

~ The Conqueror of The Conqueror ~

by Red Hope

Disclaimer

Violence: Yes, there definitely will be some violent scenes.

Subtext: Oh, always a yes!

Copyright: I do not own Xena, Gabrielle, Argo, or the Conqueror. We know who owns them.

Time Frame: Sixth Season Gabrielle and Xena. This is the sequel of [A World Away](#), so I recommend reading it before reading this one.

Started: December 29th 2000, Friday

Mini-Series One: **The Reflection of the Mirror** Story: **Two**

Section One

Three weeks after the soul mates departure...

Suddenly a large boom exploded in the office then dead silence. A pair of intense blue eyes locked on more soft green eyes. The fist on the desk was still white and pressing down hard.

"I will not agree to this," snarled the Conqueror.

The Amazon Queen searched the ruler's powerful, water, blue eyes. She was leaning towards Xena, her hands gripping the edge of the desk, and her jaw clenched. "We've been at this for weeks," she stated harshly.

"Maybe then there will be no treaty," declared the Conqueror. She corked an eyebrow.

Gabrielle's lips were curling with a grin. She closed her eyes in self-control, yet the laughter started bubbling up. She dropped her head and began laughing.

The Conqueror sighed deeply before she straightened up. She crossed her arms and waited for the younger woman to stop.

The small woman shook her head and finished laughing. She lifted her head with a smile. "I'm sorry... but this has been going on for a bit long." She combed her fingers through her strawberry-blond hair. After a sigh, she turned and walked out onto the balcony. She still wore her Amazon Queen attire; she felt it was right to stay in her attire that spoke of rank.

The ruler tilted her head; she studied the Queen's back. After she came around the desk, she slowly strolled out and joined the other woman.

"I've been meaning to ask you," whispered Gabrielle, "How did Gabrielle get that wound on her side?" She peered up.

The Conqueror sighed; her hands grasped the rail. "One of your Amazons."

The Amazon Queen gaped faintly. "What? Who?"

"Amarice." Xena turned her head and raised an eyebrow at Gabrielle. "She tried attacking me with a dagger but Gabrielle jumped in."

"She took the dagger in the side," finished the younger woman. She sighed and asked, "Where's Amarice now?" Not really sure if she wanted to know.

The Warrior Princess shrugged. "I'd imagine still in your Nation."

Gabrielle knitted her eyebrows. "You set her free?" she whispered.

"Yes."

The small woman smiled and grasped the Conqueror's forearm. "Thank you," she said sincerely.

The Conqueror nodded.

The Queen released the arm. "What... are we going to do about the treaty?" She glanced up. "We cannot seem to come to an agreement."

"Well..." The ruler stared over Athens. "We have two choices. Either we come to an agreement or... war," she stated.

"Personally..." Gabrielle folded her arms. "War isn't in my choice." She paused. "I'm amazed it's still an option to you," she uttered.

"War is always an option."

"War is never an answer," added Gabrielle. She shook her head. "It shouldn't be an option."

"However it is and you cannot run from it, Queen Gabrielle." The Conqueror faced the small woman. "You need to realize that if you plan on being a good queen."

"No," stated the small woman quickly. "I realize that war is in option and I realize it is not always the best answer." She narrowed her eyes. "That's what makes me a good queen." She grinned faintly. "A damn good queen." She lost the grin. "You may want to look into it... Conqueror." After she turned, she went into the office again.

Xena turned back to the scenery.

The Amazon Queen picked up the treaty from the desk. She reread it while she mused over the way to perfect it. She sighed sadly but slowly a grin creased her lips. "Conqueror?"

The ruler came in.

"I have an idea."

"I'd hope its more enticing than the last one," teased the Warrior Princess.

Gabrielle looked up with a grin. "It is."

~*Part 1*~

Gabrielle and Xena neared the cave outside of Stagira.

"Here it is," whispered the warrior.

The smaller warrior chuckled and smiled at her partner. "Yup." She stopped and turned to her friend. "You think it'll still work?"

"Only one way to find out," stated Xena. She neared the cave with Argo in tow. She stopped outside of the mouth.

The warrior-bard came up along side. She faced her horse and took off the tack. "Torqueo and Argo will be fine on their own?"

"Yes." The warrior nodded. "They'll be fine." She was untacking her mare.

Gabrielle breathed deeply and peered up at the surrounding forest. "I'm nervous," she whispered.

Xena glanced at her soul mate. "About seeing her?"

"Yeah," uttered the younger woman. "What if..."

The Warrior Princess corked an eyebrow. "If she's gone back?"

The short warrior nodded. "Yes, I'm worried about that."

Xena went to the saddle and took it off. "Well, considering what I saw, I doubt if she's reverted back to her old ways." She took the saddle off. "And this is why we're going... right?"

Gabrielle smiled at her lover. "Yeah." She hefted all her horse's tack in her arms. "Thank you for doing this, Xen."

The warrior flashed a smile back. "Come on, love." She nodded at the cave's mouth.

The smaller woman followed in.

The soul mates placed their tack down inside then their saddlebags. Together, they strolled back into the cave.

Before them, niched into the walls and ceiling of the cavern were gleaming green gems.

"Here we go," whispered Gabrielle. She took her lover's hand.

Xena laced their fingers together.

The soul mates walked more and became surrounded by the green gems on all sides. They heard a fizzing sound then a low hum as the gems glowed brighter and brighter. Suddenly there was a loud snap, a white flash, and pain shot through the women's bodies.

~*~*~*~

Amarice sighed and leaned against the tree's trunk. "I hate patrol duty," she grumbled.

The older Amazon, Teresa, glanced at Amarice. "It could be worse."

"How is that?"

The third Amazon grinned at Amarice. "We could be cleaning out the stalls."

Amarice laughed and nodded. "You have a point there, Aster."

Aster grinned and opened her mouth to add more but she stopped as a loud crackling sound had begun.

The three Amazons all turned on the tree limb to the sound. They gazed down at the ground where there was small lightening bolts forming.

"What in Hades..." Aster gawked when two women reappeared on the ground.

"Its that woman," whispered Amarice, her eyes narrowed.

"Its Gabrielle." Teresa smiled warmly. "The warrior." She glanced at the other Amazons. "Let's go."

"Wait," said Amarice. "You know her?"

Aster nodded. "She came into the village while you were away. She's a good guy." She chuckled.

Amarice gazed back at the two women. "Yeah?" She sighed. "I hope you're right."

"Come on, you two." Teresa moved along the branched and landed on the ground.

The two Amazons sighed, jumped, then they landed on the ground.

Gabrielle and Xena turned around.

"Gabrielle?" asked Teresa.

The small warrior smiled softly. "Teresa."

The Amazon chuckled and came closer. "You know me huh?"

"From my world, yes." The warrior-bard held her hand out to her soul mate. "Teresa this is Xena... the hero."

Teresa chuckled and peered up at the tall woman. "I saw you when you came through over a month ago."

"I think everybody in the village did," stated the warrior.

Aster and Amarice joined Teresa.

"Aster," greeted Gabrielle.

"Gabrielle." Aster bowed her head with a smile. "Welcome back."

Amarice folded her arms and corked an eyebrow at the soul mates.

The short warrior sighed. "Amarice, I'm sorry about what happened so long ago."

The young Amazon huffed. "I can't believe what happened." She looked away.

"I did it to save us all," countered Gabrielle.

Again, Amarice just huffed, her pride still pricked.

"Amarice, Gabrielle risked her life for this world. She saved your life... you at least owe her a thank you." Xena's powerful gaze locked on the Amazon.

Amarice peered up at the warrior, amazed by her. She glanced at Gabrielle. "Thank you," she whispered but it was sincere.

"Anytime." Gabrielle tried giving a warm smile.

The young Amazon gave a tiny smile in return.

"So, dropped in for a visit?" asked Teresa.

"Yup," answered Gabrielle. "Is Queen Gabrielle around?"

Aster shook her head. "No, Queen Gabrielle, Eponin, and Ephiny are still in Athens."

"They're still working on the treaty?" The warrior-bard was stunned.

"Afraid so," answered Teresa. "Solari is here however." She paused. "I assume you two want to see Queen Gabrielle and the Conqueror?"

"Yes." Xena folded her arms with a small grin. "Think you can help out?"

Teresa chuckled. "Of course. Let's head back to the village."

"Lead the way." Gabrielle smiled and followed her feathery friends.

~*~*~*~

"We'll be heading back soon." Gabrielle watched her regent cross the room.

"We?" asked Ephiny. She came around the bed; she neared her friend. "Define we."

The Queen looked away and folded her arms. "We as in you and Ep."

Ephiny sighed and leaned against the dresser to her right. "Gabrielle-

"I know... I know." The small woman held a hand up for a moment then dropped it. She her fingers went through her bangs. "Eph, I need to stay."

"Why?" whispered the regent. "So you can get killed?" she ushered.

"Ephiny, you know that's not true." Gabrielle shook her head. "I need to stay." She paused and let that sink in. "I cannot give you an explanation but something is telling me to."

The regent considered for a moment. It sounded insane and the last time something sounded insane it was the right thing. "Is this insane to you?" she whispered.

"I know it sounds insane," replied the small Queen.

The regent looked up and grinned. "Then it's the right thing." But she went serious. "Let Ep and I stay a little longer till I'm convinced things are... stable."

"I'd like that," agreed Gabrielle. "I'm just happy the Conqueror invited me to stay longer."

"What about the treaty?" questioned the Amazon.

"The Conqueror is getting a duplicate made and sent to the Amazons for our records." She paused. "And to let Solari know."

"Good." The regent smiled softly. "I'm glad things worked out."

Gabrielle started smiling warmly now and nodded. "Things have worked out." She thought about that more. "Everything is going to be okay."

"Yeah." Ephiny sighed contently. "I'm amazed." She chuckled. "It's a new era."

"It is," whispered Gabrielle. "Now, I just need to ensure it."

The regent tilted her head, just wondering exactly what her friend meant.

~*~*~*~

The Conqueror looked up from her desk when the guard entered. "Yes?"

"Two visitors have arrive, my liege." The guard stood tall, in his eyes were hints of

happiness.

The ruler noted that happiness and had to wonder why. "Who is that?"

"They wish to remain anonymous, my liege." The guard paused. "One of them awaits for you in the throne room."

"Fine," stated Xena. "I will be there in a moment." She waved a hand.

"Of course." The guard bowed and left the office.

The Warrior Princess stood up from her chair and glanced out the dark balcony. It was a candlemark after sunset and she had to wonder whom would come by at this time. After a sigh, she headed for the throne room. She stopped before she entered the room. She checked her side for her chakram, she didn't like anonymous visitors.

The Conqueror reached forward, she pushed open the door and walked into the huge throne room. She made it a few steps into the room then came to a dead stop. She smiled warmly.

Gabrielle smiled back. "Conqueror." She bowed her head.

The ruler's entire expression softened. She quickly neared the small warrior as she straightened back up. "Gabrielle, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see you, Conqueror."

Xena stood tall before her friend. "I'm surprised."

"I kinda thought so." The warrior-bard chuckled. "Come here." She moved in and hugged the ruler.

The Warrior Princess sighed dramatically but hugged back the younger woman. "Where's Xena?" she asked softly.

Gabrielle pulled back with a smile. "She's coming, she went to stable the horses."

The Conqueror nodded. "How are you and Xena doing?"

"Really well," answered the small woman. "She keeps getting more mushy by the moment."

The tall woman chuckled.

"I heard that," called the warrior as she came through the large marble doors, but she didn't get far. Since the guards at the door blocked her path with crossed spears. Xena glanced at the two guards then she arched an eyebrow at the ruler. "Did you finally tell them the difference between the warrior and the Conqueror?"

"I did." The ruler smirked but lost it. "However, they haven't seemed to understand that the warrior is friend... not foe." Her eyes narrowed at the two guards.

The guards quickly lifted their spears as the shivers rippled up their backs.

"Thank you," taunted the warrior. She strolled over to the pair.

"Its good to see you," greeted the Conqueror. She held out her arm.

Xena instantly took it and smiled. She gave a brisk shake. "How are things?"

"Very quiet." The Conqueror grinned and released the arm. "Its almost nice."

The soul mates chuckled together.

The ruler turned to a guard. "Please request Queen Gabrielle's presence down her."

The guard nodded and disappeared off.

"Amazons bring you?" asked the Conqueror.

"Yes," answered the warrior-bard. "We got here early this afternoon." She folded her arms. "Was a treaty settled?"

The ruler nodded. "Yes there was a treaty settled. Just a week ago."

"I take it then that Gabrielle will be leaving?" asked the warrior.

"I do not know... quite yet," answered the Conqueror. She heard the guard returning with somebody following him. She stepped aside and glanced over at the Amazon Queen. "A few visitors, Queen Gabrielle."

The Queen smiled at the visitors. "Xena, Gabrielle... I can't believe it."

The small warrior chuckled. "Surprise."

"It sure is." The younger Gabrielle pulled the warrior-bard in for a long hug. She then gave a warm hug to the warrior. She stepped back and stood, rather close, beside the Conqueror. "How long are you here for?"

"We're not sure, yet." The older Gabrielle peered up at her lover.

Xena glanced down, not totally concerned about the length.

"You're both welcomed to stay here," cut in the Conqueror.

"What you say, partner?" asked the warrior-bard.

The warrior smiled, now, at the Conqueror. "So, do you have any spare bedrooms with hot tubs?"

The ruler laughed deeply and nodded. "Of course."

"Wait." The Amazon Queen faced the Conqueror with her hands on her hips. "Why did I nor my Amazons receive a bedroom with a hot tub?"

The Conqueror faced the smaller woman. "Because I treat my friends better than my allies."

The Queen huffed while she dropped her hands. "I'll remember that when you come to my Nation."

The ruler grinned but turned back to her friends. "Did you bring anything?"

"Nope, empty handed."

"Fine," The ruler grinned. "Everything is provided for you here." She held her hand out to the hall door. "This way."

The warrior-bard went ahead followed by her soul mate.

"Queen Gabrielle," whispered the Conqueror.

The Amazon Queen raised an eyebrow. "I believe we'll have to rework the treaty." She strolled towards the door.

"Oh?"

"Yes, we need to include hot tubs upon my visits here."

Xena laughed quietly and left the throne room with the other women. "I do believe the treaty is fine." She paused. "You have not seen the finer print."

"What finer print?" asked the Queen quietly.

"Later." The Conqueror gestured and moved faster. She led the soul mates to their room.

~*~*~*~

Queen Gabrielle turned around after she heard the knock on the door, late tonight. "Come in."

The door opened and the Conqueror reappeared in the doorway. "Its later," she stated coolly.

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow. "Time for the... finer print?"

The corner of the ruler's lips twitched with a grin. "Yes, if you would like."

The small woman chuckled and said, "I don't think it's my bedtime quite yet."

"Wonderful." The Conqueror stepped aside in the doorway. "Care to join beside me?" she asked while she held her right hand up.

The younger woman searched hard blue eyes but they were soft deep inside. She blinked at this; not quite sure. All the other times she'd been required to follow behind the ruler in a fashion of respect. But now... it's different and she had to wonder if she was making headway.

Carefully and slowly, Gabrielle came closer and reached out. She took the much larger hand and she watched as the long fingers curled over hers. Quickly she closed the door silently then walked down the hall.

The Conqueror was quiet as a breeze and opened a door to a huge bathing room. She released the small hand and held her own hand out to the room. "The finer print of our treaty."

Gabrielle strolled in and gazed around at the huge room that contained a pool size bathtub.

The ruler stood behind the Queen, she saw the servants moving, preparing to help. She held her hand up for them to stay.

The Amazon Queen finally closed her mouth and turned around. "Not bad."

Xena chuckled deeply. "Does it meet your approval, Queen Gabrielle?"

"It'll do." The young woman nodded with her hands behind her back. She glanced around again. "A bit smaller than the one in the Nation."

The Warrior Princess grinned momentarily then went up the steps. "Servants," she ordered.

The servants came over instantly and begun removing the ruler's armor then the rest of her attire.

Gabrielle on the other hand strolled around the huge room. She'd really come to notice how many balconies the ruler had around her castle, she found it rather odd. She turned around and when she did Xena stood before her in the nude slowly walking down the steps into the steaming water. She looked away.

The Conqueror caught this and grinned inwardly yet still a sigh escaped her lips. She came down to the end where Gabrielle was near. "Care to join?"

The small woman's pastel green eyes lowered to the dark woman. "Why not?" She chuckled.

"Very well." The Conqueror glanced at the servant. "You heard our guest."

The servants nodded briskly and scurried to help the Amazon Queen.

Xena grinned at how Gabrielle wasn't use to the servitude. She moved back to the opposite side of the tub. After she leaned against the pool, she lifted her arms along the edge and dropped her head back. Within a few seconds, she felt the water moving

and knew Gabrielle was in.

The Amazon Queen stayed on the opposite side. She found a bit of a seat on a step. She sighed contently as the warm water relaxed her body and mind.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" asked the ruler. Her sharp, sky eyes opened.

"It is," replied Gabrielle. She smiled softly.

The Conqueror tilted her head. "May I inquire you about a few things?"

The Queen nodded faintly. "I am an open book to you, Conqueror."

The Warrior Princess gave a brief nod then straightened up. "You were born in Potidaea, correct?"

"Yes."

"A mother and father, a younger sister... Lila?"

"Yes," answered Gabrielle.

"All dead?" questioned the ruler.

The small woman nodded and lowered her eyes to the water. "Yes," she whispered.

Xena raised an eyebrow slowly as she spoke, "Your village was taken over by one of my commanders, you were taken into slavery by Lord Sinteres." She paused. "You were a slave until you were eighteen when the Amazons set you free." She stopped and sighed. "Further detail is a bit blurred for me."

Gabrielle licked her lips and finished her story. "I became an Amazon as soon as they took me in." She peered across at the darker woman. "The Princess... Teries was killed in a rebellion, I was there and tried saving her. But she still died and I took her caste. Eventually there was another rebellion that Queen Melosa was in and she too was killed."

"And you were next in line," finished the Conqueror.

"Yes."

Xena's head bobbed up and down as she thought. She stared across the bathroom. "I presume you remained with Lord Sinteres as his slave for all those years?" Her eyes flickered over to the small woman.

"Yes, I did." The Amazon Queen sighed deeply. "You always check your allies background?"

"I like to know who I am bring in arms reach, yes," responded Xena. She tilted her head. "Tell me about your slavery years."

Gabrielle shook her head. "There's nothing to tell... I was a slave for eight years, that's all."

"Never beaten, whipped, branded?" questioned the Conqueror.

The younger woman swallowed and stared at the steaming water. "I was... taken several times, beaten of course..." She looked up. "I was a slave." She got up from the step and crossed the distance. "As far as branding goes..." Once close enough, she turned around. Gabrielle reached up and pulled her hair up, revealing the back of her neck.

The Warrior Princess's eyes focused in on the black tattoo of Lord Sinteres, which she knew all too well. She reached up and touched it gently. "Hard years," she whispered with her hand slipping back under the water.

Gabrielle lowered her hair and turned around. "They were... but I tell myself that it could have been harder."

"Yes... you could have had my path," stated the ruler.

The Amazon Queen smiled sadly. "I would have preferred that if it meant you had an easier path." She got no verbal response from the Conqueror but her only response was loud enough. Her blue eyes had softened just quietly to Gabrielle.

"Well... that's been my road so far," Gabriele whispered. She made her way across the pool and leaned against the wall.

"If I recall correctly, you're an aspiring bard?"

Gabrielle nodded. "I am, a bit hard but I've been trying."

"What makes it hard?"

The small woman tilted her head. "A lack of inspiration in this world."

Xena chuckled deeply. "You'd think in this world it would be all the inspiration for the heroes."

"I wouldn't know what a hero is, Conqueror." The Queen let out a sigh. "This world is full of evil."

"There are heroes here, Queen Gabrielle." The Conqueror grinned. "You're just looking in the wrong place." She paused as her grin enlarged. "You have the wrong definition of a hero."

"Well..." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "I've certainly seen plenty of tragic heroes in my lifetime."

"Better tragic than none," whispered the ruler. She took a heavy breath, letting the warm steam relax her senses. "Have you thought upon my offer to stay longer?"

The Queen nodded. "I would be quite grateful to stay longer," answered the small woman. "However, I'd like to return to the Nation briefly."

"Check on affairs?"

"Yes." Gabrielle paused then asked, "If you don't mind, my regent and Eponin would like to stay longer as well."

"Of course." The Conqueror lifted herself off the wall. "But... do not over use your time," she warned.

The Amazon Queen tilted her head. "Tell me when the expiration date is and I'll head off back to my Amazons."

Xena nodded while she neared the pool's steps. She stopped and glanced at the younger woman. "The date is more up to you," she said quietly before she went up the steps. "Servants."

One came over with a robe for the Conqueror and Xena slipped into it. She turned around while she tied the sash. "Enjoy the rest of your evening." She let a tiny smile curve her lips. "And you may use this room anytime you see fit."

Gabrielle bowed her head slightly. "Thank you, my liege."

"Goodnight." The Warrior Princess walked down the steps as her robe flowed behind. She went to a small room to the side and changed into her leathers and armor once more. She tied her boots and left the room.

The Conqueror left the bathing room then she headed down to her office. Before she entered, she found a guard. "Request Draco here in my office."

"Yes, my liege." The guard crossed his fist over his chest then marched off.

Xena entered her office as she brushed her wet bangs out of the way. She was grateful for the torches being lit along with the fireplace. Having gone around her desk, she opened one scroll and skimmed over it.

"My liege." Draco entered the office. "You called."

The Conqueror placed the scroll back down and looked up when the man stood before her. "I need you to handle an affair for me, Draco."

The second in command nodded. "Of course, my liege."

"Do you know of Lord Sinteres?"

The warrior quickly nodded. "Who does not, my liege?" He paused and added, "He is one of the largest slavers in your realm."

"Yes he is, isn't he?" Xena grinned and placed her hands behind her back. "You are to take as many men as you think necessary and visit Lord Sinteres."

"To carry out what?"

The Conqueror's eyes shifted into a deep blue. "You are to kill Lord Sinteres and destroy his establishment. Is this clear, Draco?"

"My liege, he brings in much money to your realm. He holds a large amount of power." Draco narrowed his eyes. "It would be foolish to kill him." He shook his head. "And with no reason."

"I do not care about how much income he has in my kingdom, Draco." Xena narrowed her eyes. "I have thousands of other funds, I can do perfectly fine without one slaver." She leaned towards the man. "You are to kill him and destroy his compound." She leaned closer to the man. "And do this quietly." She paused as her dark eyes locked on the man. "Is this clear, Draco?" her voice was slow but seeping with anger.

Draco grounded his teeth together but answered, "Yes, my liege." He bowed his head. "It'll be done... quickly, quietly, and efficiently."

"Make sure it is done properly." Xena straightened up. "I do not want to hear of any screw ups."

"As you wish, my liege." The second in command folded his arms. "Is that all?"

"Yes, you're dismissed."

"Goodnight, my liege." Draco bowed his head before he left the office.

The Conqueror soon left her own office and headed to her room for the night.

~*~*~*~

The warrior-bard tucked her hands under her head. She sensed her warrior getting into the bed beside her. She turned her head to Xena. "Thank you for doing this."

The older woman smiled softly. "I'm glad you had asked."

Gabrielle chuckled but sighed. "I was just worried the Conqueror had gone back."

Xena grinned. "She hasn't and you've done all that worrying for nothing."

The small warrior mock glared at her soul mate. "Whatever... you were worried too."

"Yeah, I actually was," confessed the warrior. She turned onto her side and smiled down at her lover. "It's good to see her and Gabrielle getting along."

The younger woman chuckled. "Yeah, I noticed that." She moved her hands from under her head onto her stomach. "Do you smell a romance in the air too?"

The Warrior Princess chuckled and rested her left hand on Gabrielle's. "I don't think they have much choice." She grinned.

"Really." The small woman chuckled. "How long do you think we'll stay?" She shrugged. "Not too long huh?"

"A couple of days," agreed Xena. "We do need to catch up with Eve."

"We're meeting her in the Amazon village?"

The older woman nodded. "Yes, she was staying with Sara."

Gabrielle nodded. "Eve and Sara were... getting along pretty well." Her voice held suggestion.

Xena sighed dramatically. "Don't even."

The warrior-bard laughed and turned one her hands up. Her fingers laced through her soul mate's. "Well, we both know how love works."

"The understatement of the century," whispered the warrior. She leaned down and kissed her lover gently. "Tired?" she asked at the end of the kiss.

"Yeah." Gabrielle rolled to the left into her warrior's arms.

Xena wrapped her arms around Gabrielle then she got onto her back.

"Xena..." The small warrior lifted her head off her partner's chest. "You're not..."

"Jealous?" asked the warrior with a grin. "No, why would I be?"

"Oh don't give me that." Gabrielle chuckled briefly then said, "Considering what happened between the Conqueror and I."

"Is in the past," stated Xena. She shrugged. "You're mine... I have nothing to worry about." She ran her fingers through short blond hair. "Nor am I going to be a... bitch and make a scene." She grinned.

The small warrior grinned back faintly. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"Mmm anything for Gabrielle," teased the warrior.

"Got that right," joked the warrior-bard. She leaned down and kissed her warrior tenderly.

Xena quickly responded as her fingers trailed up her lover's sides.

Gabrielle pulled back with a smile, however she quickly moved in for a more passionate kiss.

~*Part 2*~

"Come in," called the Conqueror from the balcony of her room. She heard the person

come in and quietly close the door. She knew instinctively who it was. "Good morning, Queen Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen grinned at how the ruler knew it was she. She strolled across the room and came out onto the balcony. "Good morning, Conqueror."

"What brings you here?" asked Xena. She still hadn't given the small woman a glance.

Gabrielle rubbed the back of her neck for a moment. "When I woke up, I noticed Draco left with several men."

"And?" asked the dark ruler.

The small woman grasped the rail of the balcony. "Where were they headed, if you don't mind my asking?"

The Conqueror peered down at the young woman. "To carry out a mission for me," she stated nonchalantly. "A payment of what's happened in the past, so to say." She glimpsed back over her capital. "Nothing to worry about, Queen Gabrielle."

"I'll take your word on it," said Gabrielle quietly. "Has a copy of the treaty been made?"

"It's in progress," answered the ruler. "It should be here either tomorrow or the following day."

"Thank you."

Xena simply nodded.

"May I ask you something?" asked the small woman as a tiny grin swept across her lips.

The Conqueror cocked an eyebrow in question.

"Why... why do you have so many balconies?"

The ruler's expression shifted into amusement. "I enjoy a nice view."

"I can relate to that but it still doesn't explain why you have about a trillion balconies off your castle."

"It's just the way my castle was built," replied Xena.

Gabrielle huffed. "Sounds more like one of the mysteries of the known-world."

The Warrior Princess chuckled quietly. "Why does the Conqueror have so many balconies?" she said with complete amusement.

"Exactly." Gabrielle chuckled herself then she peered up. "By the way, thank you for the use of your bathing room."

The Conqueror nodded. "Of course..." She glimpsed down at the small woman. "I will be expecting a nice bath house in your Nation when I visit." She raised an eyebrow.

Gabrielle coughed falsely and glanced back at Athens. "Yes well... you may have to wait."

"Oh?"

The Queen smiled sheepishly. "We really don't have one in the Nation."

"I see," taunted the Conqueror.

The small woman sighed and moved closer to the rail and leaned on it. "Yeah well..." She chuckled. "Been meaning to tap into the local hot spring for the Nation."

"Well then, I recommend when you return briefly that you have your Amazons begin working on it." The Conqueror paused as she straightened up. "I will expect an invite to the Nation upon being allies."

Gabrielle, now, studied the ruler's face. She noted Xena was half-joking and half-serious. "Of course, my liege." She bowed her head faintly even though a tiny grin corked her lips.

The ruler let a hint of a grin masked the corner of her lips. "Now then, have you had breakfast?"

"Not at all, Conqueror."

Xena nodded before she ambled into her room. "Let's find the guests." She went to the door and held it open. "Join me, Queen Gabrielle?"

"Would love too." The Queen crossed the distance and went out of the door.

The Warrior Princess closed the door and quietly led the Queen down the hall.

Gabrielle noted how the ruler had been wearing her leathers and armor with weapons since her arrival several weeks ago. "Conqueror?" she said quietly.

The ruler stopped and waited for the small woman to join beside her. "Yes, Queen Gabrielle?" She begun walking again with Gabrielle beside her.

"I was just wondering..." The young woman peered up. "Why have you been wearing your armor so much?"

The Conqueror grinned as she came to the soul mates' room. She faced the small woman. "I have guests."

"Aaaand you're threatened by them?" inquired the Queen, completely puzzled.

"Not at all." Xena lost her grinned. "They are the ones at threat." She turned to the door. "By my men." She knocked on the door.

"How?" whispered Gabrielle.

"Changes are happening, Queen Gabrielle," uttered the ruler. "Where there are changes, there is danger." She peered down. "Be careful." The door opened when she looked up again. "Morning, Gabrielle."

The small warrior smiled and leaned against the door. "What's the early morning visit about?"

"Breakfast," answered Queen Gabrielle. "Wanted to see if you and Xena wanted to join the Conqueror and I."

"I know I will." The older Gabrielle grinned.

"I figured the lion needed feeding," taunted the ruler.

The warrior-bard shot a small glare for the old joke. "Come in, you two." She stepped back while she opened the door more.

The Conqueror and Queen came in and sat down on two sofas, opposite of each other.

The warrior came out of the bathroom, having just washed her face. "Morning," she greeted to the mirror images.

"Sleep well?" asked Queen Gabrielle.

"Yes," answered the warrior-bard. "Can't go wrong with a huge, comfortable bed."

The Conqueror chuckled and said, "I can understand."

"Considering you know the roads too," agreed the warrior. She turned to her lover "Where's my armor?"

The short warrior grinned. "Hold on." She went over to a table and collected her soul mate's brass armor.

Xena came over and slipped into the armor, she felt her partner's small hands working the buckles.

"What are the plans today?" asked Queen Gabrielle. She glanced at the Conqueror then at the soul mates.

The soul mates shrugged.

Then the warriors plus the Queen turned their attention to the Conqueror.

The Conqueror sighed dramatically. "Just because I am the ruler of this realm does not mean I plan everybody's schedules."

Both Gabrielles laughed together. The warrior, however, just grinned and finished with her armor.

The darker Xena sighed and sat up more in the sofa. "I do though need to finish some work today."

"Sounds like we'll be entertaining ourselves, this morning," stated Queen Gabrielle.

"Afraid so," agreed the Conqueror.

The soul mates came over and stood in front of their counterparts.

"What about a ride later?" asked the younger warrior.

The ruler nodded. "It sounds good to me."

The Amazon Queen groaned quietly. "I hate horses," she grumbled.

"They're not that bad once you get use to them," stated the warrior-bard with a grin.

The younger Gabrielle huffed. "Right." She stood up. "I am going to go get my Amazons if you don't mind, Conqueror."

"Go ahead." The dark Warrior Princess stood up. "We'll head to the dining hall."

"Perfect." Queen Gabrielle flashed a smile then she left.

"Shall we?" asked the ruler.

Xena grinned. "After you, Conqueror."

The ruler corked an eyebrow. "Should I be worried?"

"Only if you think so," answered the warrior

For an answer, the Conqueror went to the door and exited.

The soul mates chuckled and left.

~*~*~*~

"How about a little sparring?" asked Queen Gabrielle.

Xena glanced at her lover.

The older Gabrielle shrugged. "Why not?" She looked at her younger mirror image. "You know how to fight?"

The Queen sat up in the wood chair of the dining hall. "Yes, I know the sword and staff."

The Conqueror instantly peered across at the Amazon Queen. She hadn't imagined the young woman using any weapons but then again this was an Amazon Queen.

"The Queen however, is reluctant to use the sword," announced Ephiny.

"That's due to the fact I prefer not to kill," noted the Queen with her eyes pinning on her regent.

The Conqueror glanced over at the slaves and gave them the signal to clear the tables. She glanced back at her guests.

"Smart choice," stated the warrior-bard.

"It is," agreed the Conqueror. Her eyes locked on the Amazon Queen. "You enter another world once you've killed," she said quietly.

"You do," whispered the short warrior sadly.

The warrior grasped her soul mate's hand under the table in comfort.

Gabrielle smiled up at her lover.

Ephiny grinned. "And that's why we do not provide our Queen with a sword."

The Queen chuckled and folded her arms. "Well... when push comes to shove..." she trailed off solemnly.

"You'll knock them over with your staff," joked Eponin, in hopes to lighten things.

Everybody chuckled.

The dark ruler suddenly stood up. "I need to finish some work. Till then I imagine you five can entertain yourselves."

Queen Gabrielle nodded and peered up. "I think we can manage." She grinned.

"Good." The Conqueror paused then said, "If you decide to spar, ask any of my guards for a staff, Queen Gabrielle."

"Thank you, Conqueror."

The ruler nodded before she left the dining hall.

"So, who's going first?" asked the weapons master.

The warrior leaned towards her partner. "I am going to go talk to the Conqueror."

Gabrielle peered up into cool blue eyes. "About Draco?" she whispered.

The Warrior Princess nodded. "Yes, I'll join you later."

"Alright." Gabrielle leaned over and kissed her lover softly on the lips.

Xena returned the kiss then she stood up with a smile. "Don't beat them all up," she teased.

"Rrright." Gabrielle grinned and watched her warrior leave.

The Warrior Princess strolled down the hall and found the Conqueror's office. She stood in the doorway and knocked on the doorframe. "Conqueror."

The ruler sat behind her desk, writing something. "Come in, Xena... sit down."

Xena did just that and sat down before the ruler's desk.

The Conqueror finished writing something then she peered up. "I take it this isn't a social visit."

The warrior chuckled, she sat back in her chair. "Its about Draco."

The dark Warrior Princess grinned at that and sat back in her seat. She folded her hands over her stomach. "Go on."

The warrior didn't say anything at first, just finding her words. "How much do you trust him?" She knew the answer without asking.

"Let's say I wouldn't let Argo eat the grass he's walked on," stated the ruler.

Xena nodded at the Conqueror's response. "Then why...?"

The Conqueror grinned. "Xena, you know why." She shifted in her seat. "I keep my friends close but-"

"My enemies closer," finished the Gabrielle's soul mate. "I know and I understand, naturally." She paused before she added, "But why keep him this close when you have such a precious package in this castle. You are simply asking for trouble."

"Times are changing, Xena." The darker woman lifted her locked hands up, her elbows on the chair arms. "The sun is peaking over the horizon and soon my enemies will reappear in the sunlight." She paused. "I am preparing for this."

"But you are threatening Queen Gabrielle's life," said Xena lowly.

"That's exactly what I want," stated the Conqueror. "She is the bait that will bring my prey closer." She leaned towards the warrior. "I am never the mouse in these games, I am the trap."

The warrior narrowed her eyes about to counter that.

The Conqueror held up a hand. "Hold off." She lowered her hand. "I understand your concern about Queen Gabrielle." She stopped before she said, "But she is safe."

"How do you figure that?" whispered Xena to the Conqueror. "By her being near you she is a target, Conqueror." She narrowed her eyes. "The more your enemies will believe she is worth using against you. In one fashion or another." She leaned towards the ruler. "She is better off in her Nation surrounded by her Amazons."

"This is little of your concern, Xena."

"It is all my concern," countered the warrior. "More my concern than it is yours." She stood up. "She is my friend, I fear for her life, she is my concern." She paused. "I'd just to like to know why you're so intent on digging a hole underneath her."

The Conqueror rose up to her full height. "Remember Xena, she is a... big girl and can decide for herself where she wants to be." She folded her arms. "I am being an ally and enlisting her help."

"I believe you forgot to ask her for that help," stated the warrior.

"Do not get into my affairs, Xena," growled the ruler. She pressed her hands against the desk, leaning towards her mirror image. "This is between Queen Gabrielle and I. Stay out of it."

The Warrior Princess lost her control on her anger and let it all come out hotly to the ruler. "Well I fucking suggest you ask Queen Gabrielle. This is now my affair because I will not have a good person killed over your damn selfishness."

"Is that what you think this is, Xena?" The ruler laughed with anger. "Queen Gabrielle is in as much of a threat in her Nation as she is here." She shook her head. "I am saving Queen Gabrielle's life," she growled. "Stay out of this," she snarled lowly.

The Warrior Princess growled and stalked away from the desk. She neared the doorway to the balcony and turned around.

The Conqueror folded her arms. "I do not abuse my allies, Xena." She arched an eyebrow. "Things are under control." She tilted her head. "It has already begun."

"Care to share how you expect to keep Queen Gabrielle safe when your enemies are all around you?" Xena strolled back over.

The ruler grinned and lowered her hands back to the desk's edge. "As I said, its already begun. This morning Draco left to take out the largest slaver in the slave trade of the known-world."

"And this'll do what?" asked the warrior.

"Two things." The Conqueror came around the desk and sat down on the corner. "It first will protect Queen Gabrielle and second it will cause an uproar of the evil in my kingdom." She grinned. "Then I can begin flushing out my enemies once they've heard I've gone... soft."

"I presume it'll protect Queen Gabrielle from the slave trade," stated the warrior.

"Yes," agreed the ruler. "It'll scare the slavers, a warning to them not to touch Queen Gabrielle." She was about to add more but stopped herself. "The process has begun Xena, I recommend you and Gabrielle head back to your world." She shook her head. "It'll be safer."

"I'd prefer staying for protection."

"But?" asked the Conqueror.

"But Gabrielle and I are due somewhere else."

"I can imagine, being heroes keeps you busy." The Conqueror straightened up. "Is there anything else you needed?"

The warrior corked an eyebrow. "Do you know of Palamon?"

The ruler chuckled and said, "He is the captain of my guards, yes. Why?"

"I'd suggest enlisting his help," replied Xena. "In my world, he's quite reliable."

"In another words... he's a hero."

The warrior nodded. "Exactly."

"I'll look into it." The Conqueror folded her arms. "Now, I have a request of you and Gabrielle."

Xena nodded at the darker Warrior Princess.

The ruler took a deep breath. "If things get out of control I may send Queen Gabrielle to your world."

"We'll take care of her," stated the warrior.

"I was hoping so. I'll be sure to send a few Amazons with her."

"Good." The warrior-bard's soul mate lowered her arms. "If you it so happens you need extra support, you know the passage to our world."

The Conqueror shook her head. "I can take care of things fine."

The warrior grinned. "Even I know when I am wrong."

The ruler smirked back. "I am the Conqueror." She went back around the desk and sat down.

"Even conquerors make mistakes," whispered the warrior. She walked over to the door. "Maybe more often than the rest of us."

The Conqueror peered up. "I'll keep that in mind." She laced her hands together on her

desk. "Where are the others?"

"Sparring, I presume."

The ruler grinned. "I hope your partner doesn't beat them all up."

The Warrior Princess chuckled quietly. "I am about to find out." She headed out of the door.

"Xena," called the Conqueror. "We still have a sparring between us."

Xena stopped in the hall and yelled back, "I am ready whenever you are... Conqueror."

The ruler grinned to herself and went back to work.

The warrior grinned to herself as well before she went outside.

~*~*~*~

The Conqueror came down the steps and onto the sparring field. She watched as Xena fought against both Gabrielles. She grinned at the sight. Off to the sides, she noted the Amazons watching. She joined them.

The warrior found it odd to fight her lover and the Amazon Queen. It was like battling the past and future Gabrielle, at points it almost made her lose her focus. But she held her ground against a staff and pair of sais.

"I take it this has been interesting to watch," stated the Conqueror to the Amazons.

Ephiny peered up with hard eyes. "It is," she said faintly cold.

The ruler sighed inwardly. She had yet to reach a full understanding with the Amazons. The Amazons still angry with her for crucifying their Queen- she didn't blame them.

The Warrior Princess ducked as a staff went over her head, she jumped back in time as sais breezed past her breasts. She arched an eyebrow at her soul mate.

The short warrior chuckled but suddenly a sly grin washed over her lips. Without warning, she sprinted the tiny distance between she and Xena. She gave a hard roundhouse kick.

The warrior ducked and bounced back.

The Amazon Queen dropped her staff and decided to watch now as the soul mates fought. She glimpsed over at the Conqueror.

The ruler gave a hidden smile.

The Queen strolled over and joined the ruler but her eyes stayed pinned on the

partners sparring. She noted how much faster they sparred together, it was as if they read each other's moves. "They're amazing," she whispered.

The Conqueror nodded. "That's what five years will do," she whispered.

The Warrior Princess knocked her lover's sais from her hands.

Gabrielle grinned and backed up a little. She arched an eyebrow in challenge.

Xena closed in with a twirl of her sword.

The warrior-bard laughed and kicked at her soul mate's sword hand.

The sword flew from the warrior's hands and landed far away.

Gabrielle bounced onto the balls of her feet. Her hands up prepared to wrestle.

Xena grinned evilly and lifted her hands up.

The partners started circling each other, eyes locked, and heavy breathing, and tensed bodies.

"Watch this," whispered the Conqueror to the Queen.

The Queen peered up at the older woman.

The ruler nodded back at the soul mates.

Queen Gabrielle focused her attention back on the lovers as she leaned against her staff.

The warrior-bard narrowed her eyes and leaped forward while she slung a fist.

Xena simply caught the fist in her right hand. Her hands curled around the small fist and begun squeezing hard.

Gabrielle gritted her teeth but was showing a grin. She instantly rammed her right knee up into her lover's stomach.

The warrior took it without flinching. She smirked back and kept tightening her hold on Gabrielle's hand.

The short warrior knew another knee ram wouldn't do much. So she moved in and swiped her feet under Xena's legs.

The Warrior Princess went crashing to the ground.

Gabrielle jerked her hand free and stepped back.

The older woman flipped back up onto her feet and now her eyes were twinkling.

Oh boy, thought Gabrielle, not going to be good.

Slowly the warrior neared and quickly moved her hands into Gabrielle's defense.

Gabrielle moved her hands quickly enough to stop Xena's attacks. She was so caught into it that she hadn't noticed her partner about to move.

Xena had dropped and did a kick.

The short warrior crash onto her back now. She quickly rolled to her right as her lover's fist met the ground. She got onto her feet and turned. She rammed her body into Xena's.

Both warriors fell to the ground, Gabrielle on top of Xena.

Gabrielle pinned her soul mate down and grinned down at her. She knew her warrior could easily throw her off but she also knew Xena wasn't about too. "Kiss and make up," she whispered.

The older woman chuckled and pulled her partner's head down. Her warm lips sealed over her lover's in a tender kiss.

Slowly the pair got up after the kiss. They collect their weapons and strolled over to their audience.

"So, how about that ride?" asked Gabrielle peering up at the Conqueror.

The ruler grinned and glimpsed down at the Queen. "If... Queen Gabrielle believes she can handle it."

The Amazon Queen sighed. "Let's go."

Everybody laughed quietly then followed the ruler to the stables.

They came out of the stables with tacked horses then the Conqueror noted Queen Gabrielle lacked a horse.

"Problem, Queen Gabrielle?" she asked deeply.

"I'm not big on horses, Conqueror." The small woman grinned. "Thought I could walk."

The ruler sighed and mounted Argo. "Not a good idea." She held a hand down to the younger woman. "Ride with me," she ordered.

The Amazon Queen raised an eyebrow.

"Or ride a horse on your own," stated the ruler deeply.

The Queen groaned and took the older woman's hand. She was hauled up into the saddle with her staff.

The Conqueror took the staff and attached it to the saddle in the back. She glanced over at her friends and the Amazons. "Ready?"

They nodded together.

"This way." The ruler turned her mare towards the gates. She didn't feel any small arms around her waist. "Queen Gabrielle, I recommend you hold on."

The Queen slowly snaked her arms around the older woman's waist, not quite sure about this riding.

~*Part 3*~

The group had returned from the 'trail' ride back during the sunset, in time for dinner and to tame the lions in the two Gabrielles' stomachs. After that dinner, Queen Gabrielle had decided on leaving the following morning, or rather this morning; headed back home to her Amazons.

Xena pulled jerked down the girdle and tightened it before buckling it in. "Your set," she stated to her horse, she patted him on the side. She glanced over at her soul mate. "You ready, Gabrielle?"

"Pretty much," replied the warrior-bard, she finished up with putting the face tack on the horse. "Good to go, Xen."

The Conqueror reappeared from the castle and neared the group by the stables. "Is everything organized?" she asked deeply.

"Yes, just about," reported Palamon, he raised his head after bowing.

"How many guards are going with the party?"

"Fifteen, my liege," replied the Captain of the Guards.

"Fine." The ruler glanced over and noted the warrior and Gabrielle ready to go. She spotted the two Amazons already mounted on their horses. "Are you all ready to travel?"

Ephiny nodded but said, "We are missing one thing."

The Conqueror lifted an eyebrow. "And that is?"

"Our Queen," answered the regent as a grin creased her lips.

The Conqueror groaned and turned towards the doors of her castle. "I will return with the Queen." She strolled off briskly in a hot pursuit for the Queen.

Gabrielle looked up when the door to her room opened.

"Are you ready, Queen Gabrielle?" inquired the Conqueror, she stood tall and proud in the doorway.

The Amazon Queen nodded a few times. "I think so." She picked up her satchel off the bed and lifted the strap up and over her head. She let the strap cross against her chest. "Is everybody else ready?"

"Ready and waiting... for you," teased the ruler lightly.

Gabrielle chuckled yet shook her head. "Sorry."

"Its fine, follow me," ordered Xena, and she stepped aside, holding the door open.

The small woman exited the room and waited for the ruler to lead the way.

Xena closed the door and said, "This way." She headed down the hall but in the opposite direction of the way of the main doors.

"Conqueror?" Gabrielle grasped the strap across her chest in a bit of worry.

"Yes, Queen Gabrielle?"

"Where are we going?"

The Conqueror turned to a door and stopped. "To my room briefly." She grabbed the handle and opened the door. "Come in."

The Queen sighed yet entered the large room.

"Stay there," ordered the ruler. She then walked into a side room.

Gabrielle heard the sound of a trunk opening; she crossed her arms and started getting a bit more worried. "Conqueror-"

"Its alright," cut off Xena, she reappeared out of the room. She quickly came towards the Amazon; something contained within her hand.

The Amazon Queen gazed at the item in the large hands. She dropped her head to one side and stared at the silver dagger in the leather sheath. "Wh-wh...." She peered up, her expression completely confused.

The Conqueror's chest rose up high, and she released that breath slowly. "This was my brother's dagger." She locked her eyes on Gabrielle. "He... passed away several years back at a young age." She licked her lips within the pause but continued on. "I want you to keep this with you for protection reasons."

"But Conqueror, I can't kil-"

"I know... I know." The ruler cupped one of the smaller woman's hands, lifting it and palm up. "Keep it on you for protection, that's all I ask." She carefully placed the dagger and sheath into the warm hand.

Gabrielle stared down at it and enclosed her fingers over the dagger. "Why?" she whispered while looking back up.

Xena swallowed for a second and whispered, "You have many enemies now, Queen Gabrielle... many."

"Because... I've allied myself with you?" It was more a statement than a question.

"Yesss." The Conqueror still held onto the Queen's hand. "You are now a target and must be extremely careful, Queen Gabrielle."

"I will be," uttered Gabrielle as she searched the larger woman's eyes. "Thank you."

Xena nodded and replied, "And thank you," in a very quiet voice.

The Queen faintly shook her head. "For...?"

"For allying yourself with me despite the dangers, my Queen." The Conqueror squeezed the Amazon Queen's hand tightly.

Gabrielle let a smile curl up on her lips.

Then there was a sudden change in the Conqueror's attitude, she released Gabrielle's hand and stated, "Time to go."

The Amazon Queen nodded and stepped back, out of the way. She then followed the ruler out of the room, down the hall, through the throne room, and outside. Coming to the stables, she spotted her friends and the guards prepared to travel. She quickly slipped her dagger into her satchel carefully and neared Ephiny's horse.

"Are you ready now, my Queen?" taunted the regent.

Gabrielle pretended to consider but replied, "I think so."

Ephiny chuckled and said, "Here I'll take your satchel." She was handed the satchel and she hooked it onto her saddlebag. Next she held out her hand and helped the Queen up into the saddle.

Gabrielle settled into the saddle behind her Amazon and slipped her arms around her regent.

The Conqueror, the entire time, had been talking to the soul mates. "Be safe," she told them.

"We will," replied the warrior-bard. "Thank you for letting us stay."

"Thank you for the visit," countered the ruler with a warm smile. "Wish you two could

have stayed longer."

Xena gave a small sigh. "We wish ourselves but we're needed back in our world."

"Yes... the balance can't be broken too much," agreed the Conqueror.

"Take care of yourself, Conqueror," said Gabrielle, her warm smile never breaking.

"You too, Gabrielle." The ruler moved closer to the warrior-bard's horse.

The small warrior leaned over and down and hugged the Conqueror as best as she could.

The darker Xena returned the strong hug before moving closer to the other Xena and shaking arms with her. The Conqueror then walked over to the Queen and held out a hand.

Queen Gabrielle took the much larger hand.

"You will return?"

"Yes," replied the Queen. "Three to five days," she added in.

"Fine." Xena squeezed the hand and let go. "Safe travels, Queen Gabrielle."

"Thank you." Gabrielle grinned a little. "Don't get too bored by yourself."

The Conqueror stepped away when she saw the group starting to move. "I'll entertain myself just fine."

"That! I do believe," teased the Queen with a small giggle.

