his shoulder then slipped away to collect her partner. After she and Gabrielle said goodnight to everybody they finally made their way through the quiet city.

Gabrielle walked closely to her partner. She slipped her hand into Xena's and received a warm squeeze for it.

"Did you enjoy the party?"

The bard smiled at the Conqueror. "It was really nice... nice of mom to put it together."

The Conqueror nodded her agreement.

"Did you enjoy it?" tried the bard despite she knew her partner wasn't always keen on socializing.

"I did," answered the ruler. "I'm impressed by the size of your faction."

Gabrielle softly laughed and nodded. "I guess I never did tell you about the members." She tilted her head from a thought. "They seemed pretty comfortable with you about halfway through."

"Thanks to your story," reminded the ruler.

"Not really," argued the bard, "It was prior to that." She stepped up onto the sidewalk when they crossed the street.

"I met Palamon," brought up the ruler. She then sensed Gabrielle's quipped curiosity. "I recall him being a hoplite during my campaign." She peered down at her lover. "What does he do now?"

"I was talking to him tonight about that. He's considered taking an apprenticeship as a blacksmith but he's not really sure." Gabrielle shrugged. "To be honest, I think he toys with the idea of rejoining your army especially now that you've changed so much."

The Conqueror filed this away for later consideration. She would have to mention this information to Iolaus. She then switched the topic around. "What'd you do today?"

"I relaxed mostly since you told me to do that." Gabrielle coyly smiled then shrugged. "It was nice." Her mood slightly darkened as she gently mentioned, "I did go to see Perdicus."

The Conqueror squeezed her lover's hand in assurance. "You were betrothed to him?"

Gabrielle ran her fingers through her bangs then replied, "Yes. We were betrothed as kids and I always accepted the fact him and I would marry when it was time."

"You never found that time?"

"No," admitted the Amazon Queen, "and I may have later in life but I know I would have married him out of convenience. Its not that I didn't love him because I do but it's just... different."

"Different how?" murmured the ruler.

Gabrielle gazed down then observed how she still held hands with her lover. She ran her thumb across Xena's then finally answered the hard question. "A lot of what I feel with you... between us was something I never had with Perdicus and I know I never would have." She was surprise when the Conqueror abruptly stopped.

Xena turned to her lover and drew her closer as a few people passed them. She lowered her head and ignored the people that watched them openly. She gently kissed Gabrielle then afterwards she sincerely murmured, "I understand."

Gabrielle smiled then tugged on her lover's hand. "Come on before these people pass out on the street."

The Conqueror laughed and joked, "My city... my rules."

The bard grinned up at Xena. "Come on, tiger you can rule me tonight."

"Gabrielle," hissed the Conqueror, "we don't need people overhearing stuff like that."

Gabrielle laughed but made no other comments as they approached the iron gates of the fortress.

The guards on duty easily recognized the couple and hurried to open the gates enough for them. After the Conqueror and Amazon Queen slipped through they pulled the squeaky gates shut.

Once the couple entered the low lit courtroom, the Conqueror stopped Gabrielle from going through the door that would take them to the bedchambers up on the third floor.

Gabrielle stopped and turned to her partner. "What is it?" She noted they were in the middle of the silent courtroom.

The Conqueror drew her lover in closer. "I have a gift for you but it's in a different spot."

"Xena, I told you I didn't want anything," argued the bard, "I have so much now. I have my family... the Amazons, a job." She stepped closer and touched her lover's closest cheek. "And you."

"I know," whispered the ruler. She pulled Gabrielle's hand from her cheek and linked their hands together. "This is something I've been wanting to give to you."

The Amazon knew her lover wanted to do this so she whispered, "Alright." She smiled softly then teased, "Just don't think this'll earn you nutbread points for tonight."

"Do I really need those for tonight?" jested the ruler.

"Now that you put it that way." Gabrielle grinned.

"Come on, bard." The Conqueror freed one hand but kept her right hand in Gabrielle's as she led the way.

Gabrielle curiosity was peeked and she kept up the fast pace of the ruler. She mused that Xena must be nervous to give whatever it was because their hands were growing slick from Xena's hand moistening. She couldn't imagine what this was. She then realized they were coming to the entrance of the dungeons and she bit the inside of her mouth. She often strayed from the dungeons because it wasn't the most pleasant place. She knew her partner had made a lot of reforms dealing with the punishment system and the dungeons were receiving a much needed overhaul. The dungeons were actually soon to be relabeled as the jail as it was transforming into such.