The ruler just shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. She watched the group head towards the gates of the castle. She heard both Gabrielles and Xena call, "Goodbye." She simply waved back until she saw gates closed up behind them.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle kicked her horse into a fast trot and caught up with the Queen and regent's horse. "Queen Gabrielle?"

The Queen glanced at the warrior-bard and smiled. "Not Queen Gabrielle... just Gabrielle."

The warrior-bard chuckled at her own words she would have said in the Queen's position. "I will."

"Good." The small Queen shifted in the saddle a little and asked, "You have a question, it's in your eyes."

The small warrior nodded and replied, "The treaty with the Conqueror is final?"

"Yes." The Amazon Queen released one arm from around her regent and settled that hand on her leg. "Benefits both the Nation and the Realm."

Gabrielle nodded at the younger Gabrielle. "Good, I was worried."

The Amazon Queen grinned and stated, "You should know me better than that, Gabrielle."

The warrior-bard laughed and shook her head. "Yes, I should... you have very good skills when it comes to negotiations."

"I do," agreed the Queen. She turned in the saddle and reached into her satchel, she pulled out a scroll that held a seal. She handed it to Gabrielle. "Here it is."

Xena caught sight of her partner about to read a scroll, she grinned and shook her head. She quickened her horse's pace and caught up. She felt safer staying beside her soul mate's side while she was reading and riding at the sametime.

The warrior-bard unrolled the scroll while holding the reins in her other hands. She noted her lover riding beside her, which made her smile inwardly. *Always protecting me*, the thought passed through her mind before she started reading the treaty. As she read along, her head was bobbing up and down. When she finished, she peered up and smiled. "It looks perfect." She lowered the reins on her saddle and proceeded to roll up the scroll. "I'm happy the Conqueror agreed to protect your Nation."

"So am I." The Queen took the scroll back and inserted it back into its home.

"You are returning in a few days?" cut in Xena.

The Queen nodded. "Yes we are."

"We?" asked the warrior-bard.

"Eponin and I," answered back the regent.

Queen Gabrielle grinned evilly and teased, "Yes, my ever loyal subjects." She suddenly coughed when she found her regent's elbow in her stomach.

"Ya know, in my opinion you need more 'loyal subjects' staying in that castle with you, Gabrielle," stated the weapons master as she joined the group.

The Amazon Queen raised an eyebrow at Eponin. "Because...? If I do that, Ep then the Conqueror may feel threatened and disrespected. Its best not to bring in so many Amazons."

The weapons master considered it before saying, "True."

Palamon decided to join the group and quickly asked, "How much further to the Nation?"

"About another candlemark," replied Ephiny in a hard tone.

The Captain of the Guards moved his head in understanding. "Then we will be staying...?"

"No more than three days," answered the Queen.

"Sounds fine," concluded the Captain. He slowed his horse down and began riding in front of his men once more.

Gabrielle swayed back in forth in her saddle but she soon broke the silence with: "Gabrielle, what do you think of the Conqueror?"

The Queen's eyebrows instantly shot up into her bangs as she turned her gaze to the older Gabrielle.

~*~*~*~

Solari stepped out of the gates of the Nation with a warm smile spreading across her expression. "Queen Gabrielle." She bowed her head while several other Amazons came out of the village.

"Solari," greeted back the Queen, her own warm smile on her lips. She quickly dismounted with Ephiny's help. She then embraced her second in command in a strong hug.

"Good to see you back," whispered Solari happily.

"Nice to be back for a little while."

The second in command pulled back with a baffled look. "A little while?"

The Queen nodded and replied, "I cannot stay long... I'll explain later."

"As you wish, Gabrielle." Solari shifted her attention to the other people dismounting. "Xena, Gabrielle." Her bright smile returned and she soon found herself engulfed in hugs from the two warriors, Ephiny, and Eponin.

The Amazon Queen turned to her regent. "See that Palamon and his men are taken to the proper area for them to make camp. Also invite them to our dinner tonight... the other Amazons are to be informed of the nature of their staying."

"Of course." Ephiny turned to Palamon. "Palamon, you and your men are to follow me, please."

The Captain nodded and followed the regent after waving on his men.

The rest of the group, however, treaded into the village during the early sunset. The Queen gave both Xena and Gabrielle a hut to stay in while she headed to her own hut.

Gabrielle sat down on the bed in the middle of the hut and smiled at her warrior. "It's been a nice break," she admitted.

"It has." Xena neared her partner, she held her hands down. "Feel better that the Conqueror is unchanged?"

The warrior-bard took her lover's hands. "Yes, a lot better."

The warrior laced her fingers through her soul mate's and pulled her up to her feet. "Anybody you touch, Gabrielle is forever changed," she whispered, "And for the better."

Gabrielle lowered their arms by their side, and she pressed her body into Xena's. "I hope so, Xen." She lowered her head onto Xena's chest.

"You touch everybody's heart, love," uttered the warrior, she lowered her head onto her partner's. She then brought her arms around Gabrielle's waist with Gabrielle's arms behind her back now.

The warrior-bard sighed while closing her eyes, she squeezed her soul mate's hands.

"Tired?" asked the warrior quietly. She started swaying their bodies back and forth together.

"Yes," replied the smaller woman quietly.

"Still have a bit of a night ahead of us." Xena kissed her lover's temple. "Think you can last?" she teased.

"Mmmm, think so," whispered back Gabrielle, she rubbed her cheek against her lover's chest. She chuckled and said, "I feel like a bit of a baby here."

A grin creased the warrior's lips. "No... just cute."

"Not cute," grumbled the warrior-bard. "I'm a warrior... warriors aren't cute."

"Hmmm." The Warrior Princess laughed quietly but her body shook from the laughter. "Oh but you are cute... a cute warrior."

Gabrielle huffed and whispered, "Just... don't tell anybody."

"I won't," promised Xena quietly. She took a deep breath. "I think there's time for a nap."

"Oooh, that's the best idea I've heard all day."

The warrior laughed and released her lover's hands. She quickly picked up her partner and settled her down on the bed.

The warrior-bard chuckled amusingly, pushed up onto the bed, and lifted her feet up onto the foot of the bed. She laid back on her elbows and watched her lover unlace her boots.

Xena dropped the boots onto the floor and ordered, "Get in bed."

"What about your armor?"

"I have it covered," stated the warrior. "Go on."

Gabrielle smiled then crawled up into the bed and snuggled down under the covers. Within a few minutes, she felt a warmer, larger body join her and pull her in safely. She sighed contently in the strong arms while settling down on her soul mate's body. It did not take her long to fall asleep nor did it take Xena that long.

~*~*~*~

Queen Gabrielle nodded a few times. "That's what I thought."

Gabrielle shifted her weight to her other foot. "Well... Xena and I are needed back in our world."

The Queen grasped her friend's arm and smiled. "I know, Gabrielle." She gave brief squeeze.

The warrior-bard mirrored back the smile before taking a drink of her wine.

The Amazon Queen let go of Gabrielle's arm and turned her focus to the fire.

"You've changed already, Gabrielle," whispered the small warrior.

The Queen was silent as she brought in a deep breath. She nodded and flashed a brief smile to the older Gabrielle. "And that is all your doing." She gazed back at the fire that her Amazons danced around in the early evening. "You've made me believe, Gabrielle."

The short warrior shook her head and replied, "No, you've always had hope in you." She paused before adding, "I just showed you the door again."

"And thank you." Queen Gabrielle sighed while staring into the fire. "I have not felt this good about the future since you've came to change everything."

The warrior-bard crossed her arms and tilted her head to one side. "But what is important now, Gabrielle is for you to keep the future bright."

The Queen's head moved up and down several times. "Very true."

The older Gabrielle chewed on the inside of her lower lip but posed the question: "And how do you feel about the Conqueror?"

Queen Gabrielle peered up at her older mirror image and asked, "In what way?"

"Love," stated Gabrielle.

The younger Gabrielle licked her lips while turning her attention back to the fire. "I'm not sure, honestly." She shrugged. "Can love tame the Conqueror?" She shook her head. "I have to wonder about that question."

"Why wonder?" whispered the warrior-bard. "She already has been tamed by love."

"True," agreed the Amazon Queen. "I know you and Xena are meant to be together but..." She lifted her sad green eyes to the warrior-bard. "Does that mean the same for the Conqueror and the Amazon Queen?"

The short warrior tried to come up with the best response, her jaw faintly slack. She pressed her lips together in thought before whispering, "I honestly... don't know..."

The Amazon Queen nodded, and she stared into the fire once more. "Neither do I. I may look and think like you as does the Conqueror and Xena but that does not mean the destinies are the same."

"I am almost positive you will find out, Gabrielle," stated the warrior-bard, "The destinies are different but the fates are the same."

"Time will tell, time will tell," whispered the Amazon Queen.

The older Gabrielle nodded and was about to reply when her partner came up beside her. "Hey, Xena." She brushed her fingertips over her lover's arm.

Xena leaned over and kissed her soul mate lightly and briefly. She then smiled at the Queen. "Evening, Queen Gabrielle."

The Queen laughed and shook her head with a smile. "Just Gabrielle please, Xena."

The warrior smiled back and replied, "Of course." She made a mental note to make sure when she talked to either Gabrielle to have her full attention on them. So then whichever Gabrielle knew whom she was talking to. "Gabrielle, do you know what your plans are from here out with the Conqueror?"

The Queen shook her head after taking a small sip of her wine. "I'm not sure honestly, Xena."

The Warrior Princess nodded and folded her arms. "May I recommend?"

Queen Gabrielle chuckled and nodded. "*Your* advice, of course."

Xena focused her attention onto the Queen. "I can tell you, that the Conqueror will be tricky to figure out at first."

The Amazon Queen moved her head in agreement.

"If your life ever seems threatened I wouldn't worry about protection too much." The Warrior Princess grinned faintly. "My guess is the Conqueror will stake anything to keep you."

"Oh?" Queen Gabrielle gave a teasing grin. "Must be all these Amazons."

"Exactly," teased back the warrior.

The Queen chuckled however went a bit serious. "I will be careful though."

"Do that," replied the Warrior Princess. "There are changes happening in this world. Your life is in a lot of danger since you're allying with the Conqueror."

"That is a risk I'll gladly take," stated the Queen with a nod. "If it means my life for a new world then I'll do it."

"Let's not plan on it though," cut in the warrior-bard, she grasped her friend's arm.

Queen Gabrielle smiled at the older Gabrielle. "Not on my list to do."

The short warrior smiled brightly back.

~*Part 4*~

Xena turned around in a complete circle where she stood then nodded at her partner. "This is the spot."

Queen Gabrielle crossed her arms. "Yes this is." She smiled at her friends. "Travel safely."

"Its just a little pain," teased the warrior-bard as she stood in the center of the Amazon Forest, prepared to go home.

"I know." The Queen moved in for a strong hug with her older version.

The warrior-bard hugged back tightly and whispered, "Good luck."

"Thank you." Queen Gabrielle released her friend. She peered up at Xena. "Xena?"

The warrior slipped a grin into place before saying, "Take care of yourself." She stepped closer and hugged the small woman.

The Amazon Queen kept a hold of the warrior for a long moment.

"Ephiny?"

The regent smiled at the short warrior. "Be safe, Gabrielle."

"I will, Eph." Gabrielle gave a hug to the regent, a lump in her throat again at realizing she had to go back to her world where there was no Ephiny. She pulled back with wet eyes. "Sometimes I'm tempted to steal you away and take you to my Nation," she

whispered, a sad grin forming on her lips.

Ephiny laughed softly and nodded several times. "I know, Gabrielle." She paused, her lower lip quivering in upset. "I'm sorry you lost your Ephiny... but I'm still here."

"Yes you are," agreed the small warrior, she hugged Ephiny once more then released her. She stepped back to stand beside her soul mate.

"Ready, partner?" asked the Warrior Princess.

"I think so." Gabrielle smiled up at her lover and then looked to the two Amazons. "We'll be back soon."

"We know," replied the Amazon Queen, she walked backwards with Ephiny and got out of the way. "Be safe, Xena and Gabrielle."

"You too, Queen Gabrielle," called back Gabrielle before she faced her soul mate.

The warrior smiled down at her warrior-bard. She brushed a blond bang back and lowered her head.

Gabrielle held onto her lover's sides as her licks locked on Xena's.

Queen Gabrielle and Ephiny looked away as the lightening bolts struck in the air and a bright light flashed. The Queen looked back and saw the soul mates gone.

Ephiny took a step closer to her Queen and grasped her shoulder.

Gabrielle took a long, deep breath then turned her head to her regent. "Are we ready to go back?"

"Yes, Gabrielle." The Amazon studied her friend's sad eyes. "Are you ready to go back, my Queen?"

"Yes," whispered Gabrielle, something turned in her stomach. "Its time for me to sooth the savage beast."

Ephiny nodded but uttered, "I hope you can before the beast bites back."

"I'll die trying." The Queen turned and started walking towards the village.

The regent took one last second to study the spot where the heroes disappeared from before she followed after her Queen.

~*~*~*~

"File into order!" called Palamon, "Let's go, let's go."

Gabrielle readjusted in her saddle, this time riding a horse by herself. She glanced over at her regent, who nodded that she was ready. She glanced at Eponin, who nodded back too. The Queen held the reins in both hands now and turned to Palamon.

"Are we ready, Captain?"

"Yes we are, Queen Gabrielle." The Captain of the Guards shifted in his saddle before focusing on the Queen. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," replied the Queen, "let's move out."

Palamon nodded and ordered, "Fall out, time to move." He kicked his horse and started at a quick walk through the woods.

Queen Gabrielle kicked her horse and rode beside the Captain. She gave a wave to Solari at the gates of the Village.

The second in command waved back and smiled but sadly. "Good luck, my Queen," she whispered.

The regent rode along side the Queen while the weapons master rode on her other side.

Palamon was silent but asked, "How long are you staying in the castle for?"

Gabrielle peered up and replied, "I am not sure, Captain."

Palamon grinned and stated, "Palamon please, Queen Gabrielle."

The young Queen released a small chuckle. "Then you can call me just Gabrielle."

"Of course, Gabrielle." Palamon went a bit quiet but whispered, "I am glad you've come."

"How is that?"

Palamon smiled softly at the Amazon Queen. "I am not a fan of fighting but... its good to see the Conqueror softening up."

"Oooh, is that what you think is happening to the Conqueror?"

"Yes it is." The Captain shrugged and then added, "But do not mention to her I said that."

Gabrielle shook her head while a grin played on her lips. "I won't, Palamon."

Palamon chewed on his lower lip for a moment. "If you take careful enough steps, I think the world will be saved."

The Queen nodded but whispered, "Its not so much the world I am worried about." She grinned evilly at the Captain.

Palamon's eyebrows shot up. "Oh... I see, Gabrielle." He laughed deeply and nodded. "Then I wish you good luck. Not just anybody can be the Conqueror of the Conqueror. People have tried and tried only to fail."

"I know." Gabrielle swayed back and forth in her saddle. "But I have a secret weapon that nobody else has."

"Oh?" Palamon gave a curious look.

"Just a little love, Palamon... that's all it takes," stated the Queen simply.

"I hope you are right, Gabrielle." The Captain sighed and shook his head. "Anybody that's ever fought with her with flowers as died trying on her thorns."

"I know, I know," whispered the Queen sadly.

After that, the group fell relatively silent and just trekked south to the capital. Within two candlemarks, the group was far, far out of the Amazon Forest and traveling in a thick forest area.

Ephiny whipped her head to the right, her eyes narrowed. "What was that?" she whispered lowly to the weapons master.

Eponin was tense in her saddle and scanning for surrounding forest. "I don't know... but I don't like it."

"What is it?" asked the Queen to her Amazons.

"We're not sure," uttered the regent, her heart pounding now. "Something is about to happen."

Palamon felt the tension in the area. He suddenly stopped his horse and so did everybody else. He drew his sword quietly and all his men followed along.

"I smell a fight," whispered Eponin. She extracted her sword and gritted her teeth.

"Gabrielle, get your staff out," ordered the regent quietly.

The Queen nodded and turned back in her saddle. She unstrapped her staff and kept looking ever which way. She started hearing sounds of leaves crunching and twigs snapping. "They're coming from that way." She pointed due north.

Palamon looked at his men, he waved them forward to line up in front of the group. The men all block the way the noise was coming from, prepared for battle.

"Who you think it is?" asked the Queen to her Amazons.

"Nothing but trouble," stated Eponin.

"Protect the Queen at all costs," commanded the Captain to the guards.

Suddenly there was a ring of swords being drawn in the forest ahead. "Attack!" yelled a man and suddenly numerous warriors flooded through the forest, heading straight for the fifteen or so guards.

Ephiny's eyes widened. "On no..." she uttered in her horror at seeing all the men.

Eponin gritted her teeth and yelled, "Protect the Queen."

"Protect the Queen!" called out Palamon again.

The guards all raced ahead and crashed into all the warriors, fighting them.

The Amazons kept close to their Queen and killed any of the enemies that broke through the lines.

Palamon himself too stayed beside the Queen, protecting her and knowing it was his life if she died.

The Queen for her part watched in horror as the Conqueror's guards were slaughter one after another.

"Attack!" ordered the same voice but from behind the line of guards.

The Amazons turned in their saddles in time to see another wave of warriors come crashing into them from behind.

"No!" screamed out Ephiny, and she became frantic to protect Gabrielle.

The Amazon Queen was too shock to respond. It was a mass massacre before her eyes and no hopes of survival.

Section 2

~*Part 5*~

The Conqueror lowered her quill onto her scroll. She laced her hands together, her elbows propped up on her desk, and she lowered her chin on top of her hands. She stared directly through her office and out to the balcony, watching the clouds and a few birds dip and dive in the air.

Xena stood up with her hands falling down to her side. Coming around her desk, she made her way out onto the balcony. She gazed across her capital, Athens, and looked to the extent of her realm reaching to the horizon. Lowering her eyes, she caught sight of a bruised and battered soldier limping in through the gates. Her eyes instantly narrowed, and she hurried out of her office.

"Damn it," she growled lowly while racing down the hall towards the thrown room.

"My liege, my liege?" called a guard, who was coming from the thrown room. "One of your guards-"

"I know," cut off the ruler hotly. "Out of the way."

The guard jumped to one side as the angry Conqueror flew past, her midnight hair floating behind and chakram glistening.

Xena came outside and neared a group of five soldiers plus the injured one. "What happened here?"

One guard looked up and said, "He's from Palamon's group, my liege."

"I know that, fool," The Warrior Princess snarled. "Has he told you what's happened?"

"No, my liege."

"Well why haven't you asked?" half yelled the ruler.

"My liege..." The guard fell silent then finished his sentence. "He has lost his tongue."

Xena's eyes faintly widened but went normal again as she glanced at the hurt soldier. "Get him to a healer." She then waved her hand before stomping off.

~*~*~*~

"It was ripped out, my liege." The healer looked to the soldier lying on the pallet. He then peered up at Xena. "Not cut."

The Conqueror closed her eyes briefly and licked her lips while reopening her eyes. "How are his wounds?"

"They are clean and he'll make it." The healer bit his lower lip then added, "But there was something strange."

"And that is?"

The man gazed up to his ruler. "On his back, he seems to have a map carved into his skin... done by a dagger."

"May I see?" inquired the Conqueror.

"Of course, my liege." The healer walked over to the pallet and with Xena's help, he carefully turned the man onto his stomach. "That is the map, my liege or what seems to be a map."

The Warrior Princess studied it quickly then walked over to a wall and plucked a torch out of its ring. She handed it to the healer and ordered, "Hold it over." She then peered down closer and studied the map more carefully.

The healer touched one spot on the man's back and said, "I believe that's the Amazon Nation there, my liege." He then traced his hand along a wavy line. "And my guess is that's the coast."

"They are," confirmed the ruler. Her index and middle finger touched an 'X' on an area of the coast to the south of Athens. She then noted an arrow pointing down the man's body. "Pull his pants down some."

The healer quickly grasped the leather pants and pulled them down a bit.

There directly above the soldier's ass were words cut in.

"Come alone and unarmed."

Xena's eyes narrowed, and she stared at the 'X' spot. She then quickly looked to the healer. "Make sure this man's cuts will heal over properly with no scars."

"Yes, my liege."

The Conqueror left the healer's office and went in the direction of her room. She then called, "Guard!"

A guard reappeared from a hall and walked briskly along side the ruler, "Yes, my liege?"

"Has Draco returned with my men?"

"I'm afraid not, my liege."

Xena stopped in front of the steps to the hall of rooms. "Find out which men he took with him and report back to me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, my liege." The guard hurried off.

"And I want a hand written list," called out Xena before she went up the stairs to her room. Once in her room, Xena went over to her trunk and opened the top. Grabbing her cape, she threw it on and clipped the top onto her shoulders. The next thing she pulled out was her breast dagger and tucked it between her breasts.

A knock came at the door and the Conqueror called, "Come in."

Two guards entered into the room and one with a scroll in hand.

"Read," ordered the ruler.

The guard unrolled the scroll and began reading a list of names of soldiers. He then lowered the scroll and added, "A hundred men total, my liege."

The Warrior Princess faced the guards and walked closer to them. "And what is their loyalty towards Draco?"

"A hundred percent for all, my liege." The guard paused before saying, "These were many of the men that have fought with him."

Xena nodded while walking away, back to her trunk. "And what's their loyalty rate towards me?"

"Rather low, my liege," whispered the guard.

"Hmmm." The Conqueror narrowed her eyes while bending down and reaching into her trunk. "That'll be all."

The two guards nodded and left the room.

Xena lifted her whip out of the trunk; she tied the whip to her left side. "Lord Sinteres and Draco... quite a combination," muttered the ruler. Then a loud boom echoed in the room and Xena's large hands rested on the now closed trunk lid. "I hate traitors," she growled then walked briskly out of her room.

~*~*~*~

"Is that clear?"

The new head guard nodded to Xena. "Crystal, my liege."

Xena narrowed her eyes for a moment at the guard. "Leave."

The guard bowed his head then hurried out of the ruler's office.

The Warrior Princess sighed and gazed back down at her map of Greece. She studied the area where Lord Sinteres's compound rested, directly along the coast of the sea. The one thing she disliked was heading there without somebody she trusted in charge of her empire. It was the only thing that still kept her glue in her seat and not out slaughtering the kidnappers of Queen Gabrielle.

Xena laced her hands together and lowered her chin onto her hand and stared out to her balcony as she always did.

"I can escort myself." Came an angry female's voice.

The Warrior Princess looked up when her office door flew open with one angry Amazon standing in it.

"Conqueror," started the half beaten Amazon. She walked over to the front of the desk, droplets of blood rolling down her right arm. Then her body was rather covered by other smear marks of blood and bruises and in her right hand was her red bladed sword.

"Ephiny." The Conqueror was a bit surprised but stood up tall. "What happened?"

Ephiny dropped her sword to the floor; she grasped the edge of the desk with her head lowering. "We were ambushed on the way back from the Nation." She was breathing heavy but continued talking. She lifted her head, her dark hooded eyes rested on the great ruler. "I escaped... barely."

"And rather wounded," whispered the ruler. She'd come around the desk and was about to touch the Amazon but the regent had taken a step back.

"Let me finish," stated the Amazon harshly. "They killed your royal guards all of them." She paused, her eyes locked on the Conqueror's. "Palamon, Queen Gabrielle, and Eponin are being held... kidnapped but up for sale."

"To who?" whispered Xena.

"To the highest bidder." Ephiny's right hand still remained on the edge of the desk; she was gripping it as tight as she could. "They want you to come there but the men who captured us said they plan to only beat you. Especially because they know..." She paused and coughed before whispering, "they have the key to your kingdom in their hands." Her eyes closed, and Ephiny lost her strength. She fell to her knees beside her sword and then collapsed to her side.

"Guards!"

~*Part 6*~

Gabrielle's head bobbed back and forth, she moaned quietly. She opened her eyes a bit but quickly closed them again when she found it hurt too much. Her head was banging hard. *Why do I feel like I'm on a hangover*, grumbled the Queen mentally. Again, she tried opening her eyes but much more carefully this time.

Whatever she was sitting on suddenly shook violently then went back to the soothing rocking sensation. With her eyes now open, Gabrielle gazed around and noted she was chained to the bars of a jail wagon. "Great," she muttered.

Palamon from across the wagon gave a sad smile, his right eye black and blue and rather puffy.

The Amazon Queen returned the sad smile with her eyebrows going up briefly. She then saw Eponin sitting beside him; she was still unconscious and her head dropping back and forth. Looking beside herself, Gabrielle saw nothing but more stray and an empty set of shackles. "Ephiny," she whispered and she became confused instantly.

"She's okay, my Queen." The weapon's master's now open eyes rested on the Queen and a faint smile. "I saw her escape," she added quietly.

The Queen sighed in relief as her shoulders fell back down. "How are you feeling?"

Eponin nodded. "Wonderful despite things."

Queen Gabrielle then raised an eyebrow to Palamon.

Palamon dropped his head back against the bars. "I'm okay, myself." He lifted his head back up. "How about yourself?"

"I've been better." Gabrielle sighed with a shake of her head. She then glanced through the bars and saw the gates of a compound coming into view. A few memories flashed

into her mind briefly and it made her eyes widen. "Sinteres," she said quietly.

The weapons master recalled that name and instantly looked to the gates. She recognized the symbol on the gate doors, the same as Gabrielle's brand. "Hades," she growled.

"Look alive, prisoners." One of the soldiers of the enemy came up to the jail wagon. He hit the bars with his sword. "Since we need you alive." He walked off with a snicker.

The gates of the compound opened gradually and enough in time for the wagon to slip through. The driver of the jail wagon gave out a big yell and pulled the horses' reins back. The wagon came to a hard jerk.

Queen Gabrielle looked through the bars, noticing several men being ordered to go to their tents. Yet around ten others came to the back of the wagon and stood in a semi-circle, eyes on their captives.

Slowly, a tall dark man pushed his way through the men and came up to the back of the wagon. "Hello, Queen Gabrielle. How's your day been?" He smiled evilly.

The Amazon Queen glared back and answered, "It just got worse when I saw your face, Draco."

"I'm hurt." Came Draco's saucy response. He reached to his side and pulled off his set of keys. He inserted it into the lock and once it opened, he flung the jail door open. "Welcome to Lord Sinteres camp, ladies..." His eyes then rested on Palamon. "And gentlemen." He then looked to him men. "Get 'em out." He stepped back as his men rushed in to drag out the prisoners.

Within a minute, Draco found Queen Gabrielle in the dirt on her knees before him. "Now, follow me." He smiled falsely then turned on the balls of his feet.

The Amazon Queen was picked up off the ground and shoved to follow Draco. She threw a quick mean look at her two guards but walked behind Draco. Quickly she glanced over towards Palamon and Eponin, seeing them escort to the barrack portion of the camp. With a sigh, Gabrielle continued following Draco.

After being led into the halls of the fortress portion of the camp, Gabrielle was coming upon a door to an office she knew of too well.

Draco stepped inside first then the Queen with her guards were next.

Queen Gabrielle's eyes instantly rested on Lord Sinteres.

Lord Sinteres walked away from the fireplace with a red-hot poker. He gave a wicked smile to Gabrielle and came closer. "Welcome back... home." He raised his left hand, his fingertips just touching the small woman's chin. "We've missed you."

Gabrielle turned her head away.

"Hmmm." Sinteres nodded and looked to Draco. "Have any trouble capturing the lot?"

"None and we sent the 'message' to Xena."

"Good."

"Draco, forget to tell Lord Sinteres about the small mishap?" taunted Gabrielle- her eyes glimmering devilishly.

Lord Sinteres huffed a bit and averted his gaze from Gabrielle back to Draco.

"Explain?"

Draco sighed and folded his arms. "One of the Amazons escaped."

"Which?"

"The regent named Ephiny." The warrior shook his head. "It'll make no difference."

Sinteres narrowed his eyes. "It makes all the difference," he whispered hotly. He suddenly raised the hot poker and the tip of it was close to touching the tip of Draco's nose. "That Amazon can make all the difference between our control in this game." He held his breath for a moment.

Draco was grinding his teeth as his eyes stayed focused on the smoke rising from the poker.

"You better hope to Gods she isn't our mistake. Otherwise you'll be my next slave," promised Sinteres. He quickly lowered the poker back to his side. Then an evil smile formed on his lips that was directed at Gabrielle. "Let's get you properly dressed, Queen Gabrielle." He studied her Amazon leathers momentarily. "Even those leathers cover too much. Guards, have her taken to her cell and give her... proper clothing."

The two guards unsheathed their swords.

Gabrielle sighed, knowing at what was ahead of herself. She walked to the door with her guards but stopped for a moment. "Lord Sinteres?" She turned her head sidelong to the slaver.

Sinteres raised an eyebrow at the Amazon Queen.

"How can you be so sure the Conqueror will come for me?" The small woman now arched her own eyebrow. "She is not my protector."

"No but you are her sanity." He smirked.

Gabrielle turned her head away and walked off.

~*~*~*~

"Ephiny," whispered the ruler.

The regent moaned and turned her head away.

"Come on." The Conqueror touched Ephiny's cheek for a moment then pulled her hand away. "Wake up."

The Amazon slowly opened her eyes and stared into cool blue eyes. "Conqueror?" she muttered.

"Yeah, come on... sit up." Xena sat down on the edge of the bed.

Ephiny carefully sat up, her back against the headboard. She then gazed about the room and recognized it as Xena's.

"Ephiny, what happened?"

The Amazon brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "We were riding back from the Nation. A little ways away from the Nation, we were attacked from front and behind by fifty or more men."

"Any idea who?"

Ephiny nodded and swallowed before quietly saying, "Draco." She briefly caught sight of those blue eyes flashing then calming once more.

"What of my men?"

"All killed... except for Palamon." The regent pushed herself up more then added, "They took Queen Gabrielle, Palamon, and Eponin... I'm not sure where to."

"Mmmm, I already know where," cut in the Conqueror. She suddenly stood up, her cape falling behind her. "Ephiny, can I trust you?" She whirled around, now facing the Amazon.

"I don't know... can you?" half taunted the regent. "I assume you have a plan already."

"More like a demand," dryly replied the ruler. Her arms crossed her chest as she stood tall and dark. "If you want, you may return to your Nation... round up your Amazons to seek out your Queen. I will have nothing to do with it."

"And what about your head guard, Palamon?"

"Replaceable." The Warrior Princess shrugged. "However, I believe your weapons master and especially your Queen are not."

Ephiny narrowed her eyes. "But I know I cannot go charging in after my Queen to a place I know not of. Since Queen Gabrielle-

"Will be killed, naturally." Xena stepped closer to the bed; closer to Ephiny.

"But you cannot abandon the Amazons," stated the regent hotly.

"Why? What reasoning do you hold... what commitment do I have to you or your Queen?"

Ephiny tried moving but gritted her teeth when a shot of pain ripped through her body. Instead she peered up with menacing amber eyes. "You signed an alliance."

"And I can break it just as easily." The Warrior Princes waved her hand before she walked off. "The Amazons and their Queen are none of my concern." She reached the door with her hand preparing to grasp the door handle.

"Wait, Conqueror." Ephiny waited for the dark ruler to face her. She took a long breath and replied, "You can trust me... and the Amazons."

Xena stood still then gradually nodded. "I like trust." She neared the Amazon and folded her arms together. "Now, I am the only one with the knowledge of where the Queen is."

Ephiny nodded. "What do you want in exchange?"

The Conqueror's face broke out with a full on evil grin. "Ever thought of being a Queen, regent?"

The regent blinked.

~*~*~*~

Queen Gabrielle sighed, her head was drooped down and gazing at her clothes she now wore on her body. "Great," she muttered sarcastically, "I feel like a belly dance."

"And that may just be your next position," commented Lord Sinteres. He snapped his fingers and the guard opened the jail cell. He stepped in and falsely smiled at the Amazon. "Feel at home again, Gabrielle?"

"Queen Gabrielle," corrected the small woman.

The slaver cleared his throat and bowed his head. "Queen Gabrielle." He lifted his head again with a large smug expression. "I can respect a woman of your stature." He chuckled then added, "Well until you're bought out as a slave." He came closer to the ankle-chained female and looked up and down her length. "You've grown more beautiful since you last escaped my establishment."

Gabrielle folded her arms together. "And what do you plan to do with my Amazon?"

"Sell her as well... maybe even ransom her to your Amazons." He gave a faint laugh and stood before the Queen. "Depends." He shrugged for a second. "May even keep her for my own... for insurance reasons."

"And Palamon?"

Lord Sinteres gave a faint shrug. "Not too worried. He's of little use to the

Conqueror."

"And what is your plan with the Conqueror...?"

"My, my... I forgot how chatty you are, Queen Gabrielle."

The Queen's annoyance sparkled in her ivy eyes for a moment then disappeared.

"We'll have to fix that." The slaver walked to the cell door and tapped his knuckles on a bar. He noted the guard coming so he turned back to the Queen. "Well, tomorrow evening we'll be expecting some guests. I'm sure they'll take an interest in you." He stepped through the door after the guard opened it. "Have a lovely night, Queen Gabrielle." He put his hands behind his back and walked off.

Gabrielle watched him go then let out a long sigh. She dropped down onto the cold floor and laid her head back on the rough stone wall behind her. "Great... how are we going to make it out of this one." She closed her eyes and muttered, "We need another miracle."

~*~*~*~

"Okay, I think I can handle it," stated the regent.

The Conqueror nodded and glanced back to the new head guard. "Make sure you follow her every order," she growled lowly.

The head guard nodded and forced a smile but worry shined in his eyes. "Yes, my liege."

"You're dismissed," commanded the ruler. She then rested her gaze on Ephiny. "Come with me."

The Amazon nodded, she followed along side the Warrior Princess in the moonlight and in silence but then soon asked, "You can trust us... and me but how do I know I can trust you?"

The Conqueror had a faint grin with her now amused expression. "Well... you're just going to have to huh?" She stepped into the stables and went directly to Argo's stall.

Ephiny waited outside of the stall, watching the tall woman tack up her mare. "How about this..." She suddenly grinned evilly at Xena. "You come back with my Queen and I'll keep your kingdom in tip top shape."

The ruler arched an eyebrow. "Remember it is *my* kingdom." She shrugged and then added, "But I think that's the naturally agreement."

"Mmmm," half agreed the regent. "So what plan do you have?" she inquired, her body leaning against the wall between the stalls.

"Haven't figured that out yet," casually replied Xena with a shrug of her shoulders. "Not too worried."

Ephiny closed her eyes and a faint groan filtered between her lips. "Wonderful," she muttered dryly.

The Warrior Princess opened the stall door and led her horse out with the reins. She came outside with the regent; together they neared the gates. She sighed once close to the gates then she faced the Amazon. "Look Ephiny..." Her words fell briefly, and she took a deep breath. "I do trust you... and that's only because Queen Gabrielle does... and the fact you conduct yourself has an honourable woman."

The regent licked her lips; her head turning away and she stared at the surrounding grounds of the castle. She faintly nodded again and gave her attention back to the ruler. "Thank you... and I know I can trust you... you're a woman of your word."

The Warrior Princess gave a brief nod then quickly mounted Argo.

Ephiny took a few steps closer and rested one hand on the horse's side. "Conqueror, please bring her back... I'm not asking as her regent but as her friend."

"I know," whispered the Conqueror. She then looked to the guards on either side of the gates. "Open the gates."

"Yes, my liege," called back a guard. He and the other guard open the gates and stepped aside.

Xena glanced at Ephiny for a second then kicked her mare's sides.

Argo whined and broke out into a gallop.

Ephiny stood there for several moments, watching the Conqueror gallop through the main street of Athens. She swallowed and sent off a prayer to Gabrielle. Slowly she watched the Conqueror disappear into the night and her final thought left her with hope to seeing her Queen soon. "Close the gates!" she ordered roughly. Turning around, she faced the huge castle that glowed with the flickering torchlights and glistening in the metallic moon's light. She would live in and rule in for however long it would take the ruler to return.

~*Part 7*~

The Conqueror dismounted slowly. She gazed about the forest and considered certain parts of it then decided on one area. Leading Argo behind her, she came to an open spot in the forest. She gave a quick look to the early eastern sun.

The ruler looked back to Argo and began untacking her. "Stay near, girl. Okay?"

The mare's head moved up and down, her big brown eyes locked on her master.

Xena hefted her saddle with the other tack on top. She easily sought out a hidden spot among some large rocks. Settling the tack down on the ground near the rocks, she began pushing a large rock out of the way. She then hid Argo's tack into the opening and rolled the rock into place, perfectly hiding the items.

Strolling back over to the golden horse, she told her, "Be careful, girl." She patted Argo on the neck before taking a step back and hitting her on the butt.

Argo whined for a moment then galloped off into the woods.

The Conqueror watched her go then her dark eyes shift towards the south, and she started walking. After about fifteen minutes of walking through the woods, she came to a large clearing and walls of a compound ahead of her. She carefully studied the area and the inside of the camp through the open gates.

"Who goes?" called a guard at the gate.

The Warrior Princess came a little closer then stopped, she stood tall with folded arms. "The Conqueror of Greece, Rome, and Chin," yelled out the ruler in a throaty tone.

The head guard gave a signal to another guard and that guard briskly jogged off.

"Please wait there, Conqueror."

The Conqueror gave a raised eyebrow but waited none-the-less. Within a minute, the guard returned, she noted, but with a few other guards and somebody she quite recognised.

"Conqueror, glad you found your way," called out a teasing male voice.

"Yes, I had a map... drawn out for me."

Draco smirked to Xena while leaving the camp with five guards behind him. "Lord Sinteres would like to talk to you."

"Mmmm, wonderful," muttered back the ruler.

"This way," ordered the warrior as he spun around.

"So, how does serving Lord Sinteres compare to serving me?" inquired the Warrior Princess, her eyes pinned on Draco beside her.

Draco gave a toothy smile. "Much more livable."

"For now," countered the dark ruler.

The warrior gave a snuff look to Xena then ignored her while entering into the halls of the wrap around fortress. He was first into Lord Sinteres's office and let Xena step in followed by the guards.

"Conqueror," greeted the slaver with a rough smile. He stood from his desk and stepped around. "So glad you made it."

"Sinteres," simply replied the Conqueror.

"I was informed that you wanted my establishment destroyed and me killed. Is this correct?"

Xena shifted her weight to her right foot and tilted her head. "Yes."

Lord Sinteres nodded before sitting back on the edge of his desk. "May I know why?"

"Call it a trade," answered the ruler vaguely.

"Well isn't that funny," retorted the slaver. "I happen to have a trade myself."

"And that is?"

Sinteres shrugged and said, "A stretch of your land for two amazons and one head guard."

The Warrior Princess released a small laugh. "I don't think so."

"Well... I'm sure some others might be interested in a trade." He shrugged it off and gazed at Draco. "Let's check on the merchandise. I'm sure the Conqueror would like to see their health."

Draco nodded and ordered the guards out with Xena following.

Once into the stocks of the cells, the Conqueror noticed all of the cells empty figuring the slaves were already bought out. She then came to two cells that held Eponin and Palamon, slowly her right eyebrow raised up.

"And here we are." Sinteres glanced up at the Warrior Princess. "A shame though that we didn't get that regent."

Conqueror shot a smug look to the slaver. "Yes... a shame, she seemed to slip through your fingers. And so easily at that."

Draco's upper lip twitched a bit but he held his tongue.

The weapons master opened her eyes and stared at the Conqueror before her. "Conqueror."

"How do you feel?" questioned the ruler.

Eponin answered with a half nod and added, "Could be worse."

The ruler flashed a big grin then glanced to Palamon. "And you, will have plenty to answer to."

"I know, my liege." Palamon released a long sigh.

"Just don't forget your mission," reminded the Conqueror.

Palamon said nothing else but read the ruler's further words in her eyes.

"And the Queen?" questioned Xena to the slaver.

"Ah yes, this way... she's in a special place." Sinters waved ahead a bit and lead the group.

The group came into a large open room where there was two large men with whips and swords plus a near by female slave. Then there in the middle of the room stood the Amazon Queen beside one of the large armed men.

"And here's my Amazon Queen," stated the slaver.

Queen Gabrielle turned around and she instantly felt hope refill her upon seeing the dark beauty of the Conqueror. "My liege." She bowed her head.

"Queen Gabrielle." The Warrior Princess's cold face didn't change but her eyes briefly warmed to the Queen prior to stoning over. She then glanced to the slaver. "And what is happening to the Queen?"

"Ah yes, she's being retrained as a slave." Sinteres licked his lips then mentioned, "I've missed her... I may not sell her." He gave a big grin to the ruler.

Xena clamped her jaw close for a second, she then asked, "May I speak with the Queen alone?"

"Of course, Conqueror." Lord Sinteres waved at the slave trainers and slave. "Leave." He then marched out with the guards however Draco did not follow.

"Draco," ordered the slaver.

"I do not like-"

"Leave now," commanded the Conqueror to the warrior. Her navy blue eyes locked on Draco's eyes.

Draco tried staring down the ruler but with no luck so he huffed and stomped out.

Xena waited for a moment then her attention went on the Queen. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay, Conqueror." The Amazon grasped the ruler's right arm tenderly. "Do you know where Ephiny is?"

The Conqueror nodded. "She is at my castle, healing over well." She watched the small hand release her arm.

"Your castle?" questioned Gabrielle, confusion masking her features.

"Yes," uttered the taller woman, "she is the 'queen' of my realm until I return."

"I don't think I want to know anymore," half joked the Queen. In return, she received a half smile from the ruler. "How are you doing?"

Xena shrugged a bit. "Same old."

"What's the plan?" asked the Queen, worry had set into her since the beginning.

"I don't know yet... depends."

"On?"

The ruler shrugged. "Only if saving you, Palamon, and Eponin is worth my time."

"What?" hissed the Amazon, her eyes flaring anger. "How can you-"

"Be quiet," growled the ruler lowly, her right hand coming up to grip Gabrielle's shoulder tightly. She lowered her head and asked quietly, "You still have the dagger I gave you?"

"Yes of course."

"Good... you may need it." The Conqueror relinquished her strong hold and took a step back.

"Wait, my liege." Gabrielle quickly grasped the ruler's arm and stepped closer. "I don't care what happens to me but please, at least save my Amazon and Palamon." She licked her lips, her eyes faintly watery. "They are not meant to die, not here," she whispered.

The Conqueror stared at the small woman, considering her request for several moments. Then she slowly lowered her head and finally answered, "I'll see what I can do." Her head came back up.

"No damn it," growled the Queen quietly. "You promise me that you will save my Amazon and Palamon." She jerked Xena's arm, bring her head back down. "You at least owe me that much."

Xena ran her tongue along the back of her teeth then whispered, "I promise... Gabrielle."

Gabrielle let out a heavy sigh of disappeared weight. "Thank you, Xena," she said faintly hesitant.

The Conqueror gave a hearty nod and straightened up while Gabrielle released her arm once again. "Be careful, my Queen." She turned and walked off towards the door.

"You too, my liege," Gabrielle whispered. She stood there in the center of the round room and watched the ruler of half of the known world leave her. A faint breeze blew in through the windows, and lifted up Gabrielle's long hair and the Conqueror's cape.

The Conqueror grasped the doorknob but glanced back at the Queen, she gave a stern

nod.

Gabrielle returned one with closed eyes, and she listened to the ruler leaving the room. Within two seconds, the two slave trainers entered into the room with the female slave.

That female slave rested her soft eyes on the Amazon Queen; she felt a sense of helplessness for Gabrielle. She'd been her when the Queen was just known as Slave Gabrielle. She could only hope this Queen would survive the return of slavery torment.

~*~*~*~

"Well, a few of the bidders will be arriving this evening, Conqueror," informed Lord Sinteres.

"And your point?" retorted Xena, her eyes locked on the slaver. She stood in the middle of his office.

Lord Sinteres let out a light chuckle and sat down at his desk. "Well, you may want to stay for the bidding."

"When will that be?"

Draco was near the door, an amused smile on his lips while he leaned against the doorway.

"Tomorrow hopefully." The slaver laced his fingers together and placed his hands on the rim of the desk. "I can give you a room for the evening...?"

"No," replied the ruler darkly. "I'm not interested." She turned and walked towards the door.

"Not interested in Queen Gabrielle?" wondered Lord Sinteres aloud, as he stood up. "Now that is rather interesting."

The Conqueror pivoted on her left foot, half turning towards the slaver. "There is nothing interesting about it." Her eyes shifted into a navy blue. "None of them are of any value to me."

"I highly doubt that," whispered Lord Sinteres. "Now, we'll escort you out of the compound." He signaled Draco, whom walked out of the office.

The three of them came into the center of the compound and went directly to the gates.

Lord Sinteres stopped and inquired, "So it is of no interest to you to save the Queen?"

Xena faced the slaver. "None whatsoever, you can continue with your... bidding." Her eyes averted to Draco then back to Lord Sinteres. "But I promise you, by the third day you both will be burning on crosses for your treason."

Lord Sinteres chuckled humorously then he nodded at Draco.

The warrior glanced over at several men that were near the gate. "Form the gauntlet."

The slaver revealed a smirk to Xena. "And this is my response, Conqueror... the gauntlet for a ruler who has lost her edge."

The Conqueror's jaw was clamped down and her right hand fisted up. "Three days," she reminded in a snarl.

Lord Sinteres only laughed lowly at the ruler's promise.

The Warrior Princess suddenly growled and punched the slaver in the face. "Laugh that off." She spun on her heels and marched towards the two lines of men.

"Hades," growled Lord Sinteres, he was touching his right eye that stung.

Draco took a step with his hand going to his blade.

"No, its okay," ordered the slaver. "She'll never make the gauntlet." He lowered his hand from his eye and tried watching the Conqueror through his good eye.

Xena stopped in front of the line of men; she slowly raised an eyebrow at her own men before her. She tried estimating how many would actually hit her and how many would not. After licking her lips, she began walking through the two rows of men. The first three pairs of men never touched her but the ones to follow whaled on her with kicks then punches.

The Conqueror was thrown into one man, only to have him ram his elbow into the top of her head. She groaned and hunched over from the pain. The next blow came directly to the middle of her back sending her flat on her stomach. Her vision began swimming as she took a hit to her right side and her left side. A third kick sent her rolling into her back, blood trickling from the corner of her lips.

In the background, she heard the laughter of both Draco and Lord Sinteres and it rekindled a fire inside of her. Xena suddenly spun on her back kicking four men away from her. She flipped up onto her feet, grabbed one man by the arm when he threw a punch at her. She flung him through the gauntlet to the other side to slam into the soldier on the opposite side.

Her war cry rung from her lips, she pressed through the gauntlet seeing the end. She took a hard punch to the side of her head but she spotted the soldier to her right about to punch as well. She ducked and did a left kick, sending him flying. Caught of guard, she was slammed hard in the chest by a kick. She stumbled back a couple of steps only to get her feet taken from under her.

Two men on either side of the line began kicking vigorously at her. However, the Warrior Princess grabbed both of their ankles and jerked hard. The two soldiers dropped to their backs, knocked unconscious. That gave Xena time to hop back up; she made her way through the gauntlet more simply taking punches to her body. Then

right before her, rested the end of the gauntlet and when she took her next step she saw a fist coming directly at her face.

Xena quickly caught the fist in her hand and gave a hard twist of the man's fist, breaking his wrist. She heard him cry out while she took her last two final steps, leaving the gauntlet.

"How could she..." whispered Lord Sinteres in wonderment.

The Conqueror stared coldly at Draco and Lord Sinteres through the line of the gauntlet.

Neither Draco nor the slaver said anything; they were being drowned by the look from Xena.

Slowly, the Conqueror turned away and started walking through the gates.

"Kill her!" ordered Draco to his men.

The Warrior Princess stopped directly in the gates, her back to them all but waiting to see if anybody attacked... nobody attacked.

"Kill her!" Draco yelled out angrily.

"The Conqueror survived," called out one soldier.

Xena didn't hear anybody move closer to her so she walked into the woods, disappearing in the distance.

"She will certainly kill us now," mentioned Lord Sinteres to Draco.

Draco just stared at the slaver, his stomach dropping in fear.

~*~*~*~

The Conqueror closed her eyes and stopped walking in the center of the forest. She could smell her own blood covering her body. Her muscles ached along with one broken rib and shaking legs. Suddenly, she fell to her knees and her head dropped forward. The sense of an execution came over her while her mind spun with ideas and worry. Then the sound of movement came to her, she lifted her head and looked ahead. A very faint smile creased her lips.

The golden mare stood there, staring at her broken down master but none-the-less she came closer and nudged Xena carefully.

The ruler rubbed her horse's nose and whispered, "Where to, girl huh?" She shook her head for a moment. "I'm not sure myself." She gave a sigh of the world's weight on her shoulders. "It's a fork in the road now."

Argo whined quietly and nudged her mistress again.

"Hmmm... these woods are lovely and dark," uttered the ruler, "but I have promises to keep." She gradually and with pain shooting through her body, climbed up to her feet. "Where'd we but your tack, girl huh?"

Argo whined happily and trotted to a large set of boulders.

"That's right," muttered the Warrior Princess, "Heavy rocks... great." She gritted her teeth while starting to push a rock aside. She then moved the other two smaller ones out of the way. With a heavy breath, she hefted Argo's saddle up onto her back and began the process of putting the tack on her mare.

After a few minutes, she hauled herself up into the horse's saddle and wrapped the reins in her right hand. "Stagira, girl."

Argo seemed to understand her owner's words and turned north; she began at a trot through the woods but soon picked up into a gallop.

~*Part 8*~

Eve studied the forest around her. She sighed and continued tossing the apple back and forth in her hands. She then decided to finally eat her apple, and she stopped and leaned against a tree next to her. She tore through the apple with her front teeth and continued munching on the red fruit.

"Gods mother, when are you going to get here?" she muttered to herself. She'd been waiting for Xena and Gabrielle for several days in the Amazon village since they left over four days ago. They'd just suddenly picked up and left her mentioning something about visiting a friend for awhile. She still didn't understand why she wasn't invited to go with them.

At the same time though, she knew why both her mother and Gabrielle wanted her to stay with the Amazons. She owed a lot to the Amazons and one of the things she wanted to give back to them was herself. She tried hard to show the Amazons she'd changed and that she would become the Princess she was entitled to that was given to her by Gabrielle.

But there were still several things she was confused about. She still saw herself as God's messenger but at the same time, how could she become an Amazon Princess let alone the Queen? They were a tribe of war-like women, and she'd moved away from the way of violence. Deep inside her of herself, she still yearned to wield a blade and to stop the suffering of people with a blade. She had a never ending conflict inside herself on what her true path should be in this life. To fight fire with fire or let love conquer all...?

Eve came out of her thoughts when she heard a loud crackling noise. She lowered her hand with the apple slowly while staring in the direction of the noise. "What hell?" she muttered. She silently leaped into the trees, forgetting her apple on the ground. Quietly, she moved through the trees closer to the noise but then the crackling stopped yet the woods were silent of any animals.

Carefully, Eve bent down on the tree branch and stared at the body lying stomach

down on the ground. Her eyes then began to widen with clear realization of the person. "Mother?" she called while dropping down to the ground. She then heard a low groan as the person lifted her head confirming that it was her mother. "Mother?" she rushed over and knelt down beside Xena. "What happened?"

Xena stared at the young woman and then whispered, "Who are you?" She began lifting herself up onto her feet, her body extremely weak.

"Eve," replied Eve with a worried tone. "Your daughter...?"

Xena straightened up to her full height and her cape fell down behind her. She repeated the girl's words in her head and her eyes fuzzed over with confusion. "Eve?" she questioned, her voice rather deep.

"Mother, what's wrong... what happened?" Eve shook her head as her frantic worry heightened. "Where's Gabrielle?" Then she noticed how Xena stood so stoically towards her plus that her mother seemed almost taller. What even confused her more was that her mother's chakram was different without the handle in the middle and not to mention she was wearing a cape.

"Look... Eve, I need to find Gabrielle. Do you know where she is?" Xena now sensed her body starting to shake again, her vision hazing over, and the pain from the gauntlet coming back.

Eve didn't answer and instead stared at her mother in complete confusion. She knew now something was rather out of place. Then what shocked her more was when Xena's eyes rolled back into her head and she collapsed to the ground, out cold. She then panicked; dropping down to her knees and tried to wake Xena. "Help!" she screamed out, "Help!"

~*~*~*~

Xena groaned a bit and her senses were filled with the scent of balsam. She turned her head to the right and opened her eyes. She studied the table where a container of balsam, wraps, and bowl of water resided on top. Her eyes shifted to the window, and she noticed the sun had already set.

The room about her was made out of brown stone and decorated in dark colors. She noted a mask hanging on the wall on the opposite side above another window, she immediately recognized the mask.

"Amazons," she whispered, her eyes narrowing into slits. Xena climbed out of bed and found her attire lying on a chair. She quickly pulled them on despite how sore her entire body was after the past couple of days. The only thing she was missing was her sword, chakram, and dagger. After she clipped on her cape, Xena went to the door and opened it.

"Stop," ordered a guard Amazon at the door. "You may not leave without seeing the queen first."

Xena stared at the Amazon as her eyebrow slowly rose up in annoyance. "Then may I

see the queen?"

"No, she is rather busy at the moment. You are to stay here until instructed otherwise." The Amazon didn't move out of the warrior's way and stood her ground. "Return to your quarters."

"Hmmm." Xena turned and went back into her hut, with a hard slam of the door.

After about five or so minutes passed by, Eve appeared at the hut. "Is she awake?"

The Amazon nodded. "For a bit now," she added.

"Thanks."

The guard watched Eve enter into the hut then she returned her focus on the village.

"Hi," greeted Eve to Xena.

Xena continued staring out of the window as if she didn't notice Eve but then she turned to Eve. "So you're Xena's daughter?"

Eve licked her lips and her stomach turned with nervousness. "Yes... and who are you?"

Xena now faced the younger woman. "I am the Conqueror."

Eve narrowed her eyes at the ruler. "How...?"

The Conqueror suddenly had an amused smile, and she sat down in the nearby chair. "I am your mother's counterpart in an alternate world you could say."

Xena's daughter folded her arms and leaned against the doorway, preparing herself for this explanation. "Alternate world, what's this alternate world?"

"It is the opposite of yours," answered the ruler. "I've heard you have a hero by the name of Hercules...?"

"Had," corrected the younger woman.

"Had then." Xena laced her hands together. "He was the person to... change your mother from the darkness. In my world, Hercules never existed."

"Sso... you're the outcome of my mother if Hercules had never been born."

"Yes," confirmed the Warrior Princess. "She would have been the Conqueror of the known-world." She revealed a tiny grin. "As it turned out, I got the job."

Eve replied with a small chuckle. "Why doesn't that surprise me?" She then went more serious. "And what about Gabrielle?"

The Conqueror faintly nodded then said, "She is the Amazon Queen in my world."

"No surprise there either," stated Xena's daughter. She lifted herself off the doorway. "Why are you here?"

"To find Gabrielle," quickly responded the ruler.

"What do you need from Gabrielle?"

The Conqueror now stood up tall, her cape cascading behind her. "That is my own business." To further her statement, her eyes edged into a winter's deep cold.

Eve didn't contest the Conqueror's words but instead stared at the tall ruler and seem to judge her for several seconds. She then finally asked, "Are you hungry?"

"Yes," answered the ruler.

Eve nodded at the door. "Follow me." She left the hut and informed the guard she would escort Xena to and from the dining hut.

The guard simply nodded and studied the pair walking to the dining hut.

The Conqueror studied what she could of the torch-lit village but then was soon inside of the dining hut.

A few Amazons that were still eating in the hut all turned their heads towards the Conqueror.

The ruler heard the low whispers that were clearly about her. She just narrowed her eyes and looked away as she came up to the long outstretched table of food.

Eve picked up a plate and utensils; she started down the table picking out what she wanted to eat.

The Conqueror paused for a moment yet picked up a plate with fork and knife. She gazed at all the food on the table and debated on if she really wanted to eat but decided it was best to eat after these past days. Her body would need the food for healing and repairing.

Xena's daughter had already gathered her food and was sitting at a table waiting for the Conqueror.

The Warrior Princess came over and sat down across from the younger woman.

"So what are the Amazons like in your world?"

The Conqueror peered up from her food and studied Eve briefly. "They're the same as here."

"There are several tribes of them?"

"No," curtly answered the ruler. "There is only one and its rather small."

Eve let the tips of her fork stand on the plate as she stared at the Conqueror, her eyes slightly into slits. "They fight against you," she stated.

The Conqueror ran her tongue along the front of her teeth before saying, "They did."

A sharp grin creased Eve's lips slowly. "Let me guess, Gabrielle setup some kind of treaty with you...?"

The ruler had a hidden grin in her expression. "Yes actually."

"That's Gabrielle," whispered Eve as she continued eating her meal. Eve then looked up when she saw another Amazon enter into the hut, it was the queen.

The Conqueror saw where Eve was looking to and turned her head to see a new Amazon in the hut. She automatically guessed it to be the queen.

Eve stood up from her seat. "My queen."

"Sit, Eve."

The queen then scooted in beside Eve, and she merely looked over the Conqueror. "I am Varia, the queen of the Amazons."

The ruler lowered her fork onto the empty plate and replied, "And I am Xena, the Conqueror of the known-world."

Varia glanced at Eve with an inquisitive look.

"Its true," confirmed Xena's daughter as her focus turned on the ruler. "The Conqueror is from an alternate world."

Queen Varia shifted her attention back to the Warrior Princess. "And why are you here, Conqueror?"

"I'm here to find Gabrielle."

"I'm afraid she nor... Xena are here. They are away but may be returning tomorrow, we hope." The queen paused for a moment but then asked, "Is there anything the Amazons can help with?"

"No... not yet," answered the ruler.

"May I inquire why Eve found you beaten and unconscious?"

Xena sighed while folding her arms, and she sat back in her chair. "I went through the gauntlet."

Varia's eyes slightly widened and a hint of surprise charged through her. "And how do you feel now?"

"Much better," responded the ruler, "Thank you for hospitality."

The queen slightly bowed her head. "I am sorry there has been a guard at your hut but we were unsure of you. But I feel its safe to remove the guard."

"Thank you."

The queen gave a faint smile before she stood up and said, "Princess Eve, be sure to assist the Conqueror if she needs anything."

"Yes, my queen."

"Tomorrow Gabrielle and Xena should return and we'll be able to settle what's going on," informed the queen, "Please get some rest tonight, Conqueror."

The Conqueror nodded to Varia then watched her leave the hut.

Eve waited then stood up with her empty plate. "I'll escort you back to the hut."

The ruler rose up with her plate and followed Eve. As she went outside the hut, she asked, "You're the princess?"

Eve gave a long sigh then replied, "Sort of." She glanced at the Conqueror then back through the village. "I'm unofficially the princess until I earn my status back."

"Back?" repeated the Warrior Princess.

"I was given the caste by Gabrielle when I was a baby," informed the princess, "however I've done a lot of wrong in my time... especially to the Amazons. So I must earn my caste back along with the trust of the Amazons. When that happens then I am returned my caste."

"Then why does the queen call you the princess?" probed Xena.

"To remind me of my coming title," uttered Eve. She then saw the guard and the Conqueror's hut. She came directly to the guard and ordered, "You're duty is finished. Varia requested no guards posted here."

The guard nodded then added, "Thank you. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," called Eve.

The Warrior Princess entered her hut for the evening with Eve following in behind.

"How did you meet Gabrielle and my mother?" Eve remained in the doorway.

Xena turned around with her arms against her chest. "Gabrielle... stumbled into my world and Xena followed after her." She fell silent in thought then said, "It's a long story."

"Hmmm," agreed Xena's daughter. "I'd like to hear it sometime."

The Conqueror faintly chuckled in response. "Maybe you'll hear it sometime then."

Eve nodded, taking that as a cue to leave the hut. "Have a goodnight, Conqueror."

The ruler replied only with a nod and watched the young woman leave her hut. She then stared at her bed and gave a long sigh. "Not exactly royal," she muttered while reaching back to unhook her cape.

~*Part 9*~

Gabrielle briskly walked up the hill and looked down the valley at all the huts with light funnels of smoke filtering up from them in the distance. She glanced back down the hill. "You coming, partner?"

Xena laughed at her lover's question and climbed up to the top of the hill with Argo beside her. "Almost there huh?"

"Uh huh." The warrior-bard stared at the Amazon village in the morning sunlight. "Wonder how Eve is doing with them...?"

The warrior gave a shrug with a tilt of her head. "Probably well."

"Probably," agreed the Amazon Queen. "Hmmm... but wonder how the Amazons are doing with her?"

Xena chuckled as a grin tweaked her lips. "Probably hanging in there."

"Probably," agreed Gabrielle yet again. "It'll be nice to see her."

"Mmmm." Xena had to smile at that as she signaled Argo to follow her down the hill into the valley.

The warrior-bard turned to her stallion and patted his nose. "Come on, boy." She then followed after her soulmate down the hill.

The pair took about a candlemark to reach the border of the Amazon forest. Once they entered into the forest, they took only twenty minutes to arrive at the gates.

"Welcome back," greeted the guard Amazon at the gate.

"Its good to see you, Cyane." Gabrielle formed her warm smile to the Amazon.

Cyane reflected the smile back and hugged the warrior-bard. "We've been waiting for you both."

"Oh?" inquired the Amazon Queen.

"Yes... we've had something come up."

At hearing this, Xena turned from her mare to the Amazon. "What's happened?"

Cyane sighed and replied, "Nothing bad but... we've had an unexpected visitor. Wait here for a moment." She went into the village.

"What you think this is about?" asked Gabrielle.

"God only knows," muttered the warrior as she saw Cyane returning with two Amazons, Tyro and Bame

"Come with me and Bame will take your horses." Cyane lead her two friends into the village while Tyro took her post at the gate.

Xena and Gabrielle gave Bame the reins to their horses and then exchanged looks as they followed behind Cyane.

Cyane went directly to Varia's hut and knocked on the door. "My queen?"

The queen opened the door and smiled at the two warriors with Cyane. "Welcome back, Xena and Gabrielle."

"Its good to be back," responded the warrior-bard. "What's going on?"

"Unexpected visitor," briefly answered the queen. "Cyane, go find Eve and bring her to the guest hut."

"Right away." Cyane hurried off.

Varia nodded for her friends to come with her as she left her hut. "Yesterday Eve was on patrol duty," explained the queen, "and she came across some kind of crackling noise while on patrol. So she investigated it and found what she thought was you." Varia peered up at Xena. "But quickly figured out it wasn't you."

"The Conqueror," finished Gabrielle.

"Yes, that's what she's told us so far," confirmed the queen. "She says she's looking for you, Gabrielle but hasn't said why yet."

Gabrielle felt her stomach twist, and she licked her lips. "This can't be good."

The group came to the Conqueror's hut and went inside of it.

"Conqueror?" greeted the warrior-bard.

The Conqueror stood up from her chair with a warm smile, for the first time in weeks, coming into shape. "Hi, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle quickly smiled back and engulfed her friend in a strong hug. "Its good to see you."

The ruler looked up from Gabrielle to her mirror counterpart. "Xena." She took a step closer with her arm coming up.

"Conqueror." Xena briskly shook the Conqueror's arm with a smile.

After the ruler let go of the warrior's arm, Gabrielle asked, "Why are you here, Conqueror? And what happened to you?" She'd noticed the various scars, cuts, and bruises on the ruler's body.

The ruler let out a heavy sigh. "You'll need to sit for this one." She held her hand out to the chairs by the table.

Everybody took a spot in a chair right when Eve and Cyane stepped in the hut.

"Eve." The warrior quickly came out of her seat and hugged her daughter happily.

"Hi, mother... its about time you showed up."

The Warrior Princess laughed softly while releasing her daughter. "Sorry Gabrielle and I took so long."

"Its okay." Eve smiled and it went bigger when Gabrielle stood up to hug her.

"Miss us?" taunted the warrior-bard quietly.

A chuckle filter between Eve's lips, and she answered, "Of course."

Gabrielle pulled back and sat down. "Sit down."

Eve and Cyane took seats around the group and then everybody's attention turned to the Conqueror.

"Why are you here?" started the Amazon Queen.

The Conqueror didn't reply to Gabrielle right away but took a long breath then finally said, "I need your help."

"What's happened?" whispered the warrior-bard.

The ruler laced her hands together in her lap and rested back into her chair. "Queen Gabrielle has been taken into slavery by Lord Sinteres."

"Sinteres?" interrupted the warrior, one of her dark eyebrows rising up.

"Yes, he was one of my major slavers in my realm."

"Was? Then what happened?" questioned Eve.

The Conqueror licked her lips while forming the story in her head correctly. "Queen Gabrielle was headed back to her Nation to check on things. I sent my head guard with several soldiers with her plus her two Amazons, Ephiny and Eponin were with her. On the way back to my capital, they were ambushed by my own soldiers."

"What?" Gabrielle's eyebrows were furrowed together. "How?"

"The day before they left, I sent my general, Draco, with several soldiers out to kill Lord Sinteres and destroy his compound."

"For what reason?"

The Conqueror looked to Xena and answered, "Queen Gabrielle informed me that Lord Sinteres was her master during the years she was a slave. I wanted him killed and his compound gone as a debt paid back to Queen Gabrielle for her years of slavery. Unfortunately I did not expect Draco to turn on me."

"So they were the ones to ambush her?"

"Yes," answered the ruler to Gabrielle, "and she was kidnapped along with Eponin and Palamon, my head guard."

"What of Ephiny?" inquired the warrior-bard.

"Ephiny managed to escape and is now at my castle watching over my realm."

Gabrielle considered that for a moment and realized the Conqueror was taking a gigantic step in letting somebody else rule over her kingdom in her place. "And how did you get hurt, Conqueror?"

"Lord Sinteres... asked me to visit him and his compound alone, I did so. When I arrived there, I was taken directly to see Eponin and Palamon and both of them are fine. I saw Queen Gabrielle last... she's being retrained as a slave. Afterwards, Sinteres invited me to stay for the bidding on Queen Gabrielle." Then the Conqueror whispered, "Which should be today." She sighed before continuing with her story. "I decided to leave and before I could leave, I had to walk through a gauntlet."

The warrior-bard glanced at her lover, whom also had a confused look. "How can that be?" questioned Gabrielle, "Only leaders that have lost control of their army walk through a gauntlet."

The Conqueror faintly grinned at her friend's words. "True and I had lost control of the particular soldiers that Draco now controls. There are many changes happening within and around my realm, Gabrielle due to my own personal changes. Some people see my changes for better while others see it as a weakness."

"You're developing more enemies within your realm," finished the warrior-bard.

"Yes as well as I am making allies such as the Amazons."

The Amazon Queen nodded and sat back in her chair finally. "So the problem is saving the Queen."

"Yes, that's why I am here... I need your help and Xena's help."

The soulmates both averted their attention to each other as worried soaked into them.

Xena looked back to the Conqueror. "Who do you imagine will buy Queen Gabrielle? Gurkhan?"

The ruler slowly nodded her answer. "I imagine he would... she would catch a fine price. With that amount of money then Lord Sinteres will develop a large army."

"Then others will ally with him," added Gabrielle, "and attack you."

"I'm afraid so," confirmed the Conqueror.

"And what of Eponin and Palamon?" cut in Eve.

The Conqueror thought for a moment about Sinteres's options. "More than likely he will keep them both. He knows Palamon is valuable to me and Eponin is valuable to the Amazons. They'll be his shield."

Varia sighed deeply and finally spoke up, "That does not leave many options."

"No it does not," agreed the Conqueror.

"Conqueror, off hand do you know how large the Amazon Nation is in your world?" interrupted Cyane.

"I guess there to be roughly... a couple hundred."

"What are you thinking, Cyane?" asked the queen.

Cyane shrugged and glanced between Varia and the others. "Well... from the sounds of things, the Conqueror is going to need help. The Amazons in the Conqueror's world sound rather small... maybe the thing to do is send some of our Amazons for support."

"You think we even have that many Amazons, Cyane?" reminded the queen.

"And do you think Queen Gabrielle would hesitate to help you, Varia if this was reversed?"

Varia looked away then back at the Amazon Queen. "No she would not."

"We have Amazons to spare," stated Gabrielle.

"I don't think that's the main concern at hand," interjected the warrior, "the biggest problem is getting the Queen."

The Conqueror nodded her agreement. "That is my major concern before I can even begin to plan an attack against Sinteres. Gurkhan will be more than happy to team up with Sinteres to take over my kingdom... especially since I've put a death warrant on slavers now."

Gabrielle chewed on her lower lip while considering different routes to go. "Then

we'll have to do what we did last time with Gurkhan," decided the Amazon Queen as she turned her head at Xena.

The warrior gave her nod of approval while saying, "We'll have to infiltrate Gurkhan's palace and kill Gurkhan."

"Wait, wait," suddenly cut in Eve. "How can either of you do that?"

Xena raised an eyebrow at her daughter.

"She's got a point," agreed Cyane. "Gurkhan will undoubtedly recognize you both... maybe Gabrielle can get away with it."

"They're right." The Conqueror brought everybody's attention back to her. "There's no way you won't be recognized."

"Cyane and I can do it," cut in Eve. "They'll never recognize either of us... even more so since our counterparts don't even exist there."

"Eve, you can't protect yourself," reminded her mother.

"That's why Cyane can come inside with me," urged the daughter. "You and Gabrielle can come for support to make sure we all escape safely."

The warrior was considering her daughter's words.

"Maybe the thing to do, Xena is we'll take care of Gurkhan while Eve and Cyane get Queen Gabrielle to safety," suggested the warrior-bard.

Xena nodded her head at her soulmate's idea. "As long as you both think you can handle it," she urged to her daughter and Cyane. "You keep everybody distracted and Gabrielle and I will take care of Gurkhan."

"I gamed," instantly stated Cyane, a grin touching the corners of her lips.

"I second that." Eve had her grin crossing her expression.

Varia now entered into the conversation, "I will gather several of my Amazons to take into the alternate world to assist Queen Gabrielle's Amazons." She then shifted her focus to the Conqueror. "You said that there is only one tribe?"

"For the most part, yes." The ruler considered for a moment then added, "There may be some smaller unknown tribes throughout Greece that I do not know of. I am sure the Amazons can tell you better than I can."

"Then it would be wise to bring all of them together." Varia got nods of agreements from the rest of the group. "I suggest then we leave this afternoon before anything else happens in the other world." She turned her head to Cyane. "Gather up the sisters, we will pick out the Amazons to follow us. And bring Bane to my hut."

"Right away." Cyane jumped out of her seat and left on her mission to round up her

sisters.

"Eve, go help Cyane," ordered Gabrielle. "Please."

Eve took the hint, knowing her mother and Gabrielle wanted to talk more to the Conqueror alone. She quietly left the hut in search of Cyane.

Varia stood up and said, "If there is anything else between now and leaving, I'll be in my hut or in the center of the village."

"Thank you, Varia." Gabrielle gave a smile to the queen and watched her leave. "And what are we going to do about Palamon and Eponin? We obviously can't strike until they're freed from Sinteres."

"Then we'll have to infiltrate his compound to get them. It is the only way to do it."

"A double scheme, I like it." The Conqueror grinned before saying, "And I think I know who just to send into the compound."

"Who is that?" inquired the warrior-bard.

The ruler chuckled deeply and said, "Well, we'll have to steal Palamon and Eponin back and the best person for that job is-

"The King of Thieves," said both Xena's together, who both laughed lightly.

"Oh god," groaned Gabrielle as her shoulders slumped down.

"Him and his partner can do it," continued the Conqueror.

The Warrior Princess arched an eyebrow. "Partner?"

"And small man by the name of Iolaus, the two of them work together."

"Can we trust them?"

"As far as you can throw them." The Conqueror flashed a grin at Gabrielle but went serious again. "But jingle some money at them and they'll be very trust worthy. I've used them quite often."

"This just keeps getting better and better," joked the warrior-bard yet she then asked, "Conqueror, what will you do while we bring Queen Gabrielle back?"

The Conqueror sighed at the question. "The only thing I can do, Gabrielle... wait."

The warrior's eyes flicked to her soulmate then back at the Conqueror. "Then strike Lord Sinteres...?"

"If he doesn't strike first otherwise I will try to fend him off and rally the troops. The Amazons and I will have to work together, which will be a battle in itself from our pasts."

"Hell," grumbled the warrior-bard.

"It would be much simpler if the Queen was there to lead them," mentioned the ruler quietly.

Xena tilted her head to one side then asked the Conqueror, "How do you get along with Ephiny?"

"It is shaky."

The warrior tapped her right fingernail repeatedly on the arm rest in thought.

"What is it?" whispered the Amazon Queen.

Xena licked her lips and said, "You may have to stay to lead the Amazons. Ephiny does not get along with the Conqueror and Varia does not have the skills quite yet." She turned her head to her lover. "But you have the skills plus you get along with the Conqueror, not to mention *all* of the Amazons will follow you."

"Xena, you're going to need help with Gurkhan."

"Then she can take Varia with her," recommended the ruler. "It is a better idea to have some extra help, Xena."

The warrior gave a faint nod. "It would be the thing to do, Gabrielle."

The warrior-bard was silent for a few moments then finally answered to the hidden question. "Okay, we'll do it that way then."

"Thank you," uttered the Conqueror, "I will need your help with the Amazons."

"I'll do my best," promised the Amazon Queen.

~*~*~*~

"We're just about ready, Queen Varia."

Varia nodded at Cyane's update on the Amazons. "I need to finish with Bane and I will be out there. Will everybody be ready by then?"

"Yes of course."

"Thank you, Cyane." Varia heard Cyane leave her hut then she faced Bane again. "You think you can handle the village till we return?"

"Yes," answered the second in command. "How many Amazons are you leaving here?"

"Fifty, I hope that is enough."

"That's fine." Bane pushed herself up more in her chair then added, "I can call on the other two tribes for assistances."

"Yes, I sent out a messenger today to let them know of what's going on and that this village is under a low amount of Amazons if trouble were to occur."

"Thank you."

Varia sighed while standing up from her chair, as did Bane. "Hopefully there will be no problems. If we do have problems we will send somebody back from the alternate world."

The second in command folded her arms against her chest. "I will request the other two tribes to help fight in the campaign in the alternate world if need be."

"Exactly."

Bane reached out and grasped the queen's forearm. "Be careful, my queen."

Queen Varia smiled at her second in command. "I will, Bane... take care of our sisters."

"You know I will." Bane quickly pulled in the queen for a strong hug.

"Thank you," uttered Varia.

"You're welcome," whispered back the Amazon. She then released her friend and said, "We better get out there."

The queen nodded and left her hut with Bane at her side.

Together, they arrived in the center of the village where roughly three hundred Amazons were gathered along with Xena, Gabrielle, the Conqueror, and Eve.

"Is everything ready, Cyane?"

"Yes, my queen." Cyane glanced at various Amazons prepared for traveling either on foot or by horseback.

Varia nodded and looked at her Amazons and spoke to them all. "Today, two hundred fifty of you are following me, Xena, Queen Gabrielle, and the Conqueror into an alternate world to help your sister Amazons of an alternate world. You will come to realize that these sisters in the alternate world are the ones from our legends handed down for generations now. You will be meeting these legends and fighting by their side to stop the changes in another world that are evil and threatening to destroy our sister Amazons and the greater good. We will not rest or return to our home here until we have smothered out the ones that threaten our fellow sisters!"

The Amazons all threw up their hands with swords and cheering at the top of their lungs.

"Let's move, Amazons!" ordered the queen.

In unison, the two hundred fifty Amazons filtered out of the village and ranked up outside of the gates waiting for their queen.

"Your horses," offered Tyro and another Amazon.

"Thank you," replied Gabrielle as she took her horse.

"Thanks, Tyro." Xena smiled at the Amazon and took Argo's reins.

Varia took her own horse from the other Amazon, mounting the mare with ease.

"Do you need a ride?" offered the warrior to Eve.

Eve smiled up at her mother and shook her head. "No thanks, mother. I prefer to walk."

"Eve and I are going to discuss a rough plan for later," mentioned Cyane.

"Good idea," commended the warrior-bard.

The Conqueror glanced at Eve and Cyane. "And I think I'll help you two."

"You'll be fine walking, Conqueror?" questioned Gabrielle with a hint of worry held in her voice.

"Yes, I'll be fine, Gabrielle." The ruler gave her friend a smile.

Gabrielle nodded then looked to the gates. "Well, time to go." She kicked her stallion lightly on the sides and urged him out of the village.

Xena followed behind her soulmate with Varia directly behind and then the three women on foot.

Varia, Gabrielle, and the Warrior Princess came to the front to lead the Amazons towards Stagira.

Eve, Cyane, and the Conqueror were in the front as well but off to one side preparing a plan to save Queen Gabrielle from Gurkhan.

~*~*~*~

"Well, everybody is settled in," commented Cyane to her queen.

"Good to hear." Varia smiled at her third in command. "Thank you, Cy."

"Welcome." Cyane sat down in her spot beside the warrior-bard.

A rather large radius of the dark forest was lit up by various campfires from all the Amazons. The soulmates, Eve, Cyane, Varia, and the Conqueror were all sleeping

separate from the rest of the Amazons. Gabrielle had been the designated cook for their group tonight and was keeping busy with that chore. The others were spread out around the campfire either talking or relaxing with the exception of the Conqueror, who had left the camp for awhile and was down by the lakeside.

"Gabrielle, where's the Conqueror?" inquired Eve.

"She's down at the lake, I think," answered the Amazon Queen as she went to the campfire to check on dinner.

After hearing that, Eve stood up and walked off towards the lake.

Gabrielle exchanged a look with her soulmate, whom just shrugged in reply.

Eve spotted the ruler sitting down on a large rock looking over the lake. She saw something make the water ripple, and she noticed the Conqueror had thrown something. She came closer to the ruler and said, "Hi."

The Conqueror peered up at Xena's daughter with a faint smile and she watched the younger woman sit down beside her on the rock.

"How are you doing?"

"Alright," replied the ruler. "Yourself?"

Eve shrugged and answered, "Not bad... a bit nervous about this mission though."

"You'll do fine, Eve." The Conqueror picked a stone out of her left hand and threw it into the lake. "Its all on a matter of determination."

"True," agreed the ex-Roman commander.

"But then I think you already knew that," stated the ruler.

The messenger of God glanced at the Conqueror, a hint of surprise flashing in her eyes.

"You have that air to you," mentioned the ruler. "How much did you conqueror?" she further probed.

"A better part of the known-world."

The Conqueror slowly nodded. "Egypt?"

"Yes of course."

"Chin?"

"Easily," replied Eve.

The Conqueror laughed lightly and then asked, "Gaul and Britannia?"

"Yes, Britannia was last before I laid down my sword."

Xena pressed her lips together and tossed another rock into the lake. "Why?"

Eve took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "My mother and Gabrielle suddenly returned and showed me everything I'd done wrong. After I moved away from the way of a warrior, I discovered I'm the messenger of God."

The Conqueror nodded without questioning any of it except for one thing. "Are you still... the messenger of God?"

Eve glanced at the Warrior Princess and considered her words. "I don't know anymore, honestly."

Xena grinned at the daughter and said, "Something to chew on huh?" She tossed her last rock into the lake and watched the ripples briefly. "So you're Xena's daughter too huh?"

"Yesss." Eve was grinning a bit about the Conqueror's question. "Why you ask again?"

"You're not her carbon copy, I'll say that."

"Well... it's a bit odd how I was... conceived."

The Warrior Princess raised an eyebrow in response.

"Mother became pregnant with me by a former enemy of hers."

"That is interesting," stated the ruler with a chuckle. "How did this come about?"

"I was a gift to mother from Callisto, her former enemy, as well as God. Callisto at the time was a spirit and so she is now my spirit."

"I see." The Conqueror nodded and then asked, "So your... 'father' would be Callisto...?"

"God is more so," answered Eve. "I think they both have a hand in my life."

The ruler dropped her head to one side. "What colour eyes does Callisto have?"

"I believe they were either brown or amber, I'm not sure. Why?"

"Hmmm... how tall was she?"

"About as tall as mother." Eve shook her head in confusion and asked, "Why?"

The Conqueror revealed an amused smile. "Just because you have green eyes and you're not very tall in comparison to Xena." She noted Eve's confused look and decided to further explain. "I think you need to figure out who your true... 'father' is,

Eve. You're just between Gabrielle and Xena's height, ash-brown hair like your hair is a mix of blond and black. Besides the fact that your bone structure is small yet from what I can tell, you're rather strong physically."

Eve never spoke, her mind processing what the Conqueror said and she knew what the ruler was purposing. She was about to say something when she heard a tree branch snap.

"Hey you two, its dinner time."

The pair looked at a smiling Gabrielle behind them.

"Go on up," ordered Xena to Eve.

Eve nodded her head and left to return back to camp.

The warrior-bard sat down beside her friend and asked, "How you doing?"

"I'm okay."

Gabrielle peered up into faint dark blue eyes. "How are you feeling?" Her tone was rather stern.

The ruler dropped her gaze and stared at the ground at her feet. "Rather confused," she mentioned quietly.

The Amazon Queen let out a long dragged out sigh. "I was afraid of that."

The Warrior Princess lifted her head back up, gazing over the lake. "She made me promise to save her Amazon."

"I would have asked the same of you if I'd been her."

"I know," admitted the ruler. "I just hope we can pull it off."

"How were you and Queen Gabrielle getting along before everything happened?"

The Conqueror said nothing while considering her time with the Queen in the castle. "Things were getting better... easier." She then turned her head to the warrior-bard. "She's not you."

"No she is not," agreed the warrior-bard. "She is who I was... who I would be if I'd been in that world." She reached out and touched her friend's leg. "You don't need me... you need her."

"I'd like to not need anybody, Gabrielle." The ruler's eyes chilled over. "Depending on anybody is not in my favor."

"You haven't even begun to try it, Conqueror."

"Yes I have," countered the ruler. She leaned down to pick up a rock and threw it in

the pond. "I stopped the day my brother died."

Gabrielle squeezed the firm leg under her hand then removed her hand. "I know its hard, Conqueror... I watched Xena go through what you're going through now."

"You were there to help her," reminded the ruler.

"As Queen Gabrielle is there to help you," countered the warrior-bard. "You're going through exactly what Xena went through."

"I am not Xena," half growled the ruler at her friend.

"Nor is Queen Gabrielle me," hotly whispered Gabrielle. "Don't be scared of somebody that is there to help you." She stood up quickly.

The Conqueror lifted her eyes to the smaller warrior. "This type of change is not what I need."

"This kind of change is exactly what you need, Conqueror." Gabrielle held out her small hand out to the ruler.

Xena studied her friend momentarily but took the hand and was heaved up to her feet safely by Gabrielle.

"Dinner will be getting cold if we wait any longer." Gabrielle started off for the camp and the Conqueror joined her at her side.

~*Part 10*~

Gabrielle dismounted her stallion as she heard Varia in the background commanding the Amazons to come to a halt. "Here we are."

Xena dismounted from Argo and patted her on the side. "We're going to have to do this a certain way."

Varia came up closer to the group and stopped her horse close by the soulmates. "They'll have to go inside by groups."

"That's the simplest way to do it," agreed the Conqueror, "Probably by groups of ten could fit in there. If they're on horseback then go by groups of five with horses."

Gabrielle folded her arms in consideration. "I think it'd be best for Xena and me to go through first because we'll end up directly in the Amazon forest just as the Conqueror did here." She looked at her soulmate. "We'll take care of telling the Amazons in the alternate world of what's going on plus keep our Amazons in line."

The warrior nodded her agreement. "Varia, Eve, and the Conqueror can come through last."

Everybody agreed together and began to carry out the plan.

Gabrielle and Xena entered into the cave first with their horses. They peered up at the sparkling bits of sulfur like gems and amber that welcomed them back in each sparkle. Together, they closed their eyes and felt their body begin to tingle and a certain amount of pain increase in their bodies. They heard the horses whine in protest as they gritted their teeth against the pain they were almost use to now. As the pain settled down and the blurred world around them began to resettle and organize into something understandable, they found greenery all around them.

Gabrielle was the first one to collapse onto her knees breathing heavily.

The warrior had also found herself down on her knees coughing.

"Xena, Gabrielle?" called out a familiar voice.

The warrior-bard lifted her head to see Amarice running towards her and Xena. She slowly pushed herself up onto her feet.

The Warrior Princess was already standing back up.

"Are you both okay?" asked the Amazon in a worried tone.

"Yes." Gabrielle took a deep breath before saying, "We need to move before the others come," she reminded her lover.

The warrior nodded and patted Argo. "Come on, girl."

"The others? What's going on?" Amarice walked between the two legendary heroes.

"We've brought help, Amarice," informed the Amazon Queen.

"Then... you've heard, about what happened to Queen Gabrielle?"

"Yes, the Conqueror sought us out."

Amarice stared at Gabrielle for a moment but soon looked to the spot where they'd arrived from as forms of ten other people began developing. "By the gods," she uttered.

"Amarice?"

The Amazon didn't make any signal of hearing the warrior-bard but she certainly snapped to when Xena's voice cut in.

"Amarice?"

"Yes?"

"Can you go get Solari for me?" Gabrielle had grabbed the young Amazon's shoulder.

"Yeah sure." Amarice took one last look at the ten women that were clearly Amazons. She then turned and ran off towards the village.

Gabrielle handed her soulmate the reins, "Thanks, Xen."

"Go on," whispered the warrior with a smile.

The Amazon Queen gave a quick smile and walked over to the ten Amazons. "Amazons, you need to go stand beside Xena once you recover from the shock. The others will be coming in after you."

Slowly, the ten Amazons gathered themselves and walked over to where the Warrior Princess stood.

Gabrielle took a few steps back herself and watched as ten bodies were materializing in the air. She watched as some of the Amazons dropped down in pain while others hunched over. "That's always the fun part," she grumbled half jokingly. "Ladies, I need you to go stand by your sisters when you're ready so the others can come."

The new Amazons, one by one, walked painfully over to their fellow Amazons.

Xena heard two people running towards them from the way of the village. Then she spotted Amarice returning with Solari running behind her. "Gabrielle, Amarice is returning with Solari."

"Great, thank you."

Solari came right up to Gabrielle at a brisk walk and breathing hard. "What's going on?" she rasped.

"Move," stated the warrior-bard, she jerked the second in command back by her forearm right before ten more Amazons began forming.

"Holy Artemis," whispered Solari in awe. She watched the struggling Amazons get to their feet and move out of the way as Gabrielle requested them. She then quickly turned her head to Gabrielle. "Gabrielle?"

The Amazon Queen flashed a grin at her friend. "We heard there was some trouble... Xena and I thought you might need some reinforcements."

"Yes some help but an entire nation?"

"Well..." The warrior-bard smirked at the second in command. "Its just one of my tribes."

Solari just gaped in response. "And um... how many is that exactly?"

"Two hundred and fifty Amazons." A chuckle could be heard from the Amazon Queen but she asked, "You don't want them?"

"Oh no, I'm not complaining." Solari watched another group of Amazons move to the mounting group of Amazons near Xena. "Exactly how did you hear what happened?"

"The Conqueror found Xena and me."

"Ah that would explain it." The second in command shook her head and asked, "I take it there is a plan...?"

"Yes of course." Gabrielle smiled at the ten new arrived Amazons. "Go by the others, sisters when you can." She then glanced at the second in command. "What has happened to Queen Gabrielle?"

"Ephiny sent word that she was bought by another slaver called Gurkhan. He spent a lot of money on her too."

Gabrielle chewed on her lower lip while thinking briefly. "What else did Ephiny say?"

"She told us not to strike because we were to wait on the Conqueror plus that Eponin was captured."

The warrior-bard nodded. "Good."

Solari was about to ask a question but she'd finally realized that all of these new Amazons seemed to be staring at her a lot. They all had expressions of awe, surprise, and pure respect. "Why are they all looking at me like that?" she whispered quietly.

The Amazon Queen felt a small laugh bubble up inside of herself. "Because the Solari in my world is long gone but she is a legend in their time." She grinned at the second in command. "You're going to get a lot of those looks."

Solari simply shook her head in wonderment. "I can tell this going to be odd at first."

"Yes but that's little of our worries." The warrior-bard ordered the new set of Amazons to join the rest of the group before asking Solari, "When did you last hear from Eph?"

"It was just yesterday."

"Have you sent a message back?"

"No not yet."

Gabrielle nodded and said, "Good, we'll take care of updating Ephiny."

Solari laughed quietly then folded her arms against her chest. She watched yet another ten Amazons move to the group as ten more reappeared in thin air. "I'm glad you're here to help."

"I know." Gabrielle smiled at her friend. "This is going to be hard."

"Mmmm," agreed the second in command. "And bloody," she added.

The warrior-bard released a solemn sigh. "Afraid so."

~*~*~*~

"It should be safe enough for just us to travel to Athens," stated Xena to her soulmate and the others around the table.

"Sinteres will be too busy building up his army and allies to bother to notice us," further persuaded Eve.

"So then, the plan is to return to Athens, release Ephiny from her duties," started the Conqueror as she watched everybody nod in answer. "Then Ephiny, Gabrielle, and few designated Amazons will return back to the Nation. Eve, Xena, Varia, and Cyane will be sent off to rescue Queen Gabrielle." She saw everybody agreeing with her explanation thus far. "I will take care of getting Autolycus and Iolaus and sending them off on their mission. While that is going on, Gabrielle will be organizing the Amazons and I will meet you on the battlefield after I raise my army."

"We'll figure out a plan of attack while Autolycus and Iolaus release Palamon and Eponin," added the warrior-bard.

"Yes but we cannot attack until we know that Queen Gabrielle is safe from Gurkhan otherwise we jeopardize the entire campaign," reminded the Conqueror. "Once Queen Gabrielle is safe then can we only crush Sinteres and Draco and whoever else may follow them."

"I still would like to know how we have your word, Conqueror that you won't back out of this once the fight against Sinteres begins?" cut in Solari, her eyes pinned on the ruler.

"I think its safe to say she won't back out," answered Gabrielle yet her stomach twisted in worry.

"No," demanded Solari in a deep voice, "I know you trust her, Gabrielle but you have not been in battle your entire life against the Conqueror like we have been." She looked directly at the Conqueror but her words directed at Gabrielle. "The Conqueror has threatened us and our way of life since the day she took Greece, she has wanted to exterminate us like we are mosquitoes. How can you suddenly expect any of my Amazons to just turn over and trust her? I will not without good insurance... I will not let my Amazons fight beside our own enemy."

The Conqueror stood from her chair simultaneously with Solari. "If you did not have my help, you will never get your Queen back," she growled lowly.

"If it hadn't been for you, our Queen would have never been re-enslaved!" yelled the second in command while slamming her fist onto the table. "You owe your life to the pain and death you've brought on my sisters! not to mention all of the other people in this world you've slaughtered, murderer! You are no ruler of this world; you are what everybody feared... you are the plague of Black Death that is sweeping this world. Your enemies hope each day that Tarterous swallows you whole, bitch."

The Conqueror said nothing back but her eyes told the only emotion she was feeling and that was pure primal rage.

Solari was breathing hard, her eyes locked on the ruler and body tense.

Suddenly there was rapid movement and the Conqueror disappeared in a blur of motion.

"Conqueror!" yelled Gabrielle as she leapt out of her seat.

The second in command found herself pinned up against the wall of the hut, her feet daggling in mid-air. She started choking from the tight hold on her neck.

Everybody else was out of their seats prepared to stop the Conqueror.

"Don't!" ordered Gabrielle to the others in the room. She moved hastily to the Conqueror's side. "Drop her, Conqueror please."

"What makes you think I will, Gabrielle?" snarled the ruler.

Solari felt her face burning and her vision spinning, she began clawing at the ruler's hand.

The warrior-bard grasped the Conqueror's arm that held up Solari. "Are you really what Solari says you are or are you something different?" She glanced at Solari quickly then back at the ruler. "Because the Conqueror that I knew was much different than this. Don't prove Solari right... Xena."

The ruler growled and then opened her left hand.

Solari dropped to the floor on her side, coughing and gasping for air.

The Conqueror stormed out of the hut and into the late evening.

Gabrielle raced after the ruler while saying, "Help Solari." She looked left then right and spotted the Conqueror. She ran after the Warrior Princess and grabbed her arm then spun her around. "Conqueror?"

"Back off, Gabrielle." The Conqueror ripped her wrist free from Gabrielle's grasp.

"Hell no," growled the warrior-bard as she reached up and jerked the ruler down by her armor; her face directly in Xena's face. "You listen to me for once, Conqueror and get it through your thick skull. That Amazon in there is watching after her sisters, this is her only home and the last bit of her family left. You did begin destroying their way of life and making each day a living hell to struggle to survive. Any goddamn self respecting person would give something back to try and repay what they owe. Each damn day I watch my soulmate and her daughter struggle to find some kind of meaning in their lives after what killing and suffering they caused. They maybe in a lifetime of debt but they are happier to know they recognized their wrong doings." She paused after saying so much then whispered in a much gentler voice, "An entire kingdom, full of people, depend solely on you realizing the darkness in you and in your realm. And you hold the power to change so many people's lives and futures. Don't string them up by their necks any longer, Xena." She finally released the armor.

The Conqueror didn't move, let alone ever blink but she slowly straightened back up to her full height. That's when she realized that numerous Amazons in the village had stopped doing their duties to listen to Gabrielle's speech. She gazed around at them and saw all varieties of looks on their faces; she could see the different stories in their eyes.

Xena took a step back as she felt herself shrink and become encaged by all the looks and emotions that surrounded her from the Amazons. Her blue eyes then fell on Gabrielle and she was the only one who had the look of love for the Conqueror. She shook her head lightly and turned around quickly, she jogged off towards the gate.

Gabrielle's shoulders drop as a sigh escaped between her lips. "God, I hope that was for the best." She turned back towards the meeting hut and went inside to see how Solari was doing.

"What happened?" asked the warrior when she saw her lover at the doorway.

"I gave her a serious speech."

Xena's eyes widened and then she said, "Didn't go over too well...?"

"I'm not sure... yet." Gabrielle shifted over to the where her soulmate was kneeling. "How you feeling, Solari?"

Solari coughed a little and patted her chest. "I'm okay... she knows how to squeeze," she joked lightly.

"Yeah I know." The warrior-bard noted how red the Amazon's neck was from the hard squeeze. "Next time, try to hold your tongue."

"Can you blame me, Gabrielle?" questioned the second in command. "You'd done the same if you were me."

The Amazon Queen nodded sadly. "I would have."

"So what's the plan now?" interrupted Varia.

"It remains the same." Gabrielle stood up and helped Solari to her feet. "If none of you can take the Conqueror's word then I hope you can take my word that she'll fight." Her attention moved to Solari.

The second in command licked her lips then nodded her agreement.

"Good." The warrior-bard folded her arms and turned to Solari. "By the way, I thought I'd mention the reason how all of this got started in the first place."

"How's that?"

One of Gabrielle's eyebrows lifted up. "The Conqueror sent Draco originally to kill Sinteres and destroy his compound."

Solari suddenly had a confused look.

"She wanted to pay Queen Gabrielle back for her past as Sinteres's slave."

"But... but..." whispered the second in command in utter confusion.

Gabrielle grasped her friend's shoulder and finished the sentence. "But she's suppose to be a cold-hearted bitch?" She grinned at the confused Amazon. "That label doesn't work so well now huh?" She patted Solari on the shoulder.

"Okay sssso... she's a kind bitch," partially joked the second in command but she was still in awe about why the Conqueror would try and repay the Queen.

The Amazon Queen sighed and turned her focus to the others in the hut. "Let's all get some rest. Tomorrow we'll be going to the castle; it'll be a long trip."

Everybody nodded and slowly made their way out of the hut.

"Take it easy huh, Solari?"

"Yeah," replied the second in command as she left the meeting hut.

"Oh God," moaned the warrior-bard. Her head dropped forward into her hands.

Xena felt a frown form on her lips. She shifted behind her lover and began massaging her shoulders. "Hard playing the peacekeeper huh?"

"Tell me about it." Gabrielle dropped her head back into her soulmate's chest. "You've been pretty quiet."

"I'm working on the possible plans in my head." Xena kissed the side of her partner's head.

"I kind of thought so." Spring eyes slowly closed as another sigh left Gabrielle.

"Want to get some rest?"

The smaller warrior lifted her head up while opening her eyes. "I think I better find the Conqueror."

"Leave her alone for awhile, hun. She needs some time alone."

"Yeah... guess your right." Gabrielle reached up and took her lover's hands into her own. "Let's go get some rest before we can't get anymore."

The Warrior Princess chuckled at that but leaned down, kissing Gabrielle tenderly.

"Mmmm." Gabrielle smiled at the end of the kiss. "Love you."

The warrior kissed her partner's forehead while whispering, "I love you too." She then

straightened up while saying, "Come on," and led Gabrielle out of the hut. "Like you said, tomorrow will be a big day."

Gabrielle could only groan in response as she was led to their hut.

~

Section 3

~*~*~*~

The warrior-bard gazed down at her lover, whom slept quietly in the bed since about a candlemark ago. She'd tried sleeping herself but she was too concerned about the Conqueror, it was nagging in the back of her mind. So she had carefully worked her way out of her lover's arms, after years of experience, and put her attire back on with boots. Gabrielle silently slipped out of the hut into the late afternoon.

The first place she decided to head to was the Conqueror's hut, but once she peeked in, her shoulders slumped at not seeing the ruler inside. Immediately she went to Solari's hut and knocked on it.

"Yeah come in," called the second in command.

The Amazon Queen entered the hut with a quiet close of the door.

Solari smiled gently at her friend and asked, "What you up to?"

"Looking for the Conqueror, seen her?"

The second in command just shook her head and shifted closer to her desk. "The guards at the gates reported she went out of the village about... well about the time everything happened."

"Hmmm." Gabrielle folded her arms and fell back against the doorframe. "You still annoyed about earlier?"

"Its not that." Solari turned her head to the warrior-bard. "Just scared," she whispered.

"Why?" The bard dropped her hands back to her side. "Of what?"

Solari licked her lips while her eyes lowered to the floor. "We can't loose Queen Gabrielle." She gazed up at the warrior-bard. "And the Amazons can't be lost... this is all I have left," she uttered sincerely as she held her hands up to everything around her. "I can't lose my home, Gabrielle."

The small warrior dropped her head for a moment then lifted it back up while pushing onto the flat of her feet. She came over to her friend and grasped her shoulders, her eyes locked with Solari's. "You won't, I promise." For a moment, she remained silent then whispered, "Queen Gabrielle will be fine and the Amazons will survive and grow." A partial smile shifted onto her lips. "Just believe in it, Solari."

Solari's head lowered this time, and she considered Gabrielle's words for several seconds. Slowly she looked back up and gave a faint nod. "I do."

Gabrielle's smile grew and even more when her friend hugged her tightly. She felt Solari's body shaky some and worry instantly formed inside of her. "Solari?" She pulled back then saw the few tears coming down the Amazon's cheeks.