Xena sensed her lover's uneasiness so she coaxed, "Its okay." She walked slower when they came into the dungeons then she stopped when a guard approached her.

"My liege." The guard bowed his head and clapped his fist across his leather chest. "Is it time?"

"Yes, is it ready?"

"Yes, my liege under Galen's insistence." The guard stepped aside then offered, "Follow me." He turned and directed the couple down the newly altered jail cells there were double in size and now held bunk beds, bathroom facilities, and barred doors for better admittance of light. The soldier finally came to a stop by an often unnoticed door in the dungeon that remained locked as the only key was kept with the Conqueror. The door, for the first time in an unknown amount of moons, was unlocked and wide open.

The Conqueror let the guard go first but she turned to her partner. "Watch your step."

Gabrielle nodded; too fearful her words would betray her about this mystery. She eased down the steep steps that were wet from dampness of the rocks. She could tell that this descending corridor was directly carved out of the surrounding rock by the rough cutting and chiseling. She was grateful for the torchlight overhead that revealed mostly the steps.

The guard came to the bottom and stepped next to another open door. He held out his hand to the doorway that glowed yellow. "The men already await, my liege."

The ruler nodded then glanced at the bard slightly behind her. She squeezed the bard's hand then warmly asked, "Ready?"

Gabrielle stepped closer as she stared into the dark room beyond the next door. "I think so." She nervously wrapped her freehand around her lover's forearm, just above her wrist gauntlet.

The Conqueror smiled then turned and ducked into the room with her lover in tow.

Gabrielle followed and she stopped after a few paces into the dark room. Her eyes required adjusting then she glanced to her right where there were several soldiers with torches; they seemed to be waiting for her lover's commands. She quickly realized that this room wasn't damp compared to the stairwell they descended. It was actually slightly warm and dry, which baffled her.

The Conqueror waved at her men and ordered, "Go ahead."

Gabrielle moved closer to her lover but she was transfixed by the six soldiers, who split in half.

Three soldiers marched down either side of the walls of what was becoming a large room. They bore their torches in front of them to light their way then they came to a stop.

Gabrielle was surprised when the torchlight revealed a ladder on either side. She watched as two soldiers each climbed up the ladders on the right and left. She couldn't make out what in the middle of the room as it was far too dark.

The Conqueror observed the soldiers climbing the ladder then finally they came to their perspective points.

"My liege?" called a soldier.

"Light the torches," ordered the Conqueror.

The four soldiers on the ladders stretched out their torches to the left and the fire engulfed hidden torches that hung from the wall.

Suddenly the room started to light up from the newly lit torches.

The two soldiers remaining on the bottom each lit the wall torches last then stepped aside when their comrades came down carefully.

Gabrielle's eyebrows furrowed together as the light grew brighter and revealed the opposite wall to her. She was almost positive that the wall had small, square holes running up and down. She couldn't even count how many of these cubby holes that lined the wall. Then she squinted when she realized each square hole held a handful of scrolls. "Wha..." She shook her head and stepped forward but didn't move any further. She couldn't understand but her imagination was just going wild. She turned back to her partner.

The Conqueror smiled then offered, "Go look." She squeezed the bard's hand then released it.

Gabrielle was shy at first then after a few steps she crossed the short distance.

The Conqueror merely stayed planted in her spot. She folded her arms across her chest and watched her lover inspect the mystery. She glanced off to her right and observed her first, original wood trunk centered in the middle of the room that her lover obviously over sighted earlier.

When Gabrielle was close enough she realized that the columns of the holes had the first letter of the Greek alphabet placed in certain spots. Her fingertips touched a scroll but she didn't remove it. Her fingertips grazed over the scroll then the next and she walked down the columns with her hand touching many scrolls. She finally came to a stop by the Greek letter for Sigma. She touched a random scroll but glanced over her shoulder to her partner.

The Conqueror tilted her head then nodded her consent.

The Amazon Queen turned back to the scroll then gingerly pulled out the scroll. She untied the red ribbon and slowly unrolled the scroll that clearly had dust on it. She blew off the dust carefully then let the words on the parchment compose in the dim light. Her mouth drew open and she stared at the title at the top of the scroll then the

very familiar name below it. "By... the gods."