"Sorry," muttered the second in command as she harshly wiped her tears away. "It's just been rough." She laughed sadly, her lower lip quivered faintly. "I just wish Ephiny was here."

"She'll be back soon." Gabrielle then reassured the Amazon with another gentle hug. She'd never seen her Solari this upset nor thought it possible for Solari to get upset yet this wasn't the same Solari from her world.

Solari this time broke the hug and actually gave a genuine smile. "Thanks, Gabrielle."

"You're welcome." The warrior-bard mirrored the smile back and asked, "Out of the gates?"

The Amazon laughed some and nodded. "Yeah not too long ago. Go catch up with her, you're the only one that can talk any sense into her right now."

The bard huffed and went to the door. "You're kidding right? I mean, we're talking about the same Conqueror, aren't we?"

Solari laugh at the joke and grinned. "Yeah same one, go get her tiger tamer."

Gabrielle shook her head with a sigh. "Some of the things you Amazons make up." She opened the door, stepping out and calling, "Bye, Solari."

"Bye, Gabrielle."

The small warrior hastily made her way out of the village but stopped at the gates to ask the guards in which direction the Conqueror went. After finding out, she went directly in that direction to find the ruler. As she made her way deeper into the forest, she picked up on the sound of a sword clanging, and she recognized the sound all too well. Coming upon a clearing, she stopped and stood there watching the Conqueror sparing with herself and occasionally using a tree for an enemy.

Gabrielle sighed and walked into the clearing while saying, "You shouldn't be moving around so much after what happened to you earlier."

The Conqueror seemed to take no notice of the warrior-bard but after a many seconds, she finally stopped and sheathed her sword. She faced Gabrielle. "I need the exercise."

"But your wounds don't," countered the younger woman.

The Conqueror shook her head and just disregarded the comment as she went to sit down on a near by stone. "Why did you come out here?"

"To talk to you." Gabrielle slowly strolled over to the Conqueror, standing in front of her.

"Don't you think you've said plenty, Gabrielle?" The ruler peered up with icy blue eyes.

The smaller woman sighed and knelt down, sitting on her legs with her hands in her lap. "Yeah... I think I have."

Xena raised an eyebrow at her friend's submission.

Gabrielle slightly nodded, her words coming directly from her thoughts. "For once, I've said plenty." She peered up at the Conqueror. "I can't say anything more... the rest has to come from you." With a heavy sigh, she stood up to her feet, brushing of the blades of grass from her legs and began walking back towards the village.

"That's it?" questioned the ruler.

Gabrielle stopped and half turned to the ruler. "I can't do anything else." She shrugged. "I can't save people, that's something you've come to teach me... but I have realized I can help them. I just hope in your case it'll be enough." Turning back towards the village, she continued trekking back to the village her worry about the Conqueror never disappearing.

The Conqueror shook her head still a bit amazed that Gabrielle had agreed with her. She then lifted her elbows to her knees and clasped her hands into a fist; she dropped her forehead against her fisted hands. Slowly her sea eyes closed and many thoughts and ideas passed through her mind.

Gabrielle, on the other hand, made her way back to her hut as the sunset began. She decided she really did want to rest before tomorrow. Entering her hut, she saw her soulmate awake and sitting up in the bed.

Xena didn't say anything, she simply studied her lover.

The warrior-bard sat on the edge of the bed on Xena's side and untied her boots slowly.

The older warrior reached out and gently rubbed her soulmate's back.

The small woman sighed in relief at the warm touch as she got her last boot off. She then turned to Xena and crawled into her arms.

The Warrior Princess pulled Gabrielle in close against her body and tangled her legs with Gabrielle's. She then placed a tender kiss to her partner's temple.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and slightly rubbed her cheek against Xena's chest before starting to slip away into her dreamscape.

Xena soon joined her lover in the dreamscape, her body finally relaxing after being worried about how Gabrielle was feeling from all the stress.

~*Part 11*~

"Is everybody ready?" asked Gabrielle went briskly walking up to Solari.

The second in command turned to her friend. "Yes... except for the Conqueror."

The warrior-bard nodded while saying, "I noticed."

"If we are to go, it should be now," cut in Queen Varia. "There is too much to do."

The small warrior shook her while sighing. "We can wait a few more minutes. Either way, we need the Conqueror. Solari, how many Amazons are going with us?"

"There are twenty escorting you," replied the second in command. "Do you need more?"

"No that should be plenty."

"Where is the Conqueror?" suddenly cut in a deep voice.

Gabrielle faced her soulmate. "We're waiting on her... hopefully she'll be here in a few seconds."

The Warrior Princess slightly nodded and caught sight of Eve and Cyane coming towards them with two horses in tow.

When Eve came up to her mother, she handed her the reins.

"Thanks, Eve." Xena gave her daughter a smile before placing her supplies from last night into her saddlebags.

Gabrielle had taken her stallion from Cyane and put all her belongings away in her saddlebag as well. She then mounted her horse and turned him around towards her friends. She quickly counted the Amazons waiting to travel with her, she noted them all there. "Amazons, lets head out of the village," she ordered in a loud voice.

Varia took the signal and mounted her own horse that was beside her, as did Xena. The group of Amazons began walking through the village towards the gates.

Gabrielle quickly scanned the village for any signs of the Conqueror yet with a heavy sigh, she began for the gates.

Solari walked between Xena and Gabrielle's horses while talking to the warrior-bard. "Make sure you bring Ephiny home safely."

The small warrior laughed lightly and said, "Don't worry, Solari."

The second in command simply smiled back. "Please be careful," she said to Xena.

The Warrior Princess gave a reassuring smile to the Amazon. "It'll work out," she

stated.

"I know it will," stated the second in command.

Gabrielle noted the gates ahead of the village, and she sensed Varia looking at her so she gave a nod to the queen.

Varia then yelled, "Out of the village, Amazons and head south!"

The warrior-bard pulled her horse to stop at the gate, as did Xena. "I'll be back soon with Ephiny."

"Hopefully by the time you return the southern Nation will be here." Solari then took a deep breath and said, "Bye, Xena and Gabrielle."

The soulmates smiled and tapped their horses in the side while calling out, "Bye." The pair quickly caught up to the escort.

Solari watched the group slowly begin to shrink in the distance. Then her eyebrows furrowed together as she saw somebody reappearing from behind a tree headed towards the group. She quickly realized who it was and a small grin formed on her lips. "Good luck to you too, Conqueror," she whispered before she turned back to her village.

~*Part 12*~

The regent poked at her right calf lightly and hissed in response. "Hades... would you heal over already," she grumbled. After shaking her head, she stood up from her bed and with a hidden limp, made her way to the window. She crossed her arms on the ledge and studied the new Athens. She still couldn't believe that she was here and not saving her Queen. She figured Gabrielle had already been sold into slavery; it'd been awhile since everything happen. Now she just wondered what had become of the Conqueror.

She lowered her head a bit, and stared at the cracks in the window's ledge. More thoughts came but of her Amazon Nation and whether they were safe. Occasional thoughts came to her that the Conqueror had laid this trap with Lord Sinteres. Then use this as a likely excuse to wipe out the Amazons forever yet something remained in her that told otherwise. She thought it had something to do with the way the Conqueror had always looked at her Queen with gentle eyes. It seemed that one look the Conqueror continually gave Queen Gabrielle was the only reassurance that Ephiny had at this point.

With her shoulders slightly slumped, she gradually lifted her head and gazed about Athens once more. She then noted a few glints far away at the gates of the city. She furrowed her eyes and straightened up off the ledge, her lips pressing together. Thoughts of Queen Gabrielle safely returning filled her but at the same time it could be Lord Sinteres arriving to claim his place as the King of the Conqueror's realm.

With that sort of idea in mind, she quickly went for her sword and sheathed it at her back. She went out of her room and down into the castle's throne room while yelling,

"Guards!"

Three guards instantly raced up to her side, walking beside her as they crossed the throne room.

"Who are the strangers entering the city?"

"We have no idea, regent," replied one guard.

"Well I want to know who the Hades it is," she growled lowly and watched the guard rush off. She then gave her attention to the other two guards. "You two round up the other men and the secondary guard captain."

"Yes, regent." The two soldiers hurried off.

The Amazon came to the huge double-doors of the throne room and flung them open with both arms as hard as she could. The early morning sunlight struck her in the face soon as she opened the doors. She went down the many steps and onto the grounds that circled the castle.

She found several of the soldiers already herding to the gates with their weapons drawn. She then decided to join them at the gates as well. She also found the secondary guard captain there and quickly questioned him. "Who is coming into the city?"

The guard captain shook his head. "We are not sure, regent. One man was sent already and he should be back in a moment."

"Good," muttered the Amazon. Lifting her right hand, she shielded the sun from her eyes and saw a soldier running back to the castle with one arm waving. She slightly heard him yelling but couldn't make out what he said. "What is he saying?"

The guard captain paused for a moment then whispered, "They're going to conquer us."

Ephiny's eyes widened and her heart sped up. "They can't be here."

"Wait," called a soldier from beside Ephiny, "He's saying the Conqueror is coming."

The regent hesitated for a moment then listened to the soldier's yelling as it became clearer, and she did realize he was yelling the Conqueror is coming. "Oh gods," she whispered in relief.

The soldier came into the gates, his breath gone but a smile on his lips. "The Conqueror... is here," he rasped.

"Anybody else?" asked the regent hastily.

The soldier nodded while taking several deep breaths. "So are Amazons... lots of them."

A small grin pulled at the corner of Ephiny's lips. She looked up from the soldier and saw the group of Amazons coming closer to the castle's gates.

"Ephiny!" called a familiar voice.

The regent shook her head for a moment in disbelief as she walked through the gates. "Gabrielle?" she called.

She heard an excited laugh and it only caused her to have one herself as she hurried towards the group. She quickly spotted her friends and watched Gabrielle dismount from her horse.

"It's good to see you," greeted Gabrielle.

The regent grabbed her friend into a strong hug. "I'm so happy you came here." She slowly pulled away from the hug.

"Well, the Conqueror came for Xena and me." The warrior-bard brushed back some of her bangs from her forehead. "How you doing?"

Ephiny shook her head a bit. "I've been hanging in there. Anything about Queen Gabrielle though?"

Gabrielle took a deep breath then slightly nodded. "She's been sold to Gurkhan... about three days ago."

"Centaur shit," growled the regent.

"I know whispered," the warrior-bard.

"Let's get into the castle," suggested the Conqueror as she cut into the conversation.

Gabrielle nodded to the Conqueror's idea. "Come on, I'll tell you more."

Ephiny turned back to the castle, walking with her friends. "What of the Amazons?"

"They're fine, we just came from there."

"I figured," replied Ephiny as she signalled to the Amazon escort. "A couple I don't recognize," she whispered.

Gabrielle grinned faintly at her friend's suspicions. "I brought my Nation here."

"Your Nation?" The regent's eyes widened in disbelief. "From your... world?"

"Yup." The warrior-bard winked right before making Torqueo walk faster to the castle's stables.

Ephiny shook her head while she watched the Amazon Queen walk off with Xena at her side. The Conqueror then stepped into her view.

"How do you feel?"

The regent lifted her eyes up the length of the ruler's body until she met winter blue eyes. "I'm okay."

"How's the leg?"

"Slowly healing," stated the Amazon plainly. "Did you see Queen Gabrielle or Eponin in your travels?"

"I did," answered the ruler. "They were both fine."

"Your guard captain too?"

"Yes." The Conqueror folded her arms against her chest. "I presume you had no problems with my men..." She then glanced over at her soldiers who all began to look anywhere but at their leader.

"None at all." Ephiny placed her hands on her hips. "No problems at all." The one thing she was grateful for was that the Conqueror did serve a purpose of blocking the sun for her. "Athens was fine too," she quietly added.

"Good to hear."

"You didn't hear anything from Sinteres by any chance did you?" suddenly cut in another deep voice.

Ephiny looked at the warrior, who was returning from the stable with Gabrielle. "No... was I suppose to?"

"Not really," answered the warrior-bard.

"You three go ahead and talk," cut in the Conqueror, "I need to talk to my secondary guard captain."

Gabrielle nodded to the ruler and watched her go; she then noted Eve, Varia, and Cyane coming up beside her and Xena. "Oh Ephiny, I want you to meet Eve."

The regent smiled to Eve and held out her arm. "Pleasure to meet you, Eve."

"All mine," responded Eve.

"And Eve is Xena's daughter," added Gabrielle.

Ephiny laughed in surprise while she released the younger woman's arm. "Really? Thought some of those features looked similar."

The warrior-bard grinned faintly then pointed to the queen. "This is Queen Varia." She paused for a moment but spoke again while Ephiny and Varia were shaking arms. "Varia is the queen of the Amazons when I'm not around... which is most of the time. Then this is Cyane beside her."

Ephiny's eyes quickly lit up at the name. She stared at the well-built, blond haired Amazon beside Varia. "Cyane?"

"I know," commented Cyane, "Not the same Amazon though." She held out her arm.

"I don't know about that," whispered Ephiny as she took the young Amazon's arm. "Nice to meet you as well."

"Trust me," started Varia, "Its more our pleasure than yours, Ephiny. There are many legends about you in our village."

"Maybe so but I'm not the same Ephiny as your one once was."

Gabrielle shook her head. "I highly doubt that, you have all the same qualities as our Ephiny once did... you're very much her."

The regent said nothing else and kept silent, taking the comments at face value. "Thank you," is all she said after several seconds.

"I think we need to find the Conqueror and fill in Ephiny about what's going on," suggested the Warrior Princess.

"Good idea," agreed Gabrielle. "Cyane, can you take care of the Amazons for me? Take them into the castle and if you ask one of the guards to get food and water they will help you. Okay?"

"Sure thing, my Queen." Cyane nodded then strolled off to escort the Amazons into the castle.

"Let's go track down the Conqueror," ordered the Amazon Queen. Together the group went into the castle and decided the best place to go was to the Conqueror's office. Once near the doorway, they could hear the Conqueror talking to somebody.

"Instruct them to be here tomorrow morning at best. Is that all clear?"

"Yes, my liege."

"Good. You're dismissed."

"Yes, my liege." The soldier hurried out of the door and slipped past the group of women and went on his way.

"Come in, you five." The Conqueror sat down in her chair as her allies entered her office. "Take seats."

Everybody had a seat but Ephiny and Xena, the warrior, walked towards the opening to the balcony and picked up a chair from the corner. She carried it back over to the group and sat it down near the desk, saying, "Sit down, Eph."

The regent shook her head. "Go ahead, Xena."

"Sit," ordered the warrior in a growling tone.

Ephiny blinked then sat down while muttering, "Thanks."

Xena chuckled to herself and took a few steps back to lean against the wall.

"Xena, do you want my chair?" offered the Conqueror as she began to stand up.

The Warrior Princess shook her head while replying, "I'm fine, Conqueror... thank you though."

The ruler nodded and sat back down. She turned her focus to everybody and stated, "I sent two soldiers out to find Autolycus and Iolaus. Also in about ten to fifteen minutes my Naval Captain will be here." She folded her arms and sat back in her chair.

"I believe we need to inform Ephiny on what's going on," spoke up Varia after the ruler had spoken.

Gabrielle decided to stand up from her chair and she walked to the Conqueror's desk, she sat on the corner of the desk and looked at the group. "So far what we've come up with is we're going to basically steal Queen Gabrielle back."

Ephiny raised an eyebrow up. "How is this going to happen?"

The Amazon Queen took a huge, deep breath and began explaining. "Xena, Varia, Cyane, and Eve are going to Africa. Cyane and Eve are posing as slaves to infiltrate Gurkhan's castle and find Queen Gabrielle. Once they have done so, its up to Xena and Varia to kill him."

"Wait," cut in Ephiny while shaking her head. "How do you plan to save Queen Gabrielle and kill Gurkhan at the same time?"

"We're working on that," cut in the warrior from her spot against the wall.

"No, no." The regent stared hard at Xena then looked at everybody else in the room with a serious face. "I want a plan right here and right now on how you plan to get my Queen... my best friend from Gurkhan's liar. I will not let any of you endanger her life... I'd rather have her remain a slave than get killed," growled the regent. "She stands better a symbol of slavery than a dead corpse of a deluded plan that went wrong."

Xena licked her lips as she glimpsed over at her soulmate from across the room. She then straightened up off the wall, her arms falling to her side from her chest. "As Gabrielle said, Cyane and Eve will pretend to be slaves and be bought into Gurkhan's castle. Varia and I will be lookouts through this entire thing. When Eve and Cyane feel its safe enough, we'll go in and take care of Gurkhan."

Ephiny considered the plan, she knew it still had a few 'holes' in it that would be filled later on as Xena had more time to think the finer details out. She slowly began to nod and simply said, "Okay."

"While that's been done, we're responsible for getting the Amazons together," continued explaining Gabrielle. "You and I will return to the Nation and get the Amazons ready for war. The Conqueror in the meantime will be doing the same with her troops. Hopefully some time in there we'll join forces relatively close to Sinteres's camp."

Ephiny laughed slightly and peered up at the Conqueror then at the warrior-bard. "You're kidding, right?" She sat up in her chair. "The Amazons will not join up with the Conqueror."

The Conqueror closed her eyes as she felt her rage return like it had early in the meeting back in the Amazon village.

"I'd much rather have the Amazons fight Sinteres and Draco on our own without her help. She's liable to-"

"Ephiny," growled the warrior-bard. She stood up from the desk and her eyes were lit up with fire. "I am the Queen... in this world and in mine. Queen Gabrielle has agreed to a treaty with the Conqueror and we will abide by it. To do anything less is to destroy the Nation's honour." She paused, her chest rising and falling quickly. "We will fight beside the Conqueror."

The regent chewed on the inside of her lip because she knew this was a crazy and down right insane idea. She liked the idea now. "Alright. But how we plan to strike Sinteres when he has Eponin and Palamon?"

"Autolycus and Iolaus, the two best thieves in the known-world will take care of that," answered the ruler.

Ephiny glanced over to the Conqueror. "I hope they can do it."

"If they can't then nobody can," simply stated the Conqueror. As soon as she finished her words, a tall and thin woman entered the office. The ruler stood up. "Welcome."

Everybody else's heads turned and a few eyes widened in surprise.

"I heard you need me, my liege."

The Conqueror laughed slightly to herself. "I do, Callisto."

Callisto flashed a devilish grin and she walked over towards the Conqueror. Her fiery eyes lowered to the warrior-bard, looking her over. For some reason, she could already feel a bit of hatred coming off this younger woman.

Gabrielle looked away from Callisto and moved away from the desk, turning and facing the Conqueror.

The Conqueror looked to everybody else while saying, "Callisto is my naval captain, the best one I've had." She glanced at Callisto then at the group, introducing them one by one.

Callisto couldn't help but be surprised when she found there to be two Queen Gabrielle's and two Xena's. She definitely was interested in knowing on how this came to be, something to look into later on.

"I've decided to add a little something to our plan," cut in the Conqueror's voice.

Xena raised an eyebrow at the ruler's announcement.

"After you have saved Queen Gabrielle, I plan to have Gurkhan's entire castle destroyed. Queen Cleopatra will be there to assist in this and along with killing anybody loyal to Gurkhan."

The warrior-bard peered over to her soulmate then back at the Conqueror. "Why is this?"

The ruler folded her arms and locked eyes with the smaller woman. "I will not leave my enemies alive... not any part of them."

"So what is this little plan, my liege?" inquired Callisto.

The Conqueror turned her head to her naval captain. "You are to transport Xena, Eve, Cyane, and Varia along with two hundred troops. Take a few juggernauts and war galleys with you."

"A catapult trireme?" Callisto raised an eyebrow at the ruler and a sly grin creased her lips.

"One," replied the Conqueror with a chuckle.

"Deal." The naval captain then put her hands on her hips. "So I take these four down, what else?"

"They will take care of getting Queen Gabrielle. While that's happening you and Queen Cleopatra will get the men ready. Soon as Queen Gabrielle is out you are to take out Gurkhan's lair, wipe it off the earth. Is that clear?"

"Crystal, my liege."

"Good." The Conqueror gazed back at the group. "Oh," she turned back to Callisto, "take a scout ship with you as well. I want them back here to let us know if the Queen is safe or not."

"Yes of course," agreed the naval captain.

"Is there anything else?" inquired the ruler to the group.

"I think that's everything," replied the warrior-bard. "We should get moving with our plans."

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle jerked the strap down hard and Torqueo whined in response. "Sorry, boy," she whispered while patting him on the side. She then rechecked to make sure his tack was all on place, especially the saddle.

"You ready?" called her soulmate, as she entered into the stable.

"Just about."

Xena came up to the stall door and crossed her arms on top of the door. "How you doing?"

"I'm okay." The smaller woman continued checking her horse's tack and not looking at her partner.

The warrior for a moment was silent then asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Gabrielle shook her head then patted her horses neck before looking at her lover.

Xena just raised an eyebrow. "What is it, huh?"

The bard sighed as her shoulders fell. "I just... don't know about this."

"This?... with Callisto?"

"Exactly." The younger warrior shook her head several times. "I don't like her being there."

"I know... maybe she's not the same as our Callisto was."

"Maybe she is," countered the Amazon Queen. She shifted closer to her lover, her hands coming up and resting on top of Xena's. "I know Callisto changed in our world but... here it could be different, completely different."

The warrior licked her lips, her eyes studying her hands and Gabrielle's as she slowly laced their hands together. "I know... we'll be careful," she whispered while lifting her soft sea blue eyes.

"I know you will be... just can't help but be worried." Gabrielle shook her head a bit while saying, "Callisto is always in something for herself."

Xena squeezed her lover's hands gently before leaning in for a long kiss. "You need to be careful as well," she muttered at the end of the kiss.

"I will be." Gabrielle grinned a bit. "Aren't I always?"

The warrior laughed lightly. "Trouble comes to you like flies to shit."

"Thanks," deadpanned the warrior-bard. "Real big of yah."

Xena laughed and took a few steps back. "Come on."

The bard grabbed her horse's reins and led him out of the stall. With Xena, she strolled out of the stables into the afternoon sunlight. Just ahead she saw her group of Amazons waiting to travel back to the Nation.

"In five days we will meet on the battlefield," stated the Conqueror to Gabrielle.

The warrior-bard nodded at the ruler. "Five days." She then shifted her attention to her Amazons. "Head out," she ordered before looking to Ephiny. "Ride Torqueo, Eph... you'll need it with that leg."

"Thanks." Ephiny slowly mounted the stallion with her friend's help.

"I'll be right out," uttered the Amazon Queen to the regent.

Ephiny simply nodded then left through the gates to join the Amazons.

"Be careful." Eve smiled at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle returned the smile. "You too huh?" She went over and hugged the taller woman. "Bring her back safely." She then said her goodbyes to the rest of the group. As she walked towards the gates, her soulmate came along side.

"I'll see you in a bit." Gabrielle stopped at the front of the gates and turned to her lover. "We have a lot of damn sex to make up for this," she grumbled but a grin streaked her expression.

Xena laughed quietly and lowered her head some. "I'm not worried about that one bit. You just be careful."

"I will." The warrior-bard then finally gave in to a long hug with her partner. "I love you."

The warrior kissed the side of her lover's head while whispering, "I love you too." She gave a tight squeeze then said, "Go on."

The Amazon Queen released her soulmate and gave a rare smile of hers. "Bye."

Xena grinned a bit and winked. "See yah soon." She watched her partner go out of the gates and join the Amazons. A sigh slowly escaped her as she waved to Gabrielle then watched her disappear in the distance.

The Conqueror quietly neared Xena and said, "Not easy huh?"

"Not at all." The warrior peered up a little at the taller version of herself. "Are the ships ready?"

"Anytime you're ready," mentioned the ruler.

"Good."

The Conqueror turned to a guard and said, "Escort these ladies down to the docks. See to it Callisto greets them."

"Yes, my liege." The guard waited for the four women to come up beside him and he quietly led them out of the gates, towards the docks.

The Conqueror briefly watched them go but then yelled, "Somebody bring the secondary guard captain to my office."

~*Part 13*~

Autolycus rubbed his hands together and grinned. "Here we go; we knock out those two sentries at the gates. Then take their clothes and pose as them."

"You gotta be kidding me?" Iolaus shook his head and knelt down more behind the tree while looking at the two guards at the gates of Sinteres's compound. "We have to lure them away. We can't just knock them out that close to the compound."

"Exactly... sssso that's where you come in." The King of Thieves grinned evilly.

"What you want me to do? Dress like a woman and do the drag?"

Autolycus suddenly had an evil smirk.

"No," growled Iolaus.

"Don't worry, there's nothing to it."

Iolaus just glared at his partner.

Autolycus stumbled through the forest some, coming closer to the sentries at the gate.

"Stop!" yelled a guard.

The King of Thieves stopped and held up his hands. "What's wrong?"

"Who are you?" called a guard.

Autolycus smiled drunkenly and said, "I'm just a man... having a good time."

"Oh yeah?"

The King of Thieves grinned. "I found myself a real nice lookin' bitch." He waved his hands towards the woods. "You fellas like to join in?"

The guards exchanged looks and then nodded to one another. Together they left their post and followed behind the guy.

"Oh Georgy boy, where'd you go?" called a light voice.

"I'm coming, my sweets," yelled Autolycus.

The two guards snickered together while sheathing their swords at their sides.

"Where are you?" called Autolycus.

"Right over here," replied a light but throaty voice.

Autolycus stopped and put his hands on his hips.

"Where is she?" questioned a guard.

"She was just here," answered the King of Thieves. He cleared his throat. "Oh sweetie, where are you?"

"Right here," half growled a man's voice from the tree branches above the guards.

The two guards instantly looked up but soon found a foot coming into their face.

Autolycus laughed as he watched them fall on their faces out cold. "Nice job."

"Thanks... Georgy boy."

The King of Thieves threw a glare at his friend. "Come on, let's get these damn uniforms off them."

Iolaus seconded that idea and quickly began taking the clothes off the sentries. Afterwards, he and Autolycus tied and gagged the soldiers before putting on the uniforms.

Autolycus came out of a bush, pulling on the collar of the leather uniform. "This Hades of a thing is too tight."

"Mine fits perfectly," commented the smaller thief.

The King of Thieves sighed and said, "Let's get this over with."

The pair walked up to the posts at the gates and adjusted themselves accordingly, swords drawn.

"So I guess we'll stand here all day?" grumbled Iolaus.

"Nope, we'll get in," muttered Autolycus. "We just need a way, maybe you can think of something since you're a bright candle."

"What in Tartarous is that suppose to mean?"

"It means your little ideas never work half the time." The King of Thieves shook his head. "I still remember that screw up with the girl in the bar."

"Don't start that shit again," growled Iolaus. "I almost had her."

"Right... she almost had your face on the floor is what you mean."

"Will you shut up!" yelled Iolaus. "Like none of that kinda of centaur shit happened to you. I wont even mention the one with the Amazon."

"That was a mistake," yelled the King of Thieves.

"Yeah a funny one too." The smaller thief started laughing.

Autolycus snarled and suddenly brought the tip of his sword under his partner's throat. "Wanna keep laughing funny boy?"

"Get the Hades off me!"

"What the Hades is going on over here?" yelled a deep voice.

The two thieves turned to a tall, dark skinned man that was glaring down at them.

"He started it." Iolaus pointed a finger at the other thief.

"I don't care," growled Draco.

Autolycus had already let go of his partner.

"I want you two in the dungeon now."

~*~*~*~

Iolaus grumbled to himself as he stomped down the steps of the dungeon, Draco was behind him and his partner was ahead of him.

"You two stay the Hades down here until somebody pulls you off duty, understood?"

"How long might that be?" inquired Autolycus.

Draco glared from the fifth step up from the dungeon floor. "If you're lucky two days." After a smirk, he hurried up the stairwell and back outside.

The King of Thieves tilted his head as he heard the dungeon door at the top of the steps slam then lock. He then turned to Iolaus. "Thanks," he chided.

The thief peered up at the taller man. "What? you got us here." He shook his head and pushed his helmet further back on his head. He sheathed his sword then started searching through the dungeon. "Wait... Auto," he called.

The King of Thieves briskly walked down the tight space between the cells on either side of him. "Well whatyah know." He grinned to himself and folded his arms as he stared at the two prisoners in the cell. "And you had no faith," he taunted his friend.

"Right." Iolaus flashed a brief grin but turn his attention back to the two prisoners as he wondered how to wake them up in the best manor. "Hey," he started calling to them but he got no response. "Yo prisoners... wake up!" He still got no response.

Autolycus stood there completely amused by the scene. He just leaned against some bars of a cell and decided to watch his partner try to wake up the prisoners.

The smaller thief sighed but then suddenly kicked at the bars to make a loud clatter. Still nothing. "That's it," he growled. "Amazons are a bunch of sissy girls with nothing but sticks for weapons just like the Conqueror's captain!"

A set of dark brown eyes opened and a tall Amazon stood up in the prison cell.

Iolaus grinned to himself as he knew he accomplished his mission. Yet suddenly something went a bit wrong when he found himself choking and his face slammed into the bars of the cell.

"Your mother could kick your ass, little man just like I will," growled the Amazon. She lowered her head, close to the small thief's. "Do not even let me near a *stick* for what I may do to you with it.... because it'll be right up your ass." She squeezed a little tighter then threw him across the dungeon and he hit the other cell on the opposite side.

Iolaus groaned and slid down the bars onto the floor.

Autolycus laughed finally and straightened up from the cell. He instantly found piercing brown eyes on him but he simply ignored the threatening look. "May I introduce myself...? I'm Autolycus... the King of Thieves." He held his hand down towards Iolaus. "And this would be my partner, Iolaus."

"And why are you two here?" questioned the guard captain as he stood up from the cell floor.

"The Conqueror," stated the King of Thieves.

Palamon grinned and chuckled lightly. "She would send in thieves to steal something stolen from her."

"Naturally... and only the best of course," added Autolycus. He then glanced down at his partner, whom was rubbing his neck. "So what you coming up with?"

"Mmmm." The small man chewed on his lower lip while studying the dungeon. "Not a plan, I'll say that."

Autolycus started rubbing his chin as he considered some ideas.

~*~*~*~

"Have you heard anything from the other village yet, Solari?"

The second in command shook her head while crossing her arms against her chest. "Nothing yet... my guess is they could be here tonight definitely by sometime tomorrow."

"Good." Gabrielle took a step back and leaned against the post of the hut behind her. "How is Eph?"

"She's doing better... recovered finally from that long walk from Athens," the Amazon half joked.

"Rrrright." The warrior-bard smirked at that. "She rode the entire time... on my horse not to mention."

Solari nodded a couple of times. "She seems to be doing a lot better," finally admitted the Amazon. "I was pretty worried."

"I was myself," confessed the small warrior.

The second in command glimpsed up to Gabrielle from looking down at her boots. "How you been doing?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes for a brief moment then opened them again. "I'm doing okay... worried though."

"We all are," reminded the Amazon but added, "And I also know you're the most stressed out of any of us."

"Stress?" started teasing the small woman, "I live for it."

Solari chuckled quietly but then reached out to grasp her friend's arm. "Don't get too worked up... Eph and I are here to help out."

"I know... thank you." Gabrielle smiled warmly. She then sighed a bit and quietly whispered, "The Conqueror should be here tomorrow as well."

"Where is she planning to position her troops?"

"Not far from Sinteres compound... but she is bringing a set of troops here to protect the Nation from any outside harm."

Solari raised an eyebrow at that. "Outside harm or is she the ha-"

"Solari," warned the temporarily queen. "Don't."

The Amazon's shoulders dropped, and she viciously brushed back a few strands of hair behind her ear. "I'm sorry... but you got to understand..." she held up a hand while saying, "that we've been at war with her ever since I can remember. If its not one thing... its another." She paused as she knew her friend was starting to understand. "It takes a bit to just... trust her."

"I know," whispered the Queen. "But you can trust me when I tell you she won't harm

us."

Solari nodded slowly. "That's what I am trusting."

"Thank you," uttered the warrior-bard. She lifted herself from the post while saying, "Let's go see Eph."

Solari agreed with a nod and followed along side her friend.

~*~*~*~

"So what do you think, mother?"

Xena turned her head to Eve that stood beside her on the bow of the ship. "About?" she whispered with a gentle smile taking her lips.

"Anything." Eve shrugged a little.

"Mmmm..." The warrior reached out and held onto the railing and leaned forward against it a bit. "I think we've got ourselves in quite a mess."

The daughter chuckled but yet had to agree. "We sure did."

The Warrior Princess flashed a grin at her daughter before gazing over the sea again.

"You know what I think?"

Xena felt a small laugh vibrate inside of herself. "What's that?"

"I think it's nice to be out on an adventure with my mother."

The warrior felt a smile creep along her lips despite the entire situation ahead of them. "I think I have to agree with that."

Eve felt a bit of warmth fill her but slowly it faded out and a heavy sigh escaped her.

"Now what's on that mind of yours?" inquired the mother.

Eve shook her head a little and said, "Just been having a long... llong debate with myself."

"About?"

"About... what my destiny truly is," confessed the younger woman. She slightly peered up at her mother before looking back to the sea. "Whether I'm suppose to be God's chosen... peace keeper or-"

"A warrior," finished Xena. She felt her own heavy sigh come and leave her. She knew exactly how her daughter felt. "It's not easy, I know that." She brought her right arm around her daughter's shoulders and pulled her in a bit closer. Gazing down at

Eve, she whispered, "The best thing you can do... is go with what feels natural."

"I'm not quite sure what that is right now." Eve gazed into her mother's eyes hoping to find her answer there even though she knew she would not.

"I know and you won't for right now." Xena let a small smile appear in her expression. "You give yourself time and soon you'll know." She lowered her head and kissed her daughter's forehead while whispering, "Promise."

Eve smiled at her mother's reassurance feeling a bit of weight leave her. She wrapped her left arm around Xena's waist and dropped her head against the larger shoulder beside her. "Mother... did Callisto, by any chance, have green eyes?"

The warrior suddenly furrowed her eyebrows at the random question. "No... why, sweetie?"

"Just wondering...." Eve licked her lips while staring at the sea before her. She then said, "Didn't you ever wonder why I have green eyes? I mean... you don't have green eyes and neither does Callisto. So how did I end up with green eyes?"

The Warrior Princess didn't say anything as the question sank into her mind. She never really had thought about why her daughter had green eyes... she just simply accepted it. "Green eyes," she whispered aloud to herself in thought and then her suddenly her expression took on realization. "Gabrielle...."

"Yeah... that's what I thought too." Eve lifted her head. "She's my mother as well."

Xena finally came to the realization too that Gabrielle was most likely Eve's mother as much as her own. She then gazed down at her daughter and studied her for several silent seconds. She truly examined Eve's bright green eyes and knew in her heart that those eyes were Gabrielle's. Bringing her free hand around, she lifted a lock of Eve's golden brown hair and knew it was blond and black together. Eve's height, Xena recognized, was higher than Gabrielle but shorter than her. And then finally it clicked to the warrior that Eve... well despite all that Eve has done in her life for some reason she still held some type of innocence to her, much the same way Gabrielle has all through her life.

"So guess this means she isn't my aunt after all huh?" finally cut in Eve's voice.

Those words made one of the rarest smiles slowly shape across Xena's face. "Yes it does," she whispered softly.

"Hmmm." Eve began to grin a bit devilishly. "So... what should I call her now... mother, mom or mommy," she joked.

Xena couldn't help but laugh. "Mother is mine, I reserve it."

The younger woman laughed as well. "Well I don't think a 25 year old should go around calling her mother mommy... so I think that leaves me with mom."

The warrior grinned and said in an evil tone, "Make sure when we get back you call

her that first thing."

Eve snickered quietly. "You would, mother... and I'll make sure to do it around you."

"Good girl," teased the Warrior Princess.

Eve laughed while shaking her head as she went back to taking in the scenery around her. "So what you think about having Callisto as the naval captain?"

"I don't know what in Hell the Conqueror is thinking," half joked the warrior and in part she was rather serious. She then added in a huff.

"I have a feeling she'll turn on the Conqueror when the time comes," muttered Eve. She then turned her head sidelong and watched Callisto in the corner of her eye. "Very soon at that," she whispered.

"Mmmm," agreed the warrior. "I have that feeling as well. And it'll be a bad fight as well."

"Yes with as many ships as the Conqueror has... I wonder how many are loyal to Callisto before the Conqueror?"

"I don't even want to think about it," replied Xena. She sighed then mumbled, "That's the problem with switching sides... get new enemies and new allies."

"Hmmm," agreed Eve quietly.

~*Part 14*~

The queen lifted her head and straightened her back out as the two Amazons from the trees lowered to the ground bringing her and her horse to a halt. "I am here with my Amazons at Queen Gabrielle's request."

The two patrol Amazons glanced at each other and added nods. One patrol Amazon stepped forward and said, "Welcome, Queen Velasca."

The queen smiled a little more proudly and asked, "May we be escorted in?"

"Of course," answered the patrol Amazon. "Please follow me." She turned and headed for the village gates.

The other patrol Amazon however took a few steps back and watched the queen and her Amazons pass by.

The patrol Amazon led the party to the gates and soon as she neared, she saw the gates opening for them.

Velasca examined the larger village as she entered it.

Gabrielle left her hut soon as she heard word of the queen coming, she was glad to hear the other Amazons had arrived. She went directly to the village centre knowing

this would be where the other queen would be escorted to. In the centre she saw Solari already waiting. "You heard?" she said a bit loudly.

"Yeah," called back the second in command.

Gabrielle came up beside her friend and faced the gates; she then spotted the patrol Amazon escorting the queen and her Amazons to the centre. As she got a better look at the queen, she realized exactly who it was on that horse. "Oh my god..." she uttered in fear.

"What's wrong?" quickly asked Solari.

"Velasca is the queen?" she hotly asked as she looked to the second in command.

"Yes," whispered Solari, "I don't know if you know of her in your world but here, she is very well known." She narrowed her eyes a bit. "She is well regarded by all Amazons... this village and in her own. She technically should be the head queen, the only reason Queen Gabrielle is cause she stumbled into it by caste." She shook her head before adding, "Queen Gabrielle is lucky Velasca hasn't yet challenged her for the caste. I'm not even sure why Velasca hasn't..."

"Mmmm," was Gabrielle's only response before she forced a smile on her lips when the queen approached. "Welcome, Queen Velasca."

The queen smiled at the warrior-bard and dismounted quickly. "Thank you, Queen Gabrielle." She then suddenly gave a puzzled look. "My... you've changed quite a bit since I've last seen you."

"I'm afraid I am not the same Queen Gabrielle you are thinking of."

Velasca's expression went from puzzled to completely confused.

Solari chuckled lightly at the look and decided to explain the situation. "Well, have you heard the tales of a hero that came from another world to change the Conqueror?"

"Yesss... she supposedly looks like Queen Gabrie..." Velasca glanced back to the warrior-bard and then laughed. "Looks like? Well you certainly are a perfect copy."

The smaller warrior gave a small grin. "Well, I am Gabrielle just from another world."

"And an Amazon I do hope..." further inquired the queen.

"Yes," replied the Amazon Queen quickly. "I am the Queen of the Amazons in my world and I am the Queen here until the rightful Queen returns."

"Yes, I've heard the predicament but I was unsure when I received the letter from Queen Gabrielle. I guess this would explain everything now."

Gabrielle faintly nodded then said, "How about we take care of your horses and direct you to your huts."

"Thank you," replied Velasca.

Solari and the Queen led the group of Amazons through the village and took them first to the stables to let the Amazons on horseback stable their horses. Afterwards they went to the west side of the village where there were several vacated huts set up for two Amazons at a time. Gabrielle announced to the Amazons to choose a partner and select whatever hut they desired. The warrior-bard and Solari then escorted Velasca to her hut, which was closer to the centre of the village.

"I hope this will be satisfactory enough," commented Solari.

Velasca smiled lightly. "I'm sure it is, thank you."

Gabrielle crossed her arms against her chest and settled her hard eyes on the other queen. "Later this afternoon, before dinner, we'll be having a brief meeting. So we can catch you up-to-date on what's been happening recently."

"That would be great."

"Get some rest till then," recommended the Amazon Queen.

Velasca slightly nodded at the idea and stepped into her hut with her saddlebag of belongings.

Once the hut door closed, Gabrielle quickly turned and marched off.

Solari furrowed her eyebrows but then hurried after her friend. "Gabrielle, is everything okay?"

The small warrior sighed and quickly came to a stop. "I do not like Velasca here," she slightly growled.

"Gabrielle, she is highly regarded by all Am-"

"Is that so?" hissed the bard, "I'd like to know if Ephiny thinks the same thing."

The second in command let her mouth stay hanging open for several moments before finally saying, "No she doesn't think much of Velasca."

"And why is that?"

"Because Velasca... well she has a different way of running things sometimes."

"That's exactly it." Gabrielle placed her hands on her hips. "She does not do it the Amazon way, she does it her way." She took a step closer to her friend. "Do you know what she did in my world?"

"What?" squeaked out the Amazon.

"She doublecrossed me, stole some of my Amazons, happen to get lucky and get some ambrosia. And after she ate it, she attacked my Amazons, and was bent on killing

me." She paused for a second then added, "I do not like anybody that endangers my Amazons." She continued walking to the village.

Solari let her shoulders drop as she stood there watching her friend disappear ahead.

~*~*~*~

"The Conqueror?" repeated the queen, a slight bit of humour in her tone. "The Conqueror?"

Gabrielle raised an eyebrow at Velasca. "Yes, the Conqueror. Is there a problem?"

Velasca shook her head and replied, "I just can't believe she's going to work with us... instead of against us."

"Neither can I," muttered Solari under her breath but quickly looked up as if she didn't say anything.

"She will... trust me," stated Gabrielle. She then turned her head back to the entire group. "As I'm sure you know, I have the Amazons getting prepared... some I've already sent out to Sinteres's as outposts, in case the two thieves need any extra help." She then straightened up, lifting her hands off the long table, and continuing to stand behind the chair at the head of the table. "I think that about covers it...?"

"Just what happens if say the Conqueror does turn on us somehow, what are our plans then?" questioned Velasca.

The small warrior sighed during the few seconds she had to think. "Then we pray we can take her."

Velasca huffed in her seat and looked away from the other queen. *We'll see just how good the Conqueror is now*, she grumbled to herself.

~*Part 15*~

The three Egyptians stood tall at the end of the dock and the one in the middle held a lit torch. The other two, however, hurried to help the ship dock against the pier head of the marina. The other ships from Callisto's fleet also were docked but in various slips down the pier of the marina.

"Drop the gangplank!" ordered Callisto. One of the men scrambled to lower the gangplank down to the dock and as soon as he did, the three Egyptians boarded the ship.

Callisto met the men near the top of the gangplank.

"Welcome, Captain," greeted the Egyptian with the torch.

"Thank you," replied Callisto in her light voice. "Is the Queen home tonight?"

"She is and she is waiting inside for you and your men."

Callisto smirked a bit. "Wonderful. Let me get my... 'men' and you can escort us there."

"Yes of course," replied the man.

The Captain disappeared ahead, going down several steps to the galley of the ship where she bumped into her 'men.' "We're docked."

Xena nodded.

Callisto turned and headed back up the steps with Xena, Eve, Cyane, and Varia following behind. She led them to Egyptians and introduced them. "This is Xena, her daughter Eve and two Amazons... Cyane and Queen Varia."

"Very nice to meet you, ladies," replied the man with the torch and he bowed his head. "I am Torrid... but better known as Ra." He suddenly turned while saying, "Please follow me."

The group went down the ramp and onto the dock, their boots echoing as they made their way to the palace. At the door of the palace there were two guards keeping post as they entered inside then went to throne room. There the Queen of Egypt sat at her throne with a priest beside her and heavy built guard.

"Welcome to Egypt, ladies." Queen Cleopatra stood up and came down the steps to welcome her guests. "My, my you do look exactly as the Conqueror," she commented to the Warrior Princess.

Xena grinned. "So I've heard."

Cleopatra smiled and looked to Callisto, her smile faintly falling. "It's good to see you again, Captain."

"I wish I could say the same," whispered Callisto, her right eyebrow raised up.

The Queen ignored the comment and looked to the other three women she did not know. "And these ladies?"

"This is Eve," began Xena, "then Cyane and Queen Varia."

"Queen?" repeated Cleopatra.

"Queen of the Amazons," explained Varia, "in my world that is."

"It's wonderful to meet another queen then," joked Cleopatra lightly.

"I assume you received the Conqueror's message?" interrupted the Captain.

Queen Cleopatra turned her attention to Callisto, her stone cold look masking her features. "I did and I will be providing you with men and a guide to help you on your mission."

"We won't need any men," stated Callisto hotly. "The Conqueror provided us with plenty of men."

The Queen of Egypt chuckled amusingly. "Well I'm afraid, Captain it wasn't a request from the Conqueror... it was an order. And I do plan to keep my Conqueror happy." She narrowed her eyes. "Not her sea Captain."

Callisto only smirked as she grind her teeth quietly.

"I'm sure you all could use a break tonight."

"We could." Xena folded her arms and dropped her head to one side. "But we'd like to leave at first light."

"Yes of course." Cleopatra turned to Torrid, who stood by the entranceway. "Torrid."

The man crossed the throne room and came to the Queen's side.

"Please escort these ladies to their rooms. And tonight let my guard captain know that at first light he will be leaving for Gurkhan's."

"Yes of course, my Queen." Torrid bowed his head and turned to escort the women into the main portion of the palace.

"Goodnight," called Cleopatra. She stood there and watched them leave before sighing to herself, her eyes directly on Callisto's back. "She'll be the death of us." With a shake of her head, she decided it was best for her to retire for the night.

"What'd you think of that, mother?"

Xena leaned her sword against the wall and placed her chakram on the nightstand beside the table. "I'd say they don't get along," she joked.

"Mmmm," agreed Eve. She came up behind her mother and helped her unbuckle her brass armour. "Did you come up with a plan on how to get Cyane and I into Gurkhan's palace."

The older woman grinned and asked, "Have you ever wanted to be a belly dancer?"

"What?" choked out Eve.

Xena turned around while pulling her armour off. "A belly dancer?"

"Um... no not really." The daughter lifted an eyebrow. "What are you planning?"

The warrior shrugged and went to place her armour down on a sofa nearby. "Simple, you're going to do what Gabrielle and I had to do to save Sara."

"And that was become belly dancers?" chided Eve.

The Warrior Princess sat down on the sofa next to her armour and began untying her boots. "We got into Gurkhan's lair by being sold as slaves... it was the only way to get close enough to Gurkhan without being killed. Its what you and Cyane are going to have to do."

Eve nodded and asked, "Once we get Gabrielle, what do we do?"

"That's where it gets a bit fuzzy."

"Well... what'd you and... mom do?"

Xena peered up at hearing her daughter call Gabrielle mom, it made her smile. "Your... mom and I..." She stopped midway as she removed her boots. "...we ended up killing Gurkhan then escaping with Sara... lucky enough."

"Then we can do the same."

"True but..." Xena sat back in the sofa. "you have to keep in mind that they have Gabrielle... Queen of the Amazons. Anybody and I mean anybody would love to get their hands on her. Sara... she was easier since she was just a slave with no other importance to anybody."

"And it's not simple enough to get Gabrielle, kill Gurkhan in his... sleep, then escape?"

"Its not that, Eve." Xena sighed and stated, "I don't think Cyane can handle killing Gurkhan... not like that."

The daughter realized what her mother meant and dropped her head a bit. She kept thinking as her heart sunk a bit and she decided to sit down in a chair across from her mother. "I can kill him," she finally said.

"Eve," warned Xena.

"Mother, you know I can... I'm more than capable of handling it."

"I know that, Eve but you are on the path of God... not the warrior." The warrior sat forward, her arms resting on her legs. "You can't do that."

Eve raised an eyebrow. "I can... and I'm going to have to, mother. There's no other way... I'm not God's messenger... I never can be. I was born to be a warrior," she whispered.

Xena licked her lips; she swallowed down a lump in her throat. "Look Eve, do not kill him unless its your last resort, alright?"

Eve simply nodded.

The warrior nodded back then stood up. "Come on, we need some rest."

The pair gathered themselves and climbed into the large bed, hoping soon enough to sleep.

~*~*~*~

Autolycus stood still at the bottom of the steps in a strict formation.

Iolaus also did the same but sighed a bit, he'd been standing like this for three candlemarks now and nothing was happening like his partner planned on.

"Any minute now," muttered the King of Thieves.

"I've heard that eleven times already," grumbled the smaller thief.

"It should be pretty soon," called Palamon, "they always come in around this time."

"Gods I hope so." Iolaus sighed and leaned against the wall, his right hand resting on his sword.

Suddenly the door jerked open and two soldiers came into the jail. They hurried down the steps, each holding a tray of food for the prisoners.

"We heard you boys got stuck on dungeon duty for some stupid bickering," joked on of the soldiers.

"Yeah, yeah," replied Autolycus. "Shove it up your leathers."

The soldier that made the comment huffed while the other one snickered. Then they marched down the isle way to the cell. One soldier handed the other one his tray and took a ring of keys off his belt. He quickly unlocked the cell and took one tray at a time, placing them on the floor.

Autolycus flickered his eyes to his partner.

Iolaus slightly nodded and gripped his sword a little harder.

The two soldiers begin heading back for the stairs after locking the cell.

Iolaus tensed up and right when the soldier on his side came close enough, he drew his sword and stabbed the man in the stomach.

The other soldier froze briefly but quickly grabbed his sword.

The King of Thieves had reacted faster with his sword drawn and easily rammed his blade into the soldier's chest. He ripped out his blade and stood there as the soldier fell down and landed on top of the other one. "Well... that worked so far."

The smaller thief shook his head and knelt down while sheathing his sword. He unhooked the ring of keys and hurried down to the cell.

The King of Thieves followed behind helping his friend jerk open the cell door.

"Ready to go?" asked Iolaus with a smile.

Eponin smiled back, she started to stand up. "Hades," she growled.

"What's wrong?"

The Amazon gazed up at Autolycus. "I don't have much strength."

"Neither do I," admitted Palamon.

"What you mean?" quickly asked Iolaus, "Why didn't you say anything before?"

Eponin sighed while slowly and carefully getting onto her feet but she fell back against the wall, her breathing laboured. "I don't know... I've been feeling this way since I've gotten here."

"Me too." Palamon ran his fingers through his hair while tightly gripping a bar of the cell.

"Since you've been here?" Iolaus repeated. "Hmmm... I wonder," he thought aloud. He knelt down beside the food the soldiers had brought and lifted some of the food up on the tips of fingers. He carefully smelled it twice then licked it. "Yup... there's something in this stuff to keep you feeling weak. Some kinda of sedative."

"How come we didn't notice from the start?"

Iolaus looked up at Palamon while standing back up. "They probably used smaller quantities then so that you wouldn't notice until you got use to the stuff. It's a great way to keep a prisoner sedate."

"That explains why they give us such nice food," huffed out Eponin.

"It's worth the nicer food if it keeps the prisoners quiet and easier to handle," pointed out Autolycus. "You think you two can walk at all?"

"Yeah we'll be fine." Eponin glanced at Palamon, whom nodded his agreement.

"Let's get out of here then." The King of Thieves reached around his back and pulled out to sets of cuffs. "We'll keep these loose so you can get out of them."

The pair nodded and held their hands out, Autolycus put on one pair and Iolaus put the other pair on Eponin. Afterwards, the group headed up the stairs, the two prisoners in the front and the thieves behind with their swords drawn.

"So what you plan to say if anybody asks what we're doing with the prisoners?" inquired Iolaus.

Autolycus shrugged as he opened the jail door. "I'll think of something at the spur of the moment."

Iolaus sighed at his partner's answer but decided to leave it. He went outside with the prisoners into the cool night, happy there was some kind of darkness to cover them.

After Autolycus locked the jail back up he came behind the prisoners again. The group quietly walked through the centre of the fort making their way to the gates. They noted all the guards at the top along the walls, standing guard not towards them but towards the forest that surround the compound.

"What we gonna do about the two guards at the gate?" murmured Iolaus.

"I don't know yet," muttered the King of Thieves.

And as they neared the gates, those two guards drew their swords and stepped forward.

"Iolaus, whatever happens don't let either of those guards touch that bell."

The small thief nodded, knowing exactly what would happen if the bell was sounded.

"Who goes there?" called a guard. He squinted his eyes a bit but he recognized the two prisoners immediately when the group approached. "What are you doing with the prisoners?" He grabbed his sword without drawing it.

The other guard however unsheathed his sword, tense about the situation.

"Well you see," started Autolycus, "we're taking them to Lord Sinteres."

"Sinteres's office is that way, you idiots." He pointed in the direction with his free hand.

Autolycus looked in that direction and nodded. "So it is... my mistake." He smiled back at the guard. There was one brief second of silence then he shoved Palamon to one side and fisted up his hand. He punched the guard square in the face.

Iolaus did the same, pushing the weapons master to one side and bringing his sword at the guard but his sword clashed against the guard's.

Both Palamon and Eponin had fallen to the ground, out of the way, and too weak to get up quickly.

Autolycus had started sword fighting against his opponent.

Palamon saw that the King of Thieves was having a bit of trouble fighting the guard so he tried giving a hard kick up with his right foot. He smashed his boot right between the guard's legs.

"Oh fuck," moaned the guard, his hands directly going between his legs.

"That was cruel," stated Autolycus jokingly. "But a good idea." He grabbed the guard's shoulders and rammed his knee between the man's legs as well.

The guard squealed and fell on the ground holding himself.

Iolaus's enemy was still fighting and was trying to near the bell alarm. Iolaus quickly stopped him when he brought his sword around and stabbed the guard in the side.

The soldier dropped his sword and fell on his knees.

Iolaus turned to help Eponin up while Autolycus helped Palamon to his feet.

The bell rang.

"Shit!" yelled Iolaus as he swung around with his sword and drove the blade into the guard's chest.

The guard released the bell's rope and finally fell to the ground.

"Come on, let's get out of here," ordered Autolycus.

"Stop them!" yelled a few soldiers across the compound.

Iolaus looked behind Eponin, when she was standing, and saw several groups of soldiers racing after them.

"Get 'em! They have the prisoners!"

"The prisoners are escaping!"

"Time to go," announced Autolycus. He whirled around and kicked the gates open.

Draco came rushing out of his room half dressed in uniform. He quickly realized what was happening and yelled out, "Stop them! and kill those soldiers!" He growled before disappearing into his room again to throw on the rest of his uniform.

By then, Autolycus and Iolaus were out of the gates half dragging Palamon and the Amazon behind them.

"Can we go a little faster?" screamed Iolaus.

"We're trying," growled Eponin, "we're too weak."

The King of Thieves looked behind and saw soldiers coming up from behind with swords out and torches burning. "You two are going to have to try a little more if you want to stay alive." He then felt his ears ringing with the sounds of horse beats. "Oh no," he whispered.

Iolaus glanced back and confirmed his partner's worries; there were ten men on horseback coming after them and one of them was Draco. "We're not going to make it now."

As the runaways made it deeper into the forest, they knew they'd be dead in seconds,

as the horse beats became closer and closer.

The King of Thieves looked ahead and suddenly saw metal flashing and small fires in the air moving quickly towards them. "Oh Hades."

The rest of the group realized exactly what was happening as the enemy surrounded them. They gave up, coming to a complete stop in the middle of the dark forest.

Iolaus turned his back to Autolycus, facing the compound. "Been nice workin' with yah, Auto."

"You too," muttered the King of Thieves.

The first person on horseback to come into view was coming from deep in the forest. The rider reappeared out of the darkness on a golden horse and gave out a war cry. The rider came directly at the group of runaways with sword drawn.

Autolycus took a deep breath and closed his eyes, waiting for the sword to rip through his chest. And he waited. He opened one eye slightly and carefully but then both his eyes flew open when the rider came right up to him then the horse leapt over him and Iolaus.

"Wait... I know that horse." The King of Thieves quickly spun around.

Iolaus squinted and said, "I know that rider's hair, sheath, and armour." He laughed to himself.

"The Conqueror," whispered Palamon, and he sighed in relief.

Suddenly ten women dropped from the trees above them with masks on and swords out.

"Attack them!" yelled one of the Amazons.

Nine of those Amazons disappeared into the night, heading to attack Draco's men.

Then there was a surge of fifty horseback soldiers that swept past the runaways heading after Draco and his men.

The one Amazon remaining turned to the group. "Well... good to see you again, Ep." She pulled her mask back and curly red hair fell down.

"Amarice." The weapons master smiled and hugged her friend. "What you doing here?"

"Gabrielle sent us here to make sure everything went alright."

"Thank Artemis she did."

Amarice smiled but looked away when she saw four men on horseback came up to the group.

The leader of the group smiled down at them. "Nice to see you again, sir."

Palamon returned the smile to his soldier. "You too, Joxer."

"Can we offer you four a lift back to camp?" inquired Joxer, the second in command.

"Would love one," confessed Eponin. She took Joxer's hand and felt herself hefted up into the saddle behind him.

"See you at the camp, Ep," called Amarice. She smiled before pulling her mask down; she left for the battle ahead.

The others gathered themselves onto a horse and were ridden back to the Conqueror's camp.

~*~*~*~

"So what did you have planned at that point, Autolycus?" The Conqueror folded her arms over her chest and revealed an amused smile.

"I really don't know, Conqueror." He laughed to himself. "I just planned on you appearing out of the darkness to save the day."

The ruler huffed. "I could tell." She dropped her arms to her side again, walking to the entrance of her tent, she said, "Get some rest tonight, Autolycus. Tomorrow we'll discuss the... bill."

"That'd be great, my liege."

"Uh huh." Xena held up the flap for the smaller man as he passed through.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, my liege."

The Conqueror waited a brief moment before deciding to see how the Amazon and her guard captain were doing now. She quietly left and went to Eponin's tent first.

Amarice glanced over when she saw the tall ruler step inside of the tent; she immediately stood up.

Eponin sat up more in her bed, her full attention on the ruler.

"How you feel?" The Conqueror's voice broke the silence first.

"Still weak."

"I can imagine." The Conqueror took a step closer to the foot of the bed. "Sinteres likes to use a lot of sedatives with his prisoners... easier to deal with them."

"I've come to notice it," the weapons master joked lightly.

"By tomorrow you should be a lot better," promised the ruler.

Eponin nodded and then asked, "Have you heard anything from Gabrielle?"

"No but tomorrow I'm expected at the Amazon village. I heard reports that the other queen has arrived at the village."

Eponin nodded a couple of times. "Anything on Queen Gabrielle?"

"Nothing yet," confessed the ruler. "I hope to expect a report in a few days of their progress. They should have arrived in Egypt by now."

The weapons master pressed her lips together, her stomach twisting a little.

"Get some rest tonight. There's a guard tonight at your tent in case you need anything." The Conqueror turned to leave

Eponin hesitated for a second but spoke out. "Thank... you, Conqueror."

The ruler glanced back and gave a nod; a faint smile creased her lips slowly before she disappeared out of the tent. She stood near the entrance of the tent.

Amarice let out the breath she'd been holding the entire time. "That woman always scares the feathers off me."

"Amarice... get over her," joked the weapon's master.

The Conqueror grinned to herself at hearing the Amazon's comments. With a chuckle, she walked off. She directly went to Palamon's tent to check on him.

"Conqueror," greeted the guard captain, he tried getting out of the bed.

"Stay there, Palamon." The Conqueror came over to the bedside. "How you feeling?"

"Better... some of that poison has worked out of me."

"Good to hear." Xena placed her left hand up on the bed railing. "I'm going to need you when this fight comes against Sinteres."

"What are the plans so far, my liege?"

"The Amazons will be here soon, I plan to surround Sinteres's compound and cut off any supply routes."

"Starve them some huh?"

"Exactly," replied the ruler, "then once we know Queen Gabrielle is alive and safe, we'll attack Sinteres. Finished this stupid game."

Palamon sat up a little in the bed. "What is going on with Queen Gabrielle?"

"Fortunately, Xena and Gabrielle are here to help."

The guard captain grinned. "Ah and they're off getting Queen Gabrielle...?"

"Not quite, Xena, her daughter and two Amazons left the other day to get Queen Gabrielle."

"And Gabrielle is with the Amazons?"

The Conqueror nodded.

Palamon lowered his eyes while he thought about everything that was happening. "Sounds like everything is falling out well."

"So far," stated the ruler. "Let's not get cocky just yet."

"Mmmm," agreed Palamon.

Xena moved away from the bed, retreating to the tent's entrance. "Get some rest, Palamon."

"You too, my liege."

The ruler took one step out but stopped and turned back. "By the way, I've decided to make you my general now, Palamon."

The guard captain blinked.

The Conqueror laughed quietly as she left the tent.

"Thank you, my liege," he squeaked out.

Xena took a deep breath until she couldn't fill her chest anymore with air. She quietly went through the dark camp back to her tent. She noticed a few of her men relaxing around a campfire and decided to... encourage them. She came up quietly behind them. "I suggest you, ladies do something a little more productive than keeping your asses warm by the fire," she growled as she emerged before her men.

The four soldiers scrambled onto their feet after they'd stopped laughing from a joke from earlier.

"Sorry, my liege," called one soldier.

They quickly hurried off to take a post around the camp.

The Conqueror looked towards where they ran off. "And one of you douse this fire!" she yelled hotly. She unclenched her teeth and continued her journey to her tent. Once inside, she unattached her sword and chakram, placing them beside her bed. Lying down, she stared up at the tent, her mind wondering about what laid ahead of her.

Her entire world was changing and she had little control over much of it. She'd always had control over her own destiny, her path but at the same time she had to wonder if she really had a choice in the matter of her fate.

As of right now, she was too concerned about the war ahead. She knew it'd be easy to win this battle against Sinteres, she had little worries of defeat. The only defeat she did have fear over was Queen Gabrielle's death. She wasn't there in Egypt so she had no control of what happens to the Queen. She couldn't stand not knowing what was going on within Gurkhan's palace. The only thing that kept her from going insane was knowing Xena, her counterpart, was there to supervise the entire mission.

Yet, she still felt this dread in her that made her shiver each time she thought of Queen Gabrielle being lost in the middle of all of this. And the fact that she felt this dread towards Queen Gabrielle's death made her fearful for her very destiny. She'd never been conquered in her life and promised herself never to be conquered by anybody... or anything.

Section 4

~*~*~*~

The Conqueror lifted her right hand after she stopped Argo. She listened to the rattling of her men's armour and weapons come to a dead silence, she lowered her hand back down to her saddle.

The two Amazons at the gates of the Amazon Nation approached the ruler.

"Conqueror, what can we help you with?"

"Queen Gabrielle asked for me." The ruler shifted a little in her saddle. "I believe she would want her weapons master back." She signalled back to a bit to an Amazon riding on a horse.

The two Amazons smiled when they saw Eponin safely seated on a warhorse.

"Go on," ordered one of the guards.

One Amazon went through the slightly opened gates and rushed off in their search to find the Queen.

Palamon moved a little uneasily in his saddle.

"How you feel?" asked the Conqueror quietly.

The general sighed before replying, "Still a little weak... and saddle sore."

Xena softly laughed to herself and with an amused look, turned her head back to the

gates right when Gabrielle stepped through them.

"Welcome back, Conqueror."

The ruler smiled down at her friend. "Nice to see you again. I brought back a gift." She turned her head towards Eponin.

"Ep?"

The weapons master smiled then carefully dismounted from her horse and came up to Gabrielle to hug her.

"Glad you made it back safely," whispered the warrior-bard.

"Me too," joked the weapons master.

Ephiny and Solari were next to snake through the gates of the village. They too saw Eponin and went to greet her happily.

The warrior-bard neared the Conqueror; her head dropping back some to gaze up at the dark ruler. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." The ruler kept her back stiff in the saddle, her posture rather calm. "The men I've brought with me are for the Amazons." She half turned her head, giving a signaled with her right hand.

A young man approached on horseback to the Conqueror's side.

"This is my new guard captain, Joxer."

The guard captain smiled at the Amazon Queen.

"Nice to meet you, Queen Gabrielle," greeted Joxer.

Gabrielle stared at the man, blinked, and shook her head; an amused look took over her features. "By the God, I'd never would have imagined," she whispered to herself.

"What's wrong?" inquired the ruler.

"Nothing, Conqueror... its just in my world, our Joxer, I could never imagine as quite... well the soldier."

Xena raised an eyebrow at this before saying, "Joxer has been one of my finest since I started my campaign to conquer the known-world."

Gabrielle simply nodded her understanding. "Thank you, Conqueror. I know the Nation could use the extra protection." She then took a couple of steps back towards the gates. "Please come into the Nation."

"Thank you." Xena dismounted her mare before facing her guard captain. "Joxer, see to it that the men setup a perimeter around the Nation. Then meet us in the village."

"Yes of course, my liege." Joxer turned his horse around and ordered the men to follow him.

Gabrielle, however, escorted Palamon and the Conqueror, into the village. Ephiny, Solari, and the weapons master tagged along behind Gabrielle.

"Have my ten Amazons been cordial with you?" asked Gabrielle.

"Yes," simply answered the ruler but then she added, "They were rather helpful in stopping Draco and a few of his men earlier."

"I take it then it was a bit difficult for Autolycus and Iolaus to make it out of the fort?"

"Yes some but... they managed." The Conqueror grinned.

The Amazon Queen chuckled. She then came to a halt and called, "Teresa?"

Teresa came out of the stables and spotted her Queen. "Yes, Gabrielle?" She quickly marched over to the group.

"Can you please take our guests' horses?"

The young Amazon nodded and took the reins from Xena and then Palamon.

Solari nudged Eponin carefully. "Here, give me your horse's reigns. I can take care of him."

"Thanks, Solar."

"No problem." The second in command smiled before following Teresa into the stables.

The warrior-bard placed her hands behind her back; she peered up at her tall, dark friend. "I want you to meet the other queen of the Amazons."

"I'd appreciate that." The Conqueror held out her hand to the younger woman to lead the way.

Gabrielle briefly smiled then showed the group to Velasca's hut. Once she was at the door, she knocked three times.

Velasca quickly answered the door, her features immediately going hard at seeing the Conqueror. "Conqueror," she stated rather harshly.

The ruler's eyes faintly narrowed.

"Conqueror, this is Queen Velasca. She has been running a smaller village north of here."

The Conqueror nodded, still studying the other queen. Velasca made her skin crawl.

The small warrior then directed to the general. "And this is Palamon."

Velasca forced on a smile towards Palamon.

Gabrielle noted the silence and felt her own skin crawl at the tension. "Velasca, join us. We're going to my hut to discuss what's ahead."

The queen acknowledged her answer, closing the door to her hut and following the group to the Queen's hut.

Once inside, the group sat or stood in various spots within the Queen's hut.

"Has there been any word from Xena yet, Conqueror?" inquired the warrior-bard as she set on the corner of the desk.

"Nothing," answered the Conqueror, "but there should be something soon here."

Gabrielle simply nodded and folded her arms against her chest. "Has anybody discussed the plans with you, Eponin?"

The weapons master shook her head in response.

"Okay, the way things are working right now is Xena, Eve, and two other Amazons have gone to Egypt. They are going to get Queen Gabrielle out and then Gurkhan will be disposed of." She paused before continuing her speech. "After we hear word that the Queen is safe, we will attack Sinteres."

"We?" The weapons master raised an eyebrow.

"We...." Gabrielle pointed to the ruler. "The Amazons and the Conqueror."

"But-"

"We have a treaty to uphold, Eponin," cut off Solari, she gave her friend a challenging look.

The weapons master's expression switched, and she replied, "I didn't know."

The warrior-bard slightly smiled to herself at the second in command's interjection. "Hopefully the fight against Sinteres and Draco will go well."

"What do you need of me?" questioned the weapons master.

"Do you think you're up to this, Ep?" Gabrielle lifted herself off the corner of the table. "I need you but I do not want you strained."

The weapons master shook her head. "I'm an Amazon, that's answer enough."

Gabrielle accepted the response. "I need you to start organizing the Amazons with Solari's help." Her eyes flickered to Solari briefly then back to the weapons master.

"You two are to organize them and then setup various traps in the forest. And with Palamon's help... if that is okay by the Conqueror?" She switched her attention to the dark ruler.

The Conqueror slowly nodded. "Palamon will be happy to assist. Correct?"

"Yes of course, my liege."

"Alright." Gabrielle sighed while thinking for a moment.

"What if Sinteres and Draco do not leave the compound?" cut in Velasca. "What then?"

The ruler chewed on her lower lip before posing an answer, "We'll have to attack them then."

"Oh great, like we have the man power for that," growled Velasca.

The Conqueror sharply turned her head to the queen. "You may not but I certainly do... Queen Velasca."

Gabrielle quickly straightened off the desk and took a step forward. "The Conqueror is right, we will have to attack. We cannot leave them there."

"Even I have seen that fortress, it is built back into a small cliff side," started the queen. "There is no way in Tartarus we can break into that compound."

"There is a way," broke in Eponin. "I think I've seen a way while Palamon and I were there."

"What was that?" questioned the regent.

"I think I recall seeing some kind of..." She couldn't find the right word for it.

"It was a type of mining shaft," finished Palamon. "I think they use to mine in that cliff side before it became a fortress."

Eponin nodded her agreement. "Yes, it was well boarded over so neither of us could see in there very well."

The Conqueror had her eyebrows furrowed together as she considered this new information. "Palamon, request Joxer to come in here."

"Yes, my liege." The general quickly left the hut in search of Joxer.

"What are you thinking?" inquired the Queen.

The Conqueror came to when she heard Gabrielle's voice. "Back at the castle I have geographic maps of all the lands I've conquered. I made sure to keep detailed records from every valley to mining shaft to creek. Just incase I ever ended up fighting in those lands again I at least knew the terrain well to take to my advantage."

"You think you might have this mining shaft in your records?" queried Solari.

"Most likely." The Conqueror grinned.

"Did the shaft look large, Ep?"

The weapons master glanced to the warrior-bard. "Yeah it was pretty large, three people wide easy."

"Does anybody know what the terrain is like going up the cliff?"

"It's fairly jagged," replied Velasca. "I think we can scale it if need be."

"Hmmm." Gabrielle lowered her head a bit while considering this new information. "We'll have to work on that."

Palamon and Joxer then entered into the hut.

"My liege?" Joxer bowed his head before straightening back up.

"Joxer, I need you to send a fast rider back to Athens."

"For what, my liege?"

The Conqueror completely faced the smaller man. "Do you recall my maps of the different areas?"

"Yes of course."

"Whoever you send will need to pick up the map on the area that Sinteres's compound is located." She paused for a moment. "It'll be in the western Greece section."

"It'll be done, my liege. I'll send somebody now."

"Good."

Joxer left as quickly as he came, in search of his fastest rider.

"Okay Velasca, Solari, and Eponin why don't you three start organizing the Amazons. Please have your Amazons group up with Gabrielle's Amazons, Velasca."

The queen nodded. "Of course." She started for the door with the second in command and Eponin following behind her.

After they left, Gabrielle peered up at the Conqueror. "So, what you think about that mine shaft?"

An evil grin broke out across the ruler's face.

"Oh boy," muttered the regent, which only made Palamon laugh quietly.

~*~*~*~

Eve sighed as she gazed down at her new attire. "I can't believe this. I didn't even wear stuff this revealing when I was the Roman general."

Xena chuckled at her daughter's words. "I know." She then glanced over to the other side of the tent to Cyane. "Are you ready now?"

"I think so," replied the Amazon.

Varia suddenly rushed into the changing tent. "Come on, they've started the auctions for the slaves. And Gurkhan is here himself."

"Even better," muttered Xena. "You'll have to take care of them, Varia. I can't be seen."

"Alright," replied the queen. "Let's go."

Quickly Cyane and Eve followed Varia out of the tent.

"Torrid is waiting off to the side of steps on the platform," whispered the queen as she mingled her way through the crowd. "He'll be auctioning you two off."

"Alright," replied Eve. "Is there anything we should do to... attract Gurkhan's attention?"

"Yeah... look sexy," half teased the queen. She came up to the side of the stage and found Torrid. "Here they are, Ra."

The Egyptian nodded and went up two steps of the platform to come near a man. "I've got my slaves ready anytime the auctioneer is ready."

"Okay," replied the man simply. He then noted the auctioneer finished his current auction so he quickly approached him. He whispered something to him.

The auctioneer happily smiled at his crowd and held his hands out towards Eve and Cyane. "And the best part of this slave auction is our two Amazonian belly dancers!"

"Oh great," grumbled Eve.

Cyane laughed quietly as she was pushed up the steps by Torrid.

Xena's daughter followed behind and forced a sly grin on her lips when she came onto the stage before the slavers.

The auctioneer instantly started getting bids for the two women. He quickly started yelling out for 100 ducats for them both then 125 followed by 150 and the price kept climbing.

"So how much you think they'll get?" quietly asked Callisto as she appeared beside the

Warrior Princess.

Xena raised an eyebrow at the naval captain. "A fair bit." She folded her arms across her chest as she stood in front of the tent.

"I can imagine," agreed the captain. "Especially your daughter." She grinned as her eyes lit up at the warrior.

The warrior bit slightly on the inside of her mouth. "So have you met Queen Cleopatra before?" she inquired in an amused tone.

Callisto raised an eyebrow at the other woman. "Many times."

"Really?" Xena grinned at the captain. "You two don't seem to get along too well."

"Noooo... I'm afraid we don't have good relations."

"Hmmm." The warrior tried to think about why they may not and a thought came to mind once she put herself in the Conqueror's shoes. "She makes for a pretty good Queen of Egypt huh?"

Callisto said nothing.

"I can see why the Conqueror left her to govern Egypt." Xena nodded a few times. "The people here are extremely loyal to her... and Cleopatra is loyal to the Conqueror."

"She always has been," agreed the naval captain.

"She is probably a little more loyal than some in her realm." Xena directed a smug look at Callisto.

Callisto raised an eyebrow at the Warrior Princess. "Only because Cleopatra is desperate to keep her little kingdom. I'd fuck the Conqueror too if I was weak as she." She shrugged before gazing back at the stage. "So she's got two of the Conqueror's fingers... and I've got her navy," reminded the captain as she disappeared in the crowd.

Xena ran her tongue along the front of her teeth as she stared at Callisto briefly. "In my world and in the next, some things never change with her." She then caught sight of Varia weaving her way through the people. "Hey," she greeted.

"You think this'll work out?" questioned the queen.

"It has too," replied the warrior quietly.

"Well far as I can tell Gurkhan is not interested... he has yet to bid."

"Give him a chance." Xena glanced at the slaver. "He's just waiting."

"For?"

The warrior licked her lips. "To give the highest bid."

"I hope you're right," muttered the Amazon.

The auction for the two belly dancers came to a pause on 600 ducats. The auctioneer continued calling out 600 ducats once, twice, and then the last third.

"1000 ducats!" yelled Gurkhan.

The auctioneer spun around in his spot to point at the slaver. "1000 ducats!" He then focused on the crowd again. "1000 ducats can anybody beat that? Going once... going twice... going three." And then pointed back at Gurkhan quickly. "Sold for 1000 ducats." He then gestured for Eve and Cyane to leave the stage.

Xena grinned.

"Bingo," whispered Varia.

~*~*~*~

Eve gazed around as she was brought into the large steam room.

Cyane raised an eyebrow as she noted the five other women in the water. "See her yet?" she whispered quietly.

"No," muttered the princess. She then slipped out of her robe as she neared the edge of the steam pool. She carefully climbed into the water.

The Amazon quickly followed Eve's example, going in afterwards. Nearing Xena's daughter, she asked, "She will look like Gabrielle, exactly?"

"Pretty much according to mother." Eve smiled as a fellow wife passed by her. After she left, she uttered, "Just like Gabrielle except with longer hair and younger features."

Cyane nodded faintly and moved away a little from Eve. She leaned against the side of the pool, letting the hot water sooth her.

Eve decided to do the same, taking advantage of the nice situation. After a few moments, she closed her eyes and began relaxing.

The Amazon also relaxed, her eyes drifting shut.

Eve then felt the water slightly jounce in a rhythmic manner, she knew somebody else just entered the pool. Slowly she opened her eyes and instantly locked onto a small, blond haired woman. A grin curled the corner of her lips. "Cy," she muttered.

The Amazon quickly opened her eyes and spotted Gabrielle across the pool. "Bingo." She glanced at her friend then back to the Amazon Queen. "Let's go talk-"

"Not yet," cut off the princess.

Gabrielle noted the two new wives in the pool with the rest. She also could tell they carefully watched her but she continued to ignore them. Shifting through the pool, she came to a group of women off to one side of the large pool.

"Gabrielle," greeted one woman, she smiled as well.

"Hi, Adonia."

The Amazon Queen returned the warm smile. "How are you doing, Eboni?"

"Not too bad," replied Eboni.

"Does anybody know who is dancing tonight?" inquired Eshe.

"Not really sure," started Eboni, "It could be one of those new wives."

Gabrielle took a quick glimpse at the two women at the other end of the pool. "Does anybody know who they are?" She turned her attention back to her friends.

"Not yet," answered Adonia. "They just arrived."

"Hmmm." The Amazon Queen furrowed her eyebrows. "I'll be right back."

"Where you going?" quickly asked Eshe.

"To find out who they are." The Queen shrugged and waded through the water towards the two Amazons.

"Eve, she's coming over here."

The princess chuckled. "I can tell," she teased lightly.

Cyane huffed at her friend's words. "This should be fun."

"Excuse me, I know you two must be new here," started Gabrielle.

Eve straightened up instantly and smiled at the duplicate of her Gabrielle. "Yes we are. I am Eve and this is Cyane."

"I'm Gabrielle."

"Nice to meet you." Cyane smiled shyly at the Amazon Queen.

The bard shook her head a little then asked, "Cyane? So you're from Greece then?"

"Um... yes I am," replied the Amazon.

"I know, the name, Cyane, from where I am from is very well known."

Eve chuckled quietly at that.

The Amazon Queen caught the small laugh and just raised an eyebrow at her. "I know I have never met you before, but you seem familiar." She stared into warm green eyes.

A very large grin developed on Eve's face. "I think you've met my mother at one point."

Gabrielle became confused. "You're mother?"

The princess folded her arms against her chest. "Her name is Xena... the hero."

The Amazon Queen's lower jaw went loose.

Suddenly there was a loud footfall as a well dressed woman entered into the steam room.

Eve noted her angry stance and her eyebrows knitted together. "Who is she?" she questioned loudly.

The woman quickly heard Eve's question and walked over to her. "Who am I?" she growled lowly, "You dare to question the number one wife?"

"I have no idea who you were. I'm sorry," apologized Eve.

"Well, that's a good little dog." The number one wife straightened up and addressed all of the women, "New girls, listen up. I am Gurkhan's number one wife, and you are all dirt. I will one day carry his heir. Eventually, my son will rule over Gurkhan's kingdom. Anyone who comes between me and my Lord will feel my wrath. Believe me, that is when you will truly wish you were dead...."

Eve grunted at the woman's threat.

The number one wife's eyes flash at the princess. In response, she kicked Eve directly in the face. "Bad dog." She then smirked at Eve's surprised expression before walking out of the steam room.

"Goddamn," hissed Xena's daughter as she wiped away the blood from under her nose.

"You okay?" Gabrielle moved closer in to help.

Eve took a deep breath to control her temper. "Yeah I'm fine, thanks." She finally felt her temper come under better control. "She's a tough one, I'll give her that."

"She is," agreed the Amazon Queen. "Be careful what you say." She then took a step back to give Eve more space. "Xena and Gabrielle are here?" she uttered.

"Yes," answered Cyane. "Along with a number of Amazons from Gabrielle's Nation."

"By the gods," whispered the Queen. "What has been happening? Are Eponin,

Palamon and Ephiny safe?"

"Ephiny is far as we know," whispered Eve. "We're not sure about Eponin or Palamon, the Conqueror was working on it when we left."

Eve then saw several of the guards entering the room. "We'll talk more about it later... when it's safer." She reassured the bard by squeezing her shoulders.

"Let's go, whores," ordered a guard.

~*~*~*~

Callisto halted her army and yelled, "Make camp here."

"Think this is far enough?" muttered the queen.

Xena nodded after being near Mogador before in her times. "We should be safe enough from here."

Callisto shifted her horse closer to the other two women. "This is actually where the Conqueror set up camp the year she conquered Mogador."

"Nice to know," taunted the Amazon queen.

The naval captain raised an eyebrow. "It'll be rather amusing, personally." She then pulled her horse's left rein and started ordering the troops to set up camp.

Xena slightly turned in her saddle towards the west and saw the sun would be setting in about a candlemark. "How about we pitch our tent?" She turned back to Varia. "We'll then stake out Mogador as best as we can before dinner. Alright?"

Varia nodded her agreement.

"Come on." The warrior dismounted from her horse and the two women went about pitching their tent. After about twenty minutes they had the tent well set up.

Varia came up beside the Warrior Princess. "Let's go see what's happening down there."

Xena studied the compound through the various scattered palm trees. "I just hope they're okay in there."

"I'm sure they are," promised the queen.

Xena only sighed in response then said, "Let's go on foot."

"Should we tell Callisto?"

The warrior grinned and replied, "Screw her. Let's go." She started off for the compound with Varia at her side.

"What are we looking for exactly?"

Xena considered the Amazon's question. "Basically the easiest way in and out for all five of us."

"What are we going to do about Gurkhan?" Varia paused for a second. "Are we killing him or we leaving that up to Callisto?"

"I'm not sure yet." The Warrior Princess sighed while considering her options. "First we need to find a way to slip in." She chewed on her lower lip briefly. "And I may need you to pose as one of Gurkhan's wives, Varia."

"Why?" The queen wasn't following the warrior's plan.

"To make sure Eve and Cyane have Queen Gabrielle and to communicate with them."

Varia considered the Warrior Princess's idea. "I have a feeling we'll have to save the other wives as well," she mentioned.

"We're going to try our best." Xena then shrugged as she carefully stepped through a few large boulders in the hard sand. "But I have a feeling Queen Gabrielle can handle them if she hasn't already." She then saw the compound coming into view and was thankful that the sun had finally set in the west. Within a minute, she decided where to go first. "Alright, Varia." She came to a sudden stop. "See where that ledge is on the wall side?"

"Yeah sure."

"You think you could scale that up to the ledge then get onto the patrol walk on the wall top?"

The Amazon considered it then nodded. "As long as I have a rope to climb up, sure."

"Alright." Xena then waited for a moment and finally saw a guard walking down the wall. "Hmmm." She folded her arms.

"What we going to do about the guards?"

"Hold on," replied the Warrior Princess. She watched the guard turn around at the end of the wall and continue back down the wall. She counted the seconds until he returned back to the ledge then turn around. "Alright that means you got thirty seconds to climb the wall."

"What if he comes back by then?"

The Warrior Princess grinned at her friend. "Don't worry, you will make it up."

"Now the problem is how to get into the compound."

"Well..." Xena lowered her hands from across her chest and started walked backwards, her eyes focused on the end of the wall. "There you go." She pointed up.

Varia followed the warrior's direction and saw a door at the end of the guard wall. "Perfect."

"Let's hope though it'll take you directly into the castle and not the compound grounds," mentioned the Warrior Princess. "Alright, that'll have to do for now." She then faced the Amazon. "Let's get you back to the camp and see if we can find you some... suitable clothes for the mission."

Varia chuckled at her friend's words. She started walking back to the camp with the warrior. "I'll go in tomorrow night?"

"Yes... we'll give them a day to organize themselves."

The queen nodded. "We need to get Queen Gabrielle out of there soon though."

"I definitely agree, Varia."

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle slipped out of her room and saw nobody in the hallway. She brushed back a few strands behind her ears then walked down the hall to the fifth room away from her own. Quietly she knocked on the door; in response the door opened carefully. "Hey," she greeted.

Cyane smiled at the Amazon Queen. "Come in quickly." She shoved the door more open as the bard rushed past.

Eve peered up after hearing the door shut and a newcomer enter. "Hi, Queen Gabrielle." She stood up from her sofa with a smile on her face.

"Hi," greeted back the bard. "And please, it's just Gabrielle."

The princess chuckled quietly, nodding her understanding. "Sit down with us, please."

Gabrielle took a sofa chair across from the love sofa.

Cyane sat beside Eve on the sofa, her legs crossed and relaxed back into the sofa.

"How was the Conqueror?" hastily asked the Amazon Queen.

"She was better when we left."

Gabrielle released a sigh of relief. "Good... I heard she went through the gauntlet and survived it."

"She did," confirmed Eve. "She was in a lot better shape when we left from Athens port."

"I'm glad," whispered Gabrielle, she then lifted her eyes from the stone floor. "What is going on?"

Eve took a deep breath. "Well, mother... Xena and my queen, Varia, are here with the Conqueror's naval captain and some men. We're all planning to get you out of here and Callisto, the navel captain, has been ordered to destroy Mogador. Afterwards we'll return back home."

"What's happening back in Greece?"

"The overall plan was for the Conqueror and the Amazons to attack Sinteres and Draco."

The bard furrowed her eyebrows. "Where is Gabrielle then?"

"She is with your Amazons," answered Cyane, "acting as Queen while you're playing hooky."

The bard laughed at the Amazon. "That's good to hear then." She finally sat back into her chair. "Were there any plans yet to get Palamon and Eponin out?"

"Yes, the Conqueror was hiring the King of Thieves to rescue them from the compound."

Gabrielle nodded at Eve's answer. "I do have to request one thing."

Eve raised an eyebrow.

"The other wives need to make it out of here safely as well."

Cyane glanced at the princess in worry. "Eve, I'm not sure--"

"Cy, we can't leave them here." Eve shook her head slightly. "If we do, they'll most likely get killed. I think Callisto has it in her head to follow the Conqueror's orders thoroughly."

The Amazon sighed out her worry. "I know, just means we'll have to find some way to keep them safe before Callisto strikes."

Eve licked her lips. "We'll work on it." She returned her attention to Gabrielle. "In the meantime, I'd recommend talking to the wives and telling them to prepare themselves."

"What of the number one wife?" questioned Cyane.

The Amazon Queen huffed. "I'm not sure honestly. As much as I even dislike her, I think it's best we look after her. I just don't think it's wise to fill her in on what's happening."

"Mmmm," agreed the princess.

The bard then stood up. "I better return to my room before the guard comes around to do checks."

"Good idea." Cyane stood up, heading to the door.

"Thank you for coming over, Gabrielle." Eve smiled warmly and stood up.

The bard took a step forward and unexpectedly hugged Xena's daughter. "And thank you for coming for me."

Eve felt herself warm up from the sincere thank you, she hugged her back tightly. "All my pleasure. Please go."

Gabrielle nodded then went to the door. "Thank you too, Cyane."

Cyane smiled shyly. "You're welcome, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard chuckled then gave her a warm hug as well. "It's Gabrielle."

The Amazon responded with a chuckle. "Of course." After releasing her, she opened the door silently.

Gabrielle slipped out of the door and disappeared down the hallway without a noise.

~*Part 16*~

"Solari, how is everything going?"

The second in command turned around at hearing Gabrielle's voice. "We're moving along pretty well."

The warrior-bard came up beside the Amazon in the middle of the sparring field. "Good. Where is Ep?"

"She is taking care of the Amazons that need new or more weapons in the armoury."

Gabrielle nodded her approval. She continued watching the various groups of Amazons sparring on the field. "When do you think they'll be ready?"

Solari folded her arms against her chest while she considered the question. "I bet in two days." She studied the troops of Amazons. "This afternoon Ep is going to work with Palamon on the traps in the surrounding forest by Sinteres's compound."

"Sounds good," agreed the warrior-bard. "And have things with Joxer and his men been fine?"

"No problems," admitted the second in command. "They've been very pleasant."

The Amazon Queen grinned. "Wonderful." She then went more serious. "How do you think Ep is doing?"

The Amazon sighed with her eyes lowering away from the sparring Amazons. "She hanging in there, honestly." She peered up at her friend. "The time in the compound

was tough on her, I think." She narrowed her eyes while looking towards the armoury. "I talked to her a little about what happened...." She shook her head in confusion.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure but... I just have the distinct feeling something definitely happened to her that she's failing to mention."

Gabrielle nipped at her lower lip. "You think they could have... raped her?"

"Its possible... I'm starting to wonder about that too." Solari closed her eyes briefly then opened them again, tints of anger reappeared in them. "She's been quiet ever since she's gotten back. She won't really talk about anything that happened... just glazing over it all."

"Hades," growled Gabrielle. "I better talk to her."

Solari quickly grabbed her friend's arm. "Gabrielle, I know you're worried, just like me, but you have to understand Eponin."

"Trust me, I do... to this day, she's still one of my Amazons at home." The warrior-bard pressed her lips together. "I understand her pride but I also know she depends on her family even if she won't admit it."

The second in command sighed, she released the Queen's arm. "I know, I'm just worried."

"Me too... let me talk to her, okay?"

Solari nodded. "What happens if she has been?"

"Then I think I'll pull her off." Gabrielle shook her head. "She doesn't need this."

"But I think it's exactly what she wants... too keep her mind off what happened." Solari's features shifted back into worry.

"Yeah I know... I think I'll ask the Conqueror if Eponin can go to her castle. Stay there until the war is over for her own safety."

Solari looked away from her friend and back to the Amazons. "You should send two others with her."

"I was thinking that myself... Amarice and Teresa. They're still a bit young for this war."

"Especially Amarice," added the second in command.

"Mmmm," agreed the warrior-bard. "Alright, after Ep finishes up with at the armoury send her to my hut."

"I'll do that." Solari smiled but more sadly than anything. "Thanks, Gabrielle."

"For?"

"Looking after us all." The second in command grinned. "I don't think this village is quite use to having somebody as kind and gentle as you."

The Amazon Queen smiled at her friend's words. "Oh you've always had somebody like me; she's just a little tougher than me."

The Amazon laughed. "True."

Gabrielle reached up to briefly squeeze the other woman's arm. "I'll see you later, Solar." She headed for the gates to check on Joxer.

~*~*~*~

Gabrielle lifted her head when the weapons master entered her hut. "Afternoon, Ep."

"Hi, Gabrielle." Eponin closed the door quietly behind herself. "Solari said you wanted me for something."

"Yeah." The warrior-bard stood up from the desk. "I need to talk to you." She grabbed a chair from the corner of the room and brought it to her desk. "Sit down."

The Amazon took the offered chair and tried relaxing.

Gabrielle sat back down and folded her arms against her chest. "I and a few others have been worried about you, Ep."

The weapons master furrowed her eyebrows together in response. "What about?"

The Amazon Queen sighed, her lips pressed against each other. "I want to know what happened to you while you were in Sintere's compound."

"Nothing really, Gabrielle." The Amazon shrugged slightly. "They drugged Palamon and I... pretty much kept us in the cells."

"Pretty much?" pressed on the warrior-bard.

Eponin just shrugged.

Gabrielle sighed deeply and reached out, her right hand resting on her friend's knee. "Eponin, did they do anything to you?"

The weapons master looked away, her eyes lowered to the floor. After a moment, she closed her eyes. "Yeah," she whispered. She looked back to her friend. "A couple of the guards... well... I'm sure you can guess." She stared for a moment then returned her attention to Gabrielle. "If I hadn't been drugged the entire time, I could have easily protected myself."

The Queen squeezed the weapon's master leg gently. "Ep, I can't even imagine...."

"You don't want to," uttered the Amazon. "I try not to remember, honestly." She gave the other woman a bitter smile.

"Ep..." Gabrielle prepared herself with a deep breath. "I'm going to pull you out of this one."

"What? Over... over that?" lowly said the weapons master.

"Eponin, I will not let you perform your duties after you've been raped," slightly growled the Queen. She showed her temper only because she knew it was the only way to make Eponin listen. "I've got Ephiny and Solari to handle it all."

The weapons master quickly stood up and walked away, her back to the Queen.

The warrior-bard sighed strongly. She stood up slowly and came up behind the Amazon. "Ep, you need time, please."

Eponin didn't respond, her head dropping down and her right hand went up to pull her hair back.

"Eponin, please... you need to leave here for awhile and heal."

The weapons master turned around, her face streaked with tears.

Gabrielle felt her heart drop, and she instantly pulled her friend in for a long hug. "Everything will be fine, I promise."

"I know," whispered Eponin. She remained silent while she continued to hug Gabrielle.

After about a minute or so, Gabrielle pulled back but rested her hands on the Amazon's waist. "I'm going to ask the Conqueror if you can stay in her castle until the war is over. I'm sure she won't mind it and that way you can watch over Athens, I doubt there will be any problems." She paused momentarily. "I'm going to have Teresa and Amarice go with you too."

The weapons master just nodded.

"You think you'll be okay?"

"Yes," uttered the weapon's master. She roughly wiped her tears away. "Thank you."

The warrior-bard sadly smiled. "I'm always here to help, Ep." She hugged her friend again. "You're family to me."

"To me too." Eponin hugged Gabrielle tightly as she could.

The Queen released her friend after a moment. "Go pack your stuff now. I'll tell Amarice and Teresa."

The weapons master nodded and went to the door. "Thank you again."

Gabrielle slightly smiled. "Go on."

The Amazon left the hut just as quietly as she first came.

The warrior-bard shook her head at the thought of Sintere's men touching the weapons master. She could only imagine what that would do to Eponin. In many ways, she was similar to Xena and both of them held a lot of pride about themselves.

Gabrielle walked back to her desk and quickly jotted down a letter to the Conqueror. Afterwards, she exited the hut and went in search of Solari. And as she hunted for Solari, she considered how it would break either Eponin or Xena to lose a fight simply because they were too weak by mere medicines. They both counted on their physical strength has protection; she knew how it would eat Eponin up very much like it would Xena.

"Solari?" The warrior-bard waved her hand, with the message, at the second in command.

"Hey," greeted the Amazon. "What's going on?"

Gabrielle joined the Amazon next to the training field. "Can you get an Amazon rider to deliver this to the Conqueror?"

"Yes of course." Solari took the message.

"Ep is going to Athens."

Solari knew exactly what that meant. "Will she be okay?"

"I'm hoping so," whispered the Queen. "I think she needs time away to recover."

"I agree."

Gabrielle sighed. "Get that message taken care of for me. I'm going to go find Amarice and Teresa."

"They are going too?"

"Yeah I think its for the best." The Amazon Queen started stepping away but stopped. "If you see Eph, tell her what's going on too."

"Alright."

"Thanks, Solari."

"No problem," called back the second in command.

Gabrielle hung her head down as she walked towards Ephiny's hut to see if she could catch the regent.

~*~*~*~

"Okay, let's get this started," ordered the Queen.

Palamon nodded his agreement after studying the surrounding forest near Sinteres's compound.

"I think we should stick to the traditional ground traps," started Ephiny.

Gabrielle crossed her arms and considered. "You think there's enough foliage to cover the ground for that?"

Ephiny glanced around the area briefly. "Yeah I think so, not as many as normal, but we can get quite a few in." She grinned at her Queen. "They work very well."

"Yes, so I've heard," teased back the warrior-bard. She then went serious again.

"How about the trees?" inquired Palamon. "Archers?"

"I think so," agreed the regent. "We have some fine archers in the Nation."

Gabrielle ran her fingers through her hair while in the middle of her thoughts. "How many archers does the Conqueror have, Palamon?"

"I think she only brought a hundred men this time."

"That will do." Gabrielle peered back up at Palamon. "Ask the Conqueror for me if we may post her archers in the trees this time with a few Amazons to support them."

"I will do that."

The Queen then asked Ephiny, "Do we have much rope, sturdy rope?"

"Yes. What for?"

"What we can do is tie one end of the rope to a tree. Then have two Amazons on the other end to snap it."

"Alright, sounds good," agreed the Amazon. "I don't think Sinteres has any calvary does he?"

"No he doesn't fortunately, all his men are on foot," replied Palamon.

"Now remember," started Gabrielle, "These men won't be coming at us until we break into the fortress."

Ephiny furrowed her eyebrows. "We did decide that going through the mining shaft will work?"

"Yes," answered the Queen. "I believe the Conqueror is suppose to receive the plans

today. So our job is to stop the men when they scatter out of the fortress." She licked her lips then added, "I believe the Conqueror plans to smoke them out of there."

"Well I think if we keep most of our people in the trees, then Draco's men will not expect it."

"Leave a few forces on the ground as not to make them suspect," tagged on Palamon.

"I agree," stated the Queen. "I do want those archers in the trees. They'll be able to pick off people rather quickly, I have not doubt."

"A few warriors in the trees as well?" urged the regent. "Incase there are some men on horseback."

"We better," agreed the Queen.

Palamon lifted and pressed his arms against his chest. "I think the Conqueror wants to be sure we surround the enemy." He turned his head down to the Gabrielle. "She does not want anybody escaping at all."

Gabrielle sighed but nodded none the less. "I think that'll be easy to do." She paused then broke the silence with a question. "Is the Conqueror in the camp?"

"Yes she is," replied the general.

"I think I'll need to talk to her more about the plans." She turned her attention then to Ephiny. "Go back to the village and tell Solari what is going on. Have her here tomorrow morning with Amazons to begin the traps. Okay?"

"Not a problem," replied Ephiny. "When will you be back in the village?"

The warrior-bard gazed past her friend and saw the setting sun. "I would say in about four candlemarks, no later."

"Okay." Ephiny gave a brief smile. "See you then." She then lifted her eyes up to Palamon. "Thanks for the help, Palamon."

"My pleasure."

The Amazon then turned and headed to the group of horses. She went directly to her horse that was tied to a tree. After mounting her horse, she broke out into a gallop for the Nation.

Gabrielle turned back to the general after the regent left. "Do you think we'll have a problem stopping Sinteres and Draco?"

"No, I don't think it'll be a hard task." He then considered the fight ahead. "The only concern I have is trying to smoke them out of the compound."

"Me too." Gabrielle sighed as she started walking to her horse.

The general followed beside his friend. "But knowing the Conqueror, she will handle that easily."

"I know," whispered the warrior-bard.

Palamon neared his own horse but didn't mount right away. "Are you fearful?"

Gabrielle sighed while untying her horse's rein from the tree branch. "I always am when it involves war... when it involves people I love."

The general lowered his eyes as he considered her words. "I use to too." He looked back at Gabrielle. "Until I lost my family to war, now... I have nothing to be fearful of."

The warrior-bard mounted her horse but gazed down at the man. "That is when you know you've been fighting for too long."

Palamon thought over the statement and he felt pieces of his old self returned. "I suppose you're right." He turned and climbed into his horse's saddle. After positioning himself comfortably in the saddle, he turned his horse around and led the way to the Conqueror's camp.

Within half of a candlemark, the pair had arrived in the camp. They first went to settle their horses in the makeshift stable area. Afterwards, they went directly to the Conqueror's tent.