Gabrielle began to tremble and the words on the parchment quivered. She shook her head then scanned further down the parchment. She then quietly read aloud, "I have not had one word from her. Frankly I wish I were dead when she left, she wept a great deal. She said to me, 'This parting must be endured, Sappho. I go unwillingly.' I said, 'Go and be happy but remember whom you leave shackled by love. If you forget me, think of our gifts to Aphrodite and all the loveliness that we shared....'" Gabrielle stopped as her emotions choked her voice.

Gabrielle removed her left hand from the bottom of the scroll. She covered her mouth and stared at the scroll that hung from her right hand. Her breath came out quaking and she carefully rolled up the scroll. She inserted it back into the slot but she couldn't completely believe this yet. She removed another scroll.

The Conqueror merely watched Gabrielle inspect the next scroll.

The Amazon Queen unrolled the next scroll part of the way then saw the title and the name below it. Her eyes watered and she proudly read, "Ismene, sister, mine own dear sister, knowest thou what ill there is, of all bequeathed by Oedipus, that Zeus fulfils not for us twain while we live? Nothing painful is there, nothing fraught with ruin, no shame, no dishonour, that I have not seen in thy woes and mine." She bit her lower lip then gingerly rolled up the scroll.

Gabrielle moved back down the columns until she was at the first column again. She withdrew a scroll, unrolled it, and saw the next name and that it was an anthology of works. She read the first fable. "Wolf, meeting with a Lamb astray from the fold, resolved not to lay violent hands on him, but to find some plea to justify to the Lamb the Wolf's right to eat him. He thus addressed him: 'Sirrah, last year you grossly insulted me.' 'Indeed,' bleated the Lamb in a mournful tone of voice, 'I was not then born.' Then said the Wolf, 'You feed in my pasture.' 'No, good sir,' replied the Lamb, 'I have not yet tasted grass.' Again said the Wolf, 'You drink of my well.' 'No,' exclaimed the Lamb, 'I never yet drank water, for as yet my mother's milk is both food and drink to me.' Upon which the Wolf seized him and ate him up, saying, 'Well! I won't remain supperless, even though you refute every one of my imputations.' The tyrant will always find a pretext for his tyranny."

The Conqueror's head dropped at the very true fable. She was certainly living proof of such a tale.

Gabrielle realized what she'd read and she rolled the scroll back up. She inserted the scroll back under the alpha section then turned her confuse gaze to her partner.

The Conqueror crossed the distance to take Gabrielle's side. She held out a hand at the tall wall that was coated in cubby holes with countless scrolls. "Every scroll contains plays, poems, stories, and philosophy." She lowered her hand to her side.

Gabrielle swallowed the forming lump in her throat. "I thought...."

Xena turned her focus to her choking lover and she gently touched the bard's forearm.

Gabrielle licked her lips then hoarsely tried to speak again. "I thought you destroyed all of the literature?"

The Conqueror dipped her head then whispered, "I did except for what remains in here." She scanned the columns. "These are the last known copies of all the literature in the realm." She turned back to the bard. "I destroyed all the copies and all the originals except for these. These are the originals handwrote by each bard or philosopher. I've had them all categorized by the person's name... as you can see. When I moved here to Corinth I had this room carved out of the hillside then I had this room specially kept warm and dry so that these scrolls' lives would be prolonged."

Gabrielle shook her head as she tried to piece together the mystery before her. Her green eyes were dark and her face twisted by confusion. "Why did you keep the originals?"

Xena slowly inhaled then released her breath. "Remember, Gabrielle at the time I was bent on power and often that comes from knowledge." She paused and signaled the wall of scrolls. "This is knowledge... and now that they're the only remaining copies they are also money." She lowered her hand to her side again. "I may have been tyrant but I was smart tyrant." She then tilted her head at the bard. "I also adored the bards for their stories. Plenty of them came to mother's tavern when I was a child but I realized one key thing that the bards provided to their listeners."

"Dreams and hopes," murmured the bard.

"Exactly." The Conqueror frowned then honestly stated, "I didn't want the bards spreading that to the people."

Gabrielle raked her fingers through her hair. Her emotions surged to the top once she realized she was standing before the last collection of so many bards' and philosophers' life work. "Why are you showing this to me, Xena?" Her tears spilled down her cheeks. "Why now?"