"Come inside," ordered the ruler in a deep voice. When she looked up, she saw Palamon enter first then the warrior-bard. She gave a hidden smile to her friend. "You two are just in time."

"Why is that, Conqueror?" questioned the warrior-bard.

"I just received the map of this area."

Palamon's expression lit up at this news. "Is there a mining shaft there?"

"Yes, there is," confirmed the ruler. She crossed the tent and went to the large table in the middle of the room. She pointed to a spot on the map.

Gabrielle and the general joined her at either side and studied the map.

"It luckily runs upwards for a number of feet then levels off here." The Conqueror points to the exact spot. "And this is the spot where the top of the ridge is."

"So this means we can dig down to meet the shaft?"

The Conqueror nodded at her general's question.

"It will take several men and a good day," reminded the warrior-bard.

"Which we have," stated the ruler. "I have plenty of men and we'll have just enough

time to dig down to the shaft." She straightened up from looking over the table. "As a matter of fact, I plan to take some men over tonight to start this."

"It would probably be for the best," agreed Gabrielle. "Palamon, Ephiny, and I were discussing the plans for the fight within the forest."

"What did you three decide on?" inquired the Warrior Princess.

"Well, we're going to setup two types of traps. Ground traps and rope trips." Gabrielle turned her body to face her friend more. "Then, with your permission, we'd like to use your archers and place them in the trees along with some of the Amazon archers."

The Conqueror's head was bobbing up and down as she listened.

"They will take care of picking off the enemy. We'll keep a few warriors in the trees as well incase any of Draco's men are on horseback."

"Now, I would like Sinteres and Draco cut off from escape." The ruler folded her arms over her chest. "I want a wall of men five people thick from one side of the compound all the way to the other sound of the compound's wall. Is that clear?"

"Yes of course, Conqueror, I understand." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "You want the formation in a 'u' shape?"

"Yes, my men and I will push them into the centre of the 'u' and then close them off from the compound." Xena chewed on her lower lip momentarily. "Then we will form a circle around them then start to squeeze them in tighter until they're all dead."

Gabrielle simply nodded her agreement; her stomach turned in worry though.

"I think that's everything for now," decided the ruler. She faced her general then. "I need you to stay here to watch over the men. I'm going to begin this operation to the mining shaft. Go round up about twenty men, now."

"Yes, my liege." The general quickly left the tent in search of the men.

"My liege, did you get my message about Eponin?"

The Conqueror turned back to her friend. "I did, Gabrielle." She sighed as her ruler persona disappeared from herself. "Eponin is welcomed to stay in the castle along with Amarice and Teresa." She gave a faint worried expression. "Why are you sending her there? I know she's the weapons master."

The warrior-bard sighed, her attention turning away. "Ep was...."

"They touched her?" whispered the ruler hotly.

"They did," confirmed the Amazon Queen. She returned her focus to her friend. "And I don't think it's a good idea for her to fight this one. I want her to get away from the war."

"I understand, Gabrielle."

"Thank you, Conqueror." Gabrielle then shrugged before adding, "Besides, they will be there to inform the others when they return from Egypt."

"True," agreed the Warrior Princess. She then lightly touched her friend's arm that rested against her chest. "How are you doing?"

"I'm stressed," confessed the smaller woman. "How about you?"

"Not too bad," answered the Conqueror. "You will be okay with this?"

"Yeah... done this plenty of times." Gabrielle sighed and lowered her arms, which caused the ruler to let go of her. "I need to start heading back."

"Alright." Xena pressed her lips together for a second then said, "I'll have some men go with you just to make sure you get back safely."

"Thank you and thank you for letting Eponin stay in the castle."

"You're welcome, Gabrielle." The Conqueror turned and ordered, "Come with me."

The warrior-bard followed her friend out of the tent. Together, they found seven warriors to escort her back to the Nation. Within ten minutes, she was mounted back on her horse with her escort around her. "Thank you, Conqueror. See you soon."

The Conqueror grinned and watched her ride out of camp. Soon as she was gone, Palamon came up beside her.

"Your men are ready, my liege."

"Perfect," purred the dark ruler.

~*~*~*~

"Be careful, Varia," whispered the warrior.

The Amazon queen nodded her head as she pulled the robe closer against her body. She gazed up at the wall she had to scale tonight and mentally prepared herself. Her right hand tightened around the climbing rope, which she brought with her that had a hook at one end.

Xena watched the guard come to the end of the wall, turn, and then continue back down the wall. "Go," she whispered.

The Amazon sprinted for the wall and as she ran, she loosened the rope in her hand. Once she released enough rope, she began swing it in a circle with hook. As she neared the wall, she counted ten more steps then she hurled the hook upwards.

The hook rocketed through the air with the rope attached behind. It landed neatly on the wall's floor and Varia jerked it until it caught between two pillars. She then leapt

towards the wall, helping herself get three feet up the wall already. Hastily she began scaling up the wall.

The Warrior Princess watched and looked to her right to see the guard was already walking back. "Hades," she growled under her breath. She ran closer towards the walls while reaching between her left gauntlet. Once rather close to the wall, she extracted a tiny dart and removed a small wood tube from her side. She narrowed her eyes and readied the dart in the hollow tube. Bringing the tube up to her lips, she took a deep breath, aimed, then blew.

The guard suddenly stopped in his tracks and shook his head at the stinging sensation in the side of his neck. He dropped his spear and fell against a pillar, sliding down it and falling asleep.

Varia heard the guard fall so she looked down at Xena.

The Warrior Princess grinned devilishly.

The Amazon chuckled faintly but continued her way up the wall. Within twenty seconds, her feet hit the floor of the wall and she pulled her rope up. After she had it quickly coiled up, she lashed it to her side behind her robe. She caught sight of the guard sleeping peacefully. Turning to her left, she found the door and pulled it open quietly.

Xena watched as Varia disappeared behind the door. She just grinned again then disappeared into the night in hiding.

Varia came to the end of the steps into a long corridor. "Great," she muttered, "Where to now?" She started down the corridor in hopes she'd find Eve or Cyane soon. After making her way down the corridor, she came to a 'T' in her travels. She had to go either right or left. Then she heard some voices; she cocked her head to one side to figure out which way it was coming from.

The Amazon heard two female voices quietly whispering about something or another. She closed her eyes and listened more carefully. She heard them enter a room together and the door closing. Her eyes flew open; she turned to the right and hurried down the hallway.

The only thing she could make out between the two women's conversation was Gabrielle's name. She soon found the door that the two women went into. She raised her fisted hand to the door but didn't knock, she wasn't sure. Taking a deep breath, she knocked twice. After a few moments, a young woman answered the door.

"Yes?" The wife furrowed an eyebrow. "Who are you?"

Varia pulled her hood back. "I'm looking for somebody," she whispered. She then saw the other woman behind the one that answered the door. Her eyes lit up at the sight of Varia.

"Wait, you're an Amazon," excitedly whispered the other woman.

"Come in here quick." The wife at the door pulled the queen inside and closed the door hastily.

"What are you doing here?" asked one wife.

Varia sighed and replied, "I'm here to find three other wives... Gabrielle, Eve, and Cyane."

"You mean the two new girls?"

Varia nodded her head.

"Are you here to help save us?" asked the same excited wife.

"Yes, if I can find any three of these Amazons."

The two wives exchanged looks and the excited one explained, "Gabrielle isn't in her room."

"Where is she then?"

The excited wife suddenly went serious. "She's... she's doing a private dance to Gurkhan."

"Oh centaur shit," whispered the queen hotly. "What about Eve and Cyane?"

"They should be in their room," replied one wife. "By the way, I'm Eboni and this is Eshe." She paused then added, "We're both friends with Gabrielle."

The queen nodded her head. "You think you can help me find Eve and Cyane's room?"

"Of course," replied Eshe, "We know where their room is."

"You go ahead and take her, Eshe. I'll stay here to cover things."

"Thanks, Eboni." Eshe slipped out of the door with Varia behind her.

The Amazon slipped her hood back on and followed behind the wife.

Eshe went to the eighth door and carefully knocked on it. Once Cyane had it opened, she whispered, "I brought a friends of yours." She leaned her head to the right.

The Amazon quickly noticed a smiling Varia.

"Queen Varia?" Cyane smiled and opened the door more. The wife and queen both entered the room.

Eve had heard the pair come inside and came out of the washroom with a robe on herself. "Queen Varia."

"Hi, Eve," greeted the queen. "How are things?" She glanced between Xena's daughter and Cyane.

"They're okay," replied Cyane.

"So far we've told each of the wives what's happening here in a day or two," added the princess.

"What did they say?" inquired the queen.

"They're all happy about it and will cooperate." Eve paused in thought but also said, "The only wife that does not know is the head wife."

"We're concerned she'll tell Gurkhan," explained Cyane.

The queen nodded her understanding. "How is Queen Gabrielle?"

"She's fine, nothing wrong... so far," reported Eve. "Have you spoken with her?"

Cyane shook her head. "We assume she's in her room."

"She isn't," stated the queen.

Eve and Cyane exchanged confused looks.

"Gabrielle is doing a... private dance for Gurkhan," helped Eshe.

"Can I ask what a private dance can entail?" urged Eve.

Eshe lowered her eyes but looked back at Eve. "It starts out has a veil dance... just between Gurkhan and Gabrielle. Depending on Gurkhan it might turn into more...." She trailed off knowing everybody can figure out the rest. "Sometimes it is a chance for a wife to gain ground. Maybe even become head wife if she is better than the current one."

Eve felt her teeth grinding together at this new information.

"We can't let her..." Cyane whispered but didn't finish her sentence. She looked between the princess and Varia. "Should we stop it?"

Eve came out of her thoughts. "I have an idea."

~*~*~*~

Queen Gabrielle knelt down and brought her arms over her body, the long veil between her two hands. She let the veil drift over her head as she bowed to Gurkhan. Then slowly she heard Gurkhan begin to clap in applause.

He stood up from his chair and crossed the room to her. "Very nice, dear." He stood above her and then ordered, "Stand up."

Gabrielle rose back up while hastily tying the veil around her waist. She knew the usual drill to being a slave and what came next after something like this. Her hard days as a slave reformed inside of herself as she tried separating her two lives. She hated this old past of her life and she hoped to Gods that the Conqueror could get her out of this one.

"You remind me of a wife I once had," commented Gurkhan. He reached out, running his finger tips around the features of her face. "Young, full of spirit, strong, and a little naive." He grinned at the memories of his older wife. "As a matter of fact, she looked quite similar to you... and came from Greece."

Gabrielle grinned at that, she closed her eyes as well. "She looked like me huh?"

"Quite a bit," whispered Gurkhan. He ran his fingertips down her neck. "Except she had brown hair and a bit more curly. At first she was a bit heavy but lost a lot of the... baby fat." He brought his fingertips back up her smooth neck and across her lips. "Green eyes like yours."

Gabrielle felt her heart stop at the mention of the description. "Where from in Greece?" she uttered. This time, she slipped her tongue between her lips slightly to touch his fingertips.

"Some small town that started with a 'P'... it was sacked by the Conqueror many years ago."

The Queen's breath became faster; her heartbeat sped up. She tried remaining calm on the outside as she whispered, "What was her name?"

"She went by the name of... Sarah," replied Gurkhan. His fingertips now ran across the top of her chest.

Gabrielle's eyes flew open at the name.

Gurkhan quickly noted the surprise in them, and he was opening his mouth to ask a question.

The Queen knew what he was about to ask. She quickly moved in and kissed him furiously, using all of her anger inside of herself.

The slaver returned the furious kiss while pushing his wife backward towards his huge bed. He pulled back from the kiss then pushed her harshly into the bed.

Gabrielle revealed a devilish grin. She lifted her legs up and opened her legs to him.

Gurkhan felt a sly grin cross his features, he crawled onto the bed and between her legs.

The Queen pushed away her emotions before grabbing his head and beginning another passionate kiss. Suddenly Gurkhan stopped after there was a loud bang at his door. He jumped out of his bed after hearing a few yells outside the door.

Gabrielle launched out of the bed after the slaver did. Her heart pounding and her body shaking.

The slaver threw open the door to see what was happening. Quickly he found a dead guard at his feet and down the hall was his other guard fighting a hooded figure. "Stop him!" he yelled, "Guards!" he cried out.

The hooded figure held up his sword and stopped the guard's blade. He then kicked hard at the guard's throat, knocking the guard flat onto his back.

The hooded figure twirled their sword in midair then brought it down into the guard's chest, instantly killing them. He then looked up directly to Gurkhan, his head then slightly moved to the right at seeing Queen Gabrielle at the doorway. He then quickly came towards the slaver with his sword.

Gurkhan started yelling again, "Guards!"

The dark figure came right up to Gurkhan and held out the tip of his sword towards the slaver's throat.

Gabrielle's eyes widened as she realized what the figure was planning to do. She instantly stepped out in front Gurkhan, pressing her throat against the tip of the sword. She could barely make out the figure's face. She took a deep breath, her chest raising high up in waiting.

Gurkhan didn't move but noted the sound of his men running down the corridor.

The hooded figure also noted the running footfall. They refocused on Gabrielle.

The Queen held her breath and she slightly saw a grin develop on the figure's face, white teeth grinning back at her.

The figure walked five quick steps backwards, whirled around with their cape flying around them, and he ran off.

Gabrielle released her breath but studied the running figure. She furrowed her eyebrows when she thought about the sword the figure held. She turned her head to the right when the guards arrived.

"Go after him," ordered Gurkhan. "He went down there. Find him!" he roared. After they were gone, he said, "Very brave, my dear."

The bard faced her slaver and replied, "I figured it was for the best."

"And how was that? He was planning to assassinate me." He folded his arms against his chest, an amusing smile on his lips.

"Well I doubt he would have set me free anyway," explained the Queen, "either take me as his own, sell me, or even kill me." She shrugged. "I'm happy here."

The slaver laughed quietly at her explanation. "Well then... since its been quite a

night. I think you can return to your room."

The slave bowed her head. "Thank you." She started down the hallway.

"But we are not finished, Gabrielle," called the slaver.

"Not by a long shot," retorted the bard quietly to herself but she flashed a devilish grin to him. Once back to her room, she sighed a huge relief and leaned against her door. She dropped her head against the door then slowly slid down it as she felt even more weight compress onto her shoulders.

~*~*~*~

Varia stormed through the door onto the top of the wall. She quickly did a birdcall.

Xena heard the call and reappeared out of the woods quickly. She raced up to the wall.

"Xena," she called, "I'm gonna fly."

"Go," called back the warrior. She spread out her legs and prepared herself.

The Amazon stepped back a little, she heard the guards coming down the corridor. She reached over and closed the door quietly. She then started running and then jumped. She held out her arms and closed her legs together then aimed for Xena.

The Warrior Princess gritted her teeth then held up her hands. She neatly caught her friend and swung her around onto her feet.

"We need to split," rasped the queen.

"Come on." The warrior took off sprinting towards the thin woods ahead.

Varia quickly followed behind as she too disappeared in the dark evening.

The ten guards busted through the door onto the wall top. They looked all over and could not find Gurkhan's assassin however they saw the wall guard asleep on the floor. One of the guards went over to the sleeping guard to awake him and find out what happened.

Varia leaned against the tree and gasped for air, her head hung down.

"What happened?" asked a worried warrior.

The queen shook her head while she was catching her breath. She finally lifted her head but dropped it back against the palm tree. "Sorry about that."

"What the Hades happened in there?" urged Xena. "That was not suppose to happen."

"I know... I know," uttered the queen. She closed her eyes then started explaining. "I

found Eve and Cyane, they said the wives know what's going to happen. Queen Gabrielle is okay."

"Then why the guards?"

"Queen Gabrielle was doing a... private dance for Gurkhan. I'm sure you can guess what happens after the dance."

Xena huffed and folded her arms.

"So your daughter suggested I break up the little private dance." Varia lit up her face with a grin.

The Warrior Princess chuckled at what the Amazon said.

"So I raced down to Gurkhan's room and fought with his guards. It seemed to stop them in the middle of things."

"That's good to hear."

"Yeah, I think I stopped them just in time," stated the queen. "But...." She shook her head.

"But what?" questioned the warrior.

"It was strange." Varia's eyebrows furrowed together. "I tried acting like I was an assassin and when I went to act like I was going to kill Gurkhan...." She stopped then focused her eyes on her friend. "Queen Gabrielle stepped in between."

Xena's own confused expression came about. "The only reason I can think of to why she'd do that was to get in good with Gurkhan."

"Yes but... why? I mean, she knows she's not staying or anything."

"I know," whispered the warrior. She looked away from the ground to Varia again. "You feel okay now?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It was a good chase." The Amazon had a sly grin.

Xena laughed quietly at that. "Let's get back to camp. We'll decide on the plans to get the wives out."

Varia nodded her agreement. She lifted herself off the tree and walked towards camp with the warrior.

~*Part 17*~

Eponin sighed as she sat in the horse's saddle.

"Gods!" roared Amarice. "I can't believe I'm stuck in Athens... the Conqueror's! castle no less," she bellowed.

Teresa glanced at the weapons master.

Eponin shrugged and rolled her eyes.

Teresa chuckled quietly at that.

"I mean, doesn't Gabrielle see how important it is that I stay in the Nation?"

"Its Queen Gabrielle... to you," corrected the weapons master.

"She tells Amazons to call her Gabrielle," countered the young Amazon.

Eponin arched an eyebrow. "And did she tell you to your face you could call her Gabrielle?"

"Um... not yet," muttered Amarice.

"Then its Queen Gabrielle for you," ordered the older Amazon.

Amarice huffed and looked away from the weapons master.

"Eponin, why did she have you come to Athens?"

The weapons master was about to give her honest answer but quickly stopped. "Well... she and the Conqueror asked me to watch over Athens until the Conqueror returns."

"Oh... okay," replied Teresa.

"And why do we have to have these escorts?" Amarice direct to the ten guards behind them.

"Because I don't think Gabrielle wants us kidnapped," drew out Teresa.

The young Amazon grumbled about that. "What we going to do in Athens anyway?"

"Relax, I hope," muttered the weapons master.

"Me too," agreed Teresa. "Wine, dine, and pass time."

The weapons master laughed at Teresa's rhyme. "I'll second that."

"Argh that's sssso boring," groaned Amarice. "I was looking forward to that war. I really can't stand that Gabrielle."

Eponin brought her horse closer to Amarice's horse and grabbed her reins forcefully. She jerked the horse to a halt and locked her angry eyes on the young Amazon. "Amarice," she whispered hotly, "you do not ever... ever speak badly about Gabrielle." Her eyes burned into Amarice's own. "She has saved us all from the Conqueror's darkness." She paused then growled, "Never insult her again."

Amarice felt herself starting to shake as she shrunk down to a foot tall child. "I'm sorry," she whispered fearfully.

The weapons master loosened her jaw and just threw the reins at Amarice. She tapped her horse's side and continued down the road.

Teresa quickly caught up to the weapons master to check on her.

Amarice watched them for a second then ordered her horse to walk again. She lowered her head and tried holding back her upset.

"Hey you okay?" whispered Teresa.

Eponin sighed at the question and nodded. "Yeah... I shouldn't have yelled at her like that."

"Its okay," uttered the other Amazon. "Amarice was out of line."

"So was I," admitted the weapons master quietly.

Teresa sighed but then said, "I think she needed it. Gabrielle has done a lot for us, Xena too."

"Yes they have," agreed the weapons master. "I admire them both."

"I do too," seconded the younger Amazon. "You will be okay, Eponin?"

"Yes, thank you, Teresa."

The Amazon smiled at the weapons master.

"Hey please call me Ep too?"

Teresa smiled at that and nodded. "Thank you."

Eponin chuckled but found herself smiling for the first time since she was kidnapped.

"When do you think we'll be in Athens?"

"I think by late tonight," replied the older Amazon. "Gabrielle and the Conqueror suggested we not stop halfway."

"Fearful that something could happen?"

"Yes," responded Eponin, "and I have to agree. Sooner we get into Athens the better."

Teresa nodded her agreement.

~*~*~*~

Queen Gabrielle sighed as she gazed up towards the high cliff side. "Conqueror?" she called up. She then saw the dark ruler come to the cliff's edge and smile down at her.

"Stay there, I'll come down," ordered the ruler.

Gabrielle nodded but dismounted from her horse. She then waved her hand for Solari and the four other Amazons to dismount.

The Conqueror reappeared the around the corner of cliff bottom and came up to the Queen. "Good to see you made it."

"How is the progress?" inquired the warrior-bard.

"We are getting fairly close to the shaft," answered the ruler. She gazed up to the midday sun but then looked back at her friend. "I imagine we'll hit it by tomorrow."

"Have you heard anything from the escorts that took Eponin to Athens."

"I have not... they haven't returned yet." Xena crossed her arms over her chest. "They will most likely return later this afternoon. How have the traps been working out?"

"Pretty well," replied the warrior-bard. "We're about thirty percent complete."

The Conqueror nodded her head. "I did receive last night from Callisto."

The Amazon Queen perked up at this news. "What has happened?"

"Callisto reported that they safely arrived in Egypt and are marching to Mogador. I would say they're already there, probably for a day or two now."

"Did she say anything about their plans to rescue the Queen?"

"Nothing yet." The Conqueror sighed and stated, "The next message I get will probably be to inform us of either their success or failure."

"Its only success, my liege," simply declared the Queen.

The dark ruler grinned at her friend's words. "Success then." She then went serious again. "How has my guard captain done?"

Gabrielle nodded to Solari.

The second in command took a step forward and said, "He has been perfect. We greatly appreciate that you have made them available to us, Conqueror."

"It was my pleasure," replied the Conqueror. She felt a bit of her anger for the Amazon depleted. "Now then, is there anything else, Queen Gabrielle?"

"No, I just wanted to see what the status was of the shaft and if you've heard any new news."

"That is all," stated Xena.

"Thank you, Conqueror." The warrior-bard smiled briefly then remounted her horse. Her Amazons did the same as her.

"Tomorrow stop by the camp, Queen Gabrielle. We will finalize the attack plans again, bring Ephiny with you."

"Yes of course, my liege." Gabrielle bowed her head slightly.

The Conqueror grinned and slightly bowed her own then spun around and disappeared around the corner.

The Amazon Queen wiped away her grin as she turned her horse around. "Let's get back to the woods and see how the traps are, ladies."

"How do you think the others are doing at rescuing Queen Gabrielle?" inquired an Amazon.

The warrior-bard sighed at the Amazon's question. "I am very confident that soon they will save her. My partner, her daughter, and my two Amazons can handle that situation easily."

The four Amazons smiled at their temporary Queen's response.

"Come on, Amazons we have work to do." Gabrielle urged her horse into a gallop.

~*~*~*~

Varia sat down on her bed inside of the tent that she shared with Xena. "Okay, so we're going to have to help them escape through the compound once we sneak our way in...?"

"Yes, I think you and I need to get inside posed as dancers."

"Aren't you worried about them seeing you as the Conqueror?"

The warrior grinned at the question. "That's what veils are for. I can manage something." She then folded her arms. "Also, I think its wise we have Callisto come in with us."

"Oh gods, why?" whispered the queen. "She'll only screw things up."

The Warrior Princess shook her head and leaned against the post in the middle of the tent. "We need her help in there, Varia. Plus it gives me a chance to keep an eye on her. I think we can get Torrid to order the troops into position then we let Callisto handle them once we get out with the wives."

Varia understood now what Xena wanted. A way to keep checks on Callisto to make sure she did not 'accidentally' kill one of the innocents plus just have more help.

"Now the only problem will be figuring out a way in."

"Wait, I have just the solution." Varia grinned suddenly. "Eshe told me, right before I left, that her and few other wives will be leaving today to go to town."

Xena's expression lit up at this new information. "Perfect," she purred. "How many wives?"

"Well she will be there along with Eboni and with four others."

"That will work perfectly." Xena lifted her arms against her chest. "I hope two are brunettes and one is blond."

Varia chuckled but went serious again. "I think they'll be going into town later this afternoon for a candlemark or so."

"Alright, we better get this plan into motion." Xena shifted to the exit of the tent. "You stay here, I'm going to find Ra and Callisto."

The Amazon nodded and watched her friend disappear out of the tent. Within a few minutes, she returned with the naval captain and Torrid.

"What's going on?" questioned Callisto. "I know you two have plans."

"We do and we're going to need your help, Callisto," confessed the Warrior Princess.

"Oh this does sound interesting." A sly grin creased the naval captain's lips. "Do tell."

Xena's stomach turned but she explained the plans. "This afternoon, several of Gurkhan's wives are going into the town. Varia, you, and I are to switch places with three of them. Get back into Gurkhan's palace and find Queen Gabrielle, Eve, Cyane, and the other wives. Once we do, we'll make our escape hopefully and in the middle of it, take out Gurkhan."

"Then what?" probed Callisto.

"Once we're safely away from the compound and with the army. You can take care of your orders."

Callisto raised an eyebrow as she studied both Xena and the Amazon. "And exactly how are we going to make it all the way back here without getting slaughtered?"

"Simple, we have Ra position the army closer to the compound but just out of sight."

Slowly the naval captain started nodding then suddenly a huge grin broke out across her features again. "I like it. When do we go to town?"

Varia felt her own grin form.

"Now," replied the warrior.

Section 5

~*~*~*~

Xena and Varia scanned the town in search of the wives.

"They should be easy to spot," mentioned Callisto quietly.

"You would think," stated the queen.

The Warrior Princess shook her head then said, "Let's go to the market. That's where I'd be if I were them."

The others agreed and followed behind the warrior to the town's market.

After about ten minutes of searching through the large market, they finally spotted three familiar women by a stall.

"That's Eboni and Eshe," whispered Varia. "Come on." She quickly went to the wives, Callisto and Xena tailing behind her. "Eboni, Eshe," she greeted to them.

Eboni and Eshe and the third wife all turned to the Amazon.

"Varia!" squealed Eshe. "How are you? You made it?"

"I'm doing good and yes... we made it."

The wives then quickly noticed the two other women.

"Oh gods wow," whispered Eshe.

"What's happening?" interrupted Eboni.

"We are going back with you into the compound," answered the Warrior Princess.

Eboni glanced at the warrior and grinned at the answer. "That means were getting out of there?"

"You sure are," replied the Amazon queen happily.

"Oh thank the gods," uttered Adonia, who stood behind Eshe and Eboni.

Xena quickly then said, "Look, us three need to switch places with three others that are with you."

Eboni reached out and grabbed the Warrior Princess's arm. "Not a problem, come with us." She quickly hurried off. "We haven't much time before we have to leave town."

The group quickly followed Eboni through the market.

~*~*~*~

The two guards at the gates of the compound ordered the cart to a halt. They approached the drivers of the cart, which were two of Gurkhan's guards and then there were five others surrounding the cart. "Delivering the wives back?"

"Yes," replied a guard.

The gate guard did a quick head count of the wives and found all of them there. "Looks like you're good, go ahead."

The guard nodded then snapped the reins for the horses to continue into the fortress.

Varia sighed in relief after hearing that. She then felt the cart come to a halt once it was in front of a stable.

"Here you go, ladies. Time to unload," ordered a guard.

Another guard came around the back and lowered the flap of the cart.

The wives carefully slipped out of the cart but they made sure to keep Varia, Xena, and Callisto huddled into the back so they would take less notice of them. They then quickly made their way inside of the nearest building towards all the wives rooms.

"We have to hurry," whispered Eboni, she led the group. "The dinner will be starting soon so we have to catch the other wives before they go."

"I'm sure glad you suggested to the wives to wear veil robes today," whispered Varia.

Eboni grinned. "I had a feeling you would show up with help at the market."

The queen just mirrored the grin back.

Eboni continue leading everybody down the hall to the wives' rooms. "The only wife we might have a problem with is the head wife. Her room is further away from the rest of us. She's closer to Gurkhan's room."

"That's fine," stated Xena. "I have to take care of something anyway down there, so I will get her."

"I'll tell you where her room is, Xena."

The warrior shifted through the group and power walked along side Eboni. "Where is it?"

"You follow down this hall the rest of the way." She then came to a stop and then announced. "Ladies, get the other wives while I talk to Xena." She then focused on the warrior again. "Continue down this hallway." She pointed behind Xena. "Then make a

right at the end, if you go to the very end of that hall you'll come to the head wife's room. Gurkhan's room is to the right of hers. You can't miss them."

"Alright, thank you."

"You're welcome," replied Eboni. "Don't take too long. It will not be long before Gurkhan notices his wives missing from dinner. He may even still be in his own room preparing for dinner."

"I'm counting on it," whispered the warrior evilly. She then whirled around and raced down the corridor. She tore off her veil from around her face and threw her cape behind herself.

Varia knocked first on Gabrielle's door but didn't wait as she opened it. "Queen Gabrielle she called into the room?"

The Queen rushed to the door at hearing the new voice. "Who... what..."

"I'm Queen Varia, I'm here with Xena, Cyane, and Eve to get you and the wives out. Its time to go."

The Queen stared at the Amazon for a second but then shook her head. "Oh gods, okay." She rushed back into her room and grabbed a small dagger off the nightstand by her bed. She slipped it down between her skin and her dress, letting the handle stick up. "Where are the other wives?"

"We're getting them now." The queen stepped out of the way to let Gabrielle out.

The Amazon Queen looked and saw all of the wives gathering into the hallway. She then also saw one other woman she didn't recognized but decided to ask questions later. "Wait, where's Xena?"

"She's gone to get the head wife and I think... kill Gurkhan if she can," answered Eboni from across the large group.

"Kill Gurkhan?"

"Yes," answered Eboni.

"Hades," growled the bard. She turned to Eve and Cyane. "Get these wives out of here. I have to go get Xena."

"She can handle herself, Gabrielle," stated Eve. "Don't worry."

"No, you don't understand, I have to stop her." The bard started weaving her way through the group.

Eve grabbed the Queen's arm. "Don't, she'll be fine."

"You don't understand, Eve," growled the Amazon Queen in warning. "Please, just get these wives out of here, now. The guards will be here any minute."

"Alright, be careful."

"I will. You too." Gabrielle did an about face and went sprinting down the hall.

Eve sighed and turned to Varia. "We better get out of here now."

"Alright." Varia reached between her cape and pulled out a sword. "Catch!" she threw the sword to Eve.

The princess caught it.

Callisto grinned and held out a sword to Cyane. "You might need this, Amazon."

"Thanks." Cyane gave it a quick whirl happy to feel her sword in her hands again.

"Lead the way, Eve," called the queen.

"Right through the gates?" asked the princess while she pushed her way through the wives.

Varia nodded. "We're going to make a dash for the gates."

"Alright, let's go then." Eve twirled the sword like she always did before any fights. And she prayed to God that she would not have to use it at all on this day.

Queen Gabrielle came to the end of the hall and raced into the open door of Gurkhan's room. "Hades," she growled. Once inside of the room, she saw Gurkhan fighting Xena in sword combat. "No, Xena wait!"

The Warrior Princess surpassingly looked to the Queen and was caught off guard briefly. Her right arm got caught on the slaver's blade. She hissed and jumped back but gave a feral grin to her enemy. She whirled her sword then continued fighting him.

"What the Hades?" yelled a woman's voice.

Gabrielle had heard the head wife come out of her room.

The head wife saw her husband's attacker and opened her mouth about to call for the guards.

"No," growled the bard. She reached for her dagger and sprung for the wife. She instantly brought the dagger tip to the wife's throat. "Don't you dare yell for them," she snarled.

The head wife closed her mouth and lowered her eyes towards the dagger. "Who are you?" Her eyes lifted back up to the smaller woman. "I am the Queen of the Amazons from Greece."

The head wife's eyes widened.

"And we're being rescued by the Conqueror. So pick a side."

The head wife whispered, "I'm on your side."

"Good choice." Gabrielle lowered her dagger just in time to see Xena knock Gurkhan unconscious. She quickly ran for the warrior when she saw Xena bringing her sword up.

"Xena, wait!" yelled the bard. She leapt for her friend.

The Warrior Princess dropped her sword at the unexpected leap for herself. She instead caught herself from tripping and held up her friend. "Gabrielle, what is wrong?" she whispered hotly.

"You can't, Xena," rasped the bard. "He knows about Lila."

"Your sister?"

"Yes, I thought she was dead but I've never been sure. I think she was one of his wives at one time." Gabrielle glanced at him then back at her friend. "He's the only one that knows for sure and who she sold her to."

"Great," grumbled the warrior. "Alright." She quickly reformulated her plan. "Let's tie him up and hide him so that we can get him for later use." She quickly gazed about the room for some type of rope. She went straight to the drapes by the window and ripped the drapes' ropes off. She then hastily tied up Gurkhan.

"I have a large closet in my room," offered the head wife, she pushed the door to her room open more.

Xena nodded and dragged the slaver through the one room and into the head wife's room. She then shoved him into the rather large closet, closed the door then used another lashing from the head wife's drapes to tie the closet closed. "We need to get out of here," she said while stepping out of the room into the hall.

"Where are the others headed?" inquired Queen Gabrielle.

"The gates." Xena narrowed her eyes. "We need to hurry, they'll need our help."

Gabrielle immediately started down the hall. "Let's go," she called.

Xena faintly grinned and hurried after her friend. She heard the first wife following. She then noticed the sound of footfall, boots at that. She knew right away they belonged to guards but they were walking. She quickly rushed ahead of Gabrielle spun her sword, and saw the two guards round the bend.

The guards saw the women and instantly pulled out their swords. "Halt!" called one man.

Xena sighed and rushed them with her sword out.

The two guards readied themselves but she suddenly stopped in front of them.

The Warrior Princess kicked at the closest one and sent him smashing in the wall behind himself. She then grinned at the other guard and spun her sword.

The guard held up his sword some but didn't move.

"Come on," coaxed the warrior.

The guard stepped back, dropped his sword then ran off.

"Well... that was easy."

Gabrielle laughed and said, "Come on."

The warrior agreed and ran along side her friend. Behind her, she could hear the first wife's shoes clanging along.

Just outside the wives, Varia, Eve, Callisto, and Cyane stepped into the courtyard of the compound. Immediately five guards sprung into action, yelling and screaming for the other men to join.

"Get behind us," ordered Eve.

The wives huddled into the middle as the four warriors all surrounded them to protect them. They all watched as the women fought the guards. But then several other guards appeared out of the buildings to help, the odds were looking bad.

"Right out here." Gabrielle slammed into the door, forcing it to burst open. She saw the wives encircled but the guards were overpowering them.

Xena growled and ran faster, she grabbed at her chakram and threw it.

The chakram spun towards a guard, slicing him in the legs then it circled around, hitting another guard in the chest and finally coming back around but not without hitting yet a third guard. It then neatly came towards Xena.

The warrior caught her weapon, spun her sword and came right at a guard.

"Nice of you to join us, mother," called Eve. She held up her sword to stop the guard's blade, she then kicked him in the side.

"Not a problem," teased back the Warrior Princess. She stood still when she saw her enemy was down, unconscious. She looked around and saw all the guards were out cold. "Let's get the Hades out of here."

Eve nodded and waved everybody forward. She went to the large wood doors, which

were sealed shut.

Xena hurried up and caught up to her daughter. "I'm going to get a door open."

Eve simply nodded. She looked on as her mother sprinted ahead and started pulling a door open on her own. By the time they came up, Xena pretty much had the door opened and the group rushed out.

The warrior swung around outside and looked into the compound, she saw several soldiers getting up and others coming out of the building. She cursed and began closing the door again just to slow them down. Once it was sealed, she spun around and saw Torrid at the top of the hill, the group almost to him, and the Conqueror's army behind him. She simply grinned and hurried off.

After Callisto became in command again, she ordered the army to attack Gurkhan's compound. Xena and the Amazons however took care of the wives, checking on them and then finding them a safe place to rest. As they were sitting there, Xena was overlooking the fighting in the compound.

"What's going on down there?" inquired Gabrielle. She stood up from the rock and came over to her friend.

Xena folded her arms then replied, "Looks like Callisto has it under control."

"Yeah?" The Amazon Queen stood there, visually inspecting the on goings in the compound. "Looks like they're rounding up the soldiers that are still alive."

"Mmmm," agreed Xena. She then noticed her daughter accompanied them.

"Thank god that didn't take her long," complained the princess.

The Warrior Princess shifted her weight onto her right side. "I don't like this," she whispered.

"What you mean?" inquired Gabrielle.

"They're lining up Gurkhan's men... like they're going to be executed," explained Eve.

"I think they are," stated Xena.

Gabrielle shook her head and said, "We can't let her do that... they're prisoners."

Xena felt her shoulders drop slightly as she turned her attention to Gabrielle. "There's not much we can do, Gabrielle. The Conqueror gave her specific orders to destroy everything."

"What? Why?"

"Because they had you," simply answered the warrior. She turned her head away and now saw two of Callisto's men escorting a man outside. "Damn it," she growled.

"It's Gurkhan," whispered the bard. "Oh gods, if she kills him... I'll never be able to find my sister." She suddenly took off racing for the compound.

"Damn it," repeated Xena. She also took off.

Eve looked back at the Amazons and wives. "Stay here."

"What's going on?" inquired Varia.

"It's not good... just stay here," ordered Eve. She followed after her mother and the Amazon Queen.

"Callisto," yelled Gabrielle. She approached the naval captain and grabbed her arm. "What are you planning to do with Gurkhan?"

Callisto turned her head to the Amazon Queen, first though her cold eyes rested on the woman's hand.

Gabrielle sensed the annoyance and she released Callisto's arm.

The naval captain finally looked at Gabrielle. "I plan to kill him with the rest of his men then burn Magador to the ground."

"You can't kill Gurkhan, Callisto."

Callisto grinned and said, "I have orders to destroy anything and anybody here." She turned her attention away but without noticing Eve and Xena had come up to Gabrielle's side.

"No," growled Gabrielle suddenly. "I'm ordering you not to kill him, Callisto."

The naval captain quickly turned back to Gabrielle. "You order me?" she hissed. She fully turned to the Amazon Queen and lowered her head down. "You do not order me. You are the Queen of Amazons... not of me." She suddenly walked away and unsheathed her sword, she was heading right for Gurkhan.

"No!" yelled the angry bard. She chased after Callisto and grabbed her by the arm and swung her around. "I need him to find my sister," she yelled.

Callisto became full of anger at that point and brought her blade up to Gabrielle's throat. "Your head would look nice beside Gurkhan's," she whispered as a grin crept along her expression.

"Don't you dare," growled Xena, she already had her sword out.

Eve had her hand on her hilt, prepared to draw it out.

"Oh dear Xena...." Callisto lifted her golden, wild eyes to the warrior. "You're much softer than the Conqueror. I kinda like it."

The Warrior Princess narrowed her eyes. "And do you think the Conqueror will like

you killing her?"

"Oh I don't know," teased the naval captain, "she might not, and that could be a lot of fun." She had a toothy grin as her attention lowered back to the bard. "But... maybe I'll save it for another day." She lowered her sword. "On a rainy day, how's that sound?"

"You fuc-"

"Ah ah aaah, don't say things that'll come to haunt you, Queen Gabrielle," warned Callisto. She started to walk away, towards Gurkhan, but already heard Gabrielle moving after her. "Stop her," she ordered to several of her men.

The soldiers quickly rushed forward and blocked Gabrielle away from Callisto.

"You'll enjoy watching this, Queen Gabrielle." The naval captain spun her sword and slowly closed in on the bounded slaver.

"No!" yelled the bard.

A soldier quickly moved to grab a hold of Gabrielle, immobilizing her. The other soldiers then unsheathed their swords and stepped up to Xena and Eve.

Xena gritted her teeth as she calculated everything but knew there was nothing she could do.

Gabrielle struggled against the soldier but she suddenly stopped when she saw Callisto thrust her sword forward.

Gurkhan let out a quiet cry, as he became motionless on the blade. He then fell over when Callisto extracted her sword.

Callisto spun around with a happy grin and held up the bloody sword. "Who's next?"

Gabrielle looked away and lowered her head. "Oh gods...."

~*Part 18*~

Eponin turned around when she heard her friend come into the room. "How you doing, Teresa?"

"I'm okay." Teresa closed the door and leaned back against it. "Trying to get use to this big place."

"You do after awhile," promised the weapons master.

"Yeah? You have huh?"

The Amazon grinned back at Teresa. "Not really."

Teresa laughed crossed one leg over the other as she let all of her weight press against

the door. "Its not a bad place. The Conqueror has style."

"She thinks... big," joked the weapons master.

"Hey, you have to give her some credit."

The weapons master sat down on her bed and looked at Teresa. "How you figure that?"

"Well... think about it from a warrior's stand point. She's conquered a better part of the known-world."

Eponin slowly nodded. "She has from a warrior's stand point."

"I mean... it is impressive, you have to admit." Teresa grinned. "How many people you know can do what she's done?"

"Only one," replied Eponin.

"Who's that?" questioned Teresa.

Eponin stood up while saying, "The Conqueror." She walked around the bed a peered out of the window, she was overlooking the market area.

"So... when's dinner around here?"

Eponin shrugged as she noted the long shadow the castle was setting over the market place. "I think whenever we want it."

"How about what's for dinner?"

"I think that's also whatever we want," replied the weapons master.

Teresa laughed and added, "I could really get use to this place."

"Wait until you see the bath." The weapons master turned around with a sly grin.

The Amazon straightened up off the door. "I can't wait, let's go now."

Eponin laughed and came over. "Alright... go outside and make a right."

Teresa didn't waste any time and swung open the door.

Eponin followed behind and shut the door. "Oh and I won't mention this to Amarice."

"Ep, you know she'll kill us both if she finds out we knew and didn't tell her."

"I know, isn't it great?" teased the weapons master.

Teresa chuckled and smiled at her friend. "Definitely."

~*~*~*~

"When do you think we'll attack?" quietly asked the warrior-bard.

The Conqueror considered her friend's question as she sat down in a chair next to a table. She stared up at the hut's ceiling as she thought about the plans. "Maybe later this week."

"You think we're close to the mining shaft?"

The Conqueror slowly nodded, her eyes followed the Amazon as she sat down on the foot of her bed. "How are your Amazons looking?"

"I think pretty well set. Do you think it's still too early to head over to Sinteres's?"

"Yes. Give it another day or two... depending." She was about to add more but faltered as she realized something. "Hades," she growled.

"What's wrong?"

"We need to wait until the scout ship arrives with word about Queen Gabrielle."

"Conqueror, I don't think that'll matter. I mean, she is there and Sinteres is here."

The Conqueror shook her head and stated, "It will matter. As soon as word gets out I attacked one of my head slavers, Gurkhan will hold Gabrielle over my head."

"Wait, wait." The warrior-bard held up her hands momentarily then lowered them back down. "How the Hades can anybody sure that... well the Amazon Queen is of any importance to you."

"Word is already out, Gabrielle," reminded the Conqueror. "Plenty of people have seen her and I together, talking. They all know and I have no doubt Sinteres helped get the information around."

The Amazon Queen sighed, as she knew her friend was right. "So we wait then."

"That's all we can do until then."

Gabrielle sadly nodded but looked up from the floor to the ruler. "By now, I'd say Xena has Queen Gabrielle out of Gurkhan's hands."

The Conqueror sighed as she actually sat back into the chair. "I hope so, Gabrielle." She let her eyes lower down, she just stared at the floor. "I will run Gurkhan through myself if he's done anything to her."

"I didn't think you worried about her," quietly mentioned Gabrielle. She felt blue eyes lift up to her with question in them. "Are you worrying now, Conqueror?"

Xena huffed then muttered, "I have a treaty to uphold."

"Oh." Gabrielle stood up and crossed over to Xena. She bent down to her and grinned at her. "Didn't know the treaty entailed saving the Queen and destroying her enemies."

"Gabrielle, don't-"

"I wasn't," cut off Gabrielle, "I was just... pointing some facts out, my liege." She patted the woman's knee then stood up. She sat in a chair that accompanied the desk. "Worrying isn't always a bad thing, you know."

The Conqueror didn't say anything, she remained silent.

"Conqueror?"

The Warrior Princess returned her attention to her friend.

"Do me a favour huh?"

"What is that?"

Gabrielle put her words together in her head right then spoke them. "If she smiles at you and you feel your knees weak for just a moment then don't let her leave your life."

The ruler only lowered her eyes again and didn't say anything back to her.

Gabrielle knew though her words were sinking in with her friend. She stood up and offered, "Dinner here tonight?"

"That would be nice," replied the Conqueror. She stood up and accompanied the warrior-bard to the dining hut.

~*Part 19*~

"Wait, wait," stated the Amazon Queen. "You're telling me she has to send a scout ship ahead to let the Conqueror know I'm safe?"

"Yes," replied Xena. "Why?"

Gabrielle stood up from her chair in Cleopatra's guestroom. "To Hades with that, I'll go on the scout ship."

The warrior grinned and said, "That's fine but let some of us go with you."

"There's not much room on a scout ship," reminded Gabrielle.

"I know, so Eve and I can go with you." Xena stood up from her own chair and came over to her friend. "I think its best the Amazons stay with the wives, to watch over them."

"I agree." Gabrielle paused when she grabbed the door handle. "I guess we need to talk to Callisto huh?"

"Yeah, afraid so."

The Amazon Queen bit her lower lip but turned to the door. "Here goes." She flung open the door. "Go get Eve and I'll talk to Callisto."

"Gabrielle, are you sure?" asked the concerned warrior.

"I'm positive. I can handle her." Gabrielle shrugged then added, "I have to some time."

"Just holler if you need help. Alright?"

The Amazon Queen nodded then watched the warrior disappear down at the other end of the long hallway. She then faced the other end and slowly walked down to Callisto's room. After a deep, long breath she finally knocked on the door. She heard the naval captain order for her to come inside the room. She opened the door and stepped into her room. "Callisto, I need to talk with you."

Callisto reappeared out of the wash room, wearing just her leathers. "Oh Queen Gabrielle, how can I help you?" She grinned and put her hands on her hips.

"I heard you have to send a scout ship to give the Conqueror word of what's happening."

"Yes, I do. Why?"

Gabrielle pressed her now folded arms against her chest. "I'd like to return to Greece on the scout ship with Eve and Xena."

The naval captain thought about it for a few minutes. Suddenly a large grin appeared in her expression. "That's fine but the ship leaves in about half a candlemark from now. So I suggest you hurry, Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle nodded and started to leave but called, "Thank you."

"Oh you're quite welcome," taunted Callisto. She saw the Amazon leave and she laughed to herself.

The bard rushed down the hallway in search of Xena and Eve. "Xena?" she yelled. She heard the room two doors up open immediately.

"What's wrong?" asked Xena, she stepped out of the room.

"The ship leaves in half a candlemark."

"Alright, wait there. Eve and I are coming. I just have to finish up my conversation with Varia."

Gabrielle nodded and remained standing there until Xena and her daughter came out. The three women then quickly went to the docks to board the ship just in time.

~*Part 20*~

The Conqueror slipped into the tent and received a smile from the warrior-bard.
"Hey," she greeted. "How are things?"

"Not bad," replied the Amazon Queen. Gabrielle sat down in her chair next to the foot of her bed. "All the Amazons have been positioned in the area."

"Have they been shown their various tasks during the battle?"

The warrior-bard slowly nodded and said, "Solari and Ephiny are handling that now."

"And you're not helping?" The Conqueror had a slight grin as she folded her arms over her chest.

"No... to be honest, I needed a break." The small warrior sighed and lowered her head. "I'm worried about the others."

"I am myself," confessed the Conqueror very quietly.

The Amazon Queen lifted her head again and saw the honest look in the ruler's face.
"I'm sure they're okay," she promised.

The Conqueror only nodded but did not voice her opinion.

"How is the mining shaft going over there?"

"Its coming along." Xena's eyes flickered to the floor then back at her friend. "I expect to hit the shaft by tonight."

"That soon?"

The Conqueror grinned evilly. "Yes that soon. I've had men working on it non stop."

"That figures." Gabrielle just gave a grin back but she then went serious. "Do you think we'll be able to stop them?"

"We'll crush them," simply replied the ruler. "I don't plan on letting them walk away."

The small warrior sighed at her friend's words. She hung her head low. Then a question came to her and she looked back up. "Are you this angry because you want to be? Or you this angry because of what they did to Gabrielle?"

The ruler's jaw tightened and loosened several times. "Draco betrayed me and went behind my back. Sinteres supports him."

"That's really why?"

The Conqueror's arm fell from her chest and walked over to the opposite side of the tent. She spun around to face her friend. "What do you want, Gabrielle huh?" She shook her head and angrily asked, "You want me to fall in love with her huh? Is this

what's it about?"

Gabrielle slowly rose up and stated, "You're already in love, my liege. You just don't want to face it." She paused and suddenly got angry too. "Screw your dark side, you will not find any balance without her. And you're too scared to admit that to yourself." She shook her head and went to the tent flap. "You'll be ten times stronger with her than without her." She disappeared out of the tent.

The Conqueror stood there angry than before and suddenly rushed out of the tent after the Amazon Queen. She quickly found her and grabbed her by the arm. She spun her around and brought her face into Gabrielle's. "Do not question my power in this world. I am stronger without her."

The warrior-bard narrowed her eyes and hotly whispered, "Then why are you so intent on killing her persecutors and bringing her home? Let me know when you figure that out, Plato." She jerked her arm free and walked off.

The Conqueror stared at her back and then realized her men and a few Amazons were staring at her. She growled and disappeared as well into the late afternoon.

~*Part 21*~

The Amazon Queen jumped onto the dock and waited for her two friends to follow. "Hurry," she ordered. It been a three day trip from Egypt, well more of two and half days and it was about midday now.

Xena and Eve were on the dock now and trying to hurry after the bard.

"Gabrielle, wait up," called the Warrior Princess.

The bard sighed and stopped at the end of the dock. "I need to know what's happening."

"We know, but sprinting down a dock is not going to help much," interjected Eve.

"Queen Gabrielle?" suddenly yelled a voice.

"Eponin?" The Queen had spun around to see her weapons master at the end of the dock. "Ep!" She smiled happily and rushed to her friend.

The Amazon laughed as she was taken into a big hug. "Oh gods, welcome home, my Queen." She squeezed the Queen as hard as she could.

Gabrielle pulled back from the hug and smiled at her Amazon. "How are you?"

"I was about to ask you that."

The bard giggled and said, "I'm fine."

"I'm glad."

"I was so worried about you and Palamon and Ephiny."

Eponin smiled warmly and reached up to brush back her Queen's hair from her face. "We're fine. Ephiny made it to the Conqueror fine. The Conqueror was able to get Palamon and I out of the compound."

The bard smiled so happily at the news but then she got a confused look. "Why are you here?"

The weapons master sighed and replied, "It's a long story, I'll tell you later. I'm here with Amarice and Teresa too."

The bard looked past her Amazon and now saw the two young Amazons coming out of the castle towards the pier.

Eponin finally took a step back and greeted Xena and Eve. "Glad you two are back. Where are the others?"

"We came on the scout ship," explained Xena, "The others will be here soon enough."

"My Queen!" squealed Teresa. She pushed past the weapons master and grabbed the Queen in a hug.

Gabrielle laughed and hugged her back tightly. She then went to Amarice and saw the Amazon smile shyly at her. "Come here, Reece."

The Amazon chuckled at the nickname and hugged her Queen. "Its good to have you back, my Queen."

The bard pulled back and smiled at her three Amazons.

"Have you heard word from the Conqueror?" inquired Xena.

Eponin peered up at the warrior. "Well Gabrielle sent word that everything was prepared. As soon as they heard word that Queen Gabrielle was okay, they planned to attack."

"What was the plan?" urged Xena.

Eve was listening to the weapons master explaining the attack plan but she now saw a soldier approaching them. She furrowed her eyebrows when she saw a scroll in his hands. "I think we're about to find out the most recent news."

Eponin fell short on her words when she followed Eve's eyes. She saw the messenger approach her. "Soldier," she greeted.

"Regent." The messenger bowed his head and handed the scroll over. "This is from the Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle."

Eponin took the scroll and quickly unrolled it.

Gabrielle shifted to stand beside her friend and read the scroll as well. After she finished it, she looked up with fearful eyes. "They've been taken by surprise."

"What?" growled Xena.

"Sinteres and Draco attacked them," explained Eponin, "They must have known."

"How were things before you left?" hastily asked Gabrielle to the messenger.

"They were not well, Queen Gabrielle." The soldier sighed then further explained, "The Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle were taken surprise as you said. When I left, they were just starting to get organized and retaliate."

"Are many dead?"

"Mostly the Conqueror's men," replied the soldier, "Very few Amazons."

"The Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle are okay?"

"Yes of course, Queen Gabrielle," answered the soldier. "So is the regent."

Gabrielle briskly nodded then asked, "Did the odds look bad?"

"They were improving some when I left but at first, not at all. Neither the Conqueror or Queen Gabrielle expected them to attack."

The Queen sighed and looked to Xena and Eve. "We better get to them."

"We will go too," offered Eponin.

"No, no wait." The Queen held up her hand. "I need you three to stay." She turned to her weapons master and grasped her shoulders. "Callisto will return soon with the others. If you're not here to hold down the Conqueror's role then she'll assume it. And right now, I do not like that woman."

"That is wise," agreed the soldier.

The bard's eyes flicked over to the messenger then back to Eponin. She was even more sure now that it'd come from the soldier's mouth.

"Of course, my Queen," agreed the weapons master.

Gabrielle softly smiled and released her shoulders. "Are there enough men for us to take to the battle?"

"There should be," cut in Teresa. "I've been keeping head counts."

"How many?" inquired Queen Gabrielle.

"Five hundred plus," replied Teresa.

The bard sighed and peered over at Xena and Eve. "How many?"

Eve looked at her mother. "A hundred and fifty," she stated.

"Two hundred," countered Xena.

"We should leave over three hundred here," protested Eve. "Just to make sure Callisto does not get any ideas."

The Warrior Princess thought about it then said, "A hundred and seventy-five."

Eve grinned at her mother's amount, she turned to Gabrielle. "A hundred and seventy-five."

Eponin looked to the soldier, "Take care of it."

"Yes of course." The soldier hurried off.

Gabrielle then returned her attention to her weapons master. "When Varia, Cyane, and the others come here have them stay with you. I think it's the wisest choice right now."

"I will, my Queen."

Xena came up beside the bard and grasped her shoulder lightly. "We should get ready to move."

"Travel tonight?" offered Eve.

"Yes, we'll be closer." Xena squeezed the bard's shoulder and let go.

"Let's go then," ordered Gabrielle. She hurried off with her friends all following suit.

~*Part 22*~

Gabrielle stayed mounted on the horse and to either side of her was Xena and Eve. Behind Gabrielle though was trailing a hundred and seventy five men all prepared to die for the Conqueror. She too was prepared to die for the Conqueror. She could only hope her Amazons were fighting with every last bit of strength to stop Sinteres and Draco.

"I think we're close," quietly spoke Eve.

"We are," agreed Xena, she was now ridged in her saddle. Her eyes were darting each way and her head dropped to one side.

"What is it?" whispered the Queen.

"I can hear the fighting," quietly replied the Warrior Princess. "Eve?"

The daughter had her eyes closed and she was trying to focus on it as well. It was often she used her skills but she had them despite how long it had been. "Yeah, I hear

them too."

"How much longer until we're there then?"

"About ten minutes tops," replied Xena.

"Should I prepared the men?" quietly asked the bard.

Eve faintly nodded.

Gabrielle held up her hand and came to a halt. She heard all of the Conqueror's soldiers stop and there was finally silence instead of armour clanking. She turned her horse around to face the troops. "We are close to the battle. Prepare yourselves." For a response, she heard the loud din of swords scraping out of sheaths. "Remember, do not fail your liege as I never would either."

The soldiers raised their swords and cheered as well whistled.

"Let's stop they bastards," she hotly whispered and turned her mare around. She tapped the horse's side and hurried into a trot.

Eve and Xena tapped their horses' sides and followed behind.

The soldiers all yelled in unison and jogged behind with their swords at the ready.

The three women came through a large grouping of woods and all they could hear now was a mix of fighting, yelling, and screaming just ahead. Once they were through the huge grouping of trees, they found a huge mix of Amazons, soldiers, and warriors fighting in front of the gates of Sinteres's compound.

Gabrielle growled and spun her horse around. She pointed at the battle and yelled to the soldiers, "Attack!"

The soldiers all yelled and raged past the three women then flooded into the battlefield.

The Conqueror suddenly heard the sounds of a wave of soldiers crashing into the battle. She frantically tried to figure out where this wave came from since she didn't command it. She growled and lunged at her attacker because of her frustration.

"I have to find Gabrielle, the Conqueror, or Ephiny," announced Gabrielle.

"I'll go with you," promised Eve.

"Xena?"

The warrior unsheathed her sword. "Go ahead. I'm going to help out."

"Be careful, mother," warned Eve.

The warrior saw her daughter's look and nodded. "You too. I'll see you after the

battle."

Eve nodded and watched her mother disappear into the battle with her mare. Her eyes then flickered up to the trees. "There are Amazons in the trees," she whispered.

The Queen lifted her eyes and saw all the Amazons.

Eve dismounted her horse suddenly said, "Come on. I think we'll be able to find them faster from the trees."

The bard quickly agreed and dismounted her horse as well. She approached a tree and with Eve's help, jumped up into the tree. She quickly looked around from the treetops and saw her Amazons shooting their arrows at various enemies. She then scanned around for Ephiny or the Conqueror or Gabrielle.

"Wait, there's Ephiny," spoke up Eve. She pointed off to her right. "And there's Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen saw Gabrielle was too far away while Ephiny was much closer. "Let's get to Ephiny first."

Eve nodded her head. She took her friend's hand and asked, "Ready?"

The bard faintly nodded then followed Eve through the trees. She wasn't very good at jumping from branch to branch but it was an art she was starting to learn now.

"Can you land okay?"

"Yes," replied the bard. For a demonstration, she jumped off the branch and landed neatly beside her regent.

Eve chuckled and also leapt to the ground.

"Gabrielle!" yelled the regent, her face suddenly went happy. She then had fearful eyes and swung her staff around. "Duck!"

The Amazon Queen dropped down as the staff went over her head and smashed into one of Draco's men.

Eve quickly moved and punched the man several times and watched him collapsed.

Gabrielle laughed and stood back up. "Miss me?" she teased.

"Sweet Artemis, yes." Ephiny laughed and was about to hug her friend but didn't because of the battle going on. She saw an enemy coming up from behind her Queen. "Take this." She threw the staff at the bard.

The Queen neatly caught it and spun it while turning around. "Hey, this is my staff."

Ephiny laughed while extracting her sword from her back. "Yup, I thought you might show up and want it." She grinned at her opponent off to the right. She glanced over at

Eve who was sword playing with another bad guy.

Gabrielle grinned at her enemy. She hadn't used her staff in awhile but she knew her body hadn't forgotten how to use her staff. She suddenly attacked her enemy but not without talking to her regent. "How are things?"

"They're getting better," called back the regent. "Did you bring in the calvary?"

Gabrielle laughed and yelled, "Yeah, we brought some men with us."

"Us?" yelled Ephiny.

"Xena, Eve and I," answered the bard. She struck her enemy across the face then brought her staff back around to give him several blows to his stomach and legs. "What is the plan?"

"What the plan was to surprise attack Sinteres and Draco but they actually ended up taking our idea."

Gabrielle chuckled to herself as she gave one last hard blow to the guy's stomach, sending him onto his back. "What's the plan now?"

"To try and fix our plans," called Ephiny. She suddenly stabbed forward and was able to penetrate her enemy's defenses and run her sword through him. "The Conqueror should be showing up soon."

"What you mean, showing up soon?" yelled the bard. She was already engaged in another fight but with two soldiers this time.

"She'll be opening the gates to the compound soon," answered the regent. "Hopefully with Draco and Sinteres running out screaming."

"I got to get to the Conqueror," called the bard.

"It won't matter, Gabrielle. She has her plans in motion."

"I know that," yelled the bard as she growled at her two attackers. She struck one across the side of his head knocking him out then she went for her other enemy. "I just need to know she's okay."

Ephiny sighed as she jumped to her right and her enemy from front and behind ran each other through with their own swords. "Alright, let's see if we can break for it." She then noted Eve had been silent so she yelled, "Eve, you still with us?"

The princess laughed and replied, "Of course. We better make a run for it now if we're going to get near those gates."

"Alright." Ephiny went to the tree quickly and jumped up into the branches.

Gabrielle sighed and threw her staff up to her regent.

Ephiny caught it and saw her Queen jump up but almost lost her balance. She caught her by the shoulder and said, "Steady." She then had a huge grin and said, "Nice clothes by the way."

Gabrielle groaned as she realized she was still in her slave clothes.

Eve chuckled and saw two enemies coming at her. She grinned and said, "Come on, boys." She waited to the last minute then jumped up. Below, she heard them smash into one another.

"There are the gates." Ephiny pointed straight ahead. "Gabrielle is over there too."

"Great, maybe we can help her out."

Ephiny nodded at her Queen's words.

"What is the plan anyway?" inquired Eve.

The regent sighed. "Once the Conqueror flushes out the rest of the men from the compound, we're to encircle them then squeeze."

Eve faintly nodded and said, "And now?"

"Still the same." Ephiny then looked over at the warrior-bard fighting alone. "Let's go." She leaped from branch to branch with Eve and Gabrielle following behind her.

The Queen then realized as she was making her way to the gates, her Amazons were realizing she was with them. The Amazons were suddenly whistle at her or cheer to her and then fight even harder against their enemies, a renewed strength in them.

"They're happy you're home," whispered Ephiny, a huge grin on her face.

Gabrielle chuckled as she stood beside her regent just under the warrior-bard. She was still waiting for Eve to catch up to them. She then held her hand out when she saw Eve join them.

Ephiny handed over the staff. "Let's be careful."

The bard nodded and jumped down to the ground.

The warrior-bard had just knocked out her enemy and spun around when she heard the person behind her. She held up her sais in defense, ready to attack. She then lowered her sais at seeing Queen Gabrielle before her. "Gabrielle?"

The bard smiled happily.

The warrior-bard laughed happily and jumped at her friend.

The bard found herself caught up in a huge hug and she couldn't help but return it. She closed her eyes and squeezed tightly. Around her, she could hear Ephiny and Eve landing on an enemies to stop him from attacking them.

The warrior-bard pulled back finally and asked, "You're okay?"

"Perfectly," reassured the bard. "You?"

"Never better now." Gabrielle hadn't lost her smile. "The Conqueror will be here soon."

"That's what Eph said too." The bard then noted that several of Draco's men were closing in on them. "Well, we better not keep them waiting."

The warrior-bard grinned back and spun her sais while turning around.

"By the way," called the bard, "Xena is here."

"I kind of thought so since Eve is here."

Eve laughed between her fighting and yelled, "Mother should show up soon."

"I think she already has." The warrior-bard had caught sight from the corner of her eye her soulmate pressing through the battle and still on Argo.

Just as Xena approached the group, the gates of the compound flung open with Draco and Sinteres both on horseback and about fifty men rushing behind them to get out of the compound.

Suddenly a woman's deep voice boomed through the battle, yelling, "Kill them all!"

"Guess who?" muttered the bard. She looked over at the warrior-bard and called, "I need to get to the Conqueror."

Gabrielle looked between the bard and her opponent. She then realized her soulmate had joined into the group. "Xena," she yelled.

The warrior smiled at her partner but knew she needed something. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Can you get Gabrielle to the Conqueror?"

For a response, the Warrior Princess urged her mare to the bard's side and she held her hand down.

The Amazon Queen took out her opponent then spun her staff. She turned around and took the offered help, she easily mounted Argo.

Xena took a deep breath, spun her sword and turned Argo around. She urged Argo into a gallop and headed for the gates, slashing her way through. It took about two minutes to press through the battle and get to the Conqueror.

Once they were there, Gabrielle didn't wait a second and slipped out of the saddle. "Conqueror!" she yelled.

The ruler had just finished off her enemy and spun around at hearing her name. Her eyes widened when she saw Gabrielle just ahead of her. She saw the bard was rushing to her and not paying attention to anything. She saw one of Draco's men charging the Amazon Queen and she growled at this. She grabbed her chakram and brought it up then threw it.

The bard didn't even notice the chakram but did hear the enemy yell when the chakram rammed into his chest. She came right up to the ruler and smiled at her.

"Be more careful," growled the Conqueror. She motioned to the enemy on his back with a chakram sticking from his chest.

"Good to see you too," teased the Amazon Queen.

The ruler just glared at the small woman but before she could do any more lecturing, she was pulled into a hug. The Conqueror stood there surprised yet she wrapped her free arm around the bard. She felt as if so much of her anger drained out. She then lifted her eyes in time to see a warrior coming at them. The only thing she could do was pull Gabrielle in tighter and spun around to put her back to him. She buried her head into Gabrielle more when she felt the blade slash at her back but that was it.

Xena had stepped in after flipping off her saddle. She'd stopped the soldier's sword with her own blade. She suddenly kicked at him and pushed him further from the Conqueror and the bard.

"Are you okay?" hastily asked the Amazon Queen, a worried expression on her face.

"I'm fine," reassured the ruler. "How about you?"

"I'm okay," replied the bard. "I'm so sor-"

"Its okay," cut off the ruler. "I just want this fight over with."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows at that total change in the Conqueror's attitude.

The Conqueror sighed and whispered, "I want to go home."

The Amazon Queen nodded faintly and turned around when she'd seen that look in the ruler's face. She raised her staff up, and stopped the blade that was coming at her from behind.

The ruler growled and took on the other enemy that was at her back. At certain points, she'd take a quick look at the Amazon Queen to make sure she was okay. She was starting to realize just how good Gabrielle was with her staff. She also started surveying the battle and noted they were now winning and crushing Draco's men. It would not be long before this battle was finally over for them.

~*~*~*~

The Conqueror stared at the two men locked in the jail wagon. They were both on

opposite ends of the wagon, their eyes closed, and trying to forget today's lost. The fire light from around the camp was reflecting off their face, she could see all of the blood and scars on their faces.

After shaking her head a few times, she turned around and walked back into camp. In the background, she could hear the two jail guards talking again. She stopped about midway into the camp and scanned all of the Amazons and her soldiers. Everybody was busy cleaning up or taking care of his or her wounds. Her healers along with two Amazon healers were shifting through everybody, checking on them.

The Conqueror turned her attention away from them and looked across the camp to one tent. She saw the firelight inside of the tent flickering and a shadow moving back and forth inside of the tent. Slowly she took in a long breath then made her way to the tent. Once she neared it, she paused but went inside of it.

The bard looked up in surprise when the ruler entered.

The Conqueror instantly realized the Amazon Queen was changing out of her clothes. "Excuse me," she apologized and turned her back to Gabrielle. She felt rather embarrassed now for barging in without thinking.

"Its okay," countered the bard. "I could actually use your help."

The Conqueror kept her back to the younger woman but asked, "With?"

Gabrielle returned to taking her small top off that she'd received while at Gurkhan's. "I have a wound on my back."

Immediately the Warrior Princess turned around in worry. She then realized Gabrielle was topless. "Hades," she growled and turned back around.

Gabrielle laughed and said, "Hey we're both women."

"Yes, I know this, Queen Gabrielle but...." She was lost for words. "Its just not polite," she finished.

"Alright... let me sit down on the cot with my back to you. On the bed is a medical kit if you can help to clean it for me. I can't see it let alone reach it."

"Tell me when you're ready."

The bard quietly shifted to the bed and sat down on the edge, her back directly to the ruler. "Its okay."

Xena slowly turned around and approached her. She decided to sit down behind the young woman. She reached over to grab the medical kit, which was next to the Queen's Amazon attire. "You found your clothes?"

"Yes, Ephiny was kind enough to bring them."

The Conqueror licked her lips as she picked through the kit, looking for a cloth. "I

saw she brought you your staff as well."

"Yes," confirmed the bard. She then realized they would need some water to better clean the wound. "Over there on the chair is some clean water."

"Thank you." The Conqueror got up and went over to pick up the bowl of water that was near the other end of the cot.

Gabrielle knew she was about to turn around and see her topless again. She quickly lifted her arms and crossed them over her breasts just before the ruler turned around.

The Conqueror paused for a second but then quickly moved back to her spot behind the young woman. "Thanks," she whispered.

"For?" quietly asked the bard.

The ruler chuckled while placing the bowl in her lap. "For the water." Her voice was in a teasing tone.

The bard faintly grunted because she knew why the ruler was really thanking her. She then sensed a large hand grasping her shoulder and then a wet cloth pressing into her back.

Xena carefully dabbed the bard's back cleaning up the wound. "How'd you get this?" she asked quietly.

"I'm not sure really." Gabrielle shrugged then added, "I just realized it not long after we got back into camp."

"Mmmm." The Conqueror continued patting the wound clean. She then lowered both of her hands into the bowl with the cloth and thoroughly cleaned it. "Hurt at all?"

"Not really... I'm sure it will when you put that salve on."

"Most likely," agreed the Conqueror. She clasped her hand on the bard's shoulder again and carefully cleaned the wound a second time. "How did things go at Gurkhan's?"

"There wasn't really any problems."

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow at the word 'any.' "So there were some problems?"

The Queen was about to blurt out what happened between her and Callisto but stopped herself just as quickly. She knew it wasn't the right time to discuss it but she knew she would have to sooner or later. "Well... the only major problem was I almost ended up bedding Gurkhan." She shook her head. "But I was lucky."

"Oh?" Xena put the cloth down in the bowl and picked up the bowl. She placed it on the floor. "What happened?"

"Varia showed up and stopped us before it happened."

The Conqueror let out a breath. She started milling through the kit again, looking for salve. "I take it you came on the scout ship?"

"Yes," answered the bard. "I was... concerned."

"About? The battle?" suggested the ruler. She opened the container of balm and spread some of her two right fingers.

"Well, that too," agreed the bard. She hissed and straightened her back out when the salve touched her wound. "Hades that stuff stings."

The ruler grinned some but continued to apply the ointment. "The battle huh?"

"I was worried about you," confessed the bard. "I mean I was about my Amazons, the battle, and Gabrielle... but you too."

The Warrior Princess slowly raised an eyebrow at her submission.

"I can see that eyebrow up," joked Gabrielle.

Xena huffed. "Everything else was okay?" she persisted, "No problems with Cleopatra or Callisto?"

"No... no," half lied the bard. "All of Gurkhan's wives are coming back too."

"And what do you suggest we do with them?" The Conqueror put on a little more salve then stopped. She closed up the lid and slipped it away.

"I was planning to offer them to join my Nation... if that's alright by you, my liege."

"I think its perfect," agreed the ruler.

Gabrielle was surprised by the agreement so she started to turn around.

The ruler was about to stop her but soft green eyes caught her. She tried to keep her attention fully above Gabrielle's neck.

"Seriously?"

Xena swallowed and slowly nodded. "I agree with you. I think you need more Amazons," she whispered.

"Thank you."

The Conqueror could only simply nod again as she reached over without moving her head a fraction. Xena's right hand scurried for Gabrielle's top.

Gabrielle chuckled when she found the top in her hands. "Thanks."

"No problem." The dark ruler sprung up from the bed and walked off towards the tent

flap.

The Queen already had her top on and buckled in the back. "Thank you for taking care of the wound."

The Conqueror stopped in front of the flap and turned around, relieved to see Gabrielle's top on now. "You're welcome. Get some rest tonight."

"I will, you too, my liege."

The ruler moved her head in acknowledgement then silently left.

The Amazon Queen groaned and fell back into her cot. "Goooooddsss," she moaned.

The Conqueror hadn't walked off that far when she heard Gabrielle's noises. She felt a small grin tug at her lips as she strolled through the camp to her own hut.

The warrior-bard was still holding onto her soulmate.

Xena finally lifted her head after this long hug and whispered, "You want to lay down?"

Gabrielle sighed and squeezed her partner tighter. "In a moment."

The warrior kissed her partner's temple. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, Xena." The small warrior finally forced herself to released her partner. "Know what though?"

"Mmmm?"

"I am a little hungry."

The Warrior Princess corked an eyebrow at that. "How about you sit down and I'll hunt some food down for us."

"Are you sure? I can co-"

"Its okay," cut off the warrior. "Just take it easy huh? I'll be back shortly." She left the tent in hopes to find her and Gabrielle some kind of food. As she was milling through the camp, looking for some signs of a mess tent. She then caught the Conqueror in the corner of her eye, she hastily made her way to the ruler.

"Hi, Xena," greeted the ruler.

"Conqueror." Xena held out her arm.

The Conqueror smiled and briskly shook arms with the warrior. "Nice job today."

"You didn't do bad yourself," commented the warrior. She finally released the strong arm.

"How is Gabrielle?" inquired the ruler.

"She is fine... exhausted but fine."

The Conqueror shifted her weight to her right foot. "Things were rather stressful for her."

"I know," whispered the warrior.

"She will be fine," reassured the ruler, "especially since you're back."

Xena nodded at the Conqueror's word. "How is the Queen?"

"I was just there," confessed the ruler, "she only has a small wound on her back. Otherwise she is fine."

"Glad to hear it." Xena was about to move away but stopped when she thought to ask the ruler about the mess tent. "Where can I find some food? Gabrielle is pretty hungry."

"Mmmm." The Conqueror was about to tell her but instead decided to show her. "This way." She made a beeline for the food tent. "I think the Queen will want something as well."

"Mmmm," agreed Xena, "lions to feed."

The ruler chuckled deeply in agreement.

Together the pair found the food tent and went inside to begin the food selection. The Conqueror made sure to get one of everything since she was completely unsure what the Queen would want anyway. After both women had their trays of food, they separated and each went to a Gabrielle's tent.

"Can I come in?" called a deep voice.

Gabrielle sat up from her bed and realized it was the Conqueror. "Yeah of course." She giggled some at the fact the ruler was now asking to come into the tent.

"I brought you something... thought you might be hungry."

The bard smiled at the tray of food. "Gee... you must have gotten one of everything."

"Pretty much... I wasn't sure what you liked."

Gabrielle laughed as the covered tray lowered onto the bed between them both. "All of it."

"I did good then."

"Well except for the olives," confessed the Queen.

"Not a problem." The ruler grabbed the small bowl of olives and started popping them into her mouth.

Gabrielle laughed and shook her head. She picked up a piece of bread and decided to start there. "Have you seen anybody?"

"You mean as in Xena or Gabrielle?"

"Yeah."

"I just spoke with Xena." The ruler sat back some while chewing on the last olive. "She said Gabrielle is fine."

"That's good to hear." The bard picked up the small mug of soup. "I was thinking of going over to see them but thought I shouldn't. They probably want to be alone... plus I'm just too exhausted," confessed the bard.

Xena slightly grinned and said, "So is Gabrielle."

The Queen nodded then lifted up a spoon to start her soup. "How you feel?"

"Tired myself," honestly answered the ruler.

"Kind of thought so." Gabrielle took a few spoonfuls of the soup then quietly said, "Thank you for sparing Draco and Sinteres."

"I wouldn't have done it otherwise."

"I know." Gabrielle still recalled the ruler almost gutting both men when she'd finally cornered them. Fortunately she'd been there at the time and was able to stop the ruler. "I think we can come up with better ways to ruin their lives."

The Conqueror laughed some because she knew of a few ideas already.

Through the rest of the evening, the pair quietly talked about their past weeks while they were apart. Sometimes though there were long moments of silence, neither sure what to say like there was something else they were suppose to be discussing. Yet Gabrielle always hastily came up with some kind of topic for them to get around the main question that was between them both.

The following day, the Amazons and the army broke camp deciding it were time to go home. First the Amazon Nation was escorted back to their village just to the northwest. Yet it was Ephiny, Solari, and Queen Gabrielle that decided to join the rest to travel to Athens. Also they made sure to separate the three groups of Amazons between Velasca's, Queen Gabrielle, and Varia's Amazons. Gabrielle took command of Varia's Amazons and had them travel to Athens with them.

Together, the huge traveling group slowly made their way to Athens. They also

estimated that by the time they arrived that Callisto would have returned by then, at least they hoped.

Eponin was standing on the balcony that came out over the main portion of the city. She was about to return go back inside but faltered when she saw several glints of metal just outside of the city. "By Artemis, let that be them," she whispered. She stepped closer and grasped the rail. She squeezed the rail so tightly as she waited in anticipation. As glints began to emerge into people, she knew it was the Conqueror with her army and she also was now able to pick out several Amazons. A happy smile broke out across her expression as she raced back inside to find her friends.

It wasn't long before everybody was reunited by the following morning. Callisto and her fleet arrived the next morning at first light with a very tired group of women. All of the Amazons celebrated with several hugs and laughs. Queen Gabrielle offered to the Gurkhan's former wives if they'd like to join her Nation and none of them refused.

By the late afternoon, Xena and Gabrielle decided it was best for her and Queen Varia's Amazons to return back home. The Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle knew it'd be a long adventure for all of them and Queen Gabrielle thanked Gabrielle, Xena, Eve, and Queen Varia numerous times for their help and support. She also then promised her, Ephiny, Solari, Eponin, Amarice, Teresa, and the wives would escort them to the cave just outside of Stagira so they could return to their world.

Gradually the traveling group organized and met at the gates, rather worn out from all of the events plus the traveling. Everybody was rather eager to return back to their homes.

Xena had mounted her mare and saw her partner had just gotten on her stallion. Just off to her right was Queen Gabrielle forcing herself to mount a horse.

Gabrielle quietly chuckled at the Queen's persistence to ride a horse. "She has more spirit than me when I was her age."

Xena gave a grin to her soulmate. "She tries harder."

"I wouldn't say that," called Gabrielle, "It's the fact I don't feel like walking the distance."

Both Xena and the warrior-bard laughed together.

Ephiny came up along the other side of her Queen.

"Are we ready?" inquired the Queen.

"Yes," replied the regent.

"Good, I'm ready to get home."

"Gabrielle, you do not have to come with us," persisted the warrior-bard.

The Amazon Queen shook her head at her friend's words. "I want to make sure you

and the Amazons get back safely to your world."

The warrior-bard nodded then said, "Thank you."

Gabrielle smiled at the older woman but then looked at Ephiny. "Okay, let's get moving."

The regent nodded and was about to order everybody out but stopped when Gabrielle's hand grasped her leg. "What is it?"

The bard signaled with her head at the Conqueror.

Ephiny looked over at the ruler standing at the gates of the city, just watching them carefully. "It's your call," whispered the regent.

Gabrielle bit her lower lip. "I'll be back," she promised. She slipped out of the saddle. "Just going to thank her and say bye."

"Okay, we'll be here." Ephiny watched her Queen weave through all of the Amazons and came up to the ruler.

The Conqueror lifted herself off the gate and smiled some at the Queen. "Well, I'm sure I'll see you soon."

"You will." Gabrielle went a little closer but kept a certain distance away from her. "I just wanted to thank you for all of the help."

"I had a treaty to uphold," reminded the ruler.

Gabrielle lowered her head at the mention of the treaty. She slowly lifted her head. "Well... whether it was the treaty or well something else, I appreciate it either way." She paused and quietly added, "I know you didn't have to do all that you did."

"And I appreciate your continuing support, Queen Gabrielle... despite our pasts."

The small woman sighed at the mention of what had happened between them from the start. "The past is the past... my legs have healed just like my anger. Sometimes I don't even remember it."

"I know... and that's what makes you such an amazing woman," whispered the ruler. She took a deep breath and took one step closer. "You can return whenever you see fit." Slowly a crooked grin appeared in her expression. "I still expect an invite to your Nation... and especially to your hot springs bath."

The bard blushed as she realized there wasn't quite a hot springs bath just yet. "Well... when we have them ready, I'll be sure to invite you."

Xena nodded as her grin faded away. "Safe travels, Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle tapped her staff on the ground and said, "We'll talk soon." She turned around and took a step away.

The Conqueror noticed she wasn't going any further but instead turned back around.

"To Hades with the formality." Gabrielle quickly moved in closer.

Xena wasn't sure what to expect as she put up her guard but suddenly found herself in a hug. She stood there frozen for the second time and tried to debate what to do. She gave a heavy sigh and wrapped her arms around the smaller woman. "This is really bad for my image, you know that right, Queen Gabrielle?"

"Then don't hug me," countered the bard.

Although a part of the ruler was prepared to just that she faltered and instead squeezed the Queen tighter. "Please be careful, I do not feel like repeating this."

Gabrielle laughed softly and finally let go of the Conqueror. "Of course, my liege." She smiled warmly up at the woman.

"Go on," urged Xena, "Your Amazons wait for you."

The Queen solemnly nodded and stepped back a few times. "Bye, my liege."

The ruler bowed her head some while saying, "Goodbye, Queen Gabrielle." She lifted her head to watch Gabrielle quickly spin around and power walk off to the group of Amazons.

The Conqueror sighed deeply and went back to her position against the gates.

Gabrielle mounted her horse again and signaled to Ephiny. While her regent took care of the Amazons, she went about lashing her staff down.

The regent ordered the group to push down the road. She then started her horse into a walk but kept her attention on her best friend. "Everything okay?" she whispered.

"Yes," replied the bard.

"Nothing went wrong?" urged the regent.

"No," promised the rather quiet Queen.

Xena and her warrior-bard had noticed the shift in Queen Gabrielle's attitude. Neither of them spoke up because they knew Ephiny would handle it well.

"Then why are you... so down?" whispered the worried regent.

Gabrielle shook her head as she stared at the ground passing underneath her horse. "I feel like this is so one-sided," she confessed.

"What is?"

The bard looked at her regent, she just stared then finally answered, "My emotions."

Ephiny wasn't quite sure what to say but she half turned in her saddle and looked back at the Conqueror. The ruler was still staring at them and Ephiny knew her gaze was mainly on Gabrielle. She shifted back normal into her saddle. "Did you even try?"

"It's not worth it, Ephiny." Gabrielle shook her head. "She doesn't want me."

"I think that's for her to decide." Ephiny almost laughed in disbelief at her own words, she couldn't believe she was sitting here trying to urge her best friend to be with the Conqueror. It was such an outrageous and crazy idea so she knew it had to be the right thing. "Well... I guess since you decided for her, you don't have to worry." She shrugged and stared ahead but not without adding, "Better to have tried and failed than never tried at all."

The bard sighed as she slumped in her saddle.

Xena peered across to her soulmate, Gabrielle shook her head in protest.

Xena grumbled and tried to remain quiet.

The Amazon Queen suddenly growled, "Hades." She halted her mare and jumped off.

"Gabrielle?" called Ephiny in worry. She got no answer but she ordered everybody to stop.

Gabrielle came racing up to the Conqueror, completely out of breath.

The ruler stood up from the side of the gates and asked, "What's wr...." She stopped when the young woman held up a hand.

The bard took two gigantic breaths then straightened up to her full height. She had to move a little to try and relax herself some more before she said what she had to say. She now stood between the gates so that her back was directly against the opposite gate from Xena. "Look, I have to say this... if I don't get it off my chest, I'll just never be able to sleep."

The Conqueror slowly lifted an eyebrow in question. "Go on."

Gabrielle stared down at her feet while taking several deep breaths. She then looked up to the ruler. "I kept worrying about you while we were separated, I kept hoping you were okay and that you wouldn't give up." She paused then continued with her speech. "When I finally saw you on the battlefield, I never felt so... so just peaceful and happy. I mean we were in a middle of battle and I was happy." She laughed at herself. "And then that night in the tent together, I don't think I could have gotten enough of her attention if I tried." She stopped as she tried to see if it was affecting the ruler, she wasn't getting any real response. "Conqueror, I missed you, I honestly did." She stopped and took a few steps closer and whispered, "And gods, I hope my life doesn't end when I tell you this but... I think I'm falling in love with you."

The Conqueror lowered her eyebrow at the submission. She pressed her lips together

then folded her arms over her chest.

Gabrielle waited for something to happen or for her to say something. She tried so hard to read Xena's eyes but they were too emotionless and hollow. She suddenly felt her heart sink down and her life drain out from her body. She closed her eyes and took two steps back. "Oh gods," she moaned. Her back hit the gate and she slid down it until she was sitting in the dirt. "I just made a fool of myself," she growled at herself.

Ephiny was about to move when she saw her Queen on the ground.

"Don't," urged the warrior-bard.

"What? Why?" countered the regent.

"Just... have some faith." Gabrielle looked back to the two pair in the gateway.

The Conqueror stared down at the Queen that was about to break down crying. She ran her tongue along the front of her teeth as she considered everything. She took a deep breath and realized her knees were a bit shaky. She unfolded her arms and gradually bent down until her right knee pressed into the ground. She let her hands rest on either of her legs. "Looks like you've really fallen for me," she whispered but her tone held a taunt.

Gabrielle lifted her head and dropped it against the gate. "I'm sorry," she apologized.

The Conqueror blinked at the out right apology.

"I won't make it present anymore. I'm sorry, Conqueror." Gabrielle lowered her head again.

Xena shook her head some and asked, "I guess I don't have a say huh? That's it huh?"

The Queen looked up again after those questions. "Conqueror, I didn't mea-"

The ruler suddenly leaned forward, which cut her short on her words. Her dark blue eyes locked onto the woman and she whispered, "Sometimes you just need to be quiet, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard swallowed as her stomach dropped even more today. She felt like everything was about to end for her.

The Conqueror grinned suddenly and leaned in the rest of the way.

Gabrielle found her lips against the ruler's and she closed her eyes. She started to reach out with her right hand to grab onto the ruler.

Xena had her left hand out to also grab the young woman but her hand met halfway with Gabrielle's. She laced their hands together then returned her focus to the kiss. She slowly pushed her tongue into the bard's mouth.

Gabrielle moaned softly and squeezed the larger hand tighter when her body tingled

with heat.

The Conqueror let the kiss go on, their tongues running against each other and bringing the bard's own into her mouth. She then knew they had to separate instead of continuing this in public. She slowly pulled back and her eyes gradually opened.

Gabrielle smiled warmly at the ruler.

Xena for the first time gave a very happy smile. "That's my response to your love." She unlaced their hands and started to stand up while saying, "And I never said you had to leave Athens."

The bard dropped her head back against the gate and laughed nervously at herself. "By the gods...."

"No, it wasn't the gods," insisted the Warrior Princess.

Ephiny slid out of her saddle deciding it was time to interject. She went to the pair but didn't look at the ruler as she knelt beside her Queen. "Gabrielle?"

The bard opened her sparkling spring eyes and looked at her regent. "Yes?"

The regent almost laughed at the response but asked, "Are there a change of plans, my Queen?"

Gabrielle looked away from Ephiny and looked up at Xena, the Conqueror. She had a warm smile that the Conqueror mirrored back and for the first time, she saw the softest set of warm blue eyes. "Yes... there's certainly a change of plans."

The End

Section 5

~*~*~*~

Xena and Varia scanned the town in search of the wives.

"They should be easy to spot," mentioned Callisto quietly.

"You would think," stated the queen.

The Warrior Princess shook her head then said, "Let's go to the market. That's where I'd be if I were them."

The others agreed and followed behind the warrior to the town's market.

After about ten minutes of searching through the large market, they finally spotted three familiar women by a stall.

"That's Eboni and Eshe," whispered Varia. "Come on." She quickly went to the wives, Callisto and Xena tailing behind her. "Eboni, Eshe," she greeted to them.

Eboni and Eshe and the third wife all turned to the Amazon.

"Varia!" squealed Eshe. "How are you? You made it?"

"I'm doing good and yes... we made it."

The wives then quickly noticed the two other women.

"Oh gods wow," whispered Eshe.

"What's happening?" interrupted Eboni.

"We are going back with you into the compound," answered the Warrior Princess.

Eboni glanced at the warrior and grinned at the answer. "That means were getting out of there?"

"You sure are," replied the Amazon queen happily.

"Oh thank the gods," uttered Adonia, who stood behind Eshe and Eboni.

Xena quickly then said, "Look, us three need to switch places with three others that are with you."

Eboni reached out and grabbed the Warrior Princess's arm. "Not a problem, come with us." She quickly hurried off. "We haven't much time before we have to leave town."

The group quickly followed Eboni through the market.

~*~*~*~

The two guards at the gates of the compound ordered the cart to a halt. They approached the drivers of the cart, which were two of Gurkhan's guards and then there were five others surrounding the cart. "Delivering the wives back?"

"Yes," replied a guard.

The gate guard did a quick head count of the wives and found all of them there. "Looks like you're good, go ahead."

The guard nodded then snapped the reins for the horses to continue into the fortress.

Varia sighed in relief after hearing that. She then felt the cart come to a halt once it was in front of a stable.

"Here you go, ladies. Time to unload," ordered a guard.

Another guard came around the back and lowered the flap of the cart.

The wives carefully slipped out of the cart but they made sure to keep Varia, Xena, and Callisto huddled into the back so they would take less notice of them. They then quickly made their way inside of the nearest building towards all the wives rooms.

"We have to hurry," whispered Eboni, she led the group. "The dinner will be starting soon so we have to catch the other wives before they go."

"I'm sure glad you suggested to the wives to wear veil robes today," whispered Varia.

Eboni grinned. "I had a feeling you would show up with help at the market."

The queen just mirrored the grin back.

Eboni continue leading everybody down the hall to the wives' rooms. "The only wife we might have a problem with is the head wife. Her room is further away from the rest of us. She's closer to Gurkhan's room."

"That's fine," stated Xena. "I have to take care of something anyway down there, so I will get her."

"I'll tell you where her room is, Xena."

The warrior shifted through the group and power walked along side Eboni. "Where is it?"

"You follow down this hall the rest of the way." She then came to a stop and then announced. "Ladies, get the other wives while I talk to Xena." She then focused on the warrior again. "Continue down this hallway." She pointed behind Xena. "Then make a right at the end, if you go to the very end of that hall you'll come to the head wife's room. Gurkhan's room is to the right of hers. You can't miss them."

"Alright, thank you."

"You're welcome," replied Eboni. "Don't take too long. It will not be long before Gurkhan notices his wives missing from dinner. He may even still be in his own room preparing for dinner."

"I'm counting on it," whispered the warrior evilly. She then whirled around and raced down the corridor. She tore off her veil from around her face and threw her cape behind herself.

Varia knocked first on Gabrielle's door but didn't wait as she opened it. "Queen Gabrielle she called into the room?"

The Queen rushed to the door at hearing the new voice. "Who... what..."

"I'm Queen Varia, I'm here with Xena, Cyane, and Eve to get you and the wives out. Its time to go."

The Queen stared at the Amazon for a second but then shook her head. "Oh gods, okay." She rushed back into her room and grabbed a small dagger off the nightstand by her bed. She slipped it down between her skin and her dress, letting the handle stick up. "Where are the other wives?"

"We're getting them now." The queen stepped out of the way to let Gabrielle out.

The Amazon Queen looked and saw all of the wives gathering into the hallway. She then also saw one other woman she didn't recognize but decided to ask questions later. "Wait, where's Xena?"

"She's gone to get the head wife and I think... kill Gurkhan if she can," answered Eboni from across the large group.

"Kill Gurkhan?"

"Yes," answered Eboni.

"Hades," growled the bard. She turned to Eve and Cyane. "Get these wives out of here. I have to go get Xena."

"She can handle herself, Gabrielle," stated Eve. "Don't worry."

"No, you don't understand, I have to stop her." The bard started weaving her way through the group.

Eve grabbed the Queen's arm. "Don't, she'll be fine."

"You don't understand, Eve," growled the Amazon Queen in warning. "Please, just get these wives out of here, now. The guards will be here any minute."

"Alright, be careful."

"I will. You too." Gabrielle did an about face and went sprinting down the hall.

Eve sighed and turned to Varia. "We better get out of here now."

"Alright." Varia reached between her cape and pulled out a sword. "Catch!" she threw the sword to Eve.

The princess caught it.

Callisto grinned and held out a sword to Cyane. "You might need this, Amazon."

"Thanks." Cyane gave it a quick whirl happy to feel her sword in her hands again.

"Lead the way, Eve," called the queen.

"Right through the gates?" asked the princess while she pushed her way through the wives.

Varia nodded. "We're going to make a dash for the gates."

"Alright, let's go then." Eve twirled the sword like she always did before any fights. And she prayed to God that she would not have to use it at all on this day.

Queen Gabrielle came to the end of the hall and raced into the open door of Gurkhan's room. "Hades," she growled. Once inside of the room, she saw Gurkhan fighting Xena in sword combat. "No, Xena wait!"

The Warrior Princess surpassingly looked to the Queen and was caught off guard briefly. Her right arm got caught on the slaver's blade. She hissed and jumped back but gave a feral grin to her enemy. She whirled her sword then continued fighting him.

"What the Hades?" yelled a woman's voice.

Gabrielle had heard the head wife come out of her room.

The head wife saw her husband's attacker and opened her mouth about to call for the guards.

"No," growled the bard. She reached for her dagger and sprung for the wide. She instantly brought the dagger tip to the wife's throat. "Don't you dare yell for them," she snarled.

The head wife closed her mouth and lowered her eyes towards the dagger. "Who are you?" Her eyes lifted back up to the smaller woman. "I am the Queen of the Amazons from Greece."

The head wife's eyes widened.

"And we're being rescued by the Conqueror. So pick a side."

The head wife whispered, "I'm on your side."

"Good choice." Gabrielle lowered her dagger just in time to see Xena knock Gurkhan unconscious. She quickly ran for the warrior when she saw Xena bringing her sword up.

"Xena, wait!" yelled the bard. She leapt for her friend.

The Warrior Princess dropped her sword at the unexpected leap for herself. She instead caught herself from tripping and held up her friend. "Gabrielle, what is wrong?" she whispered hotly.

"You can't, Xena," rasped the bard. "He knows about Lila."

"Your sister?"

"Yes, I thought she was dead but I've never been sure. I think she was one of his wives at one time." Gabrielle glanced at him then back at her friend. "He's the only one that knows for sure and who she sold her to."

"Great," grumbled the warrior. "Alright." She quickly reformulated her plan. "Let's tie him up and hide him so that we can get him for later use." She quickly gazed about the room for some type of rope. She went straight to the drapes by the window and ripped the drapes' ropes off. She then hastily tied up Gurkhan.

"I have a large closet in my room," offered the head wife, she pushed the door to her room open more.

Xena nodded and dragged the slaver through the one room and into the head wife's room. She then shoved him into the rather large closet, closed the door then used another lashing from the head wife's drapes to tie the closet closed. "We need to get out of here," she said while stepping out of the room into the hall.

"Where are the others headed?" inquired Queen Gabrielle.

"The gates." Xena narrowed her eyes. "We need to hurry, they'll need our help."

Gabrielle immediately started down the hall. "Let's go," she called.

Xena faintly grinned and hurried after her friend. She heard the first wife following. She then noticed the sound of footfall, boots at that. She knew right away they belonged to guards but they were walking. She quickly rushed ahead of Gabrielle spun her sword, and saw the two guards round the bend.

The guards saw the women and instantly pulled out their swords. "Halt!" called one man.

Xena sighed and rushed them with her sword out.

The two guards readied themselves but she suddenly stopped in front of them.

The Warrior Princess kicked at the closest one and sent him smashing in the wall behind himself. She then grinned at the other guard and spun her sword.

The guard held up his sword some but didn't move.

"Come on," coaxed the warrior.

The guard stepped back, dropped his sword then ran off.

"Well... that was easy."

Gabrielle laughed and said, "Come on."

The warrior agreed and ran along side her friend. Behind her, she could hear the first wife's shoes clanging along.

Just outside the wives, Varia, Eve, Callisto, and Cyane stepped into the courtyard of

the compound. Immediately five guards sprung into action, yelling and screaming for the other men to join.

"Get behind us," ordered Eve.

The wives huddled into the middle as the four warriors all surrounded them to protect them. They all watched as the women fought the guards. But then several other guards appeared out of the buildings to help, the odds were looking bad.

"Right out here." Gabrielle slammed into the door, forcing it to burst open. She saw the wives encircled but the guards were overpowering them.

Xena growled and ran faster, she grabbed at her chakram and threw it.

The chakram spun towards a guard, slicing him in the legs then it circled around, hitting another guard in the chest and finally coming back around but not without hitting yet a third guard. It then neatly came towards Xena.

The warrior caught her weapon, spun her sword and came right at a guard.

"Nice of you to join us, mother," called Eve. She held up her sword to stop the guard's blade, she then kicked him in the side.

"Not a problem," teased back the Warrior Princess. She stood still when she saw her enemy was down, unconscious. She looked around and saw all the guards were out cold. "Let's get the Hades out of here."

Eve nodded and waved everybody forward. She went to the large wood doors, which were sealed shut.

Xena hurried up and caught up to her daughter. "I'm going to get a door open."

Eve simply nodded. She looked on as her mother sprinted ahead and started pulling a door open on her own. By the time they came up, Xena pretty much had the door opened and the group rushed out.

The warrior swung around outside and looked into the compound, she saw several soldiers getting up and others coming out of the building. She cursed and began closing the door again just to slow them down. Once it was sealed, she spun around and saw Torrid at the top of the hill, the group almost to him, and the Conqueror's army behind him. She simply grinned and hurried off.

After Callisto became in command again, she ordered the army to attack Gurkhan's compound. Xena and the Amazons however took care of the wives, checking on them and then finding them a safe place to rest. As they were sitting there, Xena was overlooking the fighting in the compound.

"What's going on down there?" inquired Gabrielle. She stood up from the rock and came over to her friend.

Xena folded her arms then replied, "Looks like Callisto has it under control."

"Yeah?" The Amazon Queen stood there, visually inspecting the on goings in the compound. "Looks like they're rounding up the soldiers that are still alive."

"Mmmm," agreed Xena. She then noticed her daughter accompanied them.

"Thank god that didn't take her long," complained the princess.

The Warrior Princess shifted her weight onto her right side. "I don't like this," she whispered.

"What you mean?" inquired Gabrielle.

"They're lining up Gurkhan's men... like they're going to be executed," explained Eve.

"I think they are," stated Xena.

Gabrielle shook her head and said, "We can't let her do that... they're prisoners."

Xena felt her shoulders drop slightly as she turned her attention to Gabrielle. "There's not much we can do, Gabrielle. The Conqueror gave her specific orders to destroy everything."

"What? Why?"

"Because they had you," simply answered the warrior. She turned her head away and now saw two of Callisto's men escorting a man outside. "Damn it," she growled.

"Its Gurkhan," whispered the bard. "Oh gods, if she kills him... I'll never be able to find my sister." She suddenly took off racing for the compound.

"Damn it," repeated Xena. She also took off.

Eve looked back at the Amazons and wives. "Stay here."

"What's going on?" inquired Varia.

"It's not good... just stay here," ordered Eve. She followed after her mother and the Amazon Queen.

"Callisto," yelled Gabrielle. She approached the naval captain and grabbed her arm. "What are you planning to do with Gurkhan?"

Callisto turned her head to the Amazon Queen, first though her cold eyes rested on the woman's hand.

Gabrielle sensed the annoyance and she released Callisto's arm.