Xena stepped closer then lowered her head to Gabrielle's. She freed one hand and wiped the tears away but they wouldn't stop. Her next words she chose carefully and answered, "I'm not showing them to you, Gabrielle... I'm giving them to you." She then pivoted on her right foot then pointed at the trunk in the middle of the room. "Let me show you something else."

Gabrielle let herself be guided over to the trunk in the center. She noted that two soldiers with torches stood several paces away on either side to provide more light. She then spotted a scroll on the top of the wood trunk.

The Conqueror picked up the scroll, kept it in her left hand, and knelt down beside the trunk. She reached into her cleavage and pulled out a key. She inserted the skeleton key into the trunk's small hole. She twisted the key, heard the familiar pop, and she lifted the lid as she stood up. She reached into the dark trunk and out materialized her hand with a scroll, which she held out to the bard.

The Amazon accepted it and slowly opened it. Her breathing went still when she saw her own handwriting before her eyes. "By the gods." She shook her head then leaned

over the open trunk to see it was filled with scrolls. "You... you saved all my scrolls?" She peered up at partner.

The Conqueror folded her arms over her chest, the one scroll in her hand protruding out. "Yes but I actually keep two copies of your work. There's a set in my office desk then there's this set." She bit her lower lip then stared at the trunk. "I've read many bards in my lifetime... heard many too but you're the only bard that's captured my imagination."

Gabrielle thought she was in a dream as she glanced between the full trunk to her lover then back down. "I... Xena... I don't..." She touched her forehead and her tears returned. She shook her head. "I don't know what to say."

The Conqueror turned and took the scroll back. She carefully tucked it back in the trunk then lowered the lid, the lock resetting itself too. "It's okay, Gabrielle." She held out the last scroll in her hand and mentioned, "This is last piece to all of this." She unrolled the scroll and took a beat to lay the long scroll flat on the trunk's lid. "Come here." She brought her hand to Gabrielle's midback and urged her forward.

Gabrielle moved closer and stared down at what was obviously a drawing on the scroll; a blueprint. She bit her lower lip when she realized it was actually Polykleitos the Younger's work and then on the margins were notes in Eupalinos's handwriting. She bent over and carefully inspected what were blueprints for a very large building. Then the title at the bottom of the scroll was what finally grabbed her attention and she read it aloud, "The Corinth Academy of... Performing Bards."

The Conqueror moved quickly when she saw the bard sinking down. She caught Gabrielle around the waist and drew her closer to her body. She felt the bard trembling and her skin chilled from nervousness. She too felt the same way but she was able to easily steady her weakened partner.

Gabrielle held onto Xena's forearm and her watery eyes stared at the blueprints. "This isn't real."

"It is," softly argued the ruler. She placed her fingertips under the bard's chin and drew Gabrielle's attention to her. "It's very real and soon this building will be real." She pointed at the building plans on the trunk. "This is just the first step, Gabrielle. It's the first phase."

"What do you mean?" urged the confused bard.

The Conqueror lowered her head closer. "After the Academy is built then the old theatres will be rebuilt throughout the providences in Greece. Then afterwards the rest of the realm will follow suit." She glanced back at the Academy's blueprints then explained, "Before I destroyed Athens I seized all of the city's blueprints from the municipal building... I happened to get the Academy's. This new Corinth Academy will be a duplicate of the Athens Academy including the Theatre of Dionysus except it'll be bigger."

Gabrielle could only listen as Xena explained it to her.

"There are certain additions such as a hall I want to dedicate to Melinda and Janice."

The bard tested her voice and asked, "To record our history?"

Xena smiled that her younger partner caught onto her idea. "Exactly." Her smile grew tender as she continued talking. "There's another hall that will be dedicated to you and I would like for it to house all these bards' scrolls." She signaled the large wall but focused back on Gabrielle. "There's just one catch."

Gabrielle dared to ask despite she feared her voice failing her. "What is it?"

"The only way this Corinth Academy will be built or even for me to reform my laws on literature I am asking you to lead the project."

The Amazon Queen shook her head then rested her hands on the leather hips in front of her. "You want... you want me to direct the project?" She glimpsed down at the blueprints. "Building the Academy?"

"Yes," murmured the ruler, "there'll be plenty of help including myself."

"When... when did you plan to start this?" Gabrielle's red eyes lifted back up.

"Construction starts after the Summer Solstice but technically the plans begin when we arrive in Egypt." Xena saw the smaller woman's confusion and she elaborated. "Much of the resources are in Egypt and that's why Cleopatra has asked me to come down so that I can inspect the materials."