The naval captain finally looked at Gabrielle. "I plan to kill him with the rest of his

men then burn Magador to the ground."

"You can't kill Gurkhan, Callisto."

Callisto grinned and said, "I have orders to destroy anything and anybody here." She turned her attention away but without noticing Eve and Xena had came up to Gabrielle's side.

"No," growled Gabrielle suddenly. "I'm ordering you not to kill him, Callisto."

The naval captain quickly turned back to Gabrielle. "You order me?" she hissed. She fully turned to the Amazon Queen and lowered her head down. "You do not order me. You are the Queen of Amazons... not of me." She suddenly walked away and unsheathed her sword, she was heading right for Gurkhan.

"No!" yelled the angry bard. She chased after Callisto and grabbed her by the arm and swung her around. "I need him to find my sister," she yelled.

Callisto became full of anger at that point and brought her blade up to Gabrielle's throat. "Your head would look nice beside Gurkhan's," she whispered as a grin crept along her expression.

"Don't you dare," growled Xena, she already had her sword out.

Eve had her hand on her hilt, prepared to draw it out.

"Oh dear Xena...." Callisto lifted her golden, wild eyes to the warrior. "You're much softer than the Conqueror. I kinda like it."

The Warrior Princess narrowed her eyes. "And do you think the Conqueror will like you killing her?"

"Oh I don't know," teased the naval captain, "she might not, and that could be a lot of fun." She had a toothy grin as her attention lowered back to the bard. "But... maybe I'll save it for another day." She lowered her sword. "On a rainy day, how's that sound?"

"You fuc-"

"Ah ah aaah, don't say things that'll come to haunt you, Queen Gabrielle," warned Callisto. She started to walk away, towards Gurkhan, but already heard Gabrielle moving after her. "Stop her," she ordered to several of her men.

The soldiers quickly rushed forward and blocked Gabrielle away from Callisto.

"You'll enjoy watching this, Queen Gabrielle." The naval captain spun her sword and slowly closed in on the bounded slaver.

"No!" yelled the bard.

A soldier quickly moved to grab a hold of Gabrielle, immobilizing her. The other

soldiers then unsheathed their swords and stepped up to Xena and Eve.

Xena gritted her teeth as she calculated everything but knew there was nothing she could do.

Gabrielle struggled against the soldier but she suddenly stopped when she saw Callisto thrust her sword forward.

Gurkhan let out a quiet cry, as he became motionless on the blade. He then fell over when Callisto extracted her sword.

Callisto spun around with a happy grin and held up the bloody sword. "Who's next?"

Gabrielle looked away and lowered her head. "Oh gods...."

~*Part 18*~

Eponin turned around when she heard her friend come into the room. "How you doing, Teresa?"

"I'm okay." Teresa closed the door and leaned back against it. "Trying to get use to this big place."

"You do after awhile," promised the weapons master.

"Yeah? You have huh?"

The Amazon grinned back at Teresa. "Not really."

Teresa laughed crossed one leg over the other as she let all of her weight press against the door. "It's not a bad place. The Conqueror has style."

"She thinks... big," joked the weapons master.

"Hey, you have to give her some credit."

The weapons master sat down on her bed and looked at Teresa. "How you figure that?"

"Well... think about it from a warrior's stand point. She's conquered a better part of the known-world."

Eponin slowly nodded. "She has from a warrior's stand point."

"I mean... it is impressive, you have to admit." Teresa grinned. "How many people you know can do what she's done?"

"Only one," replied Eponin.

"Who's that?" questioned Teresa.

Eponin stood up while saying, "The Conqueror." She walked around the bed and peered out of the window, she was overlooking the market area.

"So... when's dinner around here?"

Eponin shrugged as she noted the long shadow the castle was setting over the market place. "I think whenever we want it."

"How about what's for dinner?"

"I think that's also whatever we want," replied the weapons master.

Teresa laughed and added, "I could really get use to this place."

"Wait until you see the bath." The weapons master turned around with a sly grin.

The Amazon straightened up off the door. "I can't wait, let's go now."

Eponin laughed and came over. "Alright... go outside and make a right."

Teresa didn't waste any time and swung open the door.

Eponin followed behind and shut the door. "Oh and I won't mention this to Amarice."

"Ep, you know she'll kill us both if she finds out we knew and didn't tell her."

"I know, isn't it great?" teased the weapons master.

Teresa chuckled and smiled at her friend. "Definitely."

~*~*~*~

"When do you think we'll attack?" quietly asked the warrior-bard.

The Conqueror considered her friend's question as she sat down in a chair next to a table. She stared up at the hut's ceiling as she thought about the plans. "Maybe later this week."

"You think we're close to the mining shaft?"

The Conqueror slowly nodded, her eyes followed the Amazon as she sat down on the foot of her bed. "How are your Amazons looking?"

"I think pretty well set. Do you think it's still too early to head over to Sinteres's?"

"Yes. Give it another day or two... depending." She was about to add more but faltered as she realized something. "Hades," she growled.

"What's wrong?"

"We need to wait until the scout ship arrives with word about Queen Gabrielle."

"Conqueror, I don't think that'll matter. I mean, she is there and Sinteres is here."

The Conqueror shook her head and stated, "It will matter. As soon as word gets out I attacked one of my head slavers, Gurkhan will hold Gabrielle over my head."

"Wait, wait." The warrior-bard held up her hands momentarily then lowered them back down. "How the Hades can anybody sure that... well the Amazon Queen is of any importance to you."

"Word is already out, Gabrielle," reminded the Conqueror. "Plenty of people have seen her and I together, talking. They all know and I have no doubt Sinteres helped get the information around."

The Amazon Queen sighed, as she knew her friend was right. "So we wait then."

"That's all we can do until then."

Gabrielle sadly nodded but looked up from the floor to the ruler. "By now, I'd say Xena has Queen Gabrielle out of Gurkhan's hands."

The Conqueror sighed as she actually sat back into the chair. "I hope so, Gabrielle." She let her eyes lower down, she just stared at the floor. "I will run Gurkhan through myself if he's done anything to her."

"I didn't think you worried about her," quietly mentioned Gabrielle. She felt blue eyes lift up to her with question in them. "Are you worrying now, Conqueror?"

Xena huffed then muttered, "I have a treaty to up hold."

"Oh." Gabrielle stood up and crossed over to Xena. She bent down to her and grinned at her. "Didn't know the treaty entailed saving the Queen and destroying her enemies."

"Gabrielle, don't-"

"I wasn't," cut off Gabrielle, "I was just... pointing some facts out, my liege." She patted the woman's knee then stood up. She sat in a chair that accompanied the desk. "Worrying isn't always a bad thing, you know."

The Conqueror didn't say anything, she remained silent.

"Conqueror?"

The Warrior Princess returned her attention to her friend.

"Do me a favour huh?"

"What is that?"

Gabrielle put her words together in her head right then spoke them. "If she smiles at you and you feel your knees weak for just a moment then don't let her leave your life."

The ruler only lowered her eyes again and didn't say anything back to her.

Gabrielle knew though her words were sinking in with her friend. She stood up and offered, "Dinner here tonight?"

"That would be nice," replied the Conqueror. She stood up and accompanied the warrior-bard to the dining hut.

~*Part 19*~

"Wait, wait," stated the Amazon Queen. "You're telling me she has to send a scout ship ahead to let the Conqueror know I'm safe?"

"Yes," replied Xena. "Why?"

Gabrielle stood up from her chair in Cleopatra's guestroom. "To Hades with that, I'll go on the scout ship."

The warrior grinned and said, "That's fine but let some of us go with you."

"There's not much room on a scout ship," reminded Gabrielle.

"I know, so Eve and I can go with you." Xena stood up from her own chair and came over to her friend. "I think its best the Amazons stay with the wives, to watch over them."

"I agree." Gabrielle paused when she grabbed the door handle. "I guess we need to talk to Callisto huh?"

"Yeah, afraid so."

The Amazon Queen bit her lower lip but turned to the door. "Here goes." She flung open the door. "Go get Eve and I'll talk to Callisto."

"Gabrielle, are you sure?" asked the concerned warrior.

"I'm positive. I can handle her." Gabrielle shrugged then added, "I have to some time."

"Just holler if you need help. Alright?"

The Amazon Queen nodded then watched the warrior disappear down at the other end of the long hallway. She then faced the other end and slowly walked down to Callisto's room. After a deep, long breath she finally knocked on the door. She heard the naval captain order for her to come inside the room. She opened the door and stepped into her room. "Callisto, I need to talk with you."

Callisto reappeared out of the wash room, wearing just her leathers. "Oh Queen Gabrielle, how can I help you?" She grinned and put her hands on her hips.

"I heard you have to send a scout ship to give the Conqueror word of what's happening."

"Yes, I do. Why?"

Gabrielle pressed her now folded arms against her chest. "I'd like to return to Greece on the scout ship with Eve and Xena."

The naval captain thought about it for a few minutes. Suddenly a large grin appeared in her expression. "That's fine but the ship leaves in about half a candlemark from now. So I suggest you hurry, Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle nodded and started to leave but called, "Thank you."

"Oh you're quite welcome," taunted Callisto. She saw the Amazon leave and she laughed to herself.

The bard rushed down the hallway in search of Xena and Eve. "Xena?" she yelled. She heard the room two doors up open immediately.

"What's wrong?" asked Xena, she stepped out of the room.

"The ship leaves in half a candlemark."

"Alright, wait there. Eve and I are coming. I just have to finish up my conversation with Varia."

Gabrielle nodded and remained standing there until Xena and her daughter came out. The three women then quickly went to the docks to board the ship just in time.

~*Part 20*~

The Conqueror slipped into the tent and received a smile from the warrior-bard. "Hey," she greeted. "How are things?"

"Not bad," replied the Amazon Queen. Gabrielle sat down in her chair next to the foot of her bed. "All the Amazons have been positioned in the area."

"Have they been shown their various tasks during the battle?"

The warrior-bard slowly nodded and said, "Solari and Ephiny are handling that now."

"And you're not helping?" The Conqueror had a slight grin as she folded her arms over her chest.

"No... to be honest, I needed a break." The small warrior sighed and lowered her head. "I'm worried about the others."

"I am myself," confessed the Conqueror very quietly.

The Amazon Queen lifted her head again and saw the honest look in the ruler's face.

"I'm sure they're okay," she promised.

The Conqueror only nodded but did not voice her opinion.

"How is the mining shaft going over there?"

"It's coming along." Xena's eyes flickered to the floor then back at her friend. "I expect to hit the shaft by tonight."

"That soon?"

The Conqueror grinned evilly. "Yes that soon. I've had men working on it non stop."

"That figures." Gabrielle just gave a grin back but she then went serious. "Do you think we'll be able to stop them?"

"We'll crush them," simply replied the ruler. "I don't plan on letting them walk away."

The small warrior sighed at her friend's words. She hung her head low. Then a question came to her and she looked back up. "Are you this angry because you want to be? Or you this angry because of what they did to Gabrielle?"

The ruler's jaw tightened and loosened several times. "Draco betrayed me and went behind my back. Sinteres supports him."

"That's really why?"

The Conqueror's arm fell from her chest and walked over to the opposite side of the tent. She spun around to face her friend. "What do you want, Gabrielle huh?" She shook her head and angrily asked, "You want me to fall in love with her huh? Is this what's it about?"

Gabrielle slowly rose up and stated, "You're already in love, my liege. You just don't want to face it." She paused and suddenly got angry too. "Screw your dark side, you will not find any balance without her. And you're too scared to admit that to yourself." She shook her head and went to the tent flap. "You'll be ten times stronger with her than without her." She disappeared out of the tent.

The Conqueror stood there angry than before and suddenly rushed out of the tent after the Amazon Queen. She quickly found her and grabbed her by the arm. She spun her around and brought her face into Gabrielle's. "Do not question my power in this world. I am stronger without her."

The warrior-bard narrowed her eyes and hotly whispered, "Then why are you so intent on killing her persecutors and bringing her home? Let me know when you figure that out, Plato." She jerked her arm free and walked off.

The Conqueror stared at her back and then realized her men and a few Amazons were staring at her. She growled and disappeared as well into the late afternoon.

~*Part 21*~

The Amazon Queen jumped onto the dock and waited for her two friends to follow. "Hurry," she ordered. It been a three day trip from Egypt, well more of two and half days and it was about midday now.

Xena and Eve were on the dock now and trying to hurry after the bard.

"Gabrielle, wait up," called the Warrior Princess.

The bard sighed and stopped at the end of the dock. "I need to know what's happening."

"We know, but sprinting down a dock is not going to help much," interjected Eve.

"Queen Gabrielle?" suddenly yelled a voice.

"Eponin?" The Queen had spun around to see her weapons master at the end of the dock. "Ep!" She smiled happily and rushed to her friend.

The Amazon laughed as she was taken into a big hug. "Oh gods, welcome home, my Queen." She squeezed the Queen as hard as she could.

Gabrielle pulled back from the hug and smiled at her Amazon. "How are you?"

"I was about to ask you that."

The bard giggled and said, "I'm fine."

"I'm glad."

"I was so worried about you and Palamon and Ephiny."

Eponin smiled warmly and reached up to brush back her Queen's hair from her face. "We're fine. Ephiny made it to the Conqueror fine. The Conqueror was able to get Palamon and I out of the compound."

The bard smiled so happily at the news but then she got a confused look. "Why are you here?"

The weapons master sighed and replied, "It's a long story, I'll tell you later. I'm here with Amarice and Teresa too."

The bard looked past her Amazon and now saw the two young Amazons coming out of the castle towards the pier.

Eponin finally took a step back and greeted Xena and Eve. "Glad you two are back. Where are the others?"

"We came on the scout ship," explained Xena, "The others will be here soon enough."

"My Queen!" squealed Teresa. She pushed past the weapons master and grabbed the

Queen in a hug.

Gabrielle laughed and hugged her back tightly. She then went to Amarice and saw the Amazon smile shyly at her. "Come here, Reece."

The Amazon chuckled at the nickname and hugged her Queen. "Its good to have you back, my Queen."

The bard pulled back and smiled at her three Amazons.

"Have you heard word from the Conqueror?" inquired Xena.

Eponin peered up at the warrior. "Well Gabrielle sent word that everything was prepared. As soon as they heard word that Queen Gabrielle was okay, they planned to attack."

"What was the plan?" urged Xena.

Eve was listening to the weapons master explaining the attack plan but she now saw a soldier approaching them. She furrowed her eyebrows when she saw a scroll in his hands. "I think we're about to find out the most recent news."

Eponin fell short on her words when she followed Eve's eyes. She saw the messenger approach her. "Soldier," she greeted.

"Regent." The messenger bowed his head and handed the scroll over. "This is from the Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle."

Eponin took the scroll and quickly unrolled it.

Gabrielle shifted to stand beside her friend and read the scroll as well. After she finished it, she looked up with fearful eyes. "They've been taken by surprise."

"What?" growled Xena.

"Sinteres and Draco attacked them," explained Eponin, "They must have known."

"How were things before you left?" hastily asked Gabrielle to the messenger.

"They were not well, Queen Gabrielle." The soldier sighed then further explained, "The Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle were taken surprise as you said. When I left, they were just starting to get organized and retaliate."

"Are many dead?"

"Mostly the Conqueror's men," replied the soldier, "Very few Amazons."

"The Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle are okay?"

"Yes of course, Queen Gabrielle," answered the soldier. "So is the regent."

Gabrielle briskly nodded then asked, "Did the odds look bad?"

"They were improving some when I left but at first, not at all. Neither the Conqueror or Queen Gabrielle expected them to attack."

The Queen sighed and looked to Xena and Eve. "We better get to them."

"We will go too," offered Eponin.

"No, no wait." The Queen held up her hand. "I need you three to stay." She turned to her weapons master and grasped her shoulders. "Callisto will return soon with the others. If you're not here to hold down the Conqueror's role then she'll assume it. And right now, I do not like that woman."

"That is wise," agreed the soldier.

The bard's eyes flicked over to the messenger then back to Eponin. She was even more sure now that it'd come from the soldier's mouth.

"Of course, my Queen," agreed the weapons master.

Gabrielle softly smiled and released her shoulders. "Are there enough men for us to take to the battle?"

"There should be," cut in Teresa. "I've been keeping head counts."

"How many?" inquired Queen Gabrielle.

"Five hundred plus," replied Teresa.

The bard sighed and peered over at Xena and Eve. "How many?"

Eve looked at her mother. "A hundred and fifty," she stated.

"Two hundred," countered Xena.

"We should leave over three hundred here," protested Eve. "Just to make sure Callisto does not get any ideas."

The Warrior Princess thought about it then said, "A hundred and seventy-five."

Eve grinned at her mother's amount, she turned to Gabrielle. "A hundred and seventy-five."

Eponin looked to the soldier, "Take care of it."

"Yes of course." The soldier hurried off.

Gabrielle then returned her attention to her weapons master. "When Varia, Cyane, and the others come here have them stay with you. I think it's the wisest choice right now."

"I will, my Queen."

Xena came up beside the bard and grasped her shoulder lightly. "We should get ready to move."

"Travel tonight?" offered Eve.

"Yes, we'll be closer." Xena squeezed the bard's shoulder and let go.

"Let's go then," ordered Gabrielle. She hurried off with her friends all following suit.

~*Part 22*~

Gabrielle stayed mounted on the horse and to either side of her was Xena and Eve. Behind Gabrielle though was trailing a hundred and seventy five men all prepared to die for the Conqueror. She too was prepared to die for the Conqueror. She could only hope her Amazons were fighting with every last bit of strength to stop Sinteres and Draco.

"I think we're close," quietly spoke Eve.

"We are," agreed Xena, she was now ridged in her saddle. Her eyes were darting each way and her head dropped to one side.

"What is it?" whispered the Queen.

"I can hear the fighting," quietly replied the Warrior Princess. "Eve?"

The daughter had her eyes closed and she was trying to focus on it as well. It was often she used her skills but she had them despite how long it had been. "Yeah, I hear them too."

"How much longer until we're there then?"

"About ten minutes tops," replied Xena.

"Should I prepared the men?" quietly asked the bard.

Eve faintly nodded.

Gabrielle held up her hand and came to a halt. She heard all of the Conqueror's soldiers stop and there was finally silence instead of armour clanking. She turned her horse around to face the troops. "We are close to the battle. Prepare yourselves." For a response, she heard the loud din of swords scraping out of sheaths. "Remember, do not fail your liege as I never would either."

The soldiers raised their swords and cheered as well whistled.

"Let's stop they bastards," she hotly whispered and turned her mare around. She tapped the horse's side and hurried into a trot.

Eve and Xena tapped their horses' sides and followed behind.

The soldiers all yelled in unison and jogged behind with their swords at the ready.

The three women came through a large grouping of woods and all they could hear now was a mix of fighting, yelling, and screaming just ahead. Once they were through the huge grouping of trees, they found a huge mix of Amazons, soldiers, and warriors fighting in front of the gates of Sinteres's compound.

Gabrielle growled and spun her horse around. She pointed at the battle and yelled to the soldiers, "Attack!"

The soldiers all yelled and raged past the three women then flooded into the battlefield.

The Conqueror suddenly heard the sounds of a wave of soldiers crashing into the battle. She frantically tried to figure out where this wave came from since she didn't command it. She growled and lunged at her attacker because of her frustration.

"I have to find Gabrielle, the Conqueror, or Ephiny," announced Gabrielle.

"I'll go with you," promised Eve.

"Xena?"

The warrior unsheathed her sword. "Go ahead. I'm going to help out."

"Be careful, mother," warned Eve.

The warrior saw her daughter's look and nodded. "You too. I'll see you after the battle."

Eve nodded and watched her mother disappear into the battle with her mare. Her eyes then flickered up to the trees. "There are Amazons in the trees," she whispered.

The Queen lifted her eyes and saw all the Amazons.

Eve dismounted her horse suddenly said, "Come on. I think we'll be able to find them faster from the trees."

The bard quickly agreed and dismounted her horse as well. She approached a tree and with Eve's help, jumped up into the tree. She quickly looked around from the treetops and saw her Amazons shooting their arrows at various enemies. She then scanned around for Ephiny or the Conqueror or Gabrielle.

"Wait, there's Ephiny," spoke up Eve. She pointed off to her right. "And there's Gabrielle."

The Amazon Queen saw Gabrielle was too far away while Ephiny was much closer. "Let's get to Ephiny first."

Eve nodded her head. She took her friend's hand and asked, "Ready?"

The bard faintly nodded then followed Eve through the trees. She wasn't very good at jumping from branch to branch but it was an art she was starting to learn now.

"Can you land okay?"

"Yes," replied the bard. For a demonstration, she jumped off the branch and landed neatly beside her regent.

Eve chuckled and also leapt to the ground.

"Gabrielle!" yelled the regent, her face suddenly went happy. She then had fearful eyes and swung her staff around. "Duck!"

The Amazon Queen dropped down as the staff went over her head and smashed into one of Draco's men.

Eve quickly moved and punched the man several times and watched him collapsed.

Gabrielle laughed and stood back up. "Miss me?" she teased.

"Sweet Artemis, yes." Ephiny laughed and was about to hug her friend but didn't because of the battle going on. She saw an enemy coming up from behind her Queen. "Take this." She threw the staff at the bard.

The Queen neatly caught it and spun it while turning around. "Hey, this is my staff."

Ephiny laughed while extracting her sword from her back. "Yup, I thought you might show up and want it." She grinned at her opponent off to the right. She glanced over at Eve who was sword playing with another bad guy.

Gabrielle grinned at her enemy. She hadn't used her staff in awhile but she knew her body hadn't forgotten how to use her staff. She suddenly attacked her enemy but not without talking to her regent. "How are things?"

"They're getting better," called back the regent. "Did you bring in the calvary?"

Gabrielle laughed and yelled, "Yeah, we brought some men with us."

"Us?" yelled Ephiny.

"Xena, Eve and I," answered the bard. She struck her enemy across the face then brought her staff back around to give him several blows to his stomach and legs. "What is the plan?"

"What the plan was to surprise attack Sinteres and Draco but they actually ended up taking our idea."

Gabrielle chuckled to herself as she gave one last hard blow to the guy's stomach, sending him onto his back. "What's the plan now?"

"To try and fix our plans," called Ephiny. She suddenly stabbed forward and was able to penetrate her enemy's defenses and run her sword through him. "The Conqueror should be showing up soon."

"What you mean, showing up soon?" yelled the bard. She was already engaged in another fight but with two soldiers this time.

"She'll be opening the gates to the compound soon," answered the regent. "Hopefully with Draco and Sinteres running out screaming."

"I got to get to the Conqueror," called the bard.

"It won't matter, Gabrielle. She has her plans in motion."

"I know that," yelled the bard as she growled at her two attackers. She struck one across the side of his head knocking him out then she went for her other enemy. "I just need to know she's okay."

Ephiny sighed as she jumped to her right and her enemy from front and behind ran each other through with their own swords. "Alright, let's see if we can break for it." She then noted Eve had been silent so she yelled, "Eve, you still with us?"

The princess laughed and replied, "Of course. We better make a run for it now if we're going to get near those gates."

"Alright." Ephiny went to the tree quickly and jumped up into the branches.

Gabrielle sighed and threw her staff up to her regent.

Ephiny caught it and saw her Queen jump up but almost lost her balance. She caught her by the shoulder and said, "Steady." She then had a huge grin and said, "Nice clothes by the way."

Gabrielle groaned as she realized she was still in her slave clothes.

Eve chuckled and saw two enemies coming at her. She grinned and said, "Come on, boys." She waited to the last minute then jumped up. Below, she heard them smash into one another.

"There are the gates." Ephiny pointed straight ahead. "Gabrielle is over there too."

"Great, maybe we can help her out."

Ephiny nodded at her Queen's words.

"What is the plan anyway?" inquired Eve.

The regent sighed. "Once the Conqueror flushes out the rest of the men from the compound, we're to encircle them then squeeze."

Eve faintly nodded and said, "And now?"

"Still the same." Ephiny then looked over at the warrior-bard fighting alone. "Let's go." She leaped from branch to branch with Eve and Gabrielle following behind her.

The Queen then realized as she was making her way to the gates, her Amazons were realizing she was with them. The Amazons were suddenly whistle at her or cheer to her and then fight even harder against their enemies, a renewed strength in them.

"They're happy you're home," whispered Ephiny, a huge grin on her face.

Gabrielle chuckled as she stood beside her regent just under the warrior-bard. She was still waiting for Eve to catch up to them. She then held her hand out when she saw Eve join them.

Ephiny handed over the staff. "Let's be careful."

The bard nodded and jumped down to the ground.

The warrior-bard had just knocked out her enemy and spun around when she heard the person behind her. She held up her sais in defense, ready to attack. She then lowered her sais at seeing Queen Gabrielle before her. "Gabrielle?"

The bard smiled happily.

The warrior-bard laughed happily and jumped at her friend.

The bard found herself caught up in a huge hug and she couldn't help but return it. She closed her eyes and squeezed tightly. Around her, she could hear Ephiny and Eve landing on an enemies to stop him from attacking them.

The warrior-bard pulled back finally and asked, "You're okay?"

"Perfectly," reassured the bard. "You?"

"Never better now." Gabrielle hadn't lost her smile. "The Conqueror will be here soon."

"That's what Eph said too." The bard then noted that several of Draco's men were closing in on them. "Well, we better not keep them waiting."

The warrior-bard grinned back and spun her sais while turning around.

"By the way," called the bard, "Xena is here."

"I kind of thought so since Eve is here."

Eve laughed between her fighting and yelled, "Mother should show up soon."

"I think she already has." The warrior-bard had caught sight from the corner of her eye her soulmate pressing through the battle and still on Argo.

Just as Xena approached the group, the gates of the compound flung open with Draco and Sinteres both on horseback and about fifty men rushing behind them to get out of the compound.

Suddenly a woman's deep voice boomed through the battle, yelling, "Kill them all!"

"Guess who?" muttered the bard. She looked over at the warrior-bard and called, "I need to get to the Conqueror."

Gabrielle looked between the bard and her opponent. She then realized her soulmate had joined into the group. "Xena," she yelled.

The warrior smiled at her partner but knew she needed something. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Can you get Gabrielle to the Conqueror?"

For a response, the Warrior Princess urged her mare to the bard's side and she held her hand down.

The Amazon Queen took out her opponent then spun her staff. She turned around and took the offered help, she easily mounted Argo.

Xena took a deep breath, spun her sword and turned Argo around. She urged Argo into a gallop and headed for the gates, slashing her way through. It took about two minutes to press through the battle and get to the Conqueror.

Once they were there, Gabrielle didn't wait a second and slipped out of the saddle. "Conqueror!" she yelled.

The ruler had just finished off her enemy and spun around at hearing her name. Her eyes widened when she saw Gabrielle just ahead of her. She saw the bard was rushing to her and not paying attention to anything. She saw one of Draco's men charging the Amazon Queen and she growled at this. She grabbed her chakram and brought it up then threw it.

The bard didn't even notice the chakram but did hear the enemy yell when the chakram rammed into his chest. She came right up to the ruler and smiled at her.

"Be more careful," growled the Conqueror. She motioned to the enemy on his back with a chakram sticking from his chest.

"Good to see you too," teased the Amazon Queen.

The ruler just glared at the small woman but before she could do any more lecturing, she was pulled into a hug. The Conqueror stood there surprised yet she wrapped her free arm around the bard. She felt as if so much of her anger drained out. She then lifted her eyes in time to see a warrior coming at them. The only thing she could do was pull Gabrielle in tighter and spun around to put her back to him. She buried her head into Gabrielle more when she felt the blade slash at her back but that was it.

Xena had stepped in after flipping off her saddle. She'd stopped the soldier's sword with her own blade. She suddenly kicked at him and pushed him further from the Conqueror and the bard.

"Are you okay?" hastily asked the Amazon Queen, a worried expression on her face.

"I'm fine," reassured the ruler. "How about you?"

"I'm okay," replied the bard. "I'm so sor-"

"Its okay," cut off the ruler. "I just want this fight over with."

Gabrielle furrowed her eyebrows at that total change in the Conqueror's attitude.

The Conqueror sighed and whispered, "I want to go home."

The Amazon Queen nodded faintly and turned around when she'd seen that look in the ruler's face. She raised her staff up, and stopped the blade that was coming at her from behind.

The ruler growled and took on the other enemy that was at her back. At certain points, she'd take a quick look at the Amazon Queen to make sure she was okay. She was starting to realize just how good Gabrielle was with her staff. She also started surveying the battle and noted they were now winning and crushing Draco's men. It would not be long before this battle was finally over for them.

~*~*~*~

The Conqueror stared at the two men locked in the jail wagon. They were both on opposite ends of the wagon, their eyes closed, and trying to forget today's lost. The fire light from around the camp was reflecting off their face, she could see all of the blood and scars on their faces.

After shaking her head a few times, she turned around and walked back into camp. In the background, she could hear the two jail guards talking again. She stopped about midway into the camp and scanned all of the Amazons and her soldiers. Everybody was busy cleaning up or taking care of his or her wounds. Her healers along with two Amazon healers were shifting through everybody, checking on them.

The Conqueror turned her attention away from them and looked across the camp to one tent. She saw the firelight inside of the tent flickering and a shadow moving back and forth inside of the tent. Slowly she took in a long breath then made her way to the tent. Once she neared it, she paused but went inside of it.

The bard looked up in surprise when the ruler entered.

The Conqueror instantly realized the Amazon Queen was changing out of her clothes. "Excuse me," she apologized and turned her back to Gabrielle. She felt rather embarrassed now for barging in without thinking.

"Its okay," countered the bard. "I could actually use your help."

The Conqueror kept her back to the younger woman but asked, "With?"

Gabrielle returned to taking her small top off that she'd received while at Gurkhan's. "I have a wound on my back."

Immediately the Warrior Princess turned around in worry. She then realized Gabrielle was topless. "Hades," she growled and turned back around.

Gabrielle laughed and said, "Hey we're both women."

"Yes, I know this, Queen Gabrielle but...." She was lost for words. "Its just not polite," she finished.

"Alright... let me sit down on the cot with my back to you. On the bed is a medical kit if you can help to clean it for me. I can't see it let alone reach it."

"Tell me when you're ready."

The bard quietly shifted to the bed and sat down on the edge, her back directly to the ruler. "Its okay."

Xena slowly turned around and approached her. She decided to sit down behind the young woman. She reached over to grab the medical kit, which was next to the Queen's Amazon attire. "You found your clothes?"

"Yes, Ephiny was kind enough to bring them."

The Conqueror licked her lips as she picked through the kit, looking for a cloth. "I saw she brought you your staff as well."

"Yes," confirmed the bard. She then realized they would need some water to better clean the wound. "Over there on the chair is some clean water."

"Thank you." The Conqueror got up and went over to pick up the bowl of water that was near the other end of the cot.

Gabrielle knew she was about to turn around and see her topless again. She quickly lifted her arms and crossed them over her breasts just before the ruler turned around.

The Conqueror paused for a second but then quickly moved back to her spot behind the young woman. "Thanks," she whispered.

"For?" quietly asked the bard.

The ruler chuckled while placing the bowl in her lap. "For the water." Her voice was in a teasing tone.

The bard faintly grunted because she knew why the ruler was really thanking her. She then sensed a large hand grasping her shoulder and then a wet cloth pressing into her

back.

Xena carefully dabbed the bard's back cleaning up the wound. "How'd you get this?" she asked quietly.

"I'm not sure really." Gabrielle shrugged then added, "I just realized it not long after we got back into camp."

"Mmmm." The Conqueror continued patting the wound clean. She then lowered both of her hands into the bowl with the cloth and thoroughly cleaned it. "Hurt at all?"

"Not really... I'm sure it will when you put that salve on."

"Most likely," agreed the Conqueror. She clasped her hand on the bard's shoulder again and carefully cleaned the wound a second time. "How did things go at Gurkhan's?"

"There wasn't really any problems."

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow at the word 'any.' "So there were some problems?"

The Queen was about to blurt out what happened between her and Callisto but stopped herself just as quickly. She knew it wasn't the right time to discuss it but she knew she would have to sooner or later. "Well... the only major problem was I almost ended up bedding Gurkhan." She shook her head. "But I was lucky."

"Oh?" Xena put the cloth down in the bowl and picked up the bowl. She placed it on the floor. "What happened?"

"Varia showed up and stopped us before it happened."

The Conqueror let out a breath. She started milling through the kit again, looking for salve. "I take it you came on the scout ship?"

"Yes," answered the bard. "I was... concerned."

"About? The battle?" suggested the ruler. She opened the container of balm and spread some of her two right fingers.

"Well, that too," agreed the bard. She hissed and straightened her back out when the salve touched her wound. "Hades that stuff stings."

The ruler grinned some but continued to apply the ointment. "The battle huh?"

"I was worried about you," confessed the bard. "I mean I was about my Amazons, the battle, and Gabrielle... but you too."

The Warrior Princess slowly raised an eyebrow at her submission.

"I can see that eyebrow up," joked Gabrielle.

Xena huffed. "Everything else was okay?" she persisted, "No problems with Cleopatra or Callisto?"

"No... no," half lied the bard. "All of Gurkhan's wives are coming back too."

"And what do you suggest we do with them?" The Conqueror put on a little more salve then stopped. She closed up the lid and slipped it away.

"I was planning to offer them to join my Nation... if that's alright by you, my liege."

"I think its perfect," agreed the ruler.

Gabrielle was surprised by the agreement so she started to turn around.

The ruler was about to stop her but soft green eyes caught her. She tried to keep her attention fully above Gabrielle's neck.

"Seriously?"

Xena swallowed and slowly nodded. "I agree with you. I think you need more Amazons," she whispered.

"Thank you."

The Conqueror could only simply nod again as she reached over without moving her head a fraction. Xena's right hand scurried for Gabrielle's top.

Gabrielle chuckled when she found the top in her hands. "Thanks."

"No problem." The dark ruler sprung up from the bed and walked off towards the tent flap.

The Queen already had her top on and buckled in the back. "Thank you for taking care of the wound."

The Conqueror stopped in front of the flap and turned around, relieved to see Gabrielle's top on now. "You're welcome. Get some rest tonight."

"I will, you too, my liege."

The ruler moved her head in acknowledgement then silently left.

The Amazon Queen groaned and fell back into her cot. "Gooooddsss," she moaned.

The Conqueror hadn't walked off that far when she heard Gabrielle's noises. She felt a small grin tug at her lips as she strolled through the camp to her own hut.

The warrior-bard was still holding onto her soulmate.

Xena finally lifted her head after this long hug and whispered, "You want to lay down?"

Gabrielle sighed and squeezed her partner tighter. "In a moment."

The warrior kissed her partner's temple. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, Xena." The small warrior finally forced herself to released her partner. "Know what though?"

"Mmmm?"

"I am a little hungry."

The Warrior Princess corked an eyebrow at that. "How about you sit down and I'll hunt some food down for us."

"Are you sure? I can co-"

"Its okay," cut off the warrior. "Just take it easy huh? I'll be back shortly." She left the tent in hopes to find her and Gabrielle some kind of food. As she was milling through the camp, looking for some signs of a mess tent. She then caught the Conqueror in the corner of her eye, she hastily made her way to the ruler.

"Hi, Xena," greeted the ruler.

"Conqueror." Xena held out her arm.

The Conqueror smiled and briskly shook arms with the warrior. "Nice job today."

"You didn't do bad yourself," commented the warrior. She finally released the strong arm.

"How is Gabrielle?" inquired the ruler.

"She is fine... exhausted but fine."

The Conqueror shifted her weight to her right foot. "Things were rather stressful for her."

"I know," whispered the warrior.

"She will be fine," reassured the ruler, "especially since you're back."

Xena nodded at the Conqueror's word. "How is the Queen?"

"I was just there," confessed the ruler, "she only has a small wound on her back. Otherwise she is fine."

"Glad to hear it." Xena was about to move away but stopped when she thought to ask the ruler about the mess tent. "Where can I find some food? Gabrielle is pretty

hungry."

"Mmmm." The Conqueror was about to tell her but instead decided to show her. "This way." She made a beeline for the food tent. "I think the Queen will want something as well."

"Mmmm," agreed Xena, "lions to feed."

The ruler chuckled deeply in agreement.

Together the pair found the food tent and went inside to begin the food selection. The Conqueror made sure to get one of everything since she was completely unsure what the Queen would want anyway. After both women had their trays of food, they separated and each went to a Gabrielle's tent.

"Can I come in?" called a deep voice.

Gabrielle sat up from her bed and realized it was the Conqueror. "Yeah of course." She giggled some at the fact the ruler was now asking to come into the tent.

"I brought you something... thought you might be hungry."

The bard smiled at the tray of food. "Gee... you must have gotten one of everything."

"Pretty much... I wasn't sure what you liked."

Gabrielle laughed as the covered tray lowered onto the bed between them both. "All of it."

"I did good then."

"Well except for the olives," confessed the Queen.

"Not a problem." The ruler grabbed the small bowl of olives and started popping them into her mouth.

Gabrielle laughed and shook her head. She picked up a piece of bread and decided to start there. "Have you seen anybody?"

"You mean as in Xena or Gabrielle?"

"Yeah."

"I just spoke with Xena." The ruler sat back some while chewing on the last olive. "She said Gabrielle is fine."

"That's good to hear." The bard picked up the small mug of soup. "I was thinking of going over to see them but thought I shouldn't. They probably want to be alone... plus I'm just too exhausted," confessed the bard.

Xena slightly grinned and said, "So is Gabrielle."

The Queen nodded then lifted up a spoon to start her soup. "How you feel?"

"Tired myself," honestly answered the ruler.

"Kind of thought so." Gabrielle took a few spoonfuls of the soup then quietly said, "Thank you for sparing Draco and Sinteres."

"I wouldn't have done it otherwise."

"I know." Gabrielle still recalled the ruler almost gutting both men when she'd finally cornered them. Fortunately she'd been there at the time and was able to stop the ruler. "I think we can come up with better ways to ruin their lives."

The Conqueror laughed some because she knew of a few ideas already.

Through the rest of the evening, the pair quietly talked about their past weeks while they were apart. Sometimes though there were long moments of silence, neither sure what to say like there was something else they were suppose to be discussing. Yet Gabrielle always hastily came up with some kind of topic for them to get around the main question that was between them both.

The following day, the Amazons and the army broke camp deciding it were time to go home. First the Amazon Nation was escorted back to their village just to the northwest. Yet it was Ephiny, Solari, and Queen Gabrielle that decided to join the rest to travel to Athens. Also they made sure to separate the three groups of Amazons between Velasca's, Queen Gabrielle, and Varia's Amazons. Gabrielle took command of Varia's Amazons and had them travel to Athens with them.

Together, the huge traveling group slowly made their way to Athens. They also estimated that by the time they arrived that Callisto would have returned by then, at least they hoped.

Eponin was standing on the balcony that came out over the main portion of the city. She was about to return go back inside but faltered when she saw several glints of metal just outside of the city. "By Artemis, let that be them," she whispered. She stepped closer and grasped the rail. She squeezed the rail so tightly as she waited in anticipation. As glints began to emerge into people, she knew it was the Conqueror with her army and she also was now able to pick out several Amazons. A happy smile broke out across her expression as she raced back inside to find her friends.

It wasn't long before everybody was reunited by the following morning. Callisto and her fleet arrived the next morning at first light with a very tired group of women. All of the Amazons celebrated with several hugs and laughs. Queen Gabrielle offered to the Gurkhan's former wives if they'd like to join her Nation and none of them refused.

By the late afternoon, Xena and Gabrielle decided it was best for her and Queen Varia's Amazons to return back home. The Conqueror and Queen Gabrielle knew it'd be a long adventure for all of them and Queen Gabrielle thanked Gabrielle, Xena, Eve, and Queen Varia numerous times for their help and support. She also then promised her, Ephiny, Solari, Eponin, Amarice, Teresa, and the wives would escort

them to the cave just outside of Stagira so they could return to their world.

Gradually the traveling group organized and met at the gates, rather worn out from all of the events plus the traveling. Everybody was rather eager to return back to their homes.

Xena had mounted her mare and saw her partner had just gotten on her stallion. Just off to her right was Queen Gabrielle forcing herself to mount a horse.

Gabrielle quietly chuckled at the Queen's persistence to ride a horse. "She has more spirit than me when I was her age."

Xena gave a grin to her soulmate. "She tries harder."

"I wouldn't say that," called Gabrielle, "It's the fact I don't feel like walking the distance."

Both Xena and the warrior-bard laughed together.

Ephiny came up along the other side of her Queen.

"Are we ready?" inquired the Queen.

"Yes," replied the regent.

"Good, I'm ready to get home."

"Gabrielle, you do not have to come with us," persisted the warrior-bard.

The Amazon Queen shook her head at her friend's words. "I want to make sure you and the Amazons get back safely to your world."

The warrior-bard nodded then said, "Thank you."

Gabrielle smiled at the older woman but then looked at Ephiny. "Okay, let's get moving."

The regent nodded and was about to order everybody out but stopped when Gabrielle's hand grasped her leg. "What is it?"

The bard signaled with her head at the Conqueror.

Ephiny looked over at the ruler standing at the gates of the city, just watching them carefully. "It's your call," whispered the regent.

Gabrielle bit her lower lip. "I'll be back," she promised. She slipped out of the saddle. "Just going to thank her and say bye."

"Okay, we'll be here." Ephiny watched her Queen weave through all of the Amazons and came up to the ruler.

The Conqueror lifted herself off the gate and smiled some at the Queen. "Well, I'm sure I'll see you soon."

"You will." Gabrielle went a little closer but kept a certain distance away from her. "I just wanted to thank you for all of the help."

"I had a treaty to uphold," reminded the ruler.

Gabrielle lowered her head at the mention of the treaty. She slowly lifted her head. "Well... whether it was the treaty or well something else, I appreciate it either way." She paused and quietly added, "I know you didn't have to do all that you did."

"And I appreciate your continuing support, Queen Gabrielle... despite our pasts."

The small woman sighed at the mention of what had happened between them from the start. "The past is the past... my legs have healed just like my anger. Sometimes I don't even remember it."

"I know... and that's what makes you such an amazing woman," whispered the ruler. She took a deep breath and took one step closer. "You can return whenever you see fit." Slowly a crooked grin appeared in her expression. "I still expect an invite to your Nation... and especially to your hot springs bath."

The bard blushed as she realized there wasn't quite a hot springs bath just yet. "Well... when we have them ready, I'll be sure to invite you."

Xena nodded as her grin faded away. "Safe travels, Queen Gabrielle."

Gabrielle tapped her staff on the ground and said, "We'll talk soon." She turned around and took a step away.

The Conqueror noticed she wasn't going any further but instead turned back around.

"To Hades with the formality." Gabrielle quickly moved in closer.

Xena wasn't sure what to expect as she put up her guard but suddenly found herself in a hug. She stood there frozen for the second time and tried to debate what to do. She gave a heavy sigh and wrapped her arms around the smaller woman. "This is really bad for my image, you know that right, Queen Gabrielle?"

"Then don't hug me," countered the bard.

Although a part of the ruler was prepared to just that she faltered and instead squeezed the Queen tighter. "Please be careful, I do not feel like repeating this."

Gabrielle laughed softly and finally let go of the Conqueror. "Of course, my liege." She smiled warmly up at the woman.

"Go on," urged Xena, "Your Amazons wait for you."

The Queen solemnly nodded and stepped back a few times. "Bye, my liege."

The ruler bowed her head some while saying, "Goodbye, Queen Gabrielle." She lifted her head to watch Gabrielle quickly spin around and power walk off to the group of Amazons.

The Conqueror sighed deeply and went back to her position against the gates.

Gabrielle mounted her horse again and signaled to Ephiny. While her regent took care of the Amazons, she went about lashing her staff down.

The regent ordered the group to push down the road. She then started her horse into a walk but kept her attention on her best friend. "Everything okay?" she whispered.

"Yes," replied the bard.

"Nothing went wrong?" urged the regent.

"No," promised the rather quiet Queen.

Xena and her warrior-bard had noticed the shift in Queen Gabrielle's attitude. Neither of them spoke up because they knew Ephiny would handle it well.

"Then why are you... so down?" whispered the worried regent.

Gabrielle shook her head as she stared at the ground passing underneath her horse. "I feel like this is so one-sided," she confessed.

"What is?"

The bard looked at her regent, she just stared then finally answered, "My emotions."

Ephiny wasn't quite sure what to say but she half turned in her saddle and looked back at the Conqueror. The ruler was still staring at them and Ephiny knew her gaze was mainly on Gabrielle. She shifted back normal into her saddle. "Did you even try?"

"It's not worth it, Ephiny." Gabrielle shook her head. "She doesn't want me."

"I think that's for her to decide." Ephiny almost laughed in disbelief at her own words, she couldn't believe she was sitting here trying to urge her best friend to be with the Conqueror. It was such an outrageous and crazy idea so she knew it had to be the right thing. "Well... I guess since you decided for her, you don't have to worry." She shrugged and stared ahead but not without adding, "Better to have tried and failed than never tried at all."

The bard sighed as she slumped in her saddle.

Xena peered across to her soulmate, Gabrielle shook her head in protest.

Xena grumbled and tried to remain quiet.

The Amazon Queen suddenly growled, "Hades." She halted her mare and jumped

off.

"Gabrielle?" called Ephiny in worry. She got no answer but she ordered everybody to stop.

Gabrielle came racing up to the Conqueror, completely out of breath.

The ruler stood up from the side of the gates and asked, "What's wr...." She stopped when the young woman held up a hand.

The bard took two gigantic breaths then straightened up to her full height. She had to move a little to try and relax herself some more before she said what she had to say. She now stood between the gates so that her back was directly against the opposite gate from Xena. "Look, I have to say this... if I don't get it off my chest, I'll just never be able to sleep."

The Conqueror slowly lifted an eyebrow in question. "Go on."

Gabrielle stared down at her feet while taking several deep breaths. She then looked up to the ruler. "I kept worrying about you while we were separated, I kept hoping you were okay and that you wouldn't give up." She paused then continued with her speech. "When I finally saw you on the battlefield, I never felt so... so just peaceful and happy. I mean we were in a middle of battle and I was happy." She laughed at herself. "And then that night in the tent together, I don't think I could have gotten enough of her attention if I tried." She stopped as she tried to see if it was affecting the ruler, she wasn't getting any real response. "Conqueror, I missed you, I honestly did." She stopped and took a few steps closer and whispered, "And gods, I hope my life doesn't end when I tell you this but... I think I'm falling in love with you."

The Conqueror lowered her eyebrow at the submission. She pressed her lips together then folded her arms over her chest.

Gabrielle waited for something to happen or for her to say something. She tried so hard to read Xena's eyes but they were too emotionless and hollow. She suddenly felt her heart sink down and her life drain out from her body. She closed her eyes and took two steps back. "Oh gods," she moaned. Her back hit the gate and she slid down it until she was sitting in the dirt. "I just made a fool of myself," she growled at herself.

Ephiny was about to move when she saw her Queen on the ground.

"Don't," urged the warrior-bard.

"What? Why?" countered the regent.

"Just... have some faith." Gabrielle looked back to the two pair in the gateway.

The Conqueror stared down at the Queen that was about to break down crying. She ran her tongue along the front of her teeth as she considered everything. She took a deep breath and realized her knees were a bit shaky. She unfolded her arms and gradually bent down until her right knee pressed into the ground. She let her hands rest on either of her legs. "Looks like you've really fallen for me," she whispered but

her tone held a taunt.

Gabrielle lifted her head and dropped it against the gate. "I'm sorry," she apologized.

The Conqueror blinked at the out right apology.

"I won't make it present anymore. I'm sorry, Conqueror." Gabrielle lowered her head again.

Xena shook her head some and asked, "I guess I don't have a say huh? That's it huh?"

The Queen looked up again after those questions. "Conqueror, I didn't mea-

The ruler suddenly leaned forward, which cut her short on her words. Her dark blue eyes locked onto the woman and she whispered, "Sometimes you just need to be quiet, Queen Gabrielle."

The bard swallowed as her stomach dropped even more today. She felt like everything was about to end for her.

The Conqueror grinned suddenly and leaned in the rest of the way.

Gabrielle found her lips against the ruler's and she closed her eyes. She started to reach out with her right hand to grab onto the ruler.

Xena had her left hand out to also grab the young woman but her hand met halfway with Gabrielle's. She laced their hands together then returned her focus to the kiss. She slowly pushed her tongue into the bard's mouth.

Gabrielle moaned softly and squeezed the larger hand tighter when her body tingled with heat.

The Conqueror let the kiss go on, their tongues running against each other and bringing the bard's own into her mouth. She then knew they had to separate instead of continuing this in public. She slowly pulled back and her eyes gradually opened.

Gabrielle smiled warmly at the ruler.

Xena for the first time gave a very happy smile. "That's my response to your love." She unlaced their hands and started to stand up while saying, "And I never said you had to leave Athens."

The bard dropped her head back against the gate and laughed nervously at herself. "By the gods...."

"No, it wasn't the gods," insisted the Warrior Princess.

Ephiny slid out of her saddle deciding it was time to interject. She went to the pair but didn't look at the ruler as she knelt beside her Queen. "Gabrielle?"

The bard opened her sparkling spring eyes and looked at her regent. "Yes?"

The regent almost laughed at the response but asked, "Are there a change of plans, my Queen?"

Gabrielle looked away from Ephiny and looked up at Xena, the Conqueror. She had a warm smile that the Conqueror mirrored back and for the first time, she saw the softest set of warm blue eyes. "Yes... there's certainly a change of plans."

The End