Everything was hastily adding up for the Amazon Queen. "Gods... this is...."

The Conqueror brushed back her partner's stray blond hair. "I know it's a lot."

The bard slowly inhaled to help her calm down. She breathed deeply then tried to figure out another aspect. "Why are you doing this, Xena? After so long? Why now?"

Xena swallowed as her emotions trickled to the top. She knew this question was coming from Gabrielle and plenty of times she's practiced her speech to give all the reasons. Yet when she gazed into Gabrielle's emotional, raw eyes she knew it wasn't so simple now. She inhaled a shaky breath then prayed her voice would stay steady.

Gabrielle moved her hand from her partner's hip and collapsed the ruler's arm. She conveyed her need to hear this out and that she was open.

"When I was a child, Gabrielle I spent my waking candlemarks playing with Lyceus. We role played every story you can think of and during the evenings we listened to the bards in mother's taverna. Then the next day we'd reenact those stories if we really loved them. Those were the happiest days of my life for the longest time then I lost everything." Xena felt Gabrielle's hand caressing her arm to assure her. "Anger doesn't even describe what I felt during my days as a warlord. I desecrated every memory of my brother by doing what I did as a warlord. I sealed it when I outlawed literature and philosophy from my realm. I didn't want to remember anything from my childhood or of Lyceus because I couldn't handle the grief and the rejection."

Gabrielle freed her hand and reached up to remove the few tears on her lover's face. She believed though that some part of the old Xena most likely didn't completely give up or else she would have never saved the original scrolls like this. Even if it was about power, as Xena told her, she bet the underlying reason was Xena's hidden memories linked to Lyceus through the bards.

"Then you came into my life, Gabrielle and I swore I would stop you." Xena shook her head and she saw Gabrielle's compassion for her. "It was as if I already knew the outcome would be us here, now and my hatred didn't want to let that happen. You challenged me and I craved it more than my darkness. Then in the Amazon Nation I realized you weren't trying to challenge me any longer but you were believing in me... because of the childhood stories that my mother told you. I thought I could easily chase you off by making you fear me yet your faith in me grew stronger. You're the first person that never feared me for who I was and now you're accepting me." She shook her head. "It doesn't make sense because somebody like me shouldn't have somebody like you, Gabrielle."

The bard unclenched her jaw then hotly argued, "Somebody like you needs somebody like me... just like I do with you."

Xena lowered her head and she didn't care about her men being here. She gently took Gabrielle into an emotional kiss and after the kiss their foreheads touched for awhile; their eyes remained closed. Xena pulled back some but her right hand touched her partner's cheek. "And I need you to help me fix this wrong I did, Gabrielle." She shook her head and her voice pitched deeper. "With you beside me, the bards will return from the shadows that I once casted them into and then the realm will find hopes and dreams again. The people should not fear their ruler but it should be me that fears them if I ever become a tyrant again."

"You won't go to that place again," rasped the bard.

"I made a promise," softly reminded the Conqueror.

Gabrielle sadly smiled and kissed Xena lightly before pulling back.

"If it wasn't for these bards, Gabrielle I would have never had the beautiful childhood I did with my brother." Xena cheeks burned from her returning tears; her breathing grew constricted. "If it wasn't for arts then you would have never been a bard and you would have never reminded me of what was so precious to me in my childhood. I am in debt to you, Gabrielle."

"No," murmured Gabrielle, "you gave me back so much of what I lost too, Xena." Gabrielle glanced at the endless scrolls in the carved wall. "And now you accept me completely... you accept my dreams and my hopes." She covered her pounding heart and breathed, "Thank you so much, Xena."

Xena drew Gabrielle in tightly to her body and held her. She lowered her head down so that her cheek brushed against Gabrielle's and their hot tears mixed together. Xena's heart opened more as she and Gabrielle grew closer. Xena knew no better faith than what she held in her relationship with Gabrielle.

Gabrielle's aged wounds started to close over and her past faded behind her. She wouldn't forget but she would no longer sit in the past memories or emotions. She was ready to move forward and especially with Xena now. She lifted her head and met Xena's lips in a conveying kiss.

At the end, Xena opened her glowing eyes and saw what lay ahead of her because of the beautiful smile on Gabrielle's face. Her smile matched Gabrielle's and she warmly whispered, "Happy Birthday, Gabrielle."

The